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“SURVIVAL KITS ON WAX”: THE POLITICS, POETICS, AND PRODUCTIONS OF
GIL SCOTT-HERON, 1970-1978

A Dissertation Presented

by

DONALD W. GEESLING

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2014

W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies

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DEDICATION

In memory of my grandparents W.H. "Dub" Miller (1916-2004) and Marjorie Miles Miller (1921-2011).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Works of a scholarly nature are never entirely the result of the author's efforts alone and this dissertation is no exception. Accordingly, I would like to acknowledge those whose contributions of time, talent, and support made this project possible. I am indebted to the members of my dissertation committee, Ernest Allen, Jr., Emily J. Lordi, James E. Smethurst, and Steven C. Tracy whose advice, guidance, and scholarly input has been instrumental to my project from conception to completion. Their critiques and recommendations over the course of researching and writing this dissertation pushed my analysis and fortified my scholarship. Were it not for their abiding enthusiasm and confidence in my abilities, I would not have persevered.

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ABSTRACT

“SURVIVAL KITS ON WAX”: THE POLITICS, POETICS, AND PRODUCTIONS OF
GIL SCOTT-HERON, 1970-1978

MAY 2014

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For over four decades, from 1970 until his death in 2011, poet, novelist, and musician Gil Scott-Heron served as an architect of artistic protest and a conduit of social consciousness. Often referred to as “The Godfather of Rap,” Scott-Heron was a formidable presence in postwar African American music and literature. This dissertation demonstrates Scott-Heron’s significance to the praxis of black cultural politics in the postwar era with a particular focus on his productions and activism during the 1970s. It examines the ways in which the late artist-activist’s poems and songs gave voice to historical events and intellectual currents that, in part, defined the black experience during that momentous decade. What is more, it positions Scott-Heron in the matrix of twentieth-century African American history and literary production, mapping his variegated connections to the Jim Crow South, the Great Migration, the Civil Rights/Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement, HBCU student protests, the Nixon Administration, anti-apartheid activism, blues poetry and music, transnational political struggle, anti-nuclear activism, Pan-Africanism, and popular culture writ-large.

Aimed at raising consciousness and effecting change, Scott-Heron specialized in producing songs and poems that slyly exposed the contradictions of American democracy in regard to the historical experiences of African Americans. Much like the works of the West African griots with whom he identified, his narratives serve multiple purposes. On one hand, Scott-Heron's recordings were designed to inform his audience about contemporary issues or impending events that might impact their daily lives. However, at the same time, these works were intentionally designed to archive, and more importantly, frame the history and cultural politics of his time. Scott-Heron, much like the Black Arts Movement as a whole, fundamentally undermined commonly held distinctions between the popular and the political, the artist and the activist, and the performer and the people. Accordingly, this dissertation analyzes Scott-Heron's compositions as "aural histories" that documented key events, debates, and issues that reverberated throughout black America in the postwar era.

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INTRODUCTION

GIL SCOTT-HERON AND THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

Our vibration is based on creative solidarity: trying to influence the black community toward the same kind of dignity and self-respect that we all know is necessary to live. We are trying to put out survival kits on wax. – Gil Scott-Heron¹

But as I began to get into the history of the music, I found that this was impossible without, at the same time, getting deeper into the history of the people. That it was the history of the Afro-American people as text, as tale, as story, as exposition, narrative or what have you, that the music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection of Afro-American life, our words, the libretto, to those actual lived lives – Amiri Baraka²

For over four decades, from 1970 until his death in 2011, poet, novelist, and musician Gil Scott-Heron served as an architect of artistic protest and a conduit of social consciousness. Though perhaps best known for “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” he released a total of seventeen albums, two novels, three poetry volumes, and a posthumous memoir. Often called “The Godfather of Rap,” Scott-Heron was indeed a formidable presence in postwar African American literature and culture.³ Indeed, the *New York Amsterdam News* praised him as “probably the most important figure to emerge from [b]lack music in the ‘70s.”⁴ Despite his substantive catalog and undeniable influence, scholars have been slow to adequately document his life and career and

¹ This clever turn of phrase was coined by Scott-Heron to define the *raison d'être* for his recordings. Shelia Weller, “Survival Kits on Wax” *Rolling Stone* (2 January 1975), 16.

² Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Perennial, 1999), ix.

³ Interestingly enough, it appears that Jon Pareles, the longtime music journalist for the *New York Times*, coined this catchy sobriquet in a 1984 column. Jon Pareles, “Pop: Gil Scott-Heron,” the *New York Times*, 5 November 1984, C16.

⁴ “Gil Scott-Heron starts revolution at S.O.B. with his political poetry,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 January 1997.

analyze his inimitable poetics. He has earned recognition and mention in a number of academic publications and forums; however, there are as of yet no scholarly monographs devoted to Scott-Heron.⁵ While no single work could adequately profile the totality of an artist as complicated and prolific as Scott-Heron, this study will begin to fill this significant lacuna.

Gil Scott-Heron made his national debut in 1970 amidst the vibrant cultural backdrop of the Black Arts Movement. Lauded as “the most audacious, prolific, and socially engaged literary movement in America’s history,” this literary insurgency was, in part, an attempt to change the way that African Americans viewed themselves, their culture, and their relationship to American society and institutions.⁶ Movement luminaries such as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Askia Touré, and Sonia Sanchez lent their substantive talents to refiguring notions of black identity and giving artistic voice to issues that impacted the everyday lives of African Americans. As observed by James Smethurst, the movement was not homogeneous; rather BAM constituents represented a broad range of ideological and political thought. Influenced by a plethora of postwar intellectual, political, and social currents ranging from the Cold War to successful independence movements in Africa to the Civil Rights/Black Power movement at home, scores of African American dramatists, musicians, novelists, visual artists,

⁵ As of 2014, even the scholarly study of the BAM is still in its infancy; however, there are several noteworthy titles that reflect a general uptick in this line of inquiry. For examples of this new wave of BAM scholarship, see Cheryl Clarke, *After Mecca Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004); James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Margo Crawford and Lisa Gail Collins, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁶ Kalamu ya Salaam, “The Black Arts Movement,” *Oxford Companion to African-American Literature*, eds. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 74.

choreographers, and poets redefined extant notions of collective identity and cultural politics.⁷

Though widely regarded as a literary phenomenon, the contributions and productions of numerous musicians including Sun Ra, John Coltrane, Don Cherry, Archie Shepp, Curtis Mayfield, Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, James Brown, Cecil Taylor, and Ornette Coleman, among many others, were instrumental to the direction and success of the movement. Indeed, music was a prime mover in the Black Arts matrix.⁸ For this cohort of artists, the term “black” spoke of more than just one’s phenotype; rather, the term signified a political consciousness and aesthetic wholly distinct from and in opposition to dominant culture and forms. Writing about this transformative phenomenon in 1969, one critic observed, “the past few years have seen the advent of a new thing in [b]lack arts ... their voices are loud, strong and sometimes strident, and the song they sing is a song of affirmation[,] a song affirming ...the wonderful beauty of their blackness. They are singing to black audiences. Dig it!”⁹ Indeed, BAM artists, including Gil Scott-Heron, conjured new conceptions of art, identity, and aesthetics that refigured the cultural status quo in black America.

Aimed at raising consciousness and effecting change, Gil Scott-Heron’s works reflected an immediacy, intensity, and political content rarely countenanced in popular culture. Indeed, he is perhaps best remembered for producing songs and poems that slyly

⁷ For a full discussion of these and other aspects of the BAM, see James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

⁸ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 62, 85 and Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁹ Patricia Romero, ed., *In Black America 1968: The Year of Awakening* (Washington, D.C.: Pioneer Paperbook, 1969), 268.

exposed the contradictions of American democracy in regard to the historical experiences of African Americans. In 1970, while still an undergraduate at Lincoln University - the vaunted HBCU in Pennsylvania and alma mater of his hero Langston Hughes - he released his first novel, *The Vulture*, a volume of poetry volume, and his debut album. Despite the favorable reception accorded his books, it was the LP, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* - and his subsequent musical efforts - that captured public attention and garnered the most critical acclaim (for a complete listing of his literary and recorded works, see Appendix A). With his first recording, he joined the ranks of BAM ensembles such as The Last Poets and The Watts Prophets in pioneering a new chapter in African-American poetics. Nevertheless, one might ask: what is it about Scott-Heron and his recordings that warrant scholarly scrutiny?

The answer is two-fold. First, Scott-Heron's aesthetics placed him among the poetic vanguard in the 1970s. Like fellow innovators The Last Poets, his early spoken-word recordings juxtaposed Afrocentric hand drum rhythms with incisive commentary and politically charged verse. In contrast to The Last Poets, however, Scott-Heron was also a musician and songwriter, which allowed him to transcend the commercial limitations that impeded the careers of many of his peers in the Black Arts milieu. Secondly, much of his work was timely and spoke directly and eloquently to numerous socio-historical issues that he viewed as being of central importance to African-Americans. He explained the political content and urgency and in these early recordings, noting that "the black community was being suppressed, so I was dealing with the specific legislation – the facts and figures of the whole thing, not the generalities."¹⁰

¹⁰ Weller, "Gil Scott-Heron," 16.

Indeed, over the course of twelve LPs released in the 1970s, Scott-Heron's aural histories intentionally chronicled that decade's key cultural and intellectual currents.¹¹ "There still seems to be a need within our community to have what the *griot* supplied in terms of a historical chronology; a way to identify and classify events in black culture that were both historically influential and still relevant."¹² Much like the works of the African griots with whom he self-identified, Scott-Heron's narratives served multiple purposes. On one hand, his recordings were designed to inform his audience about contemporary issues or impending events that might impact their daily lives – in fact, he called them "survival kits on wax." At the same time, Scott-Heron intentionally designed these works to archive, and perhaps more importantly, frame African American history. Given his participation in the Black Arts Movement - not to mention his scholarly training at both Lincoln University and Johns Hopkins - this engagement with history is not an insignificant matter of aesthetics. Clearly, Scott-Heron was a key contributor to political discourse in American popular culture in the postwar era.

When assessing Scott-Heron's influence and place in Black Arts matrix it is worth noting that numerous participant-observers place him front and center as a key conveyor of black consciousness and political thought. Indeed, his work has been praised by no less than the chief Black Power/Black Arts progenitors themselves. In the posthumously published memoir, Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) praised Scott-Heron for giving artistic voice to the Black Power Movement: "The range and the intensity [of the

¹¹ Recordings are splendid oral history sources that are largely overlooked and underutilized by historians. "Aural histories" is a neologism coined by Charles Drew III that denotes the scholarly utility of sonic and visual sources ranging from recorded interviews to songs to CD-ROMS. Charles Hardy III, "Authoring in Sound: Aural history, radio and the digital revolution" in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 393.

¹² Gil Scott-Heron, *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (Edinburgh, U.K.: Canongate, 2003), xiv.

BAM] surprised me a little.... Young brothers like Gil Scott-Heron ... [expressed] these ideas and feelings [that] had been percolating upward within all elements of our community ... Now they broke into the open.”¹³

BAM-founder Amiri Baraka spoke of Scott-Heron with equal enthusiasm, citing him as a pillar of the “centuries-old tradition of African American struggle and resistance.”¹⁴ Likening him to influential nineteenth-century black abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass, Baraka lauded Scott-Heron as an artist who “tells it to us, poets it to us, sings it to us, plays it for us, so we will never forget ... Gil has us humming and singing about Third World Revolution.”¹⁵ Adding to the chorus, Abiodun Oyewole, a founding member of The Last Poets, lauded Scott-Heron as “the crown prince of the revolution.”¹⁶ Clearly, for many, Scott-Heron was the artistic embodiment of the tradition of African-American protest and resistance and my study acknowledges this recognition.

The aforementioned Black Power luminaries are not alone in their estimation. Historian Mark Naison recalled in his memoir, *White Boy*, how Scott-Heron’s music spoke to his concerns as an activist and academic: “I was marching with my students in anti-apartheid protests and demonstrations against American intervention in Central America, and joining them in potluck dinners, where we listened to ... Gil Scott-Heron

¹³ Kwame Ture and Ekwume Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 528-9.

¹⁴ Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), 237.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁶ Abiodun Oyewole interview in Don Letts, dir., *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (London: BBC4, 2003).

... dissect the casual cruelty and materialism of ... American culture.”¹⁷ Additionally, Arista records founder Clive Davis lauded Scott-Heron, saying, “Not only is he an excellent poet, musician and performer ... he’s a leader of social thought.... Gil is unique. His statements are as sharp and penetrating as those of any social leader.”¹⁸

Echoing Davis, the *New York Amsterdam News* heralded Scott-Heron’s analytical prowess: “[he] break[s] down the political and social structure ... and [reinterprets] it in a way that the powers that be would not want the world to see.” Further, the *News* proclaimed, “[his] albums help to pioneer the way to the revolution, [and he] is to today’s leaders in poetry as King was to the Civil Rights Movement.”¹⁹ Clearly, Scott-Heron was a major figure in the Black Power/Black Arts Movement matrix and through his recordings and activism became key contributor to political discourse in American popular culture during the 1970s.

For Gil Scott-Heron, music was much more than merely a means of entertainment; it was also a medium for consciousness raising, community building, and political mobilization. As previously noted, early in his career he referred to his records as “survival kits on wax” and this sense of purpose and dedication to topical productions was a constant throughout his career. Indeed, over the course of seventeen albums, his songs functioned as consciousness raising tools that communicated his support for numerous causes spanning from the anti-apartheid movement to the anti-nuclear movement. Through his compositions, Scott-Heron was able to bridge the gap between

¹⁷ Mark Naison, *White Boy: A Memoir* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 215.

¹⁸ Weller, “Gil Scott-Heron,” 16.

¹⁹ “Gil Scott-Heron starts revolution at S.O.B. with his political poetry.” *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 January 1997.

these and other seemingly disparate and unconnected strata of political activism, encouraging and uniting numerous activist constituencies around the United States and throughout the world. It is worth noting that when speaking to *Rolling Stone* in the mid-1970s, Scott-Heron did not mention the Black Arts Movement by name; however, its aesthetic and imprimatur were unmistakable: “Our vibration is based on creative solidarity: trying to influence the black community toward the same kind of dignity and self-respect that we all know is necessary to live.”²⁰

ARGUMENT/THESIS

Scott-Heron, through his compositions, recordings, and extra-musical productions - liner notes, magazine columns, and interviews - gave voice to a host of issues, debates, and events that defined black America during the 1970s. His LPs indeed served as sources of information, affirmation, and efficacy for audiences and activists in communities across America. Aided by a combination of institutional pedigree - he earned an M.F.A. at Johns Hopkins and taught at Federal City College in Washington D.C., a political and cultural hotspot in its own right – and artistic savoir-faire, Scott-Heron was a trusted voice and key public intellectual for a generation of African Americans who came of age in the anxious era of Watergate, the Bicentennial, and Three Mile Island. Indeed, even a cursory glance through his catalog reveals Scott-Heron’s commitment to addressing issues that impacted black communities at the local, national, and international levels and this focus remained a feature of his productions for over four decades.

²⁰ Weller, “Gil Scott-Heron,” 16.

This study will focus primarily on the material he produced and released between 1970 and 1978. The reasons for this periodization are threefold: first, these nine years were perhaps the most artistically fertile and successful for Scott-Heron. Not only did he release nine albums and three books during this time, he toured, taught, and published in numerous forums. Second, Scott-Heron's recordings in this period possess a certain aesthetic continuity due in part to the fact that they were largely collaborative efforts, written and produced with musical partner and fellow Lincoln alum, Brian Jackson. Lastly, this is also a particularly eventful time in black America, both historically and culturally. By limiting my focus to this part of Scott-Heron's career, I will be able to better historicize the productions he released at what was arguably the height of his popularity.

While he was, part and parcel of the Black Arts Movement and a *sine qua non* influence in hip hop, Scott-Heron's poetics are also a bridge to an earlier generation of black cultural workers, namely the poets and writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the radical black writers of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In addition, his unique combination of the Word and the Music are part of an undervalued and virtually unexplored tradition of jazz poetry that traces back to the early twentieth century. Highlighting the ways in which Scott-Heron built on the innovations of forerunners including Langston Hughes, Carl Sandburg, Jack Kerouac, Oscar Brown Jr. Charles Mingus, Jackie McLean, and Amiri Baraka, will not only enrich our understanding of these influences, it will bring this previously marginalized strain of jazz poetics to the fore. Examining his influences and productions through a multidisciplinary lens will more fully reveal the constituent elements of Scott-Heron's venerated poetics. Additionally, my analysis will highlight his

aesthetic connection to and relationship with the Black Arts Movement and his position and influence within the broader matrix of postwar African American music. Doing so will properly situate Scott-Heron's productions in their rightful historical and cultural context, firmly grounding them - and their author - in the "marrow of tradition"²¹ that is African American poetics.

Though others have written on various aspects of Scott-Heron's influence, this dissertation is the first extended study of the influential and celebrated poet-performer. As such, it will bring to light many heretofore-unknown details regarding his life and career; properly historicize a number of his compositions; and offer critical insights into the development and evolution of his inimitable poetics. Whereas many journalists have tendered articles about Scott-Heron, few have connected him to the Black Arts Movement by name and, in singing his praises, fail to identify this crucially influential antecedent and their subject's relationship to it. In contrast, this study positions Scott-Heron as a key BAM exponent and reveals his under-recognized stature within the Black Arts milieu, as well as within American popular culture broadly speaking.

Another aspect of his career that this dissertation will explore in greater detail is Scott-Heron's incessant political activism in the 1970s. Whether as part of a student envoy that visited the Nixon White House to discuss the murders at Jackson State or as a participant in Amiri Baraka's rally for Newark's first black mayoral candidate, Kenneth Gibson, or as a performer with the "No Nukes" artists coalition that rallied on behalf of anti-nuclear politics across the nation, Scott-Heron served as a model artist-activist. As Scott Saul has argued, black music and musicians played an instrumental role in the

²¹ This wonderful turn-of-phrase is the title of a novel by African American author Charles Chesnutt and first published in 1901. Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993).

movement milieu of the 1960s; this was equally true for the significant and understudied decade of the 1970s where Gil Scott-Heron occupied a key node in the matrix of musical activism. Through his prodigious output, Scott-Heron's catalog from the Seventies reflects an engagement with contemporary cultural politics that, much like the Black Arts Movement, fundamentally undermined the distinctions between the popular and the political, the artist and the activist, and the performer and the people. Furthermore, his compositions and career reflect the reach and breach of the BAM, revealing the ways in which this often-marginalized political and aesthetic project infiltrated mainstream culture on the international stage.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE/HISTORIOGRAPHY

While there exists relatively little historical or literary material devoted to the study of Gil Scott-Heron specifically, in recent years there has been an uptick in scholarship concerning the Black Arts Movement. Thus, the first line of inquiry is the growing pool of work available on the Black Arts Movement; the second includes monographs focused on this history of African American musicians as intellectuals, cultural workers, and political activists; and the third is the small selection of academic writing devoted to Gil Scott-Heron and his productions. We begin with an examination of selected titles devoted to the BAM. The first extended scholarly assessment of Black Arts Movement poetry, *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry, A Critical History*, appeared in 1976. Eugene B. Redmond's text offered a chronological survey of African American poetry spanning roughly two centuries, from the mid-1700-s through the mid-1970s. He intended his text to serve as a "partial rebuttal to those who say

poetry's impact on mankind's consciousness has been insignificant." As such, he argued that "God's trombones have historically blared through or soothed the harsh and stark realities of the Afro-American experience; and that the sources (records) of these blarings and soothsayings ... remain accessible to anyone desiring to tap them."²² Redmond divided African American poetics into four distinct periods that corresponded with historical epochs and developments, including Reconstruction, the Great Migration, and the Civil Rights/Black Power era.

Regarding the latter, one of Redmond's strengths lies in his deft assembly and analysis of a geographically and aesthetically diverse array of BAM modalities and practitioners. In addition to his pioneering scholarship on the BAM, Redmond was also one of the first academics to focus attention on Scott-Heron. He cited the "recording poet-singer" as having had a "tremendous ... impact on the black masses" and praised his work as "an impressive, ritualistic vehicle of protest and exhortation." Redmond concluded that, "with the exception of Gil Scott-Heron (who has awesome talents) these new griots [The Last Poets included] have temporary standing."²³ With *Drumvoices*, Redmond authored a pioneering reference guide to the BAM and an invaluable study of African-American poetry writ large. Moreover, by situating Scott-Heron's debut within the BAM, *Drumvoices* provides the essential literary and historical context for my scholarship.

The next BAM-related monograph that appeared was *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture* by historian William L. Van Deburg. As

²² Eugene B. Redmond, *DrumVoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1976), xiii.

²³ *Ibid.*, 369.

suggested by its title, the book is focused primarily on chronicling the historical arc of Black Power. However, Van Deburg devoted significant space to an analysis of the ways in which black culture – music, literature, dance, and fashion – functioned in the Black Power matrix. Speaking to the importance of culture to the movement, he argued:

playwrights, novelists, songwriters, and artists all had their chance to forward a personalized vision of the militant protest sentiment. They used cultural forms as weapons in the struggle for liberation and, in doing so, provided a much-needed underpinning for the movement’s more widely trumpeted political and economic tendencies.²⁴

Moreover, he argued that BAM artists “articulated and popularized a new black consciousness,” which, in turn, “raised political awareness and intensified popular commitment to social activism.”²⁵

Subsequently, Van Deburg viewed recordings by politically conscious artists such as Curtis Mayfield, James Brown, Archie Shepp, and Scott-Heron as “mini-courses in techniques of empowerment.” Despite the attention paid to the significance of cultural productions to the Black Power movement, Van Deburg barely touched on the activist role of musicians and the ways in which they lent material support to various campaigns and causes in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite this minor shortcoming, *New Day in Babylon* served as an important historical and cultural typology of the Black Power Movement. My dissertation at once draws upon and expands Van Deburg’s valuation of musicians and their varied contributions to the movement and political discourse in black America in the Black Power era.

²⁴ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day In Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

Another seminal work on the BAM was James E. Smethurst's groundbreaking monograph, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s*.²⁶ Published in 2005, this work inaugurated a new era in Black Arts Movement scholarship. In declaring that the BAM was "arguably the most influential cultural movement the United States has ever seen,"²⁷ he refuted the dismissive observations made by Harvard University's preeminent literary scholar and Black Studies professor, Henry Louis Gates. In 1994, Gates adjudicated the BAM as an unmitigated failure, saying it had been "erected on a shifting foundation of revolutionary politics, this 'renaissance' was the shortest and least successful" literary movement in American history.²⁸ Like Redmond, Smethurst excelled in his attention to detail regarding the geographical breadth and ideological depths of the movement, thereby complicating the Amiri Baraka and Harlem-centric focus routinely encountered in BAM scholarship. Indeed, this attention to detail was entirely by design; his book "undertakes to map the origins and development of the different strains of the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts movement with special attention to its regional variations while delineating how the movement gained some sense of national coherence institutionally, aesthetically, and ideologically, even if it never became exactly homogenous."²⁹

²⁶ Prior to Smethurst, several scholars, namely Lorenzo Thomas and Kimberly Benston, published informative writings that theorized and criticized BAM productions. Their works are central to my understanding of the relationship between the BAM and the Music. Though it remains unpublished, it should be noted that Kalumu Ya Salaam's manuscript on the BAM has served as a guide for several other scholars, including Smethurst. See Lorenzo Thomas, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.; University of Alabama Press, 2000), Kimberly Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000), and Kalumu Ya Salaam, "The Magic of Juju: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement."

²⁷ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 373.

²⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge," *Time*, Oct. 10th 1994, 74.

²⁹ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 7.

In addition to discussing the roles of poetry, theater, and visual arts in the Black Arts matrix, Smethurst addressed the significant institutional and aesthetic function of black music and musicians.³⁰ By noting the importance and contributions of such figures as Sun Ra, John Coltrane, Don Cherry, Archie Shepp, Abbey Lincoln, Lonnie Liston Smith, Charlie Parker, James Brown, Cecil Taylor, and Ornette Coleman, he confirmed the centrality of jazz and R&B performers to the movement. In short, *The Black Arts Movement* serves as a groundbreaking literary history and important step toward a more complete and nuanced understanding of the BAM. What is more, by privileging the contributions of musicians to the movement, as well as focusing on BAM activities in the New York/Pennsylvania/New Jersey cluster, *The Black Arts Movement* provides the necessary historical and cultural framework that will be essential to mapping Gil Scott-Heron's artistic development and early activism.³¹

Following through the opening made by Smethurst, in 2006 literary scholars Margo Natalie Crawford and Lisa Gail Collins published *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*. Seeking to further push the boundaries of BAM scholarship, this collection features essays by numerous contributors including the editors, the aforementioned James Smethurst, Kelli Jones, Wendy S. Walters, and others. The book explores a wide range of BAM-related topics, including “the principal cities and sites of the movement,” “links between the Black Arts Movement and other sociocultural movements,” and the movement’s “predecessors,” “peers,” and “legacies.”³² By examining previously uncharted terrain of the institutional, geographical, gendered, aesthetical, and

³⁰ Ibid., 291.

³² Natalie Margo Crawford and Lisa Gail Collins, “Acknowledgements,” *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2006), ix.

biographical dimensions of the BAM and its legion of adherents, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* shed light on numerous heretofore unexplored topics, thus making a substantive contribution to the lacunae in BAM scholarship. Several essays within this collection were useful to my project. In particular James Smethurst's "The Black Arts Movement on Historically Black ..." speaks to the intellectual and cultural influences of the BAM at Lincoln University, Scott-Heron's alma mater. His observations and analysis will help frame my subject's intellectual development and further establish the BAM as a prime influence on campus.

Another title that enhanced my reading of Scott-Heron is Daniel Widener's monograph *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*. Published in 2010, the book illuminates the origins, existence, institutions, and legacy of the Black Arts Movement on the West Coast, principally in Los Angeles. *Black Arts West* is a scholarly tour de force that is at once local, institutional, and intellectual history that sought to chart "the interplay between efforts to develop a consciously black art and the broader liberation struggle." Of particular interest to the author was the various roles played by black Angelino musicians in the BAM and the West Coast black freedom struggle writ-large: "*Black Arts West* takes up themes raised by scholars who go beyond considering the Black Arts moment as a purely literary phenomenon to show the centrality of jazz and visual art in the development of art about and for liberation." Indeed, Widener devotes an entire chapter - "Notes From the Underground: Free Jazz and Black Power in South Los Angeles" - to exploring the intersections between the aural arts and activism from the 1950s through the 1970s.³³ The author profiles the activism and

³³ Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 117-152.

aesthetics of Horace Tapscott, Bob Bradford, and John Carter and an assortment of jazz collectives - Underground Musicians Association, the Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension, the Community Cultural Arkestra, and the Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra.³⁴

The roots of these organizations trace back to the Central Avenue jazz scene and struggles waged by local black musicians, including Charles Mingus, Eric Dolphy, Gerald Wilson, and Buddy Collette during the 1950s.³⁵ Specifically, Widener recounts the contested 1950 merger of Local 767, the black musicians' union, with Local 47, the white musicians' union. By charting the debates surrounding this controversial and contested campaign, the author illustrates the way in which African American musicians reckoned with the racial politics in studios and on bandstands in southern California. However, given that the author restricted his focus to BAM developments in Los Angeles, the national scene – not to mention those in other locales – remain ripe for scholarly inquiry. The publication of *Black Arts West* signaled a breakthrough in movement scholarship by shining a much-needed spotlight on the tradition of activism and aesthetic exploration that existed among African-American musicians in L.A. both during and in the era leading up to the BAM. Widener's scholarship in this regard helps to highlight the significance of musicians, along with their activism and institutional affiliations, to the Black Arts Movement in Los Angeles; this line of inquiry lays the groundwork for further study of the ways in which African American performers such as

³⁴ Ibid., 118.

³⁵ Ibid., 122-23, 139.

Gil Scott-Heron engaged and impacted the movement at both the national, regional, and local levels.

Another body of literature that my dissertation engages is that which explores the various ways in which African-American musicians positioned themselves as activists and intellectuals in the postwar era.³⁶ While the majority of the titles discussed thus far acknowledge the significance of music and musicians to activism in the postwar era, none explore this aspect of the BAM in great detail or depth. Among the first to break ground in this area was the cultural historian Eric Porter with his 2002 monograph, *What is this Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*. Porter sought to re-conceptualize the way jazz musicians are typically regarded in the United States, which is to say as entertainers. In contrast, he argued that in addition to their roles as performers and cultural workers, black musicians were also intellectuals. To demonstrate his thesis, Porter sought to “[bring] to the foreground the often ignored *ideas* of musicians.” Arguing that “musicians’ commentary is both interesting and important in its own right ...and ...adds to our understanding of the changing meaning of jazz in American culture,” Porter privileges the writings and pronouncements of black performers of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.³⁷ This intellectual framework is useful to my

³⁶ In addition to the texts relating to this subject that directly relate to my dissertation, there are numerous others published over the years that have interrogated the various roles of black musicians and their works in relation to American society, political activism, consciousness raising that inform my understanding of the broader historical context, including: A.B. Spellman, *Four Lives in the Be Bop Business* (New York: Limelight, 1966); Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998); Amiri Baraka, *Blues People* (New York: Da Capo, 1962); Baraka, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009); Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin’ the Boat* (Boston: South End Press, 1999); Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974); and Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Integral Music: Languages of African American Innovation* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 2004).

³⁷ Eric Porter, *What is this Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activist*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), xiii.

study in that it provides an alternative lens through which to view Scott-Heron's extra-musical productions, including numerous magazine articles, liner notes, interviews, and other writings published by the prolific poet.

One of the next texts to tackle the subject of musicians as shapers of social thought was *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* by cultural historian Scott Saul. Published in 2003, this monograph interrogated the ways in which the subgenre of hard bop intersected and dialogued with socio-historical developments in black America during the 1960s. He sought "to explain how and why 'hard bop' ... came to serve this role: as music of cultural burial and cultural awakening." Saul linked the emergence of hard bop with the rise of the civil rights movement, noting that, "the music crystallized in tandem with [it] and was in many ways its sonic alter ego."³⁸ He posited that, "like the movement, it grounded new appeals for freedom in older idioms of black spirituality, challenging the nation's public account of itself and testifying to the black community's cultural power." As a hybrid of gospel, bebop, and blues, hard bop was the product of a particular historical moment and aesthetic imperative. Hence, in the same way that avant-garde jazz is viewed as being an aural extension of the BAM, hard bop was the musical equivalent for an earlier generation of black artists and activists.

What is more, Saul theorized hard bop as an "extension particularly of the idea of direct action into the realm of structurally improvised music."³⁹ By casting musical performance as a political text, he views musicians as political actors in their own right. This conceptualization expands the traditional notions of direct action to include the

³⁸ Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

authorship and performance of instrumental compositions. Saul extends his analysis to several distinct yet interrelated aspects of cultural expression, namely the “figure of the hipster personified by African-American performers such as Oscar Brown Jr. and Slim Gaillard;” the jazz festival as a liberatory space for postwar youth; and the ways in which the musical exploits of hard bop luminaries, such as Charles Mingus translated into political expression.⁴⁰ In making the case that hard bop musicians and composers accompanied and amplified the struggle for civil rights, *Freedom is, Freedom Ain't* expanded traditional notions of traditional political participation, thereby laying the groundwork for a reconsideration of the relationship between mass culture, musical texts, and the black liberation struggle writ-large. As one whose career highlighted the connections to and contradictions between popular culture and political consciousness, Gil Scott-Heron serves as an example of the ways in which black artists navigated this uneasy terrain in the early seventies.

Another important text that looks at the cerebral as well as cultural work of black musicians in the postwar era is the late Lorenzo Thomas' *Don't Deny My Name: Words and Music and the Black Intellectual Tradition*. In tackling the Black Arts movement, Thomas – a participant-observer – focused his analysis largely on the connections between it and the seemingly disparate worlds of jazz and R&B in the 1960s and 1970s. To Thomas, the music and its makers were central to the BAM, both as active participants and aesthetic models. In his estimation, Black Arts architects “sought to translate into political theory what they believed was a preexisting political consciousness

⁴⁰ Ibid., 7.

embodied in African American songs and folklore.”⁴¹ Drawing upon the example set by the implicitly topical, chart topping productions of artists such as James Brown, Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, Curtis Mayfield, the Whispers, Joe Tex, Otis Redding, Jerry Butler, the O’Jays, Roberta Flack, and Sam Cooke, he argued that intellectual leaders and theorists within the movement viewed music as a key means to bridge the gap between popular culture and political consciousness in the black community.

Citing essays by Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, and Askia Touré, Thomas argued that these and other critics understood the inherent value and utility of black music, noting, “the cultural expressions of black America indeed constitute a powerful weapon of defense, self-affirmation, and resistance.”⁴² He concludes that the “Black Arts Movement’s focus on popular music was not the result of a simplistic identification but ... the result of an attempt to enter an ongoing intellectual conversation and challenge the dominant view” as presented by critics in the mainstream and underground publications.⁴³ This framework is useful here because it underscores Scott-Heron’s rationale and conscious decision to seize upon songwriting as the prime vehicle for communicating his messages and concerns to the black community.⁴⁴ Like *What is this Thing Called Jazz* and *Jazz Is, Jazz Ain’t, Don’t Deny My Name* casts black musicians as

⁴¹ Lorenzo Thomas, *Don’t Deny My Name: Words and Music and the Black Intellectual Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 2008), 138.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 140.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴⁴ Echoing Larry Neal, Scott-Heron explained that, “the novel doesn’t lend itself to writing in the immediately political way I can in poems and songs. ... My work is serious but it is also entertaining. Because I do want to reach people.” It is worth noting that he also confirms the tendency of BAM practitioners to cite musicians as key literary influences. Indeed, he suggested that his prose was shaped by the sounds of “musicians more than writers” and cited the styling of such people as Richie Havens, John Coltrane, Otis Redding, and Jimmy Reed as having influenced his literary voice. Nat Hentoff, “liner notes” *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1970).

formidable activists and intellectuals, further illustrating the centrality of the music to the movement, and by extension, the significance of popular culture to political struggle in the postwar matrix of American history.⁴⁵

Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic by Amy Abugo Ongiri offered another significant advance in scholarship regarding the relationship between the BAM and the music.⁴⁶ Like Thomas, Ongiri interrogated the attitudes and writings of movement spokespeople to various aspects of popular culture, including jazz and R&B music; however, she came to a radically different conclusion regarding this facet of BAM aesthetic. Whereas Thomas demonstrated the engagement of movement theorists with black popular music, Ongiri argued that, on the whole, the BAM rejected R&B for what Baraka and others referred to as “Black Classical Music” or jazz.⁴⁷ Despite this disagreement, Ongiri acknowledged the collision of popular culture and what Smethurst terms the “popular avant-garde.”⁴⁸ *Spectacular Blackness* complicates this relationship by highlighting the tensions that arose among BAM theorists such as Baraka and Neal, who questioned the ability of black artists and their cultural productions to retain their authenticity when enmeshed within the American capitalist system.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ For additional insight into avant-garde musicians and the politics of performance in the 1960s and 1970s, see George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and Ronald N. Radano, *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton's Cultural Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 26-7.

⁴⁸ James Smethurst, “Pat Your Foot and Turn the Corner: Amiri Baraka, the Black Arts Movement, and the Poetics of a Popular Avant-Garde,” *African American Review* 37 (Summer-Autumn, 2003), 261.

⁴⁹ Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 132.

On the same hand, Ongiri points out that “the Black Power era saw advances in sound recording and radio technology that enabled music to disseminate varied philosophies of Black empowerment widely, unifying African Americans as its intended audience.” As a result, black artists on a “large scale” began to “assert control over the conditions of production of African American music.”⁵⁰ She argues that these sea changes within the commercial music industry produced a panoply of black voices and viewpoints that, by virtue of their diversity, challenged the movement’s articulation of singularly “authentic” black modality or aesthetic. In highlighting tensions between the Black Arts Movement and commercial productions, Ongiri’s work is useful for pointing out the fluid and, at times, contradictory positions and valuations of movement theorists. *Spectacular Blackness* provides a useful model for interrogating the ways in which BAM consciousness was articulated and commodified within the American popular culture by artists such as Gil Scott-Heron.

The third stream of scholarly inquiry that my dissertation intervenes in is the small - but growing - body of work devoted specifically to Gil Scott-Heron. Despite his immense popularity and influence, scholars have been slow to engage the breadth or depth of his catalog; however, there have been a number of academics and cultural critics throughout his career who have written about him or incorporated his works into their analyses. As noted earlier, Eugene V. Redmond was among the first in the scholarly community to acknowledge the “awesome talents” of the poet and songwriter in his critical anthology, *Drumvoices*. In 1985, Scott-Heron commanded the attention of another literary scholar, Jon Woodson. However, nearly nine years passed between the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 149.

publication of *Drumvoices* and Woodson's entry in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Afro-American Poets Since 1955*.⁵¹ Though he notes Scott-Heron's recordings, Woodson focuses his brief analysis on Scott-Heron's three books, *The Vulture*, *Small Talk at 125th & Lenox*, and *The Nigger Factory*. The four-page article also offers a skeletal biographical portrait and discography that, however well intentioned, are chronologically inaccurate.

In 1988, Gil Scott-Heron received a two-page entry in *Contemporary Authors: A Bio-bibliographical Guide to Current Writers in Fiction, General Non-Fiction, Poetry, Journalism, Drama, Motion Pictures, Television, and Other Fields*.⁵² This volume acknowledges Scott-Heron's contributions to literature and music, and includes a brief biography and career history. Among the first academics to engage in an extended analysis of Scott-Heron's songs was one of his former university students, Mary Ellison. Her 1989 monograph, *Lyrical Protest: Black Music's Struggle Against Discrimination* highlights her mentor's contributions to the longstanding tradition of musical activism on the international stage.⁵³ In fact, she writes that it was Scott-Heron "who suggested this book and whose music inspired it."⁵⁴ Ellison placed Scott-Heron's work on the same historical and cultural continuum as artists working in various modalities of black music

⁵¹ Jon Woodson, "Scott-Heron, Gil," *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Afro-American Poets Since 1955*, vol. 41, eds. Trudier Harris and Thadious M. Davis (Columbia S.C.: Brucoli Clark/Gale Research Company, 1985), 307-311.

⁵² "Scott-Heron, Gil," *Contemporary Authors: A Bio-bibliographical Guide to Current Writers in Fiction, General Non-Fiction, Poetry, Journalism, Drama, Motion Pictures, Television, and Other Fields*, vol. 24 (Detroit: Gale Group, 1988), 376-7. This listing was republished in volume 90 of Gale's 2000 edition of *Contemporary Authors*.

⁵³ Mary Ellison, *Lyrical Protest: Black Music's Struggle Against Discrimination* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

pioneered around the globe, including the blues, spirituals, reggae, R&B, jazz, afro-beat and rap. Ellison's study privileged the expressly political productions of black artists and, in doing so she argued that:

just as music in Africa accompanied and commented on every aspect of life, so African-American music has articulated emotions and responses to oppression that would otherwise have been unheard. . . . But the most fascinating aspect of these musics and those they spawned is that the anger they express is not contained by the music but flows out into attitudes and actions that seek to fight discrimination and unjustified aggression.⁵⁵

Ellison examined the ways in which a number of Scott-Heron's songs addressed issues such as inequality, exclusion, and classism that plagued black America throughout the 1970s and 1980s. By bringing the reader's attention to lesser-known works such as "Black History (The World)," "(You Can't Depend on) the Train From Washington," "Storm Music," "Bicentennial Blues," and "Washington D.C.," she hinted at the breadth of material in Scott-Heron's catalog as well as his continuing engagement with socio-political themes well beyond the expiration of the Black Arts Movement.⁵⁶ Accordingly, *Lyrical Protest* situates Scott-Heron's songs firmly in the international spectrum of black diasporic productions, offering an alternate framework for analyzing his poetic output and activism.

In addition to those already discussed, several scholars have written more extended analyses of Scott-Heron's poetics and career. One of the first to do so was literary scholar Joyce Ann Joyce who authored a short exposition of Scott-Heron's style that was included as the afterword in his 1990 poetry volume, *So Far, So Good*. Over the course of ten pages, in "Gil Scott-Heron: Larry Neal's Quintessential Artist," Joyce

⁵⁵ Ibid., xi.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 70-1.

argued precisely that position. Drawing upon Neal's pronouncements regarding the function of the musician in the black community, she proclaims that Scott-Heron is the "quintessential example of what Neal believes the black artist should be. He is the priest or Black magician who makes 'juju' with the word on the world. His music represents Black people's 'collective psyche.'"⁵⁷ Moreover, she judged his recordings as "aesthetically poetic and beautifully musical renderings of Black cultural and political history."⁵⁸ However, it was not Scott-Heron's historical overtures that served the focus of her scholarly attention; rather, Joyce concerned herself primarily with innovative use of literary conventions and tropes.

For purposes of her inquiry, she categorized Scott-Heron's recordings into "five interrelated modes: the poetic-blues rap (or the satiric monologue), the people's folktale, the musical poem, the mellow lyric, and the satirical lyric."⁵⁹ She proceeded to briefly analyze a number of his compositions, arguing why, based on their form and lyrical content, each piece fit within one of these groupings. Among the titles she included were "The Shah is Dead/Checkmate," "Song of the Wind," "Possum Slim," "Bicentennial Blues," "Whitey on the Moon," and "A Legend in His Own Mind." While I take exception to a few of her classifications, Joyce's recognition of the connections between Neal's taxonomy and Scott-Heron's poetics provides an essential cultural and aesthetic grounding for my dissertation.

⁵⁷ Joyce Ann Joyce, "Gil Scott-Heron: Larry Neal's Quintessential Artist" *So Far, So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), 74.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

A number of years passed before Scott-Heron reappeared in the scholarly discourse. In the late 1990s, no fewer than three anthologies acknowledged Scott-Heron as a key node in the black literary tradition. The first of these, *The Oxford Companion to African-American Literature*, noted that he “speaks with rage and hope about the difficulty of creating social change in a funky mixture of blues, jazz, and poetry.”⁶⁰ Scott-Heron also merited mention in an entry on the Black Arts Movement by literary scholar and BAM poet Kalumu Ya Salaam, who wrote that Scott-Heron was “extremely popular and influential although often overlooked by literary critics.”⁶¹ Also published in 1997, *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, edited by Harvard professor and BAM critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. and collaborator Nellie Y. McKay, notes the “vital influence” of “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” on rap music.⁶² In 2001, he appeared in another literary anthology, *African-American Writers*. This entry acknowledges the significance of “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” and Scott-Heron’s influence on “the more politically oriented representatives among contemporary rap artists.”⁶³

Then, in 2004 American Studies scholar Sylvia Schiefer published the second extended analysis of Scott-Heron’s poetry. Presented as a conference paper before the 29th annual Austrian Association for American Studies two years prior, Schiefer’s essay,

⁶⁰ Tracy J. Patterson, “Scott-Heron, Gil,” *Oxford Companion to African-American Literature*, eds. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 646.

⁶¹ Kalumu Ya Salaam, “The Black Arts Movement,” *Oxford Companion to African-American Literature*, eds. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 73.

⁶² “Rap,” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1997), 61.

⁶³ Harryette Mullen, “The Black Arts Movement: Poetry and Drama from the 1960s to the 1970s,” *African-American Writers*, 2nd ed., ed. Valerie Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2001), 55.

“Americanisms under the Critical Eye of African-American Poet, Writer, Singer, and Musician Gil Scott-Heron: the ‘Movie’ Poems,” explored the works that comprise the “B-Movie” trilogy. In her examination of “‘B’ Movie Introduction” and “‘B’ Movie – The Poem,” Schiefer argues that by “demonstrating the illusions which cover up the imperfections of American society, the ‘movie’ poems highlight the gap between American values and American actualities.”⁶⁴ However, Schiefer only engages these works as literary texts, offering minimal historical details or analysis. In fact, her only sources were the poems themselves. Despite its inherent limitations, by showing the ways in which these poems reflected American reality to non-American audiences, this essay illustrated the international reach and influence of Scott-Heron’s work

In 2008, literary scholar Tony Bolden published only the second chapter-length inquiry into Scott-Heron’s poetics. His essay appeared as part of an edited collection entitled *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture*.⁶⁵ The work, as implied by its title, is devoted to theorizing and analyzing particular elements of funk music and culture, among them is Gil Scott-Heron’s verse. Bolden’s essay – “Blue/Funk As Political Philosophy: The Poetry of Gil Scott-Heron” – cuts a wide swath through his subject’s catalogue, drawing upon examples from compositions including “Cane,” “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” “H₂O Gate Blues,” “We Beg Your Pardon,” and “The Ghetto Code,” among others. As he explains, “my interest here concerns Gil’s use of various forms of blues modalities, including signification, as

⁶⁴ Sylvia Schiefer, “Americanisms under the Critical Eye of African-American Poet, Writer, Singer and Musician Gil Scott-Heron: the ‘Movie’ Poems,” (*Anti-)Americanisms*, vol. 2, eds. Michael Draxlbauer, Astrid M. Fellner, Thomas Fröschl (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2004).

⁶⁵ Tony Bolden, ed. *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

instruments of social critique.”⁶⁶ In particular, Bolden argued that Scott-Heron’s productions repeatedly drew upon the African American vernacular tradition known as “signifying,” which he defines as historically being “expressed in the dramaturgy of ring shout rituals, ensconced in mockery, parody, virtuoso rhyming, lying, extemporizing, rappin and cappin (sic), boastin and toastin (sic), playing the dozens, and battling onstage.”⁶⁷

For Bolden, “in Gil’s oeuvre” this rhetorical device constitutes “the most striking feature of a larger blues aesthetic that contests conventional ideologies in form and content, challenging the myth of imperialism’s epistemological suzerainty.”⁶⁸ In addressing the form and substance of Scott-Heron’s recordings, the author employed the writings of a number of theorists, including Samuel Floyd, Geneva Smitherman, Aldon Nielson, Charles Mills, V.F. Hegel, and Karl Marx in an attempt to explain the social and literary functions of the compositions he selected for examination. Though Bolden erroneously claimed that his was “the first article-length work ever published on [Scott-Heron],” - Sylvia Schiefer’s essay earned that distinction - the critical observations regarding his subject’s poetics are both path breaking and inform my analysis of the many ways in which Scott-Heron interpolated elements of the blues lyrical tradition into his musical and extra-musical productions during the 1970s.

As shown in the preceding pages, Gil Scott-Heron has amassed no small measure of recognition from academics. Despite the numerous historical subjects and themes that

⁶⁶ Tony Bolden, “Blue/Funk As Political Philosophy: The Poetry of Gil Scott-Heron” *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 227.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

are threaded throughout his catalog, the bulk of this attention has come from literary quarters. This dearth of historical inquiry and context regarding the subjects behind even his most celebrated songs is conspicuous in its absence. As such, this is but one of the ways in which my study will enrich our understanding of Gil Scott-Heron's particular artistry and activism. Nonetheless, each of the works discussed within the preceding pages provide an essential element of the intellectual framework of my inquiry. Collectively these writings point to the need for an extended study of the artist, his work, and various connections to the broader postwar cultural matrix, including the Black Power/Black Arts movement.

METHODOLOGY

Any study that critically engages the artistry and life of Gil Scott-Heron will, depending on the level of authorial engagement, necessarily be an interdisciplinary endeavor. This dissertation is no exception. By drawing upon historical, literary, and cultural studies frameworks to undergird my analysis, I will reveal more fully the significance of Scott-Heron's poetic innovations and cultural contributions. Among the concepts I will use to frame my discussion are the theoretical observations of BAM co-founder and literary critic Amiri Baraka. His seminal text, *Blues People*, contains an oft-quoted statement that is a truism among many scholars of black music, present company included:

music is the one vector of culture that is impossible to eradicate. It signified the existence of an Afro-American and the existence of an Afro-American culture. And in the evolution of form in Negro music it is possible to see not only the evolution of the Negro as a cultural and social element of American culture but also the evolution of that culture itself.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Baraka, *Blues People*, 131.

He later elaborated on this observation, calling music “an orchestrated, vocalized, hummed, chanted, blown, eaten, scatted, corollary confirmation of our history....the music was explaining the history as history was explaining the music.”⁷⁰ While lyrics were important in relaying information, for Baraka, the music was equally revealing in regard to changes in black society, such as the transformation from rural living to urbanity that occurred throughout the Great Migration: “its instrumentation changes to reflect the level of the people’s productive forces and the social, political, and economic structure of those people’s lives.”⁷¹ In short, as the work and lives of African Americans changed, so too did their music. Baraka’s thesis regarding the ongoing dialectic between black history and black musical productions is an astute theoretical observation and one upon which my inquiry rests.

The idea that music functions as a repository for historical memory – a truism among its practitioners – is gaining credence in academic circles. In a 1999, Charles Hardy III discussed the rise of the digital revolution and its impact on academia. He was particularly interested in the ways in which sonic sources, principally audio recordings, were influencing historians working in public and university settings. Speaking to the transformative possibilities unleashed by this new technology, he cited the birth of “an international and interactive information infrastructure in which once separate media are already converging; a celestial jukebox in which information will be recorded, stored, transmitted, and received digitally.” For Hardy, CDs, and mp3s are part and parcel of this new celestial jukebox. Accordingly, the reissue of titles produced in the pre-digital age

⁷⁰ Ibid., ix.

⁷¹ Ibid., 20.

offer a wealth of primary sources now available to scholars. In short, the data encoded in these formats are what Hardy calls “aural histories.”⁷² Following this line of inquiry, this dissertation privileges Scott-Heron’s cultural productions as aural histories. Indeed, his works purposefully preserved and communicated significant, yet now obscure, historical events, intellectual debates, and cultural politics germane to the black experience in postwar America.

Consequently, I am not alone in viewing Scott-Heron’s compositions in particular as valuable and valid historical sources. Cultural historian Dan Berger credited Scott-Heron with “providing the soundtrack” for his edited collection *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism* and several of the essays contained within utilize his verse.⁷³ And as mentioned earlier, one of Scott-Heron’s former students, Mary Ellison, authored a monograph on the subject of musical activism in which she thanks her former professor “who suggested this book and whose music was its inspiration.”⁷⁴ Since my study will include a number of sources, themes, and personnel particular to the Black Arts Movement, it is fair to say that this project will, at times, necessarily employ elements of literary analysis, as well.

Perhaps the greatest cache of primary sources this dissertation employs is the plethora of cultural productions – poems, audio recordings, and novels – released by Gil Scott-Heron in the 1970s. In particular, the extra-musical aspects of his LPs - liner notes and cover art - that accompanied albums such as *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox, Pieces of*

⁷² Charles Hardy III, “Authoring in Sound: Aural history, radio and the digital revolution” in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 393.

⁷³ Dan Berger, *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), ix.

⁷⁴ Ellison, *Lyrical Protest*, ix.

a Man, Free Will, Winter in America, the First Minute of a New Day, From South Africa to South Carolina, It's Your World, Bridges, Secrets, Real Eyes, and 1980 were not insignificant and are also ripe for scholarly analysis. Over the course of my research, I amassed a small trove of Scott-Heron related items ranging from rare import vinyl releases, first edition prints of his novels, LP test pressings, concert posters, 8-track tapes, t-shirts, twelve-inch singles, bootleg recordings, record company-issued press kits, advertisements, and articles from the domestic and international media that, in the realm of material culture, constitute a potentially useful array of sources.

It is worth noting that I worked with Scott-Heron in a professional capacity, providing him with a Fender Rhodes and other backline needs for two concerts in Denver, Colorado at the Lion's Lair in February of 2000. Besides delivering several lengthy and humorous monologues, Scott-Heron played several unreleased songs and offered insights into the inspiration behind more familiar fare. I captured these performances on cassette tape utilizing a direct feed from the mixing board and have drawn upon these and other live recordings for purposes of my analysis. In addition to his poems and liner notes, Scott-Heron penned op-ed style commentaries for numerous publications ranging from the *Lincolnian* to *Crawdaddy* to *Ebony*. These writings touch on a broad array of subjects and provide a further glimpse into the intellectual and cultural politics that informed his productions in the 1970s. What is more, that publications such as these gave Scott-Heron a regular forum is further testament to his stature and status as a public intellectual.

Feature stories, interviews, and reviews contained in numerous newspapers and magazines from the 1970s will inform my analysis and historicization of Scott-Heron's

work. Besides scholarly writings, any attempt to assess the impact and significance of Gil Scott-Heron will necessarily have to include a survey of non-academic sources, as well. Since his debut in 1970, columnists and critics alike recognized Scott-Heron's talent and lauded his work in numerous publications across the journalistic spectrum. Arguably, these sources provide one way for historians to chart his cultural significance as well as analyze the arc of his career. It is worth noting that Scott-Heron amassed the bulk of his press coverage in the aftermath of signing with Arista, the upstart label started by former CBS Records chief Clive Davis in 1975.⁷⁵ Incidentally, though not insignificantly, he was the first artist signed to the label and remained with Arista for the next decade. While articles about him appeared in mainstream sources such as *Time Magazine*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, it was in the domain of the black press that Scott-Heron garnered the most attention and support.

Publications such as the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American* routinely ran feature-length stories, performance notices, and reviews that championed his music and spotlighted his service to the black community.⁷⁶ Fortunately, the archives of many of these aforementioned newspapers have been digitized, which enables manifold and expedient searches; in fact, I have already amassed several hundred articles culled from various newspapers and national magazines relating to Scott-Heron (see Bibliography).

In addition, an assortment of underground and so-called counter-culture publications routinely featured and supported Scott-Heron. Indeed, publications such as *Rolling Stone*, *The Black Panther*, *High Times*, *Downbeat*, and *Crawdaddy* offer further

⁷⁵ Amy Waldman, "A Ravaged Musical Prodigy at a Cross-Roads with Drugs." *New York Times*, 10 July 2001: A1, B6.

evidence of his enormous popularity, cross-cultural appeal, and prominence as a public intellectual. What is more, these writers and interviewers were of a slightly higher caliber than their counterparts in either mainstream newspapers or the black press. Nonetheless, as with other media outlets, the bulk of coverage devoted to Scott-Heron in these venues mostly appeared in the wake of his Arista debut in 1974. Among the first of these publications to take notice of the young artist was also one of the most popular and influential publications among American youth at the time, namely, *Rolling Stone*. Scott-Heron's appearances in such a diverse range of publications offer further evidence of his role as a noted musical talent, public intellectual, and tireless activist in this period. Articles such as the ones that appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *High Times*, *Down Beat*, and *Crawdaddy* are representative of the reception accorded Scott-Heron by the literati of the cultural left as well as fans from across the spectrum of popular music. Clearly, the press coverage devoted to Scott-Heron attests to not only his broad appeal among diverse constituencies, but to his cultural cache and reputation as well-regarded public intellectual, as well.

At present, it is unclear if Scott-Heron's family has placed his personal papers with a university; nonetheless, several institutions hold materials that were beneficial to my study. The special collections department at Scott-Heron's alma mater, Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania has materials related to the years he spent there in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including course syllabi, copies of the campus daily the *Lincolnian*, yearbooks, student body and administrative meeting minutes, and other items of interest pertaining to the university's culture and history. Given Scott-Heron's

visibility on campus as a musician, activist, and freshman class president, these materials shed light on his development in this formative period.

Besides archival sources, personal interviews have proven invaluable to establishing specifics regarding Scott-Heron's career and influence. In 2007, I had the privilege of corresponding with and interviewing Scott-Heron at length and have drawn upon these letters and discussions herein. Moreover, interviews and informal conversations with a number of poets, performers, and scholars including Sonia Sanchez, Ron Welburn, Askia Touré, Everett Hoagland, Ekeuwe Michael Thelwell, and Joe Bataan provided a greater understanding of Scott-Heron's imminence, impact, and artistic innovations.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

Given my training as an historian and Afro-American Studies scholar, this dissertation is ultimately an interdisciplinary enterprise. As such, several chapters will engage the historical landscape and events that served as the subjects of Scott-Heron compositions, while other chapters will interrogate key aspects of the literary and musicological elements of his canon. Chapter 1, "'Pieces of a Man': The Cultural Geography of Gil Scott-Heron" will detail, contextualize, and historicize key elements of Scott-Heron's biography. In addition to offering readers sufficient background regarding his family, upbringing, and early career, this chapter will highlight Scott-Heron's formative musical, literary, institutional, and political influences. I will argue that the cultural geography of three locales - Jackson, Tennessee, New York City, and Lincoln University near Oxford Pennsylvania - provided the kernels of culture that fueled his

artistic development. In bringing these biographical and aesthetic details to the fore, this chapter will illustrate the way in which, in the verse of Scott-Heron, the personal became political and the political became poetic.

Chapter 2, Anatomy of a “Bluesologist,” will further my inquiry into Scott-Heron’s aesthetics and influences. Blues music and poetry were early and integral influences that became the cornerstone of his musical and compositional styling. Though generally weary of labels and distrustful of musical categorization imposed from without, Scott-Heron routinely referred to himself as a “Bluesologist.”⁷⁷ The casual listener who associates Scott-Heron with his more fiery recordings may, at first glance, question this self-characterization. However, close readings of his compositions betray the resonant and unmistakable influence of the blues. In fact, they were central to his development as a musician, writer, and intellectual. Throughout Scott-Heron’s forty-plus year career, the blues served as a ever-present muse and cultural touchstone. As such, this chapter will analyze the relationship between his compositions and what Houston Baker Jr. termed “the blues matrix.”

The casual listener who associates Scott-Heron with fiery recordings such as “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” “Johannesburg,” and “Re-Ron,” might, at first glance, question this self-characterization. However, close readings of his compositions often betray the resonant and unmistakable influence of the blues. Reared in the rural enclave of Jackson, Tennessee, for Scott-Heron blues artists and their compositions provided an ever-present backdrop to everyday life and were an indelibly formative influence; in fact, they were central to his development as a writer and intellectual. In a forty-plus year career that crisscrossed the cultural matrix, the blues served as a constant

⁷⁷ Don Letts, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (London: BBC4, 2003).

muse and cultural touchstone. This chapter will explore in detail the relationship between Scott-Heron's music, lyrics, and poetry and the blues tradition.

Chapter 3, "Winter in America": Poetic Resistance in the Age of Nixon, will highlight Scott-Heron's engagement with pivotal issues that defined the early 1970s: the American War in Vietnam; the busing controversy that roiled northern urban centers; the persistence of systemic racial discrimination and inequality in American society; and the series of crimes and resultant cover-up that toppled a sitting president, namely, Watergate. Drawing upon his recordings, such as "H₂O Gate Blues," "Did You Hear What They Said," "Winter in America," "Bicentennial Blues," and "Pardon Our Analysis" this chapter will illustrate the ways in which Scott-Heron's songs spoke to not only the political dramas that had engulfed the nation, but also to the everyday concerns of many black Americans in the early to mid-1970s.

In addition to detailing the incidents and issues alluded to within these compositions, this chapter will address the notions of intersubjectivity and collective consciousness in relation to black music. I will argue that, in many ways, Scott-Heron's cultural productions functioned as what musicologist Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. termed "community theater," or, "sites of cultural memory." For Ramsey, these spaces "include but are not limited to cinema, family narratives and histories, the church, the social dance, the nightclub, the skating rink, and even literature."⁷⁸ To this list I would add the Music, and once again invoke Amiri Baraka who reminds us that, "the "story," the content of black music, tells us of Black life in America."⁷⁹ Viewed in this capacity, Gil Scott-

⁷⁸ Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 4.

⁷⁹ Baraka, *Digging*, 78.

Heron's productions facilitated consciousness-raising, a sense of efficacy, collective understanding, identity, and dialogue regarding pan-Africanism - and a host of other socio-political phenomena - among listeners both within and without black America. In broader terms, these compositions were also in dialogue with key actors and events, speaking truth to power in venues that remained inaccessible to the aggregate of African Americans.

Chapter 4, “‘From South Africa to South Carolina’: The Pan-Movement Politics and Praxis of Gil Scott-Heron,” analyzes the intersectionality of activism that became Scott-Heron's trademark. Recognizing the inherent consciousness-raising capabilities of music, he seized upon art as a means for speaking truth to power while simultaneously mobilizing the masses. In 1975, he struck upon an ingenious organizing strategy, one adroitly articulated by the title of his fifth LP, *From South Africa to South Carolina*. The title, cover art, and contents outline his strategy of linking the causes and supporters of several intercontinental protest movements—specifically, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and anti-nuclear activism in the United States. I term this unique organizing strategy “Pan-Movement activism” and argue that this philosophy was an intrinsic component of his artistic and intellectual worldview. Indeed, Scott-Heron's pan-Movement activism found expression in numerous platforms, including musical recordings, extra-musical publications, and live performances. Thus, this chapter will explore these works with particular emphasis on the ways in which Scott-Heron linked resistance to the international struggle against apartheid in South Africa to protests against nuclear energy in the United States.

Chapter 5, “And Then He Wrote ‘And then he Wrote Meditations’”: The Coltrane Poems and Songs of Gil Scott-Heron, will offer an analysis of his poetic paeans to the late John Coltrane. As a musician and composer, Coltrane figured prominently in the works and psyches of BAM artists. In addition to identifying with his musical explorations and innovations, many projected a connection between Coltrane’s politics and his cultural productions such as “Love Supreme,” “Alabama,” and “Giant Steps.” In fact, if jazz were a religion, as suggested by Ted Joans, then the personage of Coltrane is that of a holy man - a high priest, a mojo man, and patron saint - all rolled into one.⁸⁰ Like his peers in the BAM, Scott-Heron, too, idolized the iconic sax master. In giving name to this poetic phenomenon, literary scholar Kimberly Benston posits that the Coltrane Poem “has, in fact, become an unmistakable genre of contemporary black poetry...and it is in this genre that the notion of music as the quintessential idiom, and the word as its annunciator, is carried to its technical and philosophic apex.”⁸¹

A close reading of Scott-Heron’s Coltrane poems and songs - “And then he Wrote Meditations,” “Lady Day and John Coltrane,” “Trane,” and “Spirits” - will reveal the ways in which the figure of John Coltrane operates as a metaphorical, metaphysical, and semiotic trope. Placing his Coltrane poems in dialogue with those by other BAM wordsmiths such as Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, and Tony Medina will highlight his innovations to and continuities with this avant-garde poetic form. Moreover, drawing upon interviews and liner notes, I will explore Coltrane’s significance to and influence on Scott-Heron’s own cultural politics and musical productions. This will reveal a number of aesthetic commonalities between Scott-Heron and his Black Arts peers, offering further

⁸⁰ Ted Joans, “Jazz Is My Religion” *Black Pow-Wow* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 71.

⁸¹ Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 120.

proof of the way in which BAM aesthetics shaped the form and substance of black cultural productions during the 1970s.

With compositions that addressed a range of issues that impacted black America, Gil Scott-Heron's recordings offer contemporary audiences a window into the turbulent decade of the 1970s. Accordingly, his formidable catalog presents scholars with a range of sources that detail significant events and psychic dramas that have long since faded from view. As Scott-Heron once pointed out, "I like to write songs about issues not because they became headlines, but because they *could* become headlines. I don't write them after a crisis and say, "damn, wasn't that something." The idea's not that everyone who heard my song would decide the way that I have, but that, at least, they've got another way of looking at that problem."⁸²

Accordingly, these soundscapes not only complicate the traditional historical narrative, they refigure our understanding of the American past. Indeed, Gil Scott-Heron's recordings function as compelling aural histories of the postwar era that provide listeners with what Baraka called "the libretto, to ... actual lived lives." In this sense, Scott-Heron's cultural productions are not mere entertainment; they are historical documents. Put another way, in the hands of Scott-Heron, art becomes history and history becomes art. As the following chapters illustrate, his recordings offer a plethora of primary sources that reveal not only the nimble creative genius of Gil Scott-Heron, but heretofore marginalized dimensions of black life and intellectual thought in the 1970s.

⁸² A. J. Barratt, "Word War Fighter," *New Musical Express* (19 July 1986), 19.

CHAPTER 1

“PIECES OF A MAN”: THE CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF GIL SCOTT-HERON, 1949-1970

I was raised up in a small town
in the country down south
so I've been close enough to know
what oppression's about – Gil Scott-Heron⁸³

Geography [is] fate. – Ralph Ellison⁸⁴

The places Gil Scott-Heron lived, both as a youth and an adult, had a profound influence on his art. Evaluating the relationship between individuals and their environs, Ralph Ellison famously posited, “geography [is] fate.”⁸⁵ For black musicians born in the postwar era, this statement rings especially true; the politics of place and the matrix of cultural geography often acted as twin engines of artistic development and innovation. Ellison, in his essay “On Initiation Rites and Power,” expounded on the role of these factors in relation to black cultural productions:

Racial experience is diverse within itself, and rendered more complex by special relationships existing between my own group and the various regions in which Negro Americans find their existence—and by reason of the varied relationships shared by blacks and whites of various social backgrounds. These, in turn, are shaped by the politics, social history, and climatic conditions existing within the country's various political and geographical regions.⁸⁶

⁸³ Brian Jackson and Gil Scott-Heron, “95 South (All of the Places We've Been),” *Bridges* (New York: Arista Records, 1977).

⁸⁴ This phrase originated with the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus and was later reified by Ellison's namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ellison interpolated it into his own work, interrogating the meaning of this phrase in relation to the everyday lives and history of black Americans. Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 131.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸⁶ Ralph Ellison, “On Initiation Rites and Power,” *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 527.

Indeed, these various factors formatively shaped Scott-Heron's worldview and aesthetics. Thus, in order to accurately analyze his productions, one must first examine the critical elements of his biography that most heavily contributed to the musical, poetic, and political sensibilities that later became his trademark.

In doing so, we should begin by mapping the cultural landscape of several places Scott-Heron called home in the years leading up to his national debut, namely, Jackson, Tennessee, New York City, and Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania. Particular elements of these places provided the kernels of culture and tradition that comprised the matrix of influences reflected in Scott-Heron's audio recordings and literary productions. Additionally, the dynamics of black migration in the postwar era factored heavily in his biography and shaped his development as an artist. Though born in Chicago, it was Jackson, Tennessee that served as his hometown and the first of several artistic incubators. It was in the segregated environs of Jackson that he encountered not only the racial politics and other particularities of black life in the postwar South that figured prominently in his worldview in several key ways.

There, growing up in the household of his maternal grandmother Lily Scott, he absorbed many lessons regarding the struggle for black rights in the South. Scott, a longtime resident of the rural community, was outspoken on matters of racial injustice and figured prominently in shaping Scott-Heron's worldview and early political education. Additionally, Jackson was where he first imbibed the works of Langston Hughes and the sounds of the blues, both crucial influences that registered loudly and often over the course of his career. Finally, the Tennessee town served as the site where, in 1962, Scott-Heron initiated his activism with his participation in the desegregation of

the Jackson schools, an action spearheaded by the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

In the summer of 1962, Scott-Heron and his mother moved to New York City, the next place that he would call home. The neighborhood surrounding the Robert Fulton Houses in the Chelsea district where the pair would eventually settle provided the backdrop his creative development. The Latin music, especially Salsa played by Puerto Ricans, that emanated from the streets and tenement windows there proved particularly influential, inspiring the rhythms, sounds, and lyrical content of a number of his compositions. Additionally, while in New York City Scott-Heron honed his musical skills, playing piano semi-professionally on the weekends in bands that covered hits made famous by the top R&B and rock and roll acts of the early-to-mid Sixties. Later in the decade, certain other locales in New York would factor into his artistic development, most notably East Wind, the Last Poet's Harlem loft, a BAM hotspot that served as the site of regular performances and readings.

Likewise, Lincoln University – one of the first and most prominent black colleges in the United States and one of only a handful in the North – placed an indelible stamp on Scott-Heron's artistic and intellectual politics. As a key hub for the Black Arts Movement and a bastion of black intelligentsia with an international constituency, Lincoln provided an atmosphere highly conducive to aesthetic and intellectual exploration. While an undergraduate at the esteemed HBCU, Scott-Heron encountered the works of a number of seminal influences including John Coltrane, Billie Holiday, and the Last Poets. What is more, while at Lincoln he made frequent use of the holdings in special collections – the Black Stacks - and studied under the tutelage of professors who

further exposed him to a broad range of black achievement, activism, and artistic expression that inspired and informed his cultural productions. Besides sampling the intellectual bounties of Lincoln, Scott-Heron honed his skills as an activist by leading several protests that resulted in significant structural changes at the university and, in one case, an audience with Attorney General John Mitchell. Lincoln University also served as the launch pad for his musical career. There, in 1969 he met the man who became his musical partner for most of the Seventies, Brian Jackson. Jackson, a fellow student, piano player, and flautist, began writing songs with Scott-Heron during their tenure with the Lincoln-based band, Black & Blues. For these and other reasons that will be explored in greater detail in subsequent pages, the campus of Lincoln University played a central role in expanding Scott-Heron's cultural consciousness, musical sensibilities, and activist credentials.

This chapter analyzes Scott-Heron's artistic, intellectual, and political influences prior to his 1970 recording debut, *Small Talk at 125th & Lenox*. In doing so, the significance of Ellison's observation regarding geography and its applicability to Scott-Heron's artistic development will come to the fore, highlighting the dynamic interplay between where he lived and what he wrote. Another function of this chapter is to illuminate the relationship between Gil Scott-Heron and the Black Arts Movement (BAM). Exploring his aesthetic, geographic, and interpersonal connections to this cultural milieu will enrich our understanding of his productions and offer additional evidence of the ways in which the BAM made inroads into the national and international mainstream. For many of his contemporaries in the world of black poetics, his BAM *bona fides* were undeniable and the movement's imprimatur unmistakable. Yet, neither

Scott-Heron, nor most who have written about his career, situate him within this foundational cultural milieu. In contrast, this chapter highlights his Black Art influences and show that with his multi-platform debut - a novel, LP, and poetry volume - in 1970, Scott-Heron joined the vibrant BAM dialogue already in progress.

JACKSON, TENNESSEE

Gil Scott-Heron was born on 1 April 1949 at Provident Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, the town that the renowned scholars St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton christened the “black metropolis.”⁸⁷ His mother, Bobbi Scott, was the second of four children born to Bob and Lily Scott in Jackson, Tennessee. She graduated with a B.A. from Lane College in Jackson and moved to Chicago where she worked at a Western Electric plant.⁸⁸ His father, Giles Heron, hailed from Kingston, Jamaica and was a veteran of the Canadian Air Force who also worked at Western Electric.⁸⁹ The pair met in 1948 at the bowling alley located next to the plant and began a courtship that resulted in their marriage and her pregnancy. In addition to his full-time job at Western electric, Giles Heron was a semi-professional soccer player. In 1950, the Scottish team, the Celtic, played an exhibition game in Chicago; their coaches were mightily impressed with Heron’s skills on the field. Following the match, he received an offer to play for the team. As a result, in the winter of 1950, when Scott-Heron was one and one-half years of age, his parents divorced.

⁸⁷ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945).

⁸⁸ Gil Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday: A Memoir* (New York: Grove Press, 2012), 20.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

Commenting on their parting, Scott-Heron wrote, “my father decided to take an opportunity to do what he always wanted to do: play football fulltime, at the highest level, against the best players. It was, for him, the chance of a lifetime, the chance to play for one of the most famous teams in the British Isles.”⁹⁰ Interestingly, and not entirely incidental, Giles Heron was the first black footballer to play in the Scottish league. He was the recipient of “a Jackie Robinson-like invitation” as his son later explained it. Following several victories in which his speed and skill on the field had been a deciding factor, Heron earned the nickname “the Black Arrow.” His impact on the sport and national culture in Scotland is not insignificant. In fact, across Europe journalists and fans alike still celebrate his accomplishments and legacy. Heron then relocated to Europe and commenced a successful career, one distinguished by his quickness on the field and the color of his skin, which combined earned him the nickname, “the Black Arrow.”⁹¹

Soon after, in December of 1950, Scott-Heron, in the company of his maternal grandmother Lily Scott, left the Windy City on a train bound for her home in rural Tennessee.⁹² Initially it was intended that he stay with his grandmother for six months and then reunite with his mother in Chicago once her economic situation improved. However, as it were, Scott-Heron would call Jackson home for well over a decade. “It was where my grandmother and her husband had settled. It was where my mother and her brother and sisters were all born and grew up. It was where I was raised in a house on

⁹⁰ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 22.

⁹¹ Ibid., 22. For evidence of the senior Heron’s popularity, see “‘Black Arrow’ Gil Heron a trailblazer at Celtic - Father of famous jazz musician dies aged 87,” *The Scotsman* (2 December 2008) and Norman (Otis) Richmond, “Gil Heron, 81, father of Gil Scott-Heron, joins the ancestors,” <http://panafricannews.blogspot.com/2008/12/gil-heron-81-father-of-musician-gil.html> (accessed 6/4/2011).

⁹² Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 23.

South Cumberland Street that all of them called home, regardless of what they were doing and where they were doing it,” he later reminisced.⁹³

Jackson, like most communities in the postbellum South, was racially segregated. Historian Lester C. Lamon reminds us that from its origins, most of Tennessee had been hostile territory for black folk and that “slavery, caste, and segregation ... forced them to live apart and to create for themselves a separate history ... they have been a part of and apart from the developments affecting the dominant white population.”⁹⁴ In his memoir, Scott-Heron spoke to this spatial separation, noting that, “all the Black folks lived in South Jackson.”⁹⁵ He further revealed a significant demographic feature of South Jackson, noting that “a substantial percentage of the community members were from my grandparents’ generation. ... [P]eople my mother’s age ... were the folks who had left Jackson and Tennessee for factory work and urban life in the north or farther west: St. Louis, Memphis, and Chicago. Somehow their children, like me, ended up in Jackson with their grandparents, aunts, and uncles.”⁹⁶ This facet of the demographic composition of South Jackson in the 1950s, though striking on its face, should come as little surprise. Since the beginning of what scholars refer to as the Great Migration, African Americans had exited the rural South, lured to urban environs up North and out West where the

⁹³ Ibid., 1.

⁹⁴ Lester C. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee, 1791-1970* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), vii.

⁹⁵ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 24.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 24.

opportunities for employment and the escape from Jim Crow outweighed the apprehension they felt over leaving; and by all accounts, their numbers were legion.⁹⁷

When speaking of the forces behind the Great Migration, historians recount the multiple push/pull factors such as “lynchings, Jim Crow laws, boll weevil infestations and the subsequent collapse of the cotton market, World War I, disenfranchisement, sharecropping system, and ‘neo-slavery.’” Additionally, most urban locales in the North afforded Afro-Americans far greater economic opportunities and personal freedoms than were available to them in the South. As a result, approximately two million blacks emigrated from the region in the years between 1900 and 1930.⁹⁸ According to the eminent historian Leon Litwack, “the story of black migration is the story of many migrations, some of them confined to the South.”⁹⁹ For example, many African Americans in rural Tennessee relocated to the bustling urban center of Memphis, which saw its black population boom by nearly forty-five percent during the 1930s alone.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Litwack confirmed the contours of this demographic shift, noting that “nine out of ten black Americans still lived in the South in 1917 ... three of four of them in rural sections.” It is estimated that by the late 1950s, seventy-five percent of blacks lived in

⁹⁷ To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the history surrounding the Great Migration, see Edward E. Lewis, *The Mobility of the Negro: A Study in the American Labor Supply* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), August Meier and Eliot Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), Emmett J. Scott, *Negro Migration During the War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920), and Joe William Trotter, Jr., ed., *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions in Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991).

⁹⁸ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 153.

⁹⁹ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 483.

¹⁰⁰ Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 95.

urban areas.¹⁰¹ However, one should not mistake physical mobility for material progress, since, as Lamon pointed out, “poor housing, high mortality rates, debt, anemia, and general insecurity occurred as readily in Memphis” as elsewhere in Tennessee, thus, generally necessitating a second move, usually to the North.¹⁰² For those that stayed, over the course of the 1950s, by most measures, the quality of life differed substantially between black and white residents of “The Volunteer State.” During that decade the median income for African American households in relation to their white counterparts dropped from 57 percent to 53 percent.¹⁰³

Ensnared in the historically African-American locale of South Jackson, Scott-Heron’s musical and literary talents were nurtured and, equally as important, the die of his political education was cast. Not only was Jackson where he first took piano lessons and began writing prose, it was there that he first encountered two influences that would indelibly shape his aesthetic sensibilities in these areas, namely Langston Hughes and the blues.¹⁰⁴ While subsequent chapters will interrogate their respective textual and aesthetic impact on his cultural productions, let us begin by looking at the ways in which he first gained exposure to these key influences in South Jackson. As with many aspect of his character, much of the credit here belongs to Lily Scott. By virtue of her own likes and dislikes, she took a leading role in fashioning her grandson’s aesthetics and worldview. As we shall see, this applied to his literary, if not musical tastes, as well.

¹⁰¹ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 482.

¹⁰² Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee* 95.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁰⁴ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 1.

Among Lily Scott's favorite writers was the African American poet, playwright, novelist, essayist, columnist, and autobiographer, Langston Hughes. In turn, Hughes became a prime mover in Scott-Heron's poetic pantheon. Indeed, he was never one to shy away from the opportunity to acknowledge his debt to the pioneering author, often crediting Hughes as being singularly important in his own literary development. If we look at the sum of his artistic output, we can see echoes of his influence in the not only the quality but also the range and chosen mediums for his cultural productions: from poems and essays, novels and music, to newspaper columns and memoirs, Scott-Heron, like his hero, crisscrossed the cultural landscape. In particular, Lily Scott was enamored by the witty repartee contained in Hughes' Jess B. Semple stories.

Dubbed by Hughes biographer and scholar Arnold Rampersad as "the most memorable and winning characters in the annals of American literature" the Semple, or "Simple" column first appeared in print in the pages of the venerable black newspaper the *Chicago Defender* on February 13, 1943.¹⁰⁵ Incidentally, this was how the Scotts received their weekly sampling of Simple, thus serving as the source of Scott-Heron's initial exposure to Langston Hughes: "when I was living with her, on Thursdays, the guy who sold the *Chicago Defender* would come by and bring her a copy of her newspaper. We didn't take the *Memphis Press-Sentinel* or the *Commercial Appeal* – our only newspaper was the *Chicago Defender* and that's where my grandmother would keep up with what she wanted to know about."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Arnold Rampersad, "Introduction," in Langston Hughes, *The Return of Simple* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), xv.

¹⁰⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with the author, 14 April, 2007.

Questioned as to why his grandmother chose the *Defender* over a local newspaper, he explained that it was because it was “a part of that whole network that carried black news and kept people brought up on what was going on in the black communities.”¹⁰⁷ The Scotts’ preference for the Chicago-based publication was not uncommon. According to historian Mary E. Stovall, by the 1920s the *Defender* had “transcended the boundaries of its South Side offices to become the foremost shaper of black thought” in America.¹⁰⁸ The paper’s function, she pointed out, was “affirming black life by reporting significant activities, praising black success, and defining worthwhile goals for the community.”¹⁰⁹ In this way, the *Chicago Defender* was an integral feature of the cultural geography of South Jackson and a prime news source for the Scott household during the 1950s. What is more, the routine appearance of Jess B. Simple often marked the highlight of Scott-Heron’s week.

From the pages of the *Defender*, Lily Scott read Simple’s exploits aloud to her young grandson before he could read himself; however, the pair was soon perusing them together, even before Scott-Heron entered grade school. The following passage comes from the story entitled “Adventure” and is a representative of the mix of racial politics, humor, and commentary typical of Hughes’ columns:

Adventure is a great thing,” said Simple, “which should be in everybody’s life. According to “The Late Show” on TV, in the old days when Americans headed West in covered wagons, they was sure to run into adventure – at the very least a battle with the Red Skins. Nowadays if you want to run into adventure, go to Alabama or Mississippi, where you can battle with the White Skins.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Mary E. Stovall, “The Chicago Defender in the Progressive Era,” *Illinois Historical Journal* (Autumn, 1990) vol. 83, 159.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 160.

“‘Go West, young man, go West,’ is what they used to say,” I said. “*Pioneers! O pioneers!*” cried Whitman.” “‘Go South, young man, go South,’ is what I’d say today,” declared Simple.

If I had a son I wanted to make a man out of, I would send him to Jackson, Mississippi or Selma, Alabama-and not in a covered wagon but on a bus. Especially if he was a white boy, I would say, ‘Go, son, go, and return to your father’s house when you have conquered. The White Skins is on the rampage below the Mason-Dixon Line, defying the government, denying free Americans their rights. Go see what you can do about it. Go face the enemy.’¹¹⁰

Speaking to Simple’s appeal, Scott-Heron recalled that, “at that time, [the column] was something we appreciated because the least educated, the least respected, the least appreciated characters in those stories always came out on top.”¹¹¹ Therefore, it is not a stretch to say that Lily Scott’s love for Langston Hughes laid the cornerstone of not only Scott-Heron’s literacy, but his literary career as well. When asked what he took most from Hughes as a writer, Scott-Heron cited “the fact is it’s easier to laugh than it is to cry and we have a lot to cry about -- but there was a great deal of humor in his writing and a great deal of laughter in my life. [So] the humor that Langston Hughes had as a part of his make up and a part of his character that came through in his writing were things that I felt were very important to have as an artist.”¹¹² In this way, Hughes’ prose and utilization of humor served as a formative aesthetic model and one of the most readily identifiable artistic influences.

In addition to the literary styling of Langston Hughes, another prominent feature of the cultural landscape of South Jackson that factored mightily into Gil Scott-Heron’s

¹¹⁰ Langston Hughes, *The Return of Simple* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 115.

¹¹¹ Don Letts, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, (London: BBC4, 2004).

¹¹² Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with the author, 14 April 2007.

artistic development was the musical lingua franca of the region—the blues.¹¹³ To quote Scott-Heron, “Blues was the music of the day.”¹¹⁴ “It was on the radio. It was on the Jukeboxes. It was the music of Shannon Street in ‘Fights Bottom’ on Saturday night, when the music was loud and the bootleg whiskey from Memphis flowed.” While this was true, it should be noted that there were those in the black community who were quite critical of the blues, particularly churchgoers and some among the elite, who, for different reasons, remained publicly hostile to or dismissive of the music. According to her grandson, Lily Scott was among the former. Like many who would not cotton to the blues, Scott refused to allow the music to be played in her presence: “Shannon Street was taboo at my house, something my grandmother didn’t even think about. We never played the blues at home.”¹¹⁵ However, Scott-Heron later complicated this statement, noting that they eventually acquired the “ballgame radio,” which was kept in a back room. This welcome addition allowed him to indulge his interest in the blues safely out of range of his grandmother.¹¹⁶

Thus, using the so-called “ballgame radio” as a youth Scott-Heron would routinely tune in the signal of WDIA, the self-proclaimed “Goodwill Station” and “place where the blues began.”¹¹⁷ Legendary among music aficionados, WDIA was a 50,000-watt beacon of blues broadcasting in the postwar era. The station rose to prominence in

¹¹³ The scholarly literature regarding the blues is voluminous; however, for an introduction to this critical socio-cultural and musicological discourse, see Steven C. Tracy, ed., *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

¹¹⁴ Letts, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*.

¹¹⁵ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 2.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁷ Louis Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation’s First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound that Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books 1992), 5.

the late 1940s and, while white-owned, was the first in the nation to “beam its signal exclusively to a black audience.”¹¹⁸ Judging by the station’s popularity, unlike Lily Scott, many black Tennesseans held no objection to the blues. WDIA was where many nationally acclaimed artists including B.B. King, Bobby “Blue” Bland, Johnny Ace, Junior Parker, Roscoe Gordon, Isaac Hayes, and Albert King launched their musical careers.¹¹⁹ When questioned about who his favorite blues artists were as a young man, he replied:

when I was being raised down there [Jackson, Tennessee] the people that we listened to...were...John Lee Hooker, Earl King, B.B. King, Jimmy Witherspoon, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Jimmy Reed - these were the people that we kept up with.¹²⁰

He also recalled being a fan of WDIA personalities Rufus and Carla Thomas and B.B. King, regularly tuning in their shows over the course of his days in South Jackson.¹²¹ A cursory review of the station’s play lists confirms the wide variety of music that reached listeners by way of WDIA. For example, in the 1950s and early 1960s, the station playlist featured artists including Little Milton, Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Elmore James, J.B. Lenoir, and Junior Wells.¹²² Collectively, these performers are representative of the multiplicity of blues modalities, including the country blues, classic blues, and urban blues traditions. In addition to the artists he mentioned above, Scott-Heron cited the singer Joe Williams as a key contributor to his understanding of the blues and someone whose vocal style he

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 82.

¹²⁰ Letts, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*.

¹²¹ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 3.

¹²² Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale*, 22.

enjoyed and imitated.¹²³ Suffice it to say, the blues provided the soundtrack of Scott-Heron's youth in Tennessee and became a key pillar of his poetics.

In addition to making the acquaintance of Langston Hughes and the blues in South Jackson, Scott-Heron learned first-hand of the necessity for and the historical significance of the modern civil rights movement. Outspoken on issues of racial injustice and active in the local NAACP, Lily Scott passed her politics on to her grandson. Born Lily Hamilton in Russellville, Alabama, she married Bob Scott and settled in Jackson, working as a laundress out of their home. Her husband went blind in 1938 and died ten years later, one year before the birth of his grandson he would never know. One can surmise that as a black female head of household in the South during the late 1930s and 1940s, Lily Scott faced no small number of challenges.¹²⁴ As previously noted, she was self-employed as a laundress and had built up a clientele that included the mayor and the chief of police chief. In this capacity she managed to faithfully provide for her family for decades. What is more, she saved enough to send each of her four children to college, no small feat for a single-parent household headed by an African American woman in the 1940s. It was this unwavering tenacity and a seemingly studied indifference to everyday obstacles that impressed her adolescent grandson.

When Scott-Heron described Lily Scott in his memoir, he began by alliteratively defining her in the negative: "she was not narrow-minded, naïve, neurotic, nosy, or negative. She was not combative, complaining, compulsive, or complacent." Rather, she

¹²³ Gil Scott-Heron, "A Talk: Bluesology/Black History/Jaws/The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," *The First Minute of a New Day* (New York: Arista Records, 1975; reissued, New York: Ruma-Gia Ltd., 1998).

¹²⁴ Historian Jacqueline Jones reminds us that in addition to being more restricted in employment opportunities and earning less than their male counterparts, "black female household heads ... were held accountable for their own poverty." Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 263.

was “predictable, patient, perceptive, persistent, proud, private, and practical” and a “sane, sensible, settled, serious, solid, single-minded survivor.”¹²⁵ Additionally, she was not one to quietly abide disrespect from local whites in public: “my mother (Bobbi) and uncle (Buddy) used to say they hated going to the stores in Jackson with Lily because she would embarrass them” by loudly objecting to white customers being served by salespeople before her, despite the fact that she was next in line, a standard practice in the segregated South. “In line at the cash register my grandmother would loudly say, “I was here before them” and hold out her money.”¹²⁶ This unwillingness to conform to the social codes of Jim Crow may have been an embarrassment to her children; however, in the eyes of her grandson, Lily Scott’s public assertion of her dignity set a strong example.

When discussing the origins of his political consciousness, Scott-Heron recalled that as a youth he was “aware of the fact that some changes needed to be made ... I learned that on the front porch at night when my grandmother and other people would talk about what the situations were and what needed to be done.”¹²⁷ He expanded on this theme in his memoir:

there were regular gatherings on the front porch when the weather was warm. It could include any number of people from the neighborhood ... and no matter where the conversations started, they would end up talking about race. What was happening here and there. What they had read in the papers. What information had come through from the men and women who worked on the trains and knew what was going on from Miami to Chicago.”¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 29.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹²⁷ Letts, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*.

¹²⁸ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 28.

Drawing on the substance of these talks, Scott-Heron understood early on that “there were some inequities [in society],” and that black Americans “were somehow on the lower end of it ... [but] trying to do something about it.”¹²⁹ Undoubtedly, living in the rural South during the 1950s heightened Scott-Heron’s awareness of the institutional inequities and systemic oppression that had long been the defining features of the social landscape for blacks in the region. At the same time, however, he learned that individuals were not without recourse and that collective action comprised of various strategies and tactics presented blacks with an efficacious - and wholly legal - means for redressing injustice. In the early 1960s, he would have the opportunity to “wade in the water” himself; however, before this came to pass, a tragedy struck the Scott household that would alter the course of his life.

On the evening of 4 November 1960, as Democrats celebrated President-Elect John F. Kennedy’s historically narrow victory, the Scott family mourned.¹³⁰ Lily Scott had died the day before.¹³¹ Much to his horror, it was her beloved grandson who had discovered her lifeless body “one sorry Monday morning” as he was preparing breakfast for the two of them. He found her laying in her bed, unresponsive and stiff to the touch.¹³² The loss devastated Scott-Heron and left the ten-year-old “hurt and scared and shocked.... I loved her from the very marrow of my bones.”¹³³ Though he had returned to

¹²⁹ Letts, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*.

¹³⁰ Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 13 March 2007.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 50.

¹³³ Gil Scott-Heron, “Coming From a Broken Home,” *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate U.S., 2000), 1.

Chicago during the summers to visit his mother, Lily Scott's death brought the two back together "like cymbals in some ill-coordinated band's clanging climax. It wasn't only that we were unprepared to be together then, it was that we had both just lost our mother."¹³⁴ For roughly six weeks following her death, he moved in with his Aunt Sammy and Uncle William Scott in New York City; however, he then returned to Tennessee where he lived with his mother in her mother's old house on South Cumberland Street.¹³⁵

One year later, in 1962, came a turn of events that would have made Lily Scott proud. That year her grandson made civil rights history as a participant in the integration of Jackson public schools. In the wake of the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court ruling of 1954 that struck down racial segregation, public schools across the South stalled as long as possible before ceding to the ruling.¹³⁶ Though ordered that compliance occur "with all deliberate speed," officials seemingly took that to mean they could proceed at a pace of their choosing, which often translated into no progress at all. In Tennessee, for example, despite successes in Clinton, Nashville, and Memphis, by 1960, only 169 black students out of a total of 146,700 had sat in integrated classrooms.¹³⁷ The NAACP chapter in Jackson seized on the opening of a newly constructed junior high school as an opportunity to bring the Supreme Court ruling to bear locally.

¹³⁴ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 51.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 51 and 53.

¹³⁶ For more information on the Brown ruling and its aftermath, see: Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming, Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York: Viking, 2001) and Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990*, (Jackson, Miss.: University of Mississippi Press, 1991).

¹³⁷ Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 106.

Scott-Heron recalled the strategizing that surrounded his participation in this historic event: “one night after New Years Day 1962 ... my mother came into my room [and] started to explain that the negotiations between the NAACP lawyer and the Jackson City Council had been settled... in favor of the NAACP. Then my mother asked whether I still wanted to go to a white school. ... And if I wanted to, I had to start *the next day*.” He later explained, “There were 40 students who signed up with the NAACP to take part in their test-case ... for integration. When the City Council agreed to accept black students at I. B. Tigrett, only three students followed through.”¹³⁸ On 25 January 1962, he, along with classmates Gillard Glover and Madeline Walker, peacefully integrated I. B. Tigrett Junior High.¹³⁹ Writing in his memoir, Scott-Heron recalled the circumstances surrounding this auspicious occasion:

...right after New Years Day [in 1962] the city council wanted to make a deal. It was a secret that stayed that way until after we were already in classes, leaving no chance for opposition to build. ... The council had some specifics when striking the deal with the NAACP lawyer: only junior high students and Tigrett would be the “test school,” in part, I’m sure because of its location, far from Main Street. The council also wanted to go immediately, with as close to zero noise about it as possible. ... I don’t want to prop up the Jackson City Council as societal visionaries, but their plan worked pretty smoothly.¹⁴⁰

Thus, eight years after the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the landmark *Brown v. Board* decision, Scott-Heron helped bring that ruling to bear on Jackson, Tennessee.

¹³⁸ Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 13 March 2007.

¹³⁹ This historic event represented the culmination of a citywide desegregation campaign that began in 1960 when a cadre of committed students from Lane College, known as the “Four Freshmen,” successfully integrated city buses and Jackson’s downtown business district. Dan Morris, “City Leaders Feared Movement Could Become Violent,” *Jackson Sun*, http://orig.jacksonsun.com/civilrights/sec5_leadersfear.html (accessed 16 June 2010).

¹⁴⁰ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 56-7.

Doing so inaugurated his parallel career as an activist and placed the city at the vanguard of integration in the state.

While on the subject of schooling, it should be noted that the matter of Gil Scott-Heron's educational credentials is no small factor in either his biography or his artistic development.¹⁴¹ Scott-Heron wrote of his own schooling at ten institutions over seventeen years as being "an extensive journey that covered all of the educational possibilities."¹⁴² After all, it was his demonstrable intelligence and literary talents that by high school had distinguished Scott-Heron among his peers, earning him admission to the prestigious Fieldston School of Ethical Culture in Manhattan and later a scholarship to Lincoln University and, following that, a fellowship to Johns Hopkins University. We will cover these loci of learning in greater detail in the coming pages; however, it should be noted that the importance of formal education was stressed in the Scott home in South Jackson and something of a family tradition. Above all else, Lily Scott held a "belief in the power of learning" and "insisted that her children be educated."¹⁴³ In fact, the sturdy matriarch managed to put all four of her children through college on her meager earnings as a laundress. In addition, one of her daughters - Scott-Heron's mother - went on to earn an M.A. and attend the University of San Juan on scholarship in the process.¹⁴⁴ Given the premium placed on education in the Scott home, it seemed a forgone conclusion that

¹⁴¹ While an extended analysis of Scott-Heron's formal education is beyond the scope of my research, future scholars will certainly shed greater light on this crucial aspect of his intellectual development.

¹⁴² Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 40.

¹⁴³ He alliteratively described his grandmother's commitment to education, writing that she had "scrapped, scrimped, scrambled, scrunched, scrubbed, scratched, scuffled, slaved and saved, until somehow all four of her children had graduated from college with honors." Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 29.

¹⁴⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, "Coming From a Broken Home," *Now and Then*, 5.

Scott-Heron would one day continue the tradition. Before this would come to pass however, institutional forces intervened, setting the scene for the next stage in Scott-Heron's artistic and intellectual development.

Just as with the Great Migration and desegregation, the following summer, the politics of black life in the South once again impinged on the Scott household, this time in the form of so-called urban renewal. By spring of 1962, Scott-Heron had spied the road building equipment - bulldozers and pavers – at work several miles to the south of their home. By that summer, “the “urban renewal project that had been rumored for so long as part of Jackson's future was literally just over the hill.”¹⁴⁵ Writing about this episode in his memoir, he creatively conveyed the outcome in the following couplets:

Jackson's urban had become renewable
Political concessions made things suddenly doable
A six lane highway paved the way with mass approval
And the house on Cumberland Street faced imminent removal
And my old side streets were asphalt memory lanes
And in July of 1962 I left on a 4 a.m. train¹⁴⁶

Taking stock of the situation and sizing up her options, Bobbi Scott elected to abscond to the same urban environs that had absorbed several of her siblings, namely, New York City. Thus, that summer mother and son packed up their lives and moved in with her brother Buddy in an apartment on Hampton Place, located in the Bronx.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 59.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

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Dazzled by bustle and bravado of the Big Apple, Scott-Heron slowly acclimated to the brisk pace of life and excelled in this new setting. Suffice it to say, the sounds and musical modalities of New York City presented a stark contrast to those of rural Tennessee. While his academic performance at Clinton Junior High was likely typical of other eighth graders, his writing acuity and analytical talents were not. It was precisely these skills that brought him to the attention of his English teacher, who recommended him to the prestigious private academy, the Fieldston School of Ethical Culture. Located in Riverdale, Fieldston was a vaunted model of elite education. However, in 1964, Scott-Heron and his mother moved to the Robert Fulton Houses, a newly built, low-income housing development in Chelsea, dozens of blocks to the south. Seizing one of the first units, that September the Scotts made the Chelsea district home.¹⁴⁸ “By the time I had started [at] Fieldston [School of Ethical Culture] ... my mother and I had also moved to the Robert Fulton Houses—in other words, the projects ... living on our own in a two-bedroom place on West 17th Street between Ninth and Tenth avenues.”¹⁴⁹ Scott-Heron would remain at this residence in Chelsea for the next four years, making this section of New York the backdrop for the next stage in his artistic and intellectual development.

Though once a principally white and Irish neighborhood, by the mid-1960s, Latinos, particularly Puerto Ricans, constituted a statistical majority in Chelsea. Situated on 9th Avenue between 14th and 30th Streets on Manhattan’s Lower West Side, Scott-Heron nicknamed the area “Little San Juan.” In fact, when recalling Chelsea’s racial

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 98.

composition, he later joked, “the population was 85 percent Puerto Rican, 15 percent white, and me!”¹⁵⁰ As a result, a multiplicity of Latin rhythms routinely filled the air, whether blasting from above in transistor radios stationed in tenement windows or in the form of live musicians who gathered on the streets below engaged in their nightly impromptu jam sessions.¹⁵¹ In the song, “17th Street,” a spirited musical homage to his old neighborhood, Scott-Heron fondly recalled the live music that was omnipresent: “I come from 17th Street ... [where] in the evenings, about sundown ... brothers would bring out the bells, and the drums, and the instruments, because they had to do something to get right for the evening.”¹⁵²

These musical vibrations had a profound affect on a teenaged Scott-Heron who later acknowledged, “the salsa-latin influences in my blues rhythms came from there.”¹⁵³ Indeed, the rhythms and sounds he imbibed in Chelsea formed the basis for several compositions, including the aforementioned “17th Street” and his breakout hit, “The Bottle.” What is more, the District served as the setting for Scott-Heron’s first novel, *The*

¹⁵⁰ Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 13 March 2007.

¹⁵¹ Given the Puerto Rican constituency in Chelsea, one can assume that the *bomba* and *plena* styles were among those represented in the street sessions. During the 1940s and 1950s, Afro-Cuban rhythms, including the *guanguanco* (the rhythmic foundation of “The Bottle”), were all the rage among Latino musicians in New York City. Consequently, these styles were incorporated into the rhythmic repertoires of non-Afro Cubans, including Puerto Ricans in the Lower West Side. To gain further insight into the the history and commercialization of Latin music in New York City, see Vernon W. Boggs, *Salsiology: Afro-Cuban Music and the Evolution of Salsa in New York City* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), Ned Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), Miriam Jimenez Roman and Juan Flores, eds., *The Afro-Latin Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), Arthur Kimpton, *Boogaloo: The Quintessence of History of American Popular Music* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), and Ed Morales, *The Latin Beat: The Rhythms and Roots of Latin Music From Bossa Nova to Salsa and Beyond* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2003).

¹⁵² Gil Scott-Heron, “17th Street,” *It’s Your World* (New York: Arista Records, 1976).

¹⁵³ Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 13 March 2007.

Vulture.¹⁵⁴ His autobiographical poem “Coming from a Broken Home” painted a vibrant soundscape of Scott-Heron’s beloved Chelsea:

And hey Amigo!
17th and 9th in the park.
13th and 9th in the dark.
congas, cowbells, bongoes, and salsa,
beer cans, Ripple and good herbs,
Willie Bobo, Eddie Palmieri, Ray Baretto,
And the mayor of my neighborhood
Long before he covered ‘the Bottle,’ Joe Bataan.¹⁵⁵

As indicated above, famed Afro-Filipino musician and composer Joe Bataan factored into Scott-Heron’s life “long before he covered The Bottle” in 1975. In 1966, the popularity of Latin Boogaloo, reached a fever pitch in the United States and one of the artists most responsible for its success was the singer, guitarist, keyboardist, and Spanish Harlem denizen, Joe Bataan.¹⁵⁶ That year, in the wake of scoring a national hit with his original composition, “Gypsy Eyes,” Bataan became a local hero in the streets of Chelsea; a guitarist made good. “[He] was a big excitement in the neighborhood,” Scott-Heron recalled with obvious pride. However, Bataan was not the only distinguished figure with connections to the district. Indeed, to hear Scott-Heron tell it, the human geography of Chelsea reads like a who’s who of black cultural workers in the early 1970s: “(writer and scholar) Julius Lester lived up at 23rd Street; (guitarist and producer) Edward Birdsong was from 18th Street; (guitarist and songwriter) Richie Havens lived down on Hudson Street; the Wilson brothers had a loft down there before they started Mandrill – man, it

¹⁵⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 13 March 2007.

¹⁵⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, “Coming from a Broken Home,” *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate, 2000), 5.

¹⁵⁶ For more information on the Boogaloo phenomenon, see: Arthur Kimpton, *Boogaloo: The Quintessence of History of American Popular Music* (New York: Pantheon, 2003).

was very, very artistic neighborhood.”¹⁵⁷ In addition to the sounds of those mentioned above, another neighborhood musician, Jose Feliciano, whom Scott-Heron used to see perform at a local pizza parlor, was a formative influence.¹⁵⁸ Clearly, the Latin sounds and rhythms that Scott-Heron imbibed in Chelsea greatly impacted his budding musical and aesthetic sensibilities.¹⁵⁹

In addition to soaking up the Latin sounds of Chelsea, Scott-Heron nurtured his love for American popular music writ-large. He noted that since his piano playing “had improved a great deal” and he “still kept up with the top tunes on the radio,” he routinely “looked for jobs as keyboard player with some rhythm and blues or rock and roll bands in the city.”¹⁶⁰ His repertory at the time consisted of hits by groups ranging from the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, to the Temptations and Stevie Wonder.¹⁶¹ As a result, he

¹⁵⁷ Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with Author, 14 April, 2007. Coincidentally, several of these figures, namely Mandrill and Joe Bataan would later factor into Scott-Heron’s musical career. In 1974, he toured with Mandrill as their opening act; one year later Joe Bataan covered “The Bottle.” Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with Author, 14 April, 2007. Joe Bataan, “La Botella” *Afrofilipino* (New York: Epic/Salsoul, 1975).

¹⁵⁸ Scott-Heron laughingly recalled these performances, “he (Feliciano) used to play “Mack the Knife” on the guitar like when he was trying to earn himself a few coins.” Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 13 March 2007. In the liner notes for *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, Scott-Heron acknowledged the Feliciano’s influence on his own vocal styling, saying it had to do with “the way he bends notes.” He further noted that Feliciano’s “Latin background fits into the neighborhood I’m in. There’s a lot of black rhythm down here, but much of it is Puerto Rican.” Nat Hentoff, “Liner Notes,” *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (New York: Flying Dutchman Records, 1970).

¹⁵⁹ In an interview with Nat Hentoff, Scott-Heron jokingly referred his attempts at incorporating this influence into his own songwriting as the “Pennsylvania-Puerto Rican” sound. Nat Hentoff, “Liner Notes,” *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1970). For evidence of the Latin influence on Scott-Heron’s compositions, see Gil Scott-Heron, “17th Street,” *Bridges* (New York: Arista Records, 1977); “Coming From a Broken Home,” *So Far, So Good and Now and Then* (New York: Canongate, 2000); “The Bottle,” *Winter in America* (New York: Strata East Records, 1973); and, “Alien (Hold on to your Dreams),” *Moving Target* (New York: Arista Records, 1982). Additional elements of the so-called “Latin tinge” are also evident in the percussion accompaniment that remained a signature component of his recordings throughout his career.

¹⁶⁰ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 108.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

“managed to hook up with a few groups for weekend jobs at schools, in hotel bars, and at birthday parties. ... The bread was short, twenty-five dollars a night, but it beat the hell out of nothing.”¹⁶² He humorously recalled that “We played To[p] 20 dance music. Everything from Motown to Stax to the Beatles. If I could make \$25-\$50 playing at a dance or somebody’s Sweet 16 Party count me in.”¹⁶³ Two other black artists Scott-Heron listened to in this period were considerably influential on his writing and singing styles, Oscar Brown Jr. and Otis Redding. Best known as the voice behind the hits “Dat Dere,” “Work Song,” and “Signifyin’ Monkey” as well as for his lyrical contribution to Max Roach’s landmark recording *The Freedom Now Suite – We Insist!*, Oscar Brown, Jr. was a dynamic and multifaceted talent.¹⁶⁴ His music captivated the ear of an adolescent Gil Scott-Heron who later recalled, “I heard Oscar Brown Jr’s [sic] music in high school and loved it.” His admiration for Brown grew over the years, prompting the purchase of a

¹⁶² Ibid., 108.

¹⁶³ Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 13 March 2007.

¹⁶⁴ Like Scott-Heron, Oscar Brown Jr. was one of those talents whose varied range of professional accomplishments makes it difficult to accurately describe his career without being unflatteringly reductionist. Unfortunately, outside of Scott Saul’s path breaking analysis of Brown as a model “hipster,” there is little scholarship extant this significant and under-recognized contributor to postwar black culture. However, in 2007, filmmaker Donnie Betts released an informative and compelling documentary portrait of the man entitled *Music is my Life, Politics is my Mistress: The Story of Oscar Brown Jr.* Donnie I. Betts, *Music is my Life, Politics is my Mistress: The Story of Oscar Brown Jr.* (Denver, Colo.: No Credits Productions, 2007) and Oscar Brown Jr., *What It Is: The Poetry and Opinions of Oscar Brown Jr.* (Chicago: Oyster Knife Publishing, 2005). For a musical sampling of his recordings from the early Sixties, see: Oscar Brown Jr., *Sin & Soul ... and then some* (New York: Columbia Records, 1960); Oscar Brown Jr., *Oscar Brown Jr. Tells It Like It Is!* (New York: Columbia Records, 1962); Oscar Brown Jr., *In a New Mood...* (New York: Columbia Records, 1963); Oscar Brown Jr., *Mr. Oscar Brown Jr. Goes To Washington* (New York: Fontana, 1964); Oscar Brown Jr., “Dat Dere,” *Sin & Soul ... and then some* (New York: Columbia Records, 1960); Oscar Brown Jr., “Work Song,” *Sin & Soul ... and then some* (New York: Columbia Records, 1960); Oscar Brown Jr., “Signifyin’ Monkey,” *Sin & Soul ... and then some* (New York: Columbia Records, 1960); and, Max Roach, *Freedom Now Suite: We Insist!* (New York: Candid Records, 1960). For more information regarding this recording, see Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Greatest Hits collection in college.¹⁶⁵ Given the racial politics and poetic sensibilities that undergird Oscar Brown Jr.'s productions, it is not surprising to learn of his formative influence on Scott-Heron.¹⁶⁶

In addition to Oscar Brown Jr., Scott-Heron was influenced by the vocal styling of celebrated singer and Stax Records sensation, Otis Redding. Redding enjoyed a string of chart-topping hits that began with “These Arms of Mine” in 1963 and ended with the success of “Sittin’ On (The Dock of the Bay)” in 1968 following his tragic death in an airplane crash the year before.¹⁶⁷ When assessing Redding’s influence, Scott-Heron pointed to “the way he sings lyrics that so that they come through as *sounds*. You can really appreciate how close a saxophone is to the human voice when you hear Otis singing. I sometimes write poetry in a way, like Otis sings. The sounds form shapes.”¹⁶⁸ Undoubtedly, his semi-professional engagements, not to mention the compositional analysis gained by learning the songs and arrangements of the aforementioned hit makers, provided essential informal musical training and contributed mightily to his development as a writer, singer, poet, and musician. Consequently, subsequent chapters will examine how his fidelity to these formative influences, particularly the blues and R & B, contributed to his formal choices as a writer and the ways in which this aspect of his

¹⁶⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 13 March 2007.

¹⁶⁶ The two performers crossed paths several times over the course of their careers Scott-Heron recalled, once appearing as guests on a program entitled “Nightwatch” – “the show was called “3 Generations of Spoken Word” or something – and again at “the New Lincoln Center opening with other poets on October, 2004.” Gil Scott-Heron. Correspondence with author. 13 March 2007.

¹⁶⁷ For more information on the life, career, and music of Otis Redding, see Scott Freeman, *Otis! The Otis Redding Story* (New York, St. Martin’s Griffin, 2002) and Robert M.J. Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 2003).

¹⁶⁸ Hentoff, “Liner Notes.”

cultural productions connected with contentious debates among Black Arts Movement critics and practitioners.

As mentioned earlier, Scott-Heron's intellect and talents gained him entry and a full scholarship to the prestigious, private Fieldston School for Ethical Culture. Founded in 1878, Fieldston had long been a launch pad to the Ivy Leagues for children of privilege; however, until Scott-Heron's arrival in the mid-1960s, working-class African Americans had not been among the ranks of Fieldston students.¹⁶⁹ The school's mission according to founder Felix Adler was "to develop individuals who will be competent to change their environment to greater conformity to moral ideals."¹⁷⁰ The combination of Fieldston's rigorous academics and demonstrable ability to cultivate intellectual talent rendered the admissions process highly competitive. Scott-Heron started at the school in 1964, the fall of his sophomore year. "I had probably set some sort of poverty precedent by receiving a scholarship to cover books as well as tuition," he wryly joked in his memoir. Given that the school's music instructor explicitly discouraged Scott-Heron from entertaining his pianistic urges on campus,¹⁷¹ it is highly unlikely that Fieldston contributed much to his formal musical development; however, the institution inarguably honed his intellectual faculties and helped secure passage to his next destination, Lincoln University.

¹⁶⁹ For more information on Fieldston, its founder, and the Ethical Culture ideology, see Howard B. Radest, *Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998).

¹⁷⁰ "Our Mission" <http://www.ecfs.org/about/missionhistory/mission.aspx> (accessed 5/27/2012).

¹⁷¹ Scott-Heron said the ban against students playing the school's Steinway grand piano might as well have been called the "no Gil Rule," since he "was the main one playing the kind of music that Mr. Worthman objected to." Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 99.

Following his graduation from Fieldston in the fall of 1967, Scott-Heron joined the incoming class at the prestigious HBCU of international renown, Lincoln University. Situated in rural Chester County, Pennsylvania since its inception in 1854 Lincoln had been a key intellectual hub for black scholars, poets, and activists.¹⁷² Founded by a Presbyterian minister, John Miller Dickey and his wife Sarah Emlen Cresson, the institution was rooted in Scotch-Irish Calvinism with strong ties to the Quaker movement.¹⁷³ Horace Mann Bond stated that the founding of Lincoln University owed to a “concern” by its founders and Quakers associates “for Negroes as objects of God’s love, and fellow citizens of the ‘Kingdom of Spirit, Power, and Truth.’”¹⁷⁴ For Scott-Heron, however, the allure of Lincoln University had little to do with the piety of its original charter and more to do with its reputation for incubating top black literary and legal talents. “I wanted to go to Lincoln because it seemed the place where Black writers had come to national prominence.... Perhaps that isolation and the absence of urban distractions had allowed the creativity and intellect of Langston Hughes, Melvin Tolson, and Ron Welburn, and others to flourish.... And my candidate for Man of the Century, NAACP lawyer and first Black on the Supreme Court, Thurgood Marshall, went to Lincoln, too.”¹⁷⁵ Besides these luminaries, other Lincoln alumni included Ghanaian

¹⁷² For a comprehensive recounting of the history of the venerable HBCU, see Horace Mann Bond, *Education for Freedom: A History of Lincoln University, Pennsylvania* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷⁵ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday* 109-110. Incidentally, the noted poet, critic, and scholar Ron Welburn commented on the serenity of the Lincoln campus and enjoying the company and songs of various birds, particularly Grackles, as he walked between classes. These experiences, in part, were the impetus behind

Head-of-State Kwame Nkrumah, famed Jazz musician Cab Calloway, and Black Arts Movement co-founder Larry Neal.¹⁷⁶

In addition to hosting a surfeit of creative and intellectual talents over the years, Lincoln University was also a locus of liberatory politics. Literary historian Jeffrey L. Hoogveen asserted that there was “a vital connection between the important events in the civil rights struggle (as it was practiced from the period of abolitionism until today) and a local Lincoln practice is evident.”¹⁷⁷ As evidence, he cited that Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a stirring commencement address for the class of 1961 and one of his understudies, Jesse Jackson, followed in his slain mentor’s footsteps in 1969. Additionally, James Farmer was a lecturer at Lincoln in 1967;¹⁷⁸ BAM theorist and poet Larry Neal taught a course in black literature in 1968;¹⁷⁹ and both Dick Gregory and Stokely Carmichael visited campus in 1970.¹⁸⁰ What is more, as the southern struggle heated up in the early 1960s, students and faculty “became acutely aware of external politics ... which led the Lincoln faculty and student body to initiate a new kind of dialogue, one concerned with both internal administrative politics and larger national

the name of the influential, but short-lived jazz journal, *The Grackle*, co-founded by Welburn in the mid-1970s. Ron Welburn, Interview with Author, 3 May 2012.

¹⁷⁶ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 109-10.

¹⁷⁷ Jeffrey L. Hoogveen, “Progressive Faculty/Student Discourse of 1969-1970 and the Emergence of Lincoln’s Writing Program” *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition*, eds. Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), 200.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 204.

¹⁷⁹ James G. Spady, *Larry Neal: Liberated Philly Black Poet With a Blue Streak of Wisdom* (Philadelphia: PC International Press and Black History Museum Publishers, 1989), 8.

¹⁸⁰ Hoogveen, “Progressive Faculty/Student Discourse,” 204.

issues.”¹⁸¹ Combined with the switch to a co-educational environment and the newly-minted partnership between the university and the state of Pennsylvania, this new faculty-student alliance signaled that the politics of campus life - and society at large - were undergoing significant revision. In the fall of 1967, into this fray stepped an eighteen-year-old incoming freshman, Gil Scott-Heron.¹⁸²

Given his Southern roots, political consciousness, and previous activism, it is no surprise that over the course of his undergraduate career, Scott-Heron played a key role in campus politics. He wrote at length in his memoir regarding his experiences at Lincoln, including his leadership of two significant and sustained protest actions. The first of these was borne out of a personal tragedy, the death of a friend and fellow band mate, drummer Ron Colbert.¹⁸³ In November of 1969, Scott-Heron returned to campus following a weekend trip home to New York. He was greeted by the grim faces of Black & Blues personnel Brian Jackson, Carl Cornwell, and Leon Clark, whom apprised him of the circumstances that contributed to the drummer’s demise:

It turned out [he] had died Friday night. They’d had a rehearsal that lasted until about midnight, and Ron, who was an asthmatic, started having trouble breathing at the end. His inhaler gave him no relief, so they took him to the infirmary. It was closed. Someone went to the security guard’s office and explained the problem and the guard led them into the infirmary. There was no oxygen. That meant they had to call the fire department in Oxford, three miles away. Though the

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 204.

¹⁸² Though it may seem a small matter, it is worth mentioning that the civic politics of Philadelphia, the nearest metropolitan area to Lincoln, also factored into Scott-Heron’s consciousness and compositions, namely in the form of the controversial police chief and mayor, Frank Rizzo. While it is unclear the extent to which Scott-Heron ventured into Philadelphia during his Lincoln years, judging by the low esteem in which he held Mayor Rizzo, it is certain that that city’s leader made a distinctly poor impression on the young poet. For more on Frank Rizzo and his reign as police chief and mayor of Philadelphia in the 1960s and 70s, see Joseph R. Daughen, *The Cop Who Would King: Mayor Frank Rizzo* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977) and S. A. Paolantonio, *Frank Rizzo: The Last Big Man in Big City America* (Philadelphia: Camino Books), 1993.

¹⁸³ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 135.

ambulance hurried to Lincoln, there was no oxygen aboard the vehicle, and on the way to the hospital in Avon Grove, Pennsylvania, Ron died. Brian and other members of the band saw his death as unnecessary and felt something needed to be done. So I did it. I closed the school down.¹⁸⁴

Thus, prompted by the untimely and likely preventable death of his bandmate, Scott-Heron initiated the storied student boycott of 1969.

Taking matters into his own hands, Scott-Heron quickly drafted a list of seven “requests”:

1. We request that the on-campus medical facility be available twenty-four hours a day.
2. That the infirmary undergo a thorough examination by competent medical personnel and security representatives who can quickly assess its status.
3. That the recommendations of the person(s) conducting the inventory be accepted ASAP and that a schedule be adopted for bringing out facility supplies up to current community population requirements.
4. That Dr. Davies, current on-campus physician, be dismissed.
5. That a schedule be organized among all the available medical supplementary to cover the campus responsibilities until a permanent replacement can be found.
6. That a fully equipped ambulance be purchased and placed under the jurisdiction of campus security, with a competent driver always on duty with all appropriate license.
7. That a new on-campus physician be aggressively sought and hired, whose primary responsibility will be the entire Lincoln community and therefore will also be aware of coed treatment and sensitive to our new diversity.¹⁸⁵

Broad in scope and bold in substance, these “requests” were delivered in the Lincoln chapel before an overflowing crowd of more than two hundred students, faculty, and administrators. Scott-Heron called for a campus-wide class boycott until each of the items was granted, however long that might take. Working behind the scenes, he brokered support from key campus constituencies, thereby garnering a near unanimous

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 135. *The Lincolnian* covered Colbert’s death and the ensuing the boycott in depth. For examples, see the issues published on 1 December and 15 December 1969.

¹⁸⁵ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 138.

endorsement of the strike among students.¹⁸⁶ Within two weeks, a campaign that began with a senseless tragedy, ended in a significant victory. As a result of the boycott and attendant pressures, the administration acceded to each and every one of the seven demands initially submitted by Scott-Heron.¹⁸⁷ Besides bringing needed healthcare improvements to campus, another effect of the boycott was to “place students into active roles in university governance – roles that faculty members normally assumed exclusively – and allowed students to partake in administrative hiring and firing decisions.”¹⁸⁸

The eminent historian and faculty member, Phillip Foner, acted as an intermediary between the administration and students, as well as an advisor to the latter camp. According to the recollection of faculty members, students in this period “wanted more power on campus to help affect a greater involvement by the Lincoln community in the national political arena.” Many were also “frustrated with the slow rate of progress in areas of racial justice” and sought ways to quicken the pace.¹⁸⁹ Notes taken during an open meeting in 1969 reveal the students’ desire for political action:

¹⁸⁶ As previously noted, Scott-Heron entered Lincoln as the university was on the cusp of major changes. Since its inception, the privilege of attending the HBCU had been reserved strictly for men; however, in 1967, his freshman year, it converted to a co-educational facility, hence the reference to “our new diversity” contained in the students’ list of “requests.” Also, numerous Lincoln University students had their academic career interrupted by military service in the early to mid 1960s. Known as “the Vets,” some of them had returned to campus following their discharge and discovered an entirely different Lincoln upon their return. In light of these developments, various student factions formed, including “the Vets,” that reflected the disposition or cohort ranking of their respective constituencies. Scott-Heron met with and successfully rallied one such group behind the scenes in order to garner their support of the boycott. These strategic and diplomatic overtures helped unify the student body, ensuring maximum advantage in negotiations with the administration. For more information on the boycott, see Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 135-148.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 142-148.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁸⁹ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 206.

the thinking of both students and teachers moved over a wide range: marching, whether on Washington or the United Nations, has outlived its usefulness; the moratorium (which Foner proposed so that students involved in a general classroom walkout strike would not be academically punished) can be most effectively used by studying the present struggle and its future direction; urgent telegrams to the White House are indicated; political analysis is perfectly compatible with a march on Washington, the effects of which can prove beneficial.¹⁹⁰

The range of actions discussed underscored the sincerity, commitment, and political consciousness on the part of a number of black students who had come of age in an era infused with activism and stood ready to do their part to advance the struggle. According to Hoogeveen, “persistent students had thrown light onto tactics that were more immediate and productive than those employed by faculty members. . . . The faculty/student alliance was now an agent of personal and institutional, as well as political, change.”¹⁹¹ With the administration agreeing to the purchase of a new ambulance, the hiring of a new doctor, and upgraded medical facilities, the boycott resulted in significant improvements to the medical infrastructure on campus. The success of this effort demonstrated Scott-Heron’s skills as an organizer and activist and elevated his stature in the Lincoln community.

The following semester yet another campus shutdown led by Scott-Heron landed the budding novelist and performer in the national spotlight. In the spring of 1970, mere months after the student strike surrounding the death of Ron Colbert, the campus of Lincoln, along with scores of others across the United States, was once again a locus of protest and civil disobedience. At the heart of the disruptions were the murders of fellow

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 207.

¹⁹¹ Hoogeveen, “Progressive Faculty/Student Discourse,” 207. At a faculty meeting in May of 1970, Scott-Heron read a statement of condemnation regarding “atrocities” in Augusta, Georgia and “urge[d] the faculty and other students to protest these unjust actions.” Ibid., 205.

students at Kent State University in Ohio and Jackson State University in Mississippi. On 4 May 1970, the National Guard had been called in to monitor an anti-war demonstration on the grounds of Kent State University. Though the circumstances surrounding the event are mired in controversy and dispute, this much is clear: at some point during the protest, uniformed members of the National Guard unit opened fire. Within the span of minutes, four people were gunned down, including three students and a sixteen year-old visitor to campus.¹⁹² Only nine days later, on 15 May, a similar incident occurred on the campus of a southern HBCU, Jackson State College. There, police fired into a crowd of unarmed black students, killing two and wounding eleven others in what quickly became known as the “Jackson State Massacre.”¹⁹³

While seemingly disparate authorities presided over each of these incidents, to many youth in America the use of lethal violence as a means for stifling dissent or disbanding demonstrations was patently unacceptable. Scott-Heron recalled being particularly outraged by the seemingly laissez-faire attitude of Attorney General John Mitchell. By his reasoning, “the feds were responsible for the National Guard in Ohio and had no jurisdiction over the Mississippi State Highway Patrol. The problem was that nobody in Mississippi had control over them either, and as the nation’s top cop, Mitchell had authority over whoever was not exercising authority in Mississippi.”¹⁹⁴ Not one to

¹⁹² Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 80.

¹⁹³ For an in-depth account of the Jackson State Massacre, including the federal response, see Tim Spofford, *Lynch Street: The May 1970 Slayings at Jackson State College* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1989).

¹⁹⁴ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 152-3.

shy away from institutional confrontation or the opportunity to speak truth to power, Scott-Heron once again sprang into action.

In the middle of May of 1970, just as classes were winding down, Scott-Heron called for another campus-wide moratorium to protest the silence emanating from Washington D.C. regarding the murders at Jackson State College.¹⁹⁵ In terms of consciousness-raising, the second shutdown proved just as successful as the first. Initially some students proposed a march on the nearby town of Oxford in protest of the Jackson State massacre. However, when that failed to materialize, Scott-Heron undertook a more direct and intimate means of expressing his position to the powers that be in the nation's capitol. By leveraging campus outrage over the Jackson State murders and coordinating with student leaders from another HBCU, Howard University, Scott-Heron secured an audience with the aforementioned Attorney General Mitchell.¹⁹⁶ As he recalled in his memoir, Scott-Heron and Howard University student government president, Michael Harris, “took Nixon’s right-hand man through everything from the infamous ‘No Knock’ law, used in Chicago in the attack against the Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, to the illustrations on the walls of his office showing eighteenth- (sic) and nineteenth-century punishment scenes, including Blacks in chains and overseers with whips in hand.”¹⁹⁷

When asked to elaborate on his impressions of the Attorney General and the content of their discussion, Scott-Heron wryly commented, “He seemed like a politician.

¹⁹⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with Author, 15 April, 2007.

¹⁹⁶ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 154.

¹⁹⁷ The Nixon administration’s so-called “No Knock” law, the assassination of Hampton and Clark, and Scott-Heron’s poetic critique will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. Ibid., 154-155.

You know, like, Washington D.C. was 95% black, so this was all like a T.V. opportunity for them to show that they had the same concern for black students that they had for the students in Ohio... it was cosmetic.”¹⁹⁸ While it is unclear what effect the meeting had on the Attorney General’s racial politics, it nonetheless prompted him to board a plane bound for Allen Thompson Field, the local airport in Jackson where he would visit the campus and meet with local leaders, including the mayor, campus representatives, and law enforcement.¹⁹⁹ Greeted by a gaggle of reporters, Mitchell discussed the reason for his presence: “The purpose of course is to evidence concern and see what we can do about taking care of the situation here that everybody so uptight about and fraught with danger.”²⁰⁰

As Mitchell was attempting to make a getaway in a waiting car, one member of the press pointedly asked why the Attorney General had seen fit to visit the campus of Jackson State when he had not done the same following the shootings at Kent State several weeks earlier. He replied, “there’s that much concern over this incident here.” When asked if it was “the most serious one yet,” he replied, “it could possibly be.” Though Mitchell failed to mention his meeting with Scott-Heron to reporters, clearly it had the desired effect, rousing the nation’s top lawman into action. Thus, here, as with the campus boycott of ’69 - which gained a new ambulance and full-time campus physician - Scott-Heron’s activism yielded tangible results, further solidifying the young

¹⁹⁸ Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with author, 15 April 2007.

¹⁹⁹ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 131.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

poet's reputation as a student leader in the struggle.²⁰¹ Indeed, judging by the success of these key campus campaigns, Scott-Heron was one of the most organizationally intuitive student leaders at Lincoln in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In addition to absorbing the experiences of campus politics and protests, the cultural offerings at Lincoln were significant factors contributing to the intellectual and artistic development of Gil Scott-Heron. During the late 1960s, many in the student body at Lincoln were supportive of the burgeoning Black Power and Black Studies movement and the fashions and affectations of cultural nationalism are ever present in the yearbooks and campus newspapers of the era. As shown in the pages of the yearbook and the *Lincolnian*, Black Power consciousness and attendant outward modalities of cultural nationalism – dashikis, afros, raised-fist salutes, and Swahili phrases - flourished on campus during Scott-Heron's years at the institution. Additionally, several key BAM critics - Larry Neal (class of 1963) and Ron Welburn (class of 1968) - were former Lincoln students who later returned to campus as lecturers. What is more, Black Power theorist and scholar Charles V. Hamilton taught at Lincoln just prior to the publication of his *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*.²⁰² It is clear that by the time of Scott-Heron's arrival in 1967, Black Power politics and the vestiges of cultural nationalism had made significant inroads on the rural Pennsylvania campus, which combined with the creative capital on campus, positioned Lincoln University as a key institutional hub for BAM.

²⁰¹ It is worth noting that this meeting became the basis for one of Scott-Heron's most intense and confrontational recordings, "No Knock (to be slipped in John Mitchell's suggestion box)," which, along with the administration's response to the matter, will be covered in greater detail in Chapter 2.

²⁰² Ron Welburn, Interview with Author, 2 May 2012.

Not incidentally, during this time there were numerous musicians counted among the student body at Lincoln, several of whom contributed to Scott-Heron's recordings, particularly in the 1970s. Chief among them was Brian Jackson, the man who became his songwriting and production partner for the better part of that decade.²⁰³ While at Lincoln, the pair wrote and performed with the campus-based ensemble, Black & Blues. Led by vocalist Victor Brown, the eleven-piece band performed regularly and enjoyed regional popularity. Besides Brian Jackson, Scott-Heron made the acquaintance of percussionists Charles Barnett and Isaiah Washington, saxophonist Carl Cornwell,²⁰⁴ bassist Leon Clark and the aforementioned vocalist, Victor Brown, each of whom would contribute to Scott-Heron's recordings at various times throughout the 1970s. Working with these musicians at Lincoln helped further hone Scott-Heron's musical talents as a songwriter and keyboardist, while augmenting his experience as a performer.

Though some critics have rightfully associated Scott-Heron with the Black Arts Movement, the influence of the movement on Scott-Heron and his relationship to BAM have not been clearly documented. Undoubtedly, the cultural politics of Black Power and various BAM elements were well represented on campus in the late 1960s. As discussed in the Introduction, Scott-Heron routinely expressed ambivalence about his inclusion in

²⁰³ Brian Jackson's contributions to Scott-Heron's recordings and career were not insignificant and are worthy of recognition. Together, the two of them were responsible for a total of eight LPs and co-wrote a total of approximately thirty songs. After nearly a decade, they parted ways, a move that consequently opened a new chapter in Scott-Heron's career. While an extended analysis of their partnership is beyond the scope of this project, it is certainly worthy of further inquiry. Additionally, as one-half of the partnership, having Jackson's input and recollections regarding the way in which the pair wrote and produced material – not to mention his take on shared experiences - will likely complicate the narrative surrounding Scott-Heron's career.

²⁰⁴ Carl Cornwell, a talented multi-instrumentalist, went on to play piano with Pharaoh Sanders in the Seventies. He returned to horn playing when rejoined Scott-Heron and the Amnesia Express later in that decade. Interestingly, Cornwell's parents were on faculty at Lincoln, his mother was the head librarian and his father was a professor in the Psychology Department. Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with Author, 14 May 2007.

the BAM and – with the exception of his noted admiration for The Last Poets - otherwise questioned its impact on his own development during this formative period. In fact, he downplayed Amiri Baraka’s influence in particular, noting that his exposure to the works of the BAM co-founder in this period had been rather minimal and somewhat underwhelming: “I read [his] plays while at Lincoln University in ’68-’69. I also read a volume of his poetry then, many that I did not understand (too deep)... Later I went to a performance of the “Kuumba House Players,” which was a Baraka poetry ensemble.”²⁰⁵ Chances are he saw this performance at one of Baraka’s Spirit House gatherings, which Scott-Heron attended as a member of Black & Blues.²⁰⁶ It remains unclear the extent to which Scott-Heron read or otherwise engaged Baraka or Neal’s theoretical manifestos in this period; however, the BAM imprimatur on his cultural productions is inarguable and unmistakable.

Baraka and Scott-Heron share a connection that is noteworthy and further illustrative of the latter’s artistic development in this formative period. In the spring of 1970 while still enrolled at Lincoln University, the band Scott-Heron played with performed at a campaign rally organized by Baraka on behalf of Newark’s first African American Mayoral candidate, Kenneth Gibson. The all-day event that featured an abundance of poetry, music, and oratory, was designed to raise money and secure votes for Gibson ahead of the July election. It should be noted that this rally and Scott-Heron’s involvement was praised by Baraka; however, Baraka erroneously stated that the LU

²⁰⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with Author, 13 March 2007.

²⁰⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with Author, 14 April 2007.

student performed poetry, rather than appearing as part of a musical act.²⁰⁷ When questioned on this discrepancy, Scott-Heron set the record straight, recalling the humorous origins of his involvement in this historic campaign rally:

We were on our way one night to a place called the Spirit House, with Victor Brown's group. [Baraka] came on the radio; he had a weekly show. And we was driving up the Jersey Turnpike and he was saying, you know, he was telling the people who were getting ready to vote in the primary, "Look, there are going to be people outside the place offering you money, you know, to vote for Hugh Addonizio. And we know it is going to be tempting to take the money, but once you go in that voting booth you can vote for whoever you want to; so, our advice to you is to take the man's money but vote for the brother."

And he kept on coming back to that, that was like his theme for the night, "take the money but vote for the brother." And then he said, "hell, somebody ought to write a song about that." And so the guys looked at me and Brian [laughs] and so anyway we ended up writing a song called "Take the Man's Money but Vote for the Brother." ... So we went up and played for the Ken Gibson rally and we did "Take the Money but Vote for the Brother." ... That wasn't one of our big hits [but] it served its purpose as far as the campaign was concerned."²⁰⁸

Enabled by his Lincoln connections, Scott-Heron participated in what turned out to be a momentous BAM watershed and one of Baraka's "initial forays into electoral politics."²⁰⁹ The combination of composition and performance in the service of a political cause as advanced at the Gibson rally would become a permanent and defining feature of Scott-Heron's career.

²⁰⁷ Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), 237. In this same essay, Baraka pegged Ron Welburn as a participant in the rally, though the poet-turned-scholar denied his involvement, saying that he was elsewhere that day. Ron Welburn, Interview with Author, 3 May 2012.

²⁰⁸ The band's bass player, Leon Parks, hailed originally from Newark and knew several people working on the Gibson campaign. Parks informed them about his band's new song, resulting in the invitation to play at the rally. Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with Author, 14 April 2007.

²⁰⁹ Kalumu Ya Salaam, "Historical Background of the Black Arts Movement," *The Magic of Juju: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement*, www.black-collegian.com/african/bam1_200.shtml (accessed 29 May 2012).

Besides the bevy of cultural offerings, Lincoln University was instrumental to Scott-Heron's intellectual and creative development in several other key ways. While at Lincoln he studied under the renowned literary talent and scholar J. Saunders Redding. By the time he taught at Lincoln, the highly esteemed scholar had already made a name for himself as the author of *To Make A Poet Black*, *No Day of Triumph*, *Stranger and Alone*, and *They Came in Chains*.²¹⁰ With his later appointment to the English department at Brown, his alma mater, Redding became the first black faculty member in the Ivy League.²¹¹ Scott-Heron specifically recalled auditing Redding's weekly seminar as a freshman.²¹² Redding's course introduced students to the arc of black literature, beginning the late-1700s and carrying through to the early 1960s. Impressed with Redding's authoritative knowledge of black literature, Scott-Heron also pointed out that the professor had "personally known a lot of the people who connected me to where I came from creatively."²¹³ Thus, the opportunity to study with Redding provided him with a linkage to his literary heroes and broadened his exposure to black authors and their works.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ J. Saunders Redding, *To Make a Poet Black* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1939); *No Day of Triumph* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942); *The Came in Chains: Americans from Africa* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1950; and, *Stranger and Alone: A Novel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

²¹¹ C. Gerald Fraser, "J. Sunders Redding, 81, Is Dead; Pioneer Black Ivy League Teacher" *the New York Times*, 5 March 1988, 33.

²¹² Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 115. Redding was recognized as a pioneer and pillar of black literature and literary scholarship. In addition to his tenure at Brown and Lincoln University, Redding had served on the faculty of Hampton Institute, George Washington University, Morehouse College, and Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Fraser, "J. Sunders Redding, 81, Is Dead," 33.

²¹³ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 115.

²¹⁴ For details regarding Redding's life and works, see: Lawrence P. Jackson, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American writers and Critics, 1934-1960* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Lincoln University provided Scott-Heron with access to another key source of instruction regarding black history and literature: the library's special collections department. Known by students as the "Black Stacks" and housed in the Langston Hughes Memorial Library on campus, these holdings proved to be a source of endless intellectual engagement, not to mention racial pride, for the eager underclassman. So much so that Scott-Heron made a point to offer some "advice" for other Lincoln University students: "all I can say for you to do is to go into the Negro Collection of the library and start digging yourselves."²¹⁵ By his own admission, Scott-Heron spent hour after hour "from the day [he] reached Lincoln's campus" entranced by books on black history and literature that outlined for him the contours of the African American experience.²¹⁶ In fact, as freshman he would "organize [his] class schedule and find out where the holes were in my week that would permit extra time" to peruse the works in this section of the library.²¹⁷

In his estimation, the library's collection of "books and special editions" were "exceeded only by the tremendous amount of material available at the Schomburg," the New York Public Library's internationally renowned archive of African American history and culture located in Harlem.²¹⁸ In making the connection between his immersion the Black Stacks and his later productions, Scott-Heron said, "I started to evaluate Black American history, dating back to the 18th century and I came to the realisation [sic] that along the way a lot of people have filled in what would otherwise

²¹⁵ Wanda Johnson, "Spiderman Raps" *The Lincolnian*, 15 May 1970 (vol. 39, no. 6), 3.

²¹⁶ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 114.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

have been gaps. To that end, I feel that I have even played a small part by filling in a gap in my own era.”²¹⁹ Interestingly, his plumbing of the Black Stacks was something Scott-Heron shared in common with fellow Lincoln University and BAM alum, Larry Neal, who related that he “often dug into that collection as a student.”²²⁰ It stands to reason that the library holdings at Lincoln, along with the tutelage of J. Sanders Redding, exposed Scott-Heron to a vast array of sources pertaining to black history and the black literary tradition.²²¹

In addition to meeting his future creative partner and a number of band mates at Lincoln, it was in this collegiate setting that Scott-Heron honed his tastes regarding “the music.” As Scott-Heron recalled in his memoir, “I hung out with a lot of guys who were into the jazz heavies, the ones you didn’t hear too often on the radio. We spent a lot of time supposedly doing our homework, but really in each other’s rooms checking out the jams – Coltrane, Dexter Gordon, Herbie Hancock.”²²² Scott-Heron elaborated on the musical influences he absorbed at Lincoln, noting that “we had all of the Impulse Records with Bob Thiele²²³ as producer of Coltrane, Archie Shepp, Pharoah Sanders,

²¹⁹ John E. Abbey, “Gil Scott-Heron, Still Tellin’ it Like it Is...” *Blues & Soul & Disco Music Review*, no. 318 (2-15 December 1980), 20-21.

²²⁰ Spady, *Larry Neal: Liberated Philly Black Poet With a Blue Streak of Wisdom*, 8.

²²¹ In conversation, Scott-Heron revealed another way in which the holdings at Lincoln shaped his thinking in regard to Afro-American history: “See a lot of folks were kind of confused about whether they wanted to have black history or black American history. So, what I’m saying is the background I have as a scholar as well as a musician, I had had some insight into both of them. And I had spent a lot of time in the black stacks at Lincoln and read up on things that had happened during the Harlem Renaissance and its background.” Interview with Author, 14 April 2007.

²²² *Ibid.*, 134.

²²³ Coincidentally, Bob Theile, the man responsible for production duties on Coltrane’s historic Impulse recordings in the 1960s served as Scott-Heron’s producer and label-head at Flying Dutchman. For more information on the storied career of producer and impresario, see Bob Theile as told to Bob Golden, *What a Wonderful World: A Lifetime of Recordings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Ashley Kahn, *The House the Trane Built: The Story of Impulse Records* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

Leon Thomas, etc.”²²⁴ Of these “heavies,” John Coltrane would soon figure prominently in several of Scott-Heron’s productions and remain a lifelong touchstone and inspiration.²²⁵ Likewise, another singer, the inimitable Billie Holiday, was a saintly figure in his musical pantheon and a singular vocal influence: “Nobody else phrases like her!” he enthused.²²⁶ Besides these informal dorm room listening sessions, black musical trends and traditions found their way to the ears of the student body by way of the jukebox in the Student Union and the campus radio station. Loaded with a wide array of selections to accommodate a broad range of tastes, the jukebox in the Student Union was stocked with the latest releases by black artists, including Curtis Mayfield, James Brown, and The Last Poets.²²⁷ Lastly, the campus radio station, WLIU, amplified a range of contemporary and traditional black music from the blues to gospel to the avant-garde.²²⁸

The student-run paper, *The Lincolnian*, was another prominent feature of the cultural geography at Lincoln University.²²⁹ In addition to carrying notice of campus news and events, *The Lincolnian* delivered a modicum of cultural reportage, creative writing, and editorializing by student contributors. For contemporary readers the paper

²²⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 13 March 2007.

²²⁵ As with other BAM artists, the subject of John Coltrane is of no small consequence. Coltrane’s influence on Scott-Heron’s Coltrane poems and songs will be the subject of Chapter 5.

²²⁶ Hentoff, “Liner Notes.”

²²⁷ Jon Woodson, “Scott-Heron, Gil,” *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Afro-American Poets Since 1955*, vol. 41, eds. Trudier Harris and Thadious M. Davis (Columbia, S.C.: Brucoli Clark/Gale Research Company, 1985), 308.

²²⁸ While playlists from Scott-Heron’s years at Lincoln would reveal exactly what music was popular on campus then, judging by the artists named in an article on WLIU, the station featured a full range of black musical expression. “Do the Do’ on WLIU,” *The Lincolnian* 45, no. 6 (16 December 1974), 3.

²²⁹ Since its inception in 1933, the paper was published twice monthly in the fall and spring semesters. In addition to Scott-Heron, another notable *Lincolnian* contributor included Ron Welburn who co-edited and wrote copy as an undergraduate.

provides a window to the world of Lincoln University circa the late 1960s. A cursory scan of a few headlines from his time there reveal the extent to which strains of contemporary politics, including debates regarding Black Power and Vietnam, prevailed on campus: “Black Leaders: Carmichael and Cleaver;” “By Merit and By Culture... Black and Beautiful;” “Black Student’s Cultural Views;” “Draft Counselor Gives Advice;” “Black Power;” and “Our Men in S. Africa.”²³⁰ Besides offering insight into campus life, *The Lincolnian* served as a springboard for Scott-Heron’s creative and journalistic talents. In 1968, he joined the paper’s staff as a news editor and occasional contributor.²³¹

Additionally, he was among the many creative talents who lent their verse to the paper’s regular feature, “The Poet’s Corner.” *Time* magazine published an article on the New Black Poetry in the spring of 1970 that mentioned Scott-Heron and noted he was a student at Lincoln and included a snippet of “Whitey’s On the Moon.”²³² *The Lincolnian* acknowledged the nod with a short profile of Scott-Heron that featured the entire text of his timely poem.²³³ Though he had yet to officially start his career, thanks in part to *The Lincolnian* Scott-Heron’s talents did not go unnoticed on campus. In the spring of his sophomore year he was awarded the Omega Psi Phi Hughes/Tolson Award for Creative Writing, named for two prestigious authors and Lincoln alumni, Langston Hughes and

²³⁰ “Black Leaders: Carmichael and Cleaver,” *The Lincolnian* 40, no. 6 (15 December 1969), 3; “By Merit and By Culture... Black and Beautiful,” *The Lincolnian* 40, no. 6 (15 December 1969), 4; “Black Student’s Cultural Views,” *The Lincolnian* 39, no. 6 (20 December 1968), 1; “Draft Counselor Gives Advice,” *The Lincolnian* 39, no. 6 (20 December 1968), 1; “Black Power,” *The Lincolnian* 40, no. 6 (15 December 1969), 1; “Our Men in S. Africa,” *The Lincolnian* 39, no. 11 (1 May 1969), 1.

²³¹ Gil Scott-Heron, “WLIU Newsmen Need Help,” *The Lincolnian* 39, no. 6 (20 December 1968), 1.

²³² “Books: The Undaunted Pursuit of Fury,” *TIME* (6 April 1970), 98-E7.

²³³ “Gil Scott-Heron,” *The Lincolnian* (1 May 1970), 3.

Melvin B. Tolson.²³⁴ *The Lincolnian* article that accompanied the award described the young man as “a product of the ghetto [who] writes with striking sensitivity about the shocking reality of his ghetto existence and his experiences as a Black man struggling for respect, dignity, and freedom in a white man’s world.”²³⁵ What is more, prior to the release of his debut recording and novel the paper published an interview with Scott-Heron - likely the first - that showcased the outgoing and intellectually dexterous underclassman; it was entitled “Spiderman Raps.”²³⁶ Thus, in addition to relaying campus news and reflecting contemporary trends in black cultural and intellectual politics *The Lincolnian* provided a platform and showcase for Scott-Heron’s many talents.

Additionally, at Lincoln University Scott-Heron was first exposed to the BAM artists who inarguably had a large impact on his formative development, namely The Last Poets. Scott-Heron, along with his band mates Isaiah Washington and Charlie Barnett, routinely traveled to Harlem where they frequented performances and readings at The Last Poets’ East Wind loft.²³⁷ “That was something that Isaiah and Charlie took me to because [they] lived at 117th and Adam Clayton Powell Blvd ... we used to go by there all the time.”²³⁸ Moreover, Scott-Heron noted that he was first exposed to The Last Poet’s eponymous debut LP while at Lincoln, which he claimed to have “enjoyed.”²³⁹ These

²³⁴ “Gil Scott-Heron Receives first Omega Writing Award,” *The Lincolnian* (15 May 1968), 3.

²³⁵ Though, in fact, Chelsea was not really a “ghetto” in the sense that Harlem or Bedford Stuyvesant was at the time, the writer’s point regarding Scott-Heron’s working-class roots is valid. *Ibid.*, 3.

²³⁶ With his campus popularity buoyed by the success of the recent boycotts, not to mention the *Time* magazine story and subsequent publication of “Whitey’s on the Moon,” *The Lincolnian* ran this follow-up feature on Scott-Heron. Johnson, “Spiderman Raps,” 3.

²³⁷ Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with author, 13 April 2007.

²³⁸ Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with author, 14 April 2007.

outings and recordings exposed Scott-Heron to the loft scene and performative poetry that was at the center of the Black Arts Movement, then in full swing. The performances, verse, and instrumentation of the Last Poets heavily informed the material he recorded for his debut.²⁴⁰

Outside of their shared musical and poetic sensibilities, another connection between Scott-Heron and The Last Poets came in the form of Abiodun Oyewole's cousin who also attended Lincoln and was friends with the lanky sophomore.²⁴¹ Thanks in part to this connection, Scott-Heron had the distinction of introducing and visiting with the Last Poets on the occasion of their performance at Lincoln on 16 April 1969.²⁴² As Oyewole later recalled, a visibly amped Scott-Heron approached the group after the show. He remembered that the young student had seemed like a man reborn: "after we did our thing [he] brought us backstage and he ... says, 'Look man, I want to start a group like you guys.' ... I didn't have any idea what he could do [but] I knew ... that he was an eager young brother who wanted to do what we were doing."²⁴³ In part, this

²³⁹ Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 13 March 2007.

²⁴⁰ I will speak more to this influence in subsequent chapters as I engage the substance of Scott-Heron's recordings; however, it is important to note that initially the similarities, including the use of percussion - congas, gourds, and shakers - as instrumental accompaniment for poetic recitations, were quite pronounced.

²⁴¹ "Lynden Plummer was the cousin's name and he had transferred to Lincoln from Tugaloo College in Mississippi," Scott-Heron recalled. Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 13 March 2007. In addition to making Scott-Heron's introduction to Oyewole, Plummer was also one of the people who proofread and commented on various iterations of *The Vulture* prior to its publication in 1970. Gil Scott-Heron, "The Bird is Back," *The Vulture* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Canongate, 2010), x.

²⁴² "The Last Poets," *The Lincolnian* 39, no. 11 (1 May 1969), 1. Scott-Heron's role as emcee is not mentioned in *the Lincolnian*; however, he clarified the circumstances surrounding his involvement with the concert in conversation with the author. Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with Author, 14 April 2007.

²⁴³ Abiodun Oyewole, interview in Don Letts, dir., *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*.

exposure to the Black Arts Movement at Lincoln ignited Scott-Heron's infatuation with the "new black poetry" and charted the course for his future career.²⁴⁴

CODA

Each of the three places that Gil Scott-Heron called home leading up to his debut in 1970 - Jackson, Tennessee, New York City, and the Pennsylvania campus of Lincoln University - contributed in unique and specific ways to his development as an artist-activist. Reared in Jackson, his political sensibilities and awareness of injustice and oppression were sparked in part by his grandmother's opinions and his personal experiences, which were in turn shaped by the racial politics of the Jim Crow South. Additionally, in Jackson he first encountered the blues, a style that heavily informed his poetics, philosophy, and musical compositions. Moreover, he inaugurated his parallel career as an activist with his participation in the integration of I.B. Tigrett Junior High in 1962. Likewise, as a resident of New York City, particular elements of that locale's cultural geography profoundly affected his intellectual and artistic trajectory, whether in the form of the privileged education he received from Fieldston or the exposure to a multi-cultural musical matrix that included the Latin sounds of Chelsea alongside mainstream fare from contemporary rock and roll and R&B artists.

Lincoln University further expanded Scott-Heron's consciousness regarding black history, literature, and contemporary cultural politics. Additionally, the school provided a platform for both activism and musical performance, with the two strains

²⁴⁴ The phrase, "new black poetry" is Stephen Henderson's descriptor for BAM verse. Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: Morrow, 1973).

coming together at the Kenneth Gibson rally in the summer of 1970. Combined, the environs of Lincoln University and New York City provided a BAM-infused atmosphere that carried over into his creative writing, particularly his poetry. As shown, the cultural geography of locales of Jackson, New York City, and Lincoln University offer keen insight into his artistic development prior to his national debut. What is more, this line of inquiry, in keeping with Ellison's admonition regarding geography and destiny, also reveals the intrinsic relationship that existed between where he once lived and what he later wrote. To use one of Scott-Heron's turns of phrase, these places - and their respective cultural milieus - represented key "pieces of a man" and were integral to who he was as a writer, performer, activist, and public intellectual.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, "Pieces of a Man," *Pieces of a Man* (New York: Flying Dutchman Records, 1971).

CHAPTER 2

ANATOMY OF A BLUESOLOGIST

If I had to define myself ... I would have to say that I am a bluesologist. – Gil Scott-Heron²⁴⁶

We have assigned ourselves the task of defining certain trends and certain situations and in such have become more so than musicians, bluesicians, because we have tended to try to define certain meanings and modes related to the blues. – Gil Scott-Heron²⁴⁷

The blues singer is not an alienated artist moaning songs of self-pity and defeat to an infidel mob. He is the voice of the community, its historian, and one of the shapers of its morality. He may claim to speak for himself only but his ideas and values are, in fact, merely expressions of the general psychology of his people.” – Larry Neal²⁴⁸

Though wary of labels, Gil Scott-Heron often described himself as a “bluesician” or “bluesologist.” Those who know him for recordings such as “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” “Johannesburg,” and “The Bottle” might, at first blush, question this characterization; however, a close reading of his compositions betray the resonant and unmistakable influence of his favorite music, the blues. For Scott-Heron, WDIA, the legendary radio station out of Memphis, provided a soundtrack to everyday life during his youth in Tennessee. In this respect, the musical and lyrical stylings of postwar blues artists were an indelibly formative influence. Moreover, the blues poetry of Langston Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance figures were central to his development as a

²⁴⁶ Robert Mugge, dir., *Black Wax* (New York: Winstar, 1982; DVD released, 1998).

²⁴⁷ Often, when referencing his compositions and artistic accomplishments on-stage and in interviews, Scott-Heron invoked the collective pronoun “we.” In these instances, it appears that he used the term as a means for minimizing self-aggrandizement and acknowledging his bandmates’ contributions to productions and performances. Interestingly, this usage reverses the polarity of the communal “I” - in which “I” translates into “we” - a common facet of blues lyrics that allows the performer to speak to and for the audience. Unlike in his lyrics, in the aforementioned instances “we” generally referred only to himself and fellow band members, not the audience.

²⁴⁸ Larry Neal, “Any Day Now: Black Art and Liberation,” Steven C. Tracy, *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1999), 425.

writer, intellectual, and artist-activist. The blues, in its varied and various forms, would serve as a potent muse and cultural touchstone throughout his career. This chapter will interrogate the links between Scott-Heron's musical and textual productions and the blues tradition writ-large.

Examining key aspects of Scott-Heron's blues poetics brings into sharp relief the myriad ways in which this tradition informed and intersected with his original compositions. Several questions will guide this inquiry: how were the blues represented in his music, particularly in regard to his choice of song forms, musical accompaniment and arrangements, structures and stanzaic patterns, vocal techniques, symbolism, lyrical content, themes, and performance? How do his compositions resemble and/or reshape standard or inherited blues forms? What is the relationship between Scott-Heron's compositions and the blues poetry of one of his prime influences, Langston Hughes? In what ways did his interpolation of blues music and poetry into his repertoire serve as a challenge to those in the BAM who regarded the blues as counterrevolutionary and irrelevant to the struggle for black liberation? Conversely, in what ways do Scott-Heron's blues reflect a kinship with fellow BAM artists and scholars who affirm the cultural and political values of the blues? Lastly, what do Scott-Heron's blues reveal about the relationship between black music and socio-political dialogue in the mid-1970s?

In order to answer these queries we will survey a number of Scott-Heron's writings, pronouncements, and compositions, namely "The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues," "H₂O Gate Blues," "The Liberation Song (Red, Black, and Green)," "We Beg Your

Pardon, America,” and “Bicentennial Blues.”²⁴⁹ While his thoughts on the blues are instructive, it is primarily in the form and content of his compositions that we see evidence of the many ways in which his works intersect with and enlarge the blues tradition.²⁵⁰ One way to think of this salubrious dialogue is to utilize anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits’ theory of *retentions*, a concept he defined as “a mingling of old patterns and newly experienced alternatives.”²⁵¹ While Herskovits was speaking in terms of the lingering imprint of African culture and customs, for our purposes the term *retentions* refers to evidence of direct links to the blues tradition - both musical and poetic - found in the works of postwar poets and musicians.

Alongside these *retentions*, one will also encounter *blues extensions* – my term for the myriad ways in which Scott-Heron’s compositions and performances innovated upon the blues tradition.²⁵² While the former manifests strongly in regard to his musical productions, the latter concept is illustrated most clearly in regard to his poetic performances. This line of inquiry will cast light on Scott-Heron’s “bluesology,” demonstrating the ways in which these cultural productions embody and extend the blues

²⁴⁹ While evidence of these blues *retentions* are evident throughout Scott-Heron’s entire catalogue, a full accounting of this influence is well beyond the scope of this chapter. Thus, my analysis will be limited to his compositions that are explicitly blues numbers, either in title or musical/lyrical structure.

²⁵⁰ Owing to the unique qualities of these productions, we will examine each of them independently, rather than proceeding through a thematic analysis of Scott-Heron’s blues catalog. Unlike artists whose repertoires are comprised almost solely of blues material, Scott-Heron’s blues, though relatively few are substantively distinct.

²⁵¹ In his pioneering 1958 study, Melville Herskovits examined the influence of African folkways, art, and religion in African American culture in the United States. He termed these elements, “African *retentions*” or “Africanisms.” *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 7.

²⁵² The term “*extensions*,” like many blues lyrics, has a double meaning. In jazz theory, the word refers to chords based on the 9 11, 13, b9, #9, #11, and b13 tones of the major scale. These tones provided the basis for the scale/chord structures of bebop. For more information on the musicological meaning and function of *extensions*, see: Mark Levine, *The Jazz Theory Book* (Petaluma, Calif.: Sher Music, 1980).

tradition, bringing into sharp relief his pronounced contributions to contemporary Afro-American blues music and poetry during the 1970s.

THE BLUES ROOTS OF GIL SCOTT-HERON

Growing up in Jackson, Tennessee during the 1950s, blues music featured prominently in Scott-Heron's upbringing. Reflecting on his youth, he recalled that the music of blues royalty such as B.B. King, Bobby 'Blue' Bland, Lightnin' Hopkins, and John Lee Hooker often filled the air.²⁵³ Additionally, the music of renowned vocalist Joe Williams and famed guitarist, harp player, and singer Jimmy Reed had a tremendous impact on Scott-Heron's blues sensibilities as he humorously recalled during a live performance:

Certain people though have contributed such a great deal to the blues and to my understanding of [the blues] that I have named particular poems after them and particular phases of the blues after them. Like, Joe Williams always sounded like a horn when he was doing them big city/big band blues; so I had the Joe Williams down, which was a big band sound. (sings) "Goin' to Chicago/Sorry that I can't take you"... On the other end of that spectrum I had like the Jimmy Reed blues. Jimmy Reed got you into geometry, you see, because Jimmy Reed delivered his blues from an angle. Jimmy Reed's blues would be something like: (sings) "Bright lights and big city/Done gone to my baby's head"... About four doubles into the evening Jimmy Reed became a genius. Soon as you got right here, you say, "Yeah, play that again! That son of a bitch sound exactly right!" This is how Jimmy Reed is the hero of everybody who stays up from one o'clock on, because his stuff starts to make more and more sense around closing time.²⁵⁴

Hits by these early influences inspired Scott-Heron to take up piano and begin composing his own songs. Though he briefly took formal lessons as a child, he was largely an autodidactic talent who, like many musicians of his generation, learned songs by ear,

²⁵³ Don Letts, dir., *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. (London: BBC4, 2003).

²⁵⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, "A Talk: Bluesology/Black History/JAWS/The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" on Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *First Minute of a New Day* (New York: Ruml-Gia Ltd., 1998).

playing along with recordings by their favorite artists.²⁵⁵ The blues played on the radio, specifically WDIA in Memphis during the 1950s, was crucial in formulating Scott-Heron's blues tastes. As Steven C. Tracy asserts, a performer's "style is based on a particular time, location, environment, and the interaction of elements in that environment ... and after the blues were recorded ... of elements not normally associated with that area."²⁵⁶ By taking inspiration from those he heard on WDIA growing up, in place of a single mentor, Scott-Heron had many. These figures represented a cross-section of styles that - with the exception of Hopkins and Hooker who performed country and delta blues respectively - were grounded in the subgenre called urban blues and R & B. The influence of these particular blues styles would later manifest in Scott-Heron's musical excursions in several distinct ways, including lyrical content, stanzaic patterns, musical form, and instrumentation.²⁵⁷

As noted in Chapter One, Lincoln University yielded further exposure to what Houston A. Baker, Jr. called the "blues matrix," which had a profound influence on Scott-Heron's intellectual framing of the blues tradition.²⁵⁸ He not only performed with the campus-based band Black & Blues, but through a combination of close listening and archival research he also immersed himself in the study of the blues:

²⁵⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with Author, 14 April 2007.

²⁵⁶ Steven C. Tracy, ed., *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 88-89.

²⁵⁷ Additionally, it should be noted that Scott-Heron recorded cover versions of two blues classics - Bobby "Blue" Bland's "I'll Take Care of You" and Robert Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues" - for what became his final album. Gil Scott-Heron, *I'm New Here* (London: XL Recordings, 2010).

²⁵⁸ Under the guiding principle that "Afro-American culture is a complex, reflexive enterprise," Baker defined the Afro-American blues matrix as "a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit." The blues, he noted, provide the "multiplex, enabling script in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed. Houston A. Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3-4.

And with all the different kinds of blues I was getting into, I started to do some research on it because the more I checked it out the more I wanted to know. So I found out that a lot of different poets had worked on phases of the blues back during the Harlem Renaissance: Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Jean Toomer, these people were blues poets. And they polished this art form to the degree that it became scientific in its approach. And the more research I did the more I found that there was a two-hundred year legacy of poetry that had been fashioned along ideas that correlated with the blues that went back from 1789 that chronicled our lives and our experiences in this country.²⁵⁹

It is worth noting that neither Countee Cullen nor Claude McKay, or their critics and scholars, would consider themselves blues poets; in fact, their works largely eschewed the blues tradition. Scott-Heron's inclusion in his list of Harlem Renaissance blues literati was likely an attempt to bring their names before his audience, not rebrand their signature productions. As we will soon discover, Scott-Heron's own blues productions would intersect with this literary tradition in a number of significant and artistically profitable ways.

Thus, when evaluating Scott-Heron's canon, it is imperative to examine not only the influence of blues music and lyrics, but also that of blues poetry. As revealed in chapter one, Scott-Heron routinely cited the Harlem Renaissance poets as a key node in his matrix of influences. In fact, one of his favorite authors was Renaissance pioneer, novelist, poet, and playwright, Langston Hughes. As mentioned in Chapter One, Scott-Heron's initial exposure to Hughes came via his grandmother who read him Jesse B. Semple stories that appeared in serial form in the *Chicago Defender*.²⁶⁰ When asked what he took most from Hughes as a writer, he replied:

²⁵⁹ Scott-Heron, "A Talk."

²⁶⁰ Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with Author, 14 April 2007.

the fact is it's easier to laugh than it is to cry and we have a lot to cry about -- but there was a great deal of humor in his writing and a great deal of laughter in my life. [So] the humor that Langston Hughes had as a part of his make up and a part of his character that came through in his writing were things that I felt were very important to have as an artist.²⁶¹

Indeed, Hughes saw a similar quality in the blues: “for as sad as [they] may be, there’s almost always something humorous in them – even if it’s the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying.”²⁶² Hughes anticipated (and perhaps inspired) this sentiment in his path breaking essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” when he wrote of the “incongruous humor that so often as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears.”²⁶³ As we will soon discover, this often-overlooked facet of his work is quite characteristic of many of Scott-Heron’s blues compositions. In addition to the use of humor, Hughes’ blues poetics left an indelible mark on Scott-Heron’s aesthetic. Having grown up in a community in which blues music was a constitutive element, Scott-Heron recognized their influence on black writers, noting that “you talk about their art, matter of fact, if you read any of the things they did over the course of the Harlem Renaissance, they always refer back to the blues, and living in Tennessee, the blues artists were the ones I was most familiar [with] from the radio. I could see the necessity of it, I could see the humor of it, and I could see the rhythm of it.”²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Steven C. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 183.

²⁶³ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” ed., Winston Napier, *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 28.

²⁶⁴ While a full treatment of the connections to and influence of Hughes on Scott-Heron is beyond the scope of this chapter, certain connections will be discussed as they apply to Scott-Heron’s blues songs and poetry. Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with Author, 14 April 2007.

Scott-Heron's revision of the bluesman archetype, the "bluesologist," is a fascinating and significant extension. The bluesman and blueswoman were trusted figures that spoke with authority to and for listeners in the black community.²⁶⁵ Scott-Heron once jokingly relayed his reasoning for this locution, saying that he "took some shit [he] wanted to do and added an 'ologist' to the end."²⁶⁶ While this statement is entirely tongue-in cheek, Scott-Heron's update of the traditional bluesperson construct is noteworthy. Just as a seismologist and sociologist are generally regarded as knowledgeable, trustworthy authorities in their respective fields, for audiences, so too is the "bluesologist." This semantic revision, though seemingly subtle, is quite significant. Much like the aforementioned professionals who act as veracious analysts for their respective audience, so too did Scott-Heron. Instead of the so-called pure sciences, his fortes were matters of socio-political import facing African-American community writ-large. With the addition of the suffix "ologist," Scott-Heron's role as an analyst and chronicler assumed a pseudo-scientific status, a clever revision of the bluesman persona for his generation. As with his other signature extensions, this move signaled a self-conscious intervention to the blues tradition.

THE BLUES AND THE BAM

Considerable divisions and debates exist within the critical dialogue surrounding the blues. To some scholars and BAM theorists, the blues were, essentially, maladaptive

²⁶⁵ Sherley Anne Williams, "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry," *Massachusetts Review* 18 (Autumn 1977), 543.

²⁶⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, Concert, The Lion's Lair, Denver, Colo., 26 February 2000.

for revolution or otherwise devoid of politics and protest.²⁶⁷ Blues scholar Samuel Charters staunchly asserted in the early 1960s, “there is little social protest in the blues.”²⁶⁸ Echoing Charters, some in the Black Arts Movement took up this line of critique. Prominent West Coast cultural nationalist and US founder, Maulana Karenga, denounced the blues in the late Sixties as a “backward and counterrevolutionary form.”²⁶⁹ He claimed that the blues were “invalid” tools for struggle since “they teach resignation.”²⁷⁰ However, many BAM critics repeatedly and vociferously rebutted this assertion, even some like Baraka who were strongly influenced by Karenga’s Kawaida neo-African ideology. Baraka argued that blues music “is one vector expressing the material, historical, and psychological source” of black oppression.

Moreover, in his estimation class consciousness pervades the music since it was created and advanced by a people that were “experiencing common material conditions which [were] defined, ultimately, politically and economically.”²⁷¹ Baraka regarded the relationship of blues and jazz to black life as being rooted in class-consciousness. It is fair to say that in this regard, he was not alone. Given the movement’s Marxian tendencies, at least among some of its members, many in the BAM identified and celebrated jazz, blues,

²⁶⁷ To gain a better sense of the specific contours of this debate outside of the Black Arts context, see the excellent summary offered by blues scholar Steven C. Tracy in his editorial remarks that preface the section titled “Racism and Social Protest” in *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*. Steven C. Tracy, ed. (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 339-41.

²⁶⁸ Samuel Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues* (New York: Avon, 1963), 152.

²⁶⁹ Lorenzo Thomas, *Don’t Deny My Name: Words and Music and the Black Intellectual Tradition* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 140.

²⁷⁰ Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 131.

²⁷¹ Amiri Baraka. *Digging the Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009), 20.

and R&B as constituent elements of the African American experience and models for a new black aesthetic.

Blues musicians and poets routinely utilized their creations to give voice to the injustices and indignities meted out to black people in America. Indeed, Scott-Heron's blues recordings were infused with political themes, revolutionary rhetoric, and social critiques. As such, these cultural productions presented a challenge to the critiques of the blues as being incapable of communicating political consciousness or of being accommodationist or otherwise counterrevolutionary. BAM critics and artists such as Baraka, Larry Neal, Askia Touré, Jayne Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, and Scott-Heron privileged the forms embedded in these musics as being the province and progeny of African American artists. This should not be surprising given that by and large most movement participants were of working-class upbringing and highly attuned to the currents in black popular music ranging from bebop to the blues to R & B. Among others, Lorenzo Thomas emphasized the connections between R & B music, the BAM. His discussion of the issue brought to light the immense respect that Black Arts theorists and critics had for popular artists such as Joe Tex, Otis Redding, Jerry Butler, Curtis Mayfield, and others. Rather than serving as the antithesis of the BAM, these cultural workers were echoing numerous Black Arts themes in their productions. After all, as Thomas pointed out, "social comment – and protest – was at the center of many of their songs."²⁷² Moreover, many BAM poets wrote tributes to or referenced blues performers in their works, further indicating that the music resonated strongly with many in that cohort.

²⁷² Thomas, *Don't Deny My Name*, 145.

Not all blues advocates within the BAM community began with that opinion. In fact, the polemical denunciations by certain critics prompted at least one writer/scholar to give the music a closer listen. Writing about her first forays in the blues, Sherley Anne Williams claimed:

I began to delve into the blues as an act of quiet rebellion against the cultural nationalist who proclaimed the blues counterrevolutionary because they were “morose” songs that reminded people of “slavery times”... Back then people were saying things like the blues were of no “lyric” or “verbal interest.” Which of course meant that my sister and her friends would not survive the “Revolution” – which seemed a poor reward for having survived the Depression and peckerwoods... I recanted my earlier disdain for the blues as the misguided arrogance of the undergraduate and vowed to be on guard against such parochialism in the future.²⁷³

Speculating as to nature of the opposition to the blues in certain black revolutionary quarters, Williams ventured: “The nationalists who denounced the blues as irrelevant to the contemporary struggle of black people were exaggerating a bias in the literature on Afro-American music that favors the instrumental tradition, i.e. jazz, over the lyrical and vocal traditions, blues, and other mass-oriented forms.”²⁷⁴

Like Williams, James Cone took exception to the idea that the blues was music of accommodation or devoid of social protest. The theologian and scholar forcefully maintained that the black music such as the blues “is an artistic rebellion against the humiliating deadness of western culture” and “political because in its rejection of white cultural values, it affirms the political ‘otherness’ of people. Through song, a new political consciousness is continually created, one antithetical to the values of white

²⁷³ Sherley Anne Williams, “Returning to the Blues: Esther Philips and Contemporary Blues Culture,” *Callaloo* 14. no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 819-20.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 820.

society.”²⁷⁵ Moreover, Cone vouched for the veracity of the blues, writing that the music does not “deal with abstract ideas that can be analyzed from the perspective of ‘objective reason.’ They are not propositional truths *about* the black experience. Rather they are the essential ingredients that define the *essence* of the black experience.”²⁷⁶ By this logic, the blues music was not merely the textual repository of black history; it was a reflection and embodiment of that history. Hence, attempts to depoliticize the blues or cast the music as existing outside the tradition of struggle among African Americans is anathema to many critics and scholars alike. In fact a number of blues scholars have ably countered this assessment, including Steven C. Tracy, James Cone, Sherley Ann Williams, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Douglass Henry Daniels.²⁷⁷ Moreover, the numerous examples of songs by blues performers and poets that contain elements of social protest – either coded or overt – belie this reductionist and, ultimately, disempowering reading of the blues.

BLUES RETENTIONS AND EXTENSIONS IN THE WORKS OF GIL SCOTT-HERON

In the early 1970s Gil Scott-Heron made several musical forays into the blues, namely, “The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues,” “H₂O Gate Blues,” and “The Liberation Song

²⁷⁵ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 6.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁷⁷ To get a better sense of the many ways in which blues music acted as a vehicle for complaint and resistance, see: Steven C. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988) and *Write Me A Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). For a discussion of the myriad ways in which electoral politics and the blues meshed in earlier eras, see: Guido van Rijn, *Roosevelt’s Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs on FDR* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1997); *The Truman and Eisenhower Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs, 1945-1960* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2004); and, *Kennedy’s Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs on JFK* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

(Red, Black, and Green).”²⁷⁸ Each of these productions is unique in regard to content and form, arrangement and performance, aesthetic and perspective. Of these, “The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues,” co-written by Brian Jackson, was his first take on a traditional twelve-bar blues featuring musical accompaniment. The song’s subject matter echoes a common refrain heard in mainstream R&B productions of the time, namely, the ghetto. In addition to Scott-Heron, a plethora of black artists ranging from Donny Hathaway (“The Ghetto” and “Little Ghetto Boy”) to Curtis Mayfield (“Freddie’s Dead” and “The Other Side of Town”) to Bobby Womack (“Across 110th street”) to Stevie Wonder (“Living for the City” and “Village Ghetto Land”) to Marlena Shaw (“Woman of the Ghetto”) to Johnny Taylor (“It Just Don’t Pay (To Wake Up In the Morning)”) passed comment on the stifling environment and structural impediments that marked everyday life for African Americans in highly segregated urban areas such as Detroit, the South Bronx, Harlem, Newark, and Watts in the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁷⁹ However, in a departure from the aforementioned songs, Scott-Heron used a traditional blues to communicate his critiques.

In a blues song that appeared on his third LP, *Free Will*, Scott-Heron took listeners on a guided tour of a neighborhood he called “the ghetto.” Delivered with his trademark disarming mix of humor and irony, “The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues” offered an intra-group critique of several facets of the contemporary urban landscape, circa 1972.

²⁷⁸ Regarding the lyric transcriptions, whenever possible, I relied on the printed text as they appeared in either liner notes or poetry collections. All spelling, spacing, and textual idiosyncrasies appear in the original unless otherwise noted. When print sources were unavailable, I transcribed lyrics and interviews from the original recordings; any and all errors are mine.

²⁷⁹ Donny Hathaway, “The Ghetto,” *Everything is Everything* (New York: Atlantic, 1970); Donny Hathaway, “Little Ghetto Boy,” *Live* (New York: Atlantic, 1972); Curtis Mayfield, “Freddie’s Dead (Theme from *Superfly*),” *Superfly* (Chicago, Ill.: Curtom, 1972); Curtis Mayfield, “The Other Side of Town,” (Chicago, Ill.: Curtom, 1970); Bobby Womack, “Across 110th Street,” *Across 110th Street Soundtrack* (Los Angeles: United Artists, 1972); Stevie Wonder, “Living for the City,” *Innervisions* (Los Angeles: Tamla/Motown, 1973); and, Stevie Wonder, “Village Ghetto Land,” *Songs in the Key of Life* (Los Angeles: Tamla, 1976).

Among Scott-Heron's "internally focused commentaries," the song addressed topics such as drug abuse, welfare dependency and fraud, structural poverty, and urban blight.²⁸⁰ Like Bobby "Blue" Bland's insistence that "there ain't no love in the heart of the city," Scott-Heron's inner-city blues paints an unflinching, yet dark-humored picture of the urban landscape. Backed by an assembly of top-tier New York session players including drummer Bernard Purdie, bassist Gerry Jemmott, guitarist David Spinozza, and Scott-Heron's musical partner, pianist Brian Jackson, the singer-poet delivers an emotive, funky, and humorous vocal performance. Musically speaking, the song is a sixteen-bar blues progression in the key of G, with a set of chord changes reminiscent of T-Bone Walker's classic "Call it Stormy Monday (But Tuesday is Just as Bad)."²⁸¹ However, this was not the only aspect of the song that harkens to the blues tradition. The presence of a spoken introduction is another subtle yet significant blues retention. Indeed, performative introductions and prefatory remarks are quite common in the blues. As noted by Portia K. Maultsby they functioned, in part, to "establish a rapport with the audience."²⁸²

Remarking on this aspect of Scott-Heron's blues repertoire, literary scholar Joyce A. Joyce noted that he sounded like "an educated, intellectual version of the Black man who stands in front of the Dew Drop Inn, [who] often begins his concerns with a clever

²⁸⁰ James B. Stewart, "Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop," *Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3: The History of Hip Hop (Summer 2005): 206.

²⁸¹ T-Bone Walker, "Call it Stormy Monday (But Tuesday is Just as Bad)," (Brooklyn, NY: Black & White Records, 1947).

²⁸² Portia K. Maultsby, "Africanisms in African Music" in *Africanisms in American Culture*, Joseph E. Holloway, ed. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2005), 329.

and humorous monologue designed to entertain, inspire, and enlighten.²⁸³ In this case, its function is informational: “What we want to discuss here are routes out of the ghetto / This is called ‘The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues.’”²⁸⁴ There is considerable irony in the intro quip; indeed, one of these “routes” - busing - is the subject of the first verse. Busing - the transfer and transport of African American students from schools in their home districts to others school, often located in predominantly white, suburban (or urban-like South Boston) enclaves - was a policy designed to increase the pace of integration and provide educational opportunities for participating students. However, in the mid-1970s, this practice further stoked racial resentment and confrontations between groups of parents on both sides of the debate in urban areas such as Boston and New York City.²⁸⁵ If we are to judge by Scott-Heron’s lyric, the practice had yet to become a problem and was in fact, for some, a mark of distinction:

I know you think you’re cool, lord, if they bus your kids to school
 I know you think you’re cool just cause they bus your kids to school
 But you ain’t got a thing to lose, you just got the get out of the ghetto blues

There are several noteworthy retentions in the above passage. First, here we encounter one of the prototypical stanza structures and rhyme schemes of the blues, namely the *AAB* form. As Charles Keil notes, “blues chorus or verse [is] usually ... divided into three

²⁸³ Dr. Joyce Joyce, “Gil Scott-Heron: Larry Neal’s Quintessential Artist” in Gil Scott-Heron, *So Far, So Good* (Chicago, Ill.: Third World Press, 1990), 74.

²⁸⁴ Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, “The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues” on Gil Scott-Heron, *Free Will* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1972).

²⁸⁵ For a scholarly appraisal of the contours of the struggle over busing and various other phenomena Scott-Heron addresses in the song, see Robin P. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2002) and Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America In The Seventies* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

call-and-response sections with the overall rhyme scheme of AAB.”²⁸⁶ Additionally, Scott-Heron employs a time-honored technique known as “worrying the line.” This designation refers to the many ways in which blues singers or lyricists often vary the words in the restatement of a previous line of a stanza. In this instance we see Scott-Heron substituting “just cause” in place of “lord, if.” Scott-Heron frequently “worried the line,” making this a recurring retention in his blues repertoire. In the above verse we also find another signal blues retention, namely repetition. A hallmark of blues lyricists and instrumentalists alike, repetition serves as a means for building tension in a passage and anticipation among an audience. According to Sherley Anne Williams, “repetition in blues is seldom word for word ... [and] changes in word order, repetitions of phrases within the line itself ... punctuate the performance of the songs.”²⁸⁷ What is more, the verse pointed out a key contradiction in American society, namely the gap between policy and praxis, *de jure* and *de facto*, in regard to the *Brown v Board* ruling issued by the Supreme Court almost twenty years earlier.

With the second stanza Scott-Heron poses an intra-community critique of welfare fraud and offers ironic commentary on the stiff penalties typically meted out for the offense:

I know you think you're cool if you gettin' two welfare checks
You done told me you think you're cool because you're getting two welfare checks
Yeah, but you got ten years to lose (spoken: if they catch you) just tryin' to fight
the get out of the ghetto blues

²⁸⁶ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (1966; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 51

²⁸⁷ Williams, “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry,” 546.

Here again, we find the *AAB* rhyme scheme and stanza construct, along with another example of “worrying the line.” Scott-Heron squeezes in a few extra syllables with the hurried words “if they catch you” that appear in the third line above. Moreover, during the instrumental solos, he interjects words such as “what it is, what it is,” and “my lord.” Michael Taft terms these types of lexical utterances “exclamatory elements” or “Exs” for short. As he points out, Exs such as “well, now,” “lord,” and “yeah” generally operate as “emotive” words that “might occur at the beginning, at the end, or in the midst of a phrase.”²⁸⁸ At the end of the solo before launching into the last verse, he delivers a humorous aside, also spoken: “If he don’t get you in the wash, lord knows know he’ll catch you in the rinse.” Like the song’s spoken intro, this is yet another retention and connection to the blues tradition. Charles Keil reminds us that sometimes a well-honed punch line offers bluesmen and blueswomen an effective device for signifying on a serious matter or issue: “a single phrase or punch line can make all the difference.”²⁸⁹

As previously mentioned, humor is a key facet of Scott-Heron’s aesthetics that is often overlooked in favor of his revolutionary rhetoric. “The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues” provides a particularly illustrative example of the fusion of humor and social commentary characteristic of his catalog. In the song’s third and final verse, Scott-Heron critiques heroin use, another phenomenon that wreaked havoc in black America during the early 1970s:

I know you think you’re cool ‘cause you shoot that stuff in your arms
I seen you nodding ‘cause you shoot that stuff into your arm
And it don’t matter which pine box you choose, you got the get out of the ghetto
blues

²⁸⁸ Michael Taft, *The Blues Lyric Formula* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 60.

²⁸⁹ Keil, *Urban Blues*, 91.

In addition to these retentions, Scott-Heron employs the vocal technique known as “melisma.” This occurs when Scott-Heron sings the word “nodding” that appears in the second line. Undetectable on the printed page though readily apparent in performance, this clever inflection – stretching out a single syllable over a series of descending notes – mimics the act of a heroin user falling into a narcotic-induced stupor, referred to colloquially as a “nod.” Given the widespread heroin epidemic in the early 1970s, it is almost certain that this signifying was not lost on listeners at the time of its release.²⁹⁰

Lastly, the third line contains a humorous summarizing phrase, “it don’t matter which pine box you choose, you got the get out of the ghetto blues.” The term “pine box” is colloquial for a coffin, signifying death, or one of the “routes out of the ghetto” mentioned in the introduction. By virtue of the song’s topical content, Scott-Heron tapped into another vein of the blues tradition, using the music as a means for intra-group critique and commentary. Musically and lyrically, “The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues” is brimming with blues extensions and illustrative of how the urban blues recordings he favored as a youth informed Scott-Heron’s musical aesthetic as an adult. In the main, the song served as a humorous, yet biting cynical, blues commentary on contemporary urban issues that dominated the headlines such as the busing crisis in Boston, the heroin epidemic on the East Coast, and government anti-poverty programs.

Another dimension of Scott-Heron’s blues poetic centered on political verse set to blues music. We can see this potent blend of politics, poetics, and the blues manifest in

²⁹⁰ Indeed, for a period in the 1970s, a deadly heroin epidemic wracked the streets of black America. The problem was particularly acute in Harlem, where a full one third of heroin users in the United States called home. Uptown, users were offered a veritable buffet of junk with brand names such as Harlem Hijack, Past Due, Tragic Magic, and KKK. Owing in part to the heroin trade “the number of drug-related complaints in central Harlem doubled” between 1972 and 1978. Jonathan Gill, *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capitol of Black America* (New York: Grove Press, 2011), 412-3.

the 1973 recording of “H₂O Gate Blues.” Remarkable for presaging the scandal that would topple a sitting president only nine months after its release, the composition also captures a number of forgotten scandals and questionable associations that dogged the Nixon administration preceding Watergate. Like “The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues,” the performance kicks off with a spoken introduction. According to Scott-Heron, this section was improvised live in the studio:

We set up to do one take, a “live ad-lib” to a blues backing. My description of the colors ... was off the top of my head, and the poem was done with a few index cards with notes to be sure I got the references straight without stumbling period. I still stumbled. After we got through it, we listened to it played back with an open studio mike and became the audience.²⁹¹

The resulting introduction ranks among the most intricate that Scott-Heron committed to record:

This here, this, is gonna be a blues number.
But first I want to do a little background on the blues,
Say what it is:

Like there are six cardinal colors of the blues
and colors have always come to signify more
than simply that particular shade
Like ‘RED-NECK’
Or ‘GOT-THE-BLUES’
That’s where you apply colors to something else, you know
To come up with what it is you’re tryin’ to say.

At this point, Scott-Heron launches into a humorous lecture on the blues, brimming with ribald wordplay and his signature wit. When discussing the multiplicity of blues forms, he advised:

There are six cardinal colors –
Yellow, red, orange, green, blue, and purple.
And there are three thousand shades.
If you take these three thousand shades
and divide them by six,

²⁹¹ Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 179.

then you'll come up with five hundred-meaning there are at least five hundred shades of the blues.

For example, there's the 'I ain't got me no money' blues.
There's the 'I ain't got me no woman' blues.
There's the 'I ain't got me no money and 'I ain't got me no woman' blues',
which is the double blues.²⁹²

Here again Scott-Heron ventured into a Hughes-eque territory. Consider, for example, the following passage from an essay titled "Songs Called the Blues" in which the elder poet advanced his own systematic analysis of the blues lyric matrix:

There are many kinds of Blues. There are the family Blues, when a man and woman have quarreled, and the quarrel can't be patched up. There's the loveless Blues, when you haven't even got anybody to quarrel with. And there's the left-lonesome Blues, when the one you care for's gone away. There's also the broke-and-hungry blues, a stranger in a strange town. And the desperate going- to-the river Blues...²⁹³

Though he offers up more scatological categories, the rhetorical similarities between the two passages are striking and suggestive of Hughes' abiding literary and aesthetic influence. Following a brief mention of politicians who had recently been caught up in scandal, including Frank Rizzo ("the lie detector blues") and Nixon's former Vice President, Spiro Agnew ("SPEARHEAD X"), Scott-Heron segues into the body:

And the poem is called H₂O gate blues
And if H₂O is still water and g-a-t-e is still gate
What we getting ready to deal on is the 'Watergate Blues' ...

And with that, he begins to catalog the sundry domestic and foreign policy maneuvers and scandals that plagued the Nixon administration prior to Watergate: items such as

²⁹² Gil Scott-Heron, "H₂O Gate (Watergate) Blues – Intro," *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Canongate), 80 and "H₂O Gate Blues" on Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *Winter in America* (New York: Strata East, 1973).

²⁹³ Langston Hughes, "Songs Called the Blues," *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, Ed. Steven C. Tracy. (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 391.

voting irregularities; the Vietnam war; the riot and subsequent inmate deaths at Attica state prison in New York; and, the murder of college students at Kent State and Jackson State by authorities garnered a mention:

How much more evidence do the citizens need
that the election was rigged with trickery and
greed?
And, if this is so, and who we got didn't win
let's do the whole Goddam election over again!
The obvious key to the whole charade
would be to run down all the games that they
played:
Remember Dita Beard and ITT, the slaughter of
Attica,
the C.I.A. in Chile knowing nothing about
Allende at this time
in the past. The slaughter in Augusta, G.A.
the nomination of Supreme Court Jesters to
head off the tapes,
William Calley's Executive Interference in the
image of John Wayne,
Kent State, Jackson State, Southern Louisiana,
hundreds of unauthorized bombing raids,
the chaining and gagging of Bobby Seale –
somebody tell these jive Maryland Governors to
be for real!²⁹⁴

Unlike “The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues,” “H₂O Gate Blues” is spoken, not sung; the recitation features solid musical backing courtesy of former members of the then defunct Lincoln outfit, Black & Blues. The instrumentation –electric bass, drums, and piano – lends an urban blues feel to the proceedings and several of the musicians serve as foils to Scott-Heron's patter with various catcalls, affirmatives, and laughter. However, aside from the twelve-bar blues structure, as shown by the above excerpt, the work bears little resemblance to the standard *AAB* blues verse: the meter is uneven; the rhyme

²⁹⁴ Scott-Heron, “H₂O Gate (Watergate) Blues,” *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Canongate), 84.

scheme and stanza structure are atypical; and the speedy, stream-of-consciousness delivery compromises the rhythmic formula typically associated with blues lyrics:

We leave America to ponder the image of its
new leadership:
Frank Rizzo, the high school graduate Mayor of
Philadelphia, whose
ignorance is surpassed only by those who voted
for him.
Richard Daley, Mayor of Chicago, who took
over from Al Capone and
continues to implement the same tactics.
Lester Maddawg, George Wallace, Strom
Thurmond, Ronald Regan –
an almost endless that won't be missed
when at last
America is purged.

...
McCord has blown, Mitchell has blown.
No tap on my telephone.
McCord has blown, Mitchell has blown.
No tap on my telephone.
Haldeman, Erlichmann, Mitchell and Dean
It follows a pattern if you dig what I mean.
And what are we left with?
Bumper stickers saying Free the Watergate 500,
spy movies of the same name with a cast of
thousands,
and that ominous phrase: If Nixon knew, Agnew!
What really happened to J. Edger Hoover?
The king is proud of Patrick Gray
while America's faith is drowning
beneath that cesspool – Watergate²⁹⁵

Despite these seemingly aberrant schemas and stanza forms, “H₂O Gate Blues” shares several connections to and parallels with the blues tradition. As noted, the song begins with a spoken introduction, characteristic of the way in which many blues singers from the Delta would initiate a performance. Additionally, the lyrics contain numerous referents in coded language, another feature common to blues tradition. Moreover, as

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 85.

Michael Taft demonstrates, blues lyrics and verse do not always follow a standard pattern and blues artists have often combated attempts to standardize, formalize, or flatten blues lyric formulas.²⁹⁶ Sherley Anne Williams echoes this assessment in her essay “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry,” arguing that, “in some contemporary Afro-American poetry, the devices and structures of the classic blues form are transformed, thus allowing the poetry to function in much the same way as blues once functioned within the black communities across the country.”²⁹⁷ To Williams, the blues was, in part, a means for dialogue and reflection, “an atmosphere in which analysis can take place ... achieved through the use of verbal and musical irony.”²⁹⁸ Lastly, the presence of a reoccurring refrain “while America’s faith is drowning/beneath that cesspool – Watergate” is another hallmark of blues lyrics. We see a repeating refrain at work in “We Beg Your Pardon, America,” in this case worded as, “We beg your pardon, America/We beg your pardon/because somehow the pardon did not sit.”²⁹⁹ Indeed, this blues retention is a feature of Scott-Heron’s poetry in general, appearing prominently in works such as “Whitey’s on the Moon,” “Billy Green is Dead,” and “The Ghetto Code.”

In addition to these retentions, in this work Scott-Heron struck upon a formal innovation that could be termed *free blues*. Much in the same way that musicians like John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, and Ornette Coleman re-articulated and redefined the harmonic language and aesthetics of jazz in the 1960s, Scott-Heron similarly innovated upon the strictures and structures of traditional blues verse. Though not giving name to

²⁹⁶ Michael Taft, *The Blues Lyric Formula* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 103.

²⁹⁷ Sherley Anne Williams, “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry,” *Massachusetts Review* 18 (Autumn 1977), 446.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 447.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 455.

the practice, Williams described it by saying that blues poets “extend the verbal traditions of the blues in the same way that the Swing of Count Basie and the bebop of Charlie Parker extended the instrumental traditions of the blues.”³⁰⁰ Dispensing with the traditional boundaries of meter and rhyme of the *AAB* stanza while interpolating such wordplay into a standard twelve-bar format, free blues posits a new category for analysis, further complicating scholarly assumptions regarding blues poetics and the blues tradition writ-large.

Last but certainly not least, it is important to note that the work also functions as history, offering a veritable tableau of the drama, disgrace, and “dirty tricks” that came to characterize Watergate. Perhaps most significantly, the work captures many unsavory elements of Nixon’s tenure that have been forgotten by historians and the American public. By documenting the concentric ripples of political scandal that emanated from the White House, Scott-Heron seizes on the blues as a vehicle for encoding historical memory. Indeed, in many instances the blues functions as a repository of aural history that compliments and enhances more conventional sources. Or as Scott-Heron says in another poem: “the blues remembers everything the country forgot.”³⁰¹

Indeed, we see this maxim evidenced in the sequel to “H₂O Gate Blues,” a poem titled “We Beg Your Pardon, America.”³⁰² In the second work in his blues trilogy, he

³⁰¹ Gil Scott-Heron, “Bicentennial Blues” on Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *It’s Your World*. New York: Arista Records, 1976; “Bicentennial Blues,” *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate U.S., 2000), 96-101; “Bicentennial Blues,” *So Far, So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), 63-67.

³⁰² The topical and historical content of this poem will be scrutinized more closely in Chapter Three. For present purposes, the analysis will necessarily focus on the blues retentions and extensions evident in the text and recording. Gil Scott-Heron, “We Beg Your Pardon, America” on Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *First Minute of a New Day*, (New York: Arista Records, 1975); “We Beg Your Pardon, America,” *So Far, So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), 54-58 ; and, “We Beg Your Pardon, America,” *Now*

updates listeners as to the state of the nation, crafting a lyrical counter narrative of the pardon granted Nixon by his successor, Gerald Ford. Unlike its predecessor, “We Beg Your Pardon, America” was a solo recitation, performed and recorded before live audience at New York University in December of 1974:

We beg your pardon, America.
Somebody said ‘BrotherMan gon’ break a
window,
gon’ steal a hub cap,
gon’ smoke a joint and BrotherMan gon’ go to
jail.’
The man who tried to steal America is not in
jail.

The next stanza notes the hypocrisy inherent in the American justice system by comparing the punishment meted out for non-violent drug offences - “Big Ben” or prison time - to that received by the disgraced former president:

Get caught with a nickel bag, BrotherMan!
Get caught with a nickel bag, SisterLady
on your way to get yo’ hair fixed!
You’ll do Big Ben and Big Ben is Time.
A man who tried to fix America will not do
time.

The clever way in which Scott-Heron played on the double meaning of the word “fix” is also noteworthy. It is with cynical irony that he pointed out that the “man who tried to fix America” would now walk free while an anonymous “SisterLady” - busted for a “nickel bag,” slang for several grams of marijuana, on the way to have her hair “fixed” - would actually face prison time, or “Big Ben.” Instead, as Scott-Heron pointed out, President Nixon received a full pardon, in which he not only avoided prosecution but also retained his federal pension:

and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron (New York: Canongate U.S., 2000), 86-90. Scott-Heron, “We Beg Your Pardon, America,” 87-88.

Said they wuz gonna' slap his wrist
and retire him with \$850,000.
America was shocked!
America leads the world in shock.
Unfortunately, America doesn't lead the world
in deciphering
the cause of shock.

Here, Scott-Heron makes a profound observation regarding the difference between reaction and reflection that he attributes to the nation. That America “leads the world in shock” but “doesn't lead the world / in deciphering / the cause of shock” is not an insignificant sentiment, particularly in the early 1970s, when “shocks” ranging from Watergate to the “oil shock” had taken a psychic toll on the public at large. In this period, as historian Bruce J. Schulman, seemingly echoing Scott-Heron, stated that, “many Americans sensed that the nation had entered a period of decline. No longer able to lead the world, the United States could no longer even find its way at home.” As he put it, the “intimations of decline were everywhere to be heard and seen in the early 1970s—as the war ground to defeat, as the Watergate cover-up unraveled, as the Arab oil embargo humiliated a seemingly impotent nation, as the economy worsened.”³⁰³

Like “H₂O Gate Blues,” its successor does not follow a standard stanzaic pattern and could also be thought of as a “free blues.” Though lacking in formal structure, the poem is not without key blues retentions – most notably the use of repetition as a framing device and rhythmic refrain - as demonstrated in the following passage:

And what were the results of this pardon?
We now have Oatmeal Man.

Anytime you find someone in the middle
Anytime you find someone who is lukewarm

³⁰³ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 48-49.

Anytime you find someone
who has been in Congress for twenty-five years
and no one ever heard of him, you've got
Oatmeal Man

...

Oatmeal Man: the man who said
you could fit all of his Black friends
in the trunk of his car and still have room
for the Republican elephant.

Oatmeal Man: there was no crime he
committed.

Oatmeal Man says that, America,
In 1975 your President will
be a 1913 Ford.

Regressive.

Circle up the wagons
to defend
yourself from nuclear attack.

Reminiscent of 1964's Goldwater.

Thank God he didn't win.

But Oatmeal Man didn't win.

I didn't vote for him.

Did you vote for him?

Here we see the art of repetition embodied in several memorable and perhaps transgressive ways, particularly with the phrases “anytime you find someone” and “Oatmeal Man.” The former is used as a setup to describe qualities in the stanza’s subject, President Gerald Ford, that strike Scott-Heron as negative qualifications, “lukewarm,” “in the middle,” and perhaps most damning as a politician “who has been in Congress for twenty-five years/and no one ever heard of him.” Moreover, the moniker “Oatmeal Man” further pegged Ford as a bland, unappealing moderate. In these instances, repetition functions as a frame and refrain, particularly “Oatmeal Man” as exhibited above in lines two, eight, nine, thirteen and fifteen. As shown by the response to this trio of poems, free blues prosody resonated with black audiences in the 1970s. In fact, Scott-Heron called these recordings “the three major poems from the ‘Blues’ [sic]

series,” noting that they were “among our most requested.”³⁰⁴ Their popularity offers testament to the enduring role of the blues in black America and the ability of the music/verse to communicate powerful socio-political critiques and timely reportage. At the same time, Scott-Heron’s significant revisions and innovations reveal a malleability of form that is a keystone of the blues.

Another composition, “The Liberation Song (Red, Black, and Green),” co-authored by Brian Jackson, placed revolutionary politics at the fore, further contradicted the notion that the blues was anachronistic. The song appeared in 1974 on the *First Minute of a New Day*, Scott-Heron’s Arista debut.³⁰⁵ The title was a reference to the primary colors that comprised the UNIA flag, a design popularized by its namesake - Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association - in the early twentieth century. Conceived as a response to the popular song “Every Race Has a Flag But the Coon,” the tri-partite design was adopted as the official flag at that organization’s convention held in August of 1920.³⁰⁶ For Garvey, its bold colors symbolized more than the insignia of the UNIA. In the words of historian E. David Cronon, red represented “the blood of the race, nobly shed in the past and dedicated to the future,” black stood for “pride in the color of its skin,” and green reflected “the promise of a new and better life in Africa.”³⁰⁷ The flag featured prominently in the semiotic sphere of the UNIA,

³⁰⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, “Liner Notes” to Gil Scott-Heron, *The Mind of Gil Scott-Heron: A Collection of Music and Poetry* (New York: Arista, 1979).

³⁰⁵ Scott-Heron’s song should not be confused with the Roy Ayers composition, “Red, Black, and Green,” *Red, Black, and Green* (New York: Polydor, 1973).

³⁰⁶ E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 67, and Will A. Heelan and J. Fred Helf “Every Race Has a Flag but the Coon” (New York: Jos. W. Stern & Co., 1900).

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

including the UNIA anthem entitled “Ethopia, Thou Land of Our Fathers,” which contained sentiments such as, “When swords are thrust outward to gleam; / For us will the vict’ry be glorious / When led by the red, black, and green.”³⁰⁸ This echoed the message contained in Garvey’s speeches in which he invoked the flag as a symbol of black unity and self-determination:

If we have been liberal minded enough to give our life's blood in France, in Mesopotamia and elsewhere, fighting for the white man, whom we have always assisted, surely we have not forgotten to fight for ourselves, and when the time comes that the world will again give Africa an opportunity for freedom, surely 400,000,000 black men will march out on the battle plains of Africa, under the colors of the red, the black, and the green.³⁰⁹

Though Garvey was often criticized for what detractors viewed as garish pageantry and self-aggrandizing pomp and circumstance, the black leader took immense pride in the material culture of the UNIA. In 1921, following the creation of the flag Garvey proudly noted the achievement, saying, “Aye! In song and mimicry they have said, "Every race has a flag but the coon." How true! Aye! But that was said of us four years ago. They can't say it now.”³¹⁰

Due in part to the influence of Garvey’s philosophy within the Black Power milieu, the flag experienced a resurgence in popularity during the late 1960s, becoming a symbol of nationalist aspirations for a new generation of Afro-American activists. As such, “The Liberation Song (Red, Black, and Green)” offered contemporary listeners a poetic explication of the color scheme long synonymous with the struggle for black

³⁰⁸ Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1994), 60.

³⁰⁹ Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Vol. V* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 143-149.

³¹⁰ Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987), 43.

liberation and nationalist aspirations. In doing so, Scott-Heron not only reinterpreted the symbolism of the UNIA flag for his listeners, he also provided activists throughout the diaspora with words of affirmation and encouragement. Moreover, he connected it to an expressive form likely alien to Garvey himself.

Musically, the song is a propulsive, rhythmic blues, anchored by polyrhythmic percussion and energetic performances from the Midnight Band, including Brian Jackson on piano; Bilal Sunni-Ali on tenor saxophone; Danny Bowens on bass; Eddie Knowles, Charlie Saunders, Victor Bowens, and Barnett Williams on percussion; Bob Adams on drums; and Victor Brown on co-lead vocals.³¹¹ “Liberation Song (Red, Black, and Green)” shares much in common with the blues tradition and is emblematic of Scott-Heron’s use of blues forms and retentions in his compositions; that said, there are also several key extensions at work, which we will discuss momentarily. We can see evidence of several key retentions in the song’s verses and choruses. Consider, for example, that the first four lines of each verse are written in *ABAB*, a common stanzaic form:

I've seen the red sun in the autumn
And I've seen the leaves turn to golden brown
I've seen the red sun in the autumn
And I've seen the leaves returning to golden brown

Each verse is followed by a five-line refrain comprised of an *ABACD* rhyme scheme:

I've seen the red blood of my people
Heard them calling for freedom everywhere
If you've seen the red blood of your people
All you've got to do is reach out your hand and we'll take you there
Red stands for liberation³¹²

³¹¹ Most of the personnel on “The Liberation Song (Red, Black, and Green)” were alumni of Black & Blues, the Lincoln University-based band led by Victor Brown discussed in chapter one.

³¹² Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, “The Liberation Song (Red, Black, and Green)” on Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *First Minute of a New Day* (New York: Arista, 1975).

Notated as *ABAB* (*rABACD*), this pattern is perhaps less common; however, a wide variance in verse structures is a hallmark of the blues.³¹³ Moreover, notice the way in which Scott-Heron worries the line in the third lyric, making the change from a declarative (“I’ve seen the red blood of my people”) to the conditional (“if you’ve seen the red blood of your people”) and from the personal (“I’ve”) to the interpersonal (“you’ve”).³¹⁴ Additionally, the first line of this stanza corresponds with Garvey’s interpretation of red as a representation of the blood of Africans and their diasporic descendants. Here, as in subsequent refrains, the final line references the color that had been the subject of the previous verse, equating each hue with the concept of “liberation.” In each instance the word “liberation” functions at once as a destination and state-of-being achievable to Afro-Americans. Which is to say that the concept of liberation exists on several distinct yet intersectional planes, one as a political project and psychic state. The use of the colors red, black, and green as an extended metaphor for freedom was a reference that most black audiences in the mid-1970s would have grasped immediately.

Another aspect of the opening verse that links Scott-Heron to the blues lyric tradition is his use of the sun. The sun, both as a symbol and signifier, is a staple metaphor in the blues. As Steven C. Tracy reminds us, the sun “as a harbinger of a new

³¹³ Taft, *Blues Lyric Formula*, 10.

³¹⁴ Although scholars of the blues argue that the interpersonal “I” is usually synonymous with the communal “we,” that is not the case here. Judging by Scott-Heron’s use of pronouns in song’s refrain - “I’ve,” “you’ve,” “we’ll” and “my” – one can surmise that “I” referred to the singer and when they sang “we’ll” it referred to the Midnight Band. For more information on this usage, see Fahamisha Patricia Brown, *Performing the Word: African American Poetry as Vernacular Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999) and Sherley Anne Williams, “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry,” *Massachusetts Review* 18 (Autumn 1977).

beginning or an ending is common.”³¹⁵ We can think of examples such as Big Joe Turner’s take on the blues standard “Trouble in Mind”:

Trouble in mind
I’m blue
But I won’t be blue always
‘Cause that sun’s gonna shine on my backdoor someday³¹⁶

Son House’s “Delta Blues” similarly invoked the sun as a sign of brighter days ahead:

The sun gonna shine in my backdoor someday
Sun gonna shine in my backdoor someday,
Oh the wind gonna rise and blow my blues away³¹⁷

Furthermore, Langston Hughes routinely deployed solar imagery in his blues poetry, such as with “Hey!” which begins:

Sun’s a settin’
This is what I’m gonna sing.
Sun’s a settin’
This is what I’m gonna sing:
I feel de blues a comin’,
I wonder what de blues’ll bring³¹⁸

Departing from these examples but keeping with the blues tradition, the first verse of “Red Black and Green” casts the sun in a seemingly destructive though naturalistic light. Scott-Heron draws a parallel between the “red sun in the autumn” and “leaves returning to golden brown.” On one hand this seems to suggest a causal relationship between the sun and the desiccated, dying leaves; however, the word “returning” implies that this is a cyclical, seasonal occurrence, a natural process in and of itself. This metaphor, when applied to the struggle for political liberation, suggests that this, too, is a

³¹⁵ Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 184.

³¹⁶ Big Joe Turner, “Trouble in Mind” (New York: Atlantic Records, 1957).

³¹⁷ Son House, “Delta Blues,” *Son House: The Legendary 1941-1942 Recordings in Chronological Sequence* (N.p.: Roots, 1941).

³¹⁸ Langston Hughes, “Hey!” as quoted in Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 185.

cyclical, ongoing process in which each generation makes its imprint and nurtures the next in line. In fact, seasonal and generational change is a central theme and trope within the song. It is also worth noting that in the teachings of Islam, the sun takes on a symbolic meaning, namely freedom. So undoubtedly in the minds of some listeners, especially among those who were Muslim, this metaphor held multiple meanings.

In the second verse we find a similar form to the first, an *ABAB* rhyme scheme, four lines in length. Here again we see Scott-Heron “worrying the line,” marked by the Exs “yeah” and “and” to the third and fourth lines respectively:

I see the blackness of winter
I see death lurking in the trees
Yeah, I see the blackness of winter
And I see death lurking in the trees³¹⁹

These lines chronologically advance the seasonal motif, this time shifting the frame to winter. In this verse, Scott-Heron wrote of the “blackness of winter” and “death lurking in the trees,” grim associations of “blackness” to be sure. However, the first lines of the next refrain reverse this polarity. Like Garvey, Scott-Heron links the color black with racial pride and contemporary diasporic liberation struggles:

I see the blackness of my people
You know they're calling for freedom everywhere
I've seen the blackness of my people
And all you got to do, Brothers and sisters, reach out your hands,
We're gonna take you there
Black stands for liberation

Notably, the latter two lines assure listeners that freedom is a destination and Scott-Heron and the Midnight Band are “gonna take you there.”

The song’s last verse, written in *ABAB* form, rounds out the seasonal cycle, this

³¹⁹ Scott-Heron and Jackson, “The Liberation Song (Red, Black, and Green).”

time focusing on spring. Accordingly, naturalistic imagery of optimism populates the stanzas:

I've seen the green buds in the springtime
And somebody told me that means new life
I've seen the green buds in the springtime, comin' up through the concrete
Somebody told me they symbolize new life

Here the third color in the UNIA flag, green, takes on a rather traditional role, symbolizing growth (“green buds”) and rebirth (“new life”). Keeping with Garvey’s original association of green as the color of hope of a prosperous future for blacks in Africa, this could easily be read as a metaphor for the emergence of new freedom movements in the 1960s and 1970s, especially those in Africa and Latin America. Scott-Heron worries the line and varies the rhythm with the addition of “comin’ up through the concrete” to the third line. What is more, green functions as an extended metaphor in the third refrain:

I've seen the green fields of my homeland
And I've heard people calling for freedom everywhere
It seems to me like if you've seen the green fields of your homeland
Even when you dream it, you can reach out your mind
And someone will take you there, cause
Green stands for liberation³²⁰

In this instance, Scott-Heron references having glimpsed the “green fields of [his] homeland.” It is likely that the “homeland,” he has in mind is not Jackson, Tennessee but rather Africa. This reading would be in keeping with the pan-African imagery, metaphors, and references that dot the lyrical landscape of “The Liberation Song (Red, Black, and Green).”

The song’s final verse threads together the three colors, revealing them as being the fabric of “our flag.” By identifying with the colors UNIA flag with liberation, Scott-

³²⁰ Ibid.

Heron figuratively upends the traditional association of red, white, and blue of “Old Glory” as the signifier of freedom for Afro-Americans. What is more, he encouraged parents to pass these teachings and traditions on to their children, ensuring the Pan-African tradition of struggle would continue to endure across generations:

There are three colors on our flag now, brother
One red, one black, and there's one green
There are three colors on our flag now, sister
Can you tell your babies what they mean?

The final refrain reiterates the new liberationist color scheme, admonishing listeners to “keep on thinking ‘bout red, and black, and green.” Scott-Heron assures listeners by virtue of the rising tide of revolutionary consciousness and their continued efforts that:

...sooner than you think the whole world's gonna know just what we mean
When we say they stand for liberation
They stand for liberation

The song’s coda cinches its message:

Talkin' bout red
Yes, and black
We're talkin' bout green
It's more than a dream if you dig what we mean

And explicitly ties the color scheme-come extended metaphor to nationalist aspirations:

It stands for liberation
It stands for a brand new nation
It stands for liberation
It stands for a brand new nation³²¹

Make no mistake, despite contemporary themes and instrumentation, “Liberation Song (Red, Black, and Green)” is a song rooted firmly in the blues tradition. We find evidence of this link in both its musical and lyrical forms as well as its content. Replete with references to black liberation, pan-African consciousness, gender inclusivity, cultural

³²¹ Ibid.

nationalist symbolism, and revolutionary sentiments, Scott-Heron struck a tone of optimism and efficacy, not resignation and defeat.

The role of blues music as a source of affirmation and self-empowerment within the black community should not be underestimated, and its function in this capacity cannot be overstated. According to theologian James Cone, “blues music is music of the black soul, the music of the black psyche renewing itself for living and being.”³²² Furthermore, the blues “affirm the somebodiness of black life” and “tell us how black people who affirmed their existence and . . . defined their own somebodiness and realized that America was not their true home.”³²³ If we accept this to be true then “The Liberation Song (Red, Black, and Green),” replete with nationalist symbolism and rhetoric, reinforced the bond between Africa and black Americans. What is more, the song’s positive and constructive approach to unity building stands as an effective model of consciousness-raising. Lastly, by substituting the red, black and green of the Garvey flag in place of the red, white and blue of “Old Glory,” Scott-Heron cleverly subverted the colors traditionally associated with freedom and nationhood in the United States. This type of psychic realignment jibes perfectly with the BAM’s rejection of decaying symbols of the West and promotion of a pan-African vision of liberation.

In addition to offering listeners proscriptive visions of the future, Scott-Heron’s blues functioned as effective counters to the ideology of American exceptionalism. Such is the case with his poem, “Bicentennial Blues.” Recorded live in Boston on 3 July 1976, artfully teased the historical contradictions and failures of democracy in regard to African

³²² Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues.*, 104.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 105.

Americans. Included on *It's Your World* the following year, the poem was the sole spoken word selection on that release. Like “The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues,” “The Liberation Song (Red, Black, and Green),” and “H₂O Gate Blues,” “Bicentennial Blues” tapped into a socio-cultural zeitgeist. In its introduction, Scott-Heron recounted the inspiration behind the poem: “We have attempted to identify the ‘Lie Detector Blues,’ as caught by Mayor Frank Rizzo.... And what Brian Jackson called the ‘Ex-Officio Blues,’ caught by Agnew, Nixon: terminal. And what we found ourselves becoming afflicted with over the past six months or so, the ‘Bicentennial Blues.’”³²⁴ Judging by audience reaction on the live recording, Scott-Heron’s critique was a welcome respite from the seemingly ubiquitous jingoism that greeted the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Coming on the heels of Watergate, the resignation of President Nixon and installation of President Ford, the Church Committee Hearings, and years of economic recession and urban decay, many were in black America were in no mood for a party.

Nonetheless, the media, politicians and Madison Avenue mined the Bicentennial as fodder for a seemingly endless barrage of television specials and advertising campaigns. The summer of 1976 was filled with “fireworks, parades, parties, races, games, and historical reenactments ... [and] exhibitions of arts and crafts.”³²⁵ Indeed, the year marked an outpouring of civic engagement as members of the public “joined forces to restore historic buildings and sites, to plant trees, to build parks, and to compile pictorial and oral histories.” This was undoubtedly aided by funds Congress who had

³²⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, “Bicentennial Blues” on Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *It's Your World* (New York: Arista, 1976).

³²⁵ Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the 70's* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 200.

allocated \$51 million to fund bicentennial-themed projects and celebrations throughout the nation. Administered by The American Revolution Bicentennial Administration (ARBA), the organization acted as patron to 27,146 events held in 11,639 locales. The seemingly incessant stream of patriotic pomp and circumstance led *Time* magazine to conclude that, “after thirteen consecutive years of assassinations, race riots, youth rebellion, Vietnam, political scandal, political collapse, energy crisis, and recession, the nation’s mood seems optimistic again.”³²⁶

In contrast, Scott-Heron’s poem strikes a somber and, at times, disgusted tone, providing a pointed counter to the celebratory exceptionalism that characterized official commemorations. In “Trouble in Mind: The Bicentennial and the Afro-American Experience,” historian Leon Litwack took an equally reflexive position. Noting the tendency toward what he called “mindless evocations of the American Dream – patriotic, self-congratulatory, ritualistic orgies with little substantive content,” he saw the Bicentennial as an “opportunity to think in different ways about our heritage” to envision a more inclusive and accurate historical narrative. A narrative that would “remember the men and women, losers in their own time, outlaws, rebels – who individually and collectively, as much as any of the Founding Fathers, tried to give meaning to abstract notions of liberty, independence, and freedom.”³²⁷ In part, this is the intervention that Scott-Heron undertakes in “Bicentennial Blues.” Part history and part ethnomusicology, the poem catalogs the simultaneous founding of the United States, rise of slavery, and birth of the blues. In fact, one could think of “Bicentennial Blues” as the poetic

³²⁶ Ibid., 200-01.

³²⁷ Leon Litwack, “Trouble in Mind: The Bicentennial and the Afro-American Experience,” *Journal of American History* 74 no. 2 (September 1987): 335-36.

embodiment of Litwack's proposed revisionist narrative. Scott-Heron begins his poetic mediation on America and the blues with a lesson for listeners regarding their common roots and routes:

Some people think that America invented the blues
and few people doubt that America is the home of the blues.
And the bluesicians have gone all over the world carrying the
blues message and the world has snapped its fingers and
tapped
its feet right along with the blues folks, but
the blues has always been totally American.
As American as apple pie.
As American as the blues.
As American as apple pie.
The question is why ...
Why should the blues be so at home here?
Well, America provided the atmosphere
America provided the atmosphere for the blues and the blues
was born.³²⁸

Several elements regarding the poem's form are significant and provide further insight into Scott-Heron's blues poetics. The poem is another example of the *free blues* verse that typified the stanzaic patterns in "H₂O Gate Blues." Unlike that production, however, "Bicentennial Blues" is a solo recitation, which places it in the tradition of blues poetry rather than blues music. While there are identifiable lyric patterns within the poem, overall the work is quite complex and not easily reduced to a single more traditional formulaic structure like *AAB* or *ABAB*. Also, when we examine the verses above, another prominent blues retention stands out, namely, repetition. Indeed, we can see both repetition and variance at work in several places throughout the poem, such as in the following stanza:

³²⁸ Gil Scott-Heron, "Bicentennial Blues" on Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *It's Your World* (New York: Arista, 1976); "Bicentennial Blues," *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron*. New York: Canongate U.S., 2000), 96-101; and, "Bicentennial Blues," *So Far, So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), 63-67.

the country has been ripped off!
Ripped off like the Indians!
Ripped off like jazz!
Ripped off like nature!
Ripped off like Christmas!

And later with lines such as:

It's a blues year and America
has got the blues.
It's got the blues because of
partial deification of
partial accomplishments over a
partial period of time.
Half-way justice.
Half-way liberty.
Half-way equality.
It's a half-ass year

We see a similar pattern in an earlier passage that states the blues are “As American as apple pie/As American as the blues/As American as apple pie.” The latter lines leads to the question that sits at the heart of the poem: “why should the blues be so at home here?”

In the next stanza, Scott-Heron fashions a blues creation story, reminding listeners of the historical connections between black music and the contours of the black experience in the United States:

The blues was born on the American wilderness,
The blues was born on the beaches where the slave ships
docked,
Born on the slave man's auction block.
The blues was born and carried on the howling wind.
The blues grew up a slave.
The blues grew up as property.
The blues grew up in Nat Turner visions.
The blues grew up in Harriet Tubman courage.
The blues grew up in small town deprivation.
The blues grew up in the nightmares of the white man.

As in the previous verse, here again we see a stanzaic pattern rooted in repetition. In addition to building tension from line to line, it also provides a rhetorical framework for

the history lesson at hand. This is particularly noticeable in the six lines that begin with the phrase “the blues grew up.”

Also noteworthy here is the manner in which Scott-Heron explicitly ties the birth of the blues with the rise of chattel slavery. The idea of the blues being born on “the auction block” and “beaches where the slave ships/docked” echoes the consensus of most African American music scholars and critics.³²⁹ Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal were both adamant about the role of slavery in providing the formulaic and psychic bedrock of the blues that, in fact, evolved in the post-bellum period and appeared in more or less mature form in the early Jim Crow era. Baraka pointed out the links between African “chants and litanies” and polyrhythmic drumming and the work songs and field hollers that developed on plantations. Accordingly, the music served as both an accompaniment and response to forced labor in a foreign land.³³⁰ Also, Scott-Heron associates Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman - two paragons of black resistance - with the blues. In addition to paying tribute to Turner and Tubman, this semiotic association stood as a rebuke of the notion that blues music was somehow the soundtrack of accommodation. Rather, for Scott-Heron, the blues were the sonic embodiment of the rebellious, subversive, and tenacious spirit that had sustained generations of Africans and African Americans who resisted slavery’s reign. In his words, “The blues remembers everything the country forgot.”

³²⁹ While the scholarly literature on the blues is quite voluminous and extensive, for a sampling of views on the origins and development of blues music, see: Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), Steven C. Tracy, *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Perennial, 1999), Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), Lawrence Cohn, *Nothing But the Blues: The Music and the Musicians* (New York: Abeville Press, 1993), and Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Viking, 1981).

³³⁰ Baraka, *Blues People*, 18.

The next stanzas follow the development of the blues, making the case that one can “trace the evolution of the blues on a parallel line with the evolution of this country”:

The blues grew up in the blues singing of Bessie and Billie
and Ma.

The blues grew up in Satchmo’s horn, on Duke’s piano
in Langston’s poetry, on Robeson’s baritone.

The point is ...that the blues is grown
the blues is grown now – fully grown and you can
trace

the evolution of the blues on a parallel line
with the evolution of this country.

From Plymouth Rock to acid rock.

From 13 states to Watergate,

The blues is grown, but not the home.

The blues is grown, but the country has not.

The blues remembers everything the country forgot.

Here the speaker charts the growth of the music via the black musical pioneers Bessie [Smith], Billie [Holiday], Ma [Rainey], [Paul] Robeson, Louis Armstrong, and Duke [Ellington]. In Scott-Heron’s estimation, “the blues is grown, but not the home/the blues is grown, but the country has not,” reflecting a dissenting opinion regarding American Exceptionalism. The final line - “the blues remembers everything the country forgot” - is an arresting and profoundly expansive observation on the historicity of the blues. What is more, it alludes to the archival role of blues productions, a tradition that harkens back to its griot roots.³³¹

Given the saccharine tenor of most official Bicentennial celebrations, for audiences in 1976 Scott-Heron’s poem served as a potent reminder of the centrality of slavery to the country’s charter. This sentiment is particularly pronounced in the following verse where Scott-Heron highlights the relationship between bondage and liberty that delimited life for African Americans in early America:

³³¹ For more information on this centuries-old tradition see, Thomas A. Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998).

The ideas of justice, liberty, and equality got cold
by George Washington
slave owner general!
Ironic that the father of this country
should be a slave owner.
The father of this country a slave owner
having got by him
it made it easy to get by his henchmen,
the creator's of this liberty,
who slept in bed with the captains of the slave
ships,
fought alongside Black freed men in the Union Army,
and left America a legacy of hypocrisy.

This critical imagery strongly contradicted the portrayals of the nation and its founding fathers that permeated the American superstructure in 1976. By shifting the focus from freedom to slavery, Scott-Heron brought to the fore the contradiction that lay at the heart of the American creation myth as reified in the plethora of Bicentennial-themed commemorations and commercials. In turn, Scott-Heron, like Leon Litwack, instructed listeners to think critically about the narrative of the past, its role in shaping the present, and its use in molding the future. This line of critique calls to mind another potent anti-bicentennial riff voiced by famed black comedian and actor Richard Pryor. Affecting a sermon-like tone and preacherly cadence, he, too, stressed the “legacy of hypocrisy” from the standpoint of an African American speaker: “we are gathered here today to celebrate this year of Bicentenniality [sic] in hope of freedom and dignity. We’re celebrating 200 years of White folks kicking ass... How long? How long? How long will this bullshit go on?”³³² Clearly, the “historical/hysterical” meanings of the Bicentennial were not lost on Pryor, Scott-Heron, or their respective audiences.

³³² Richard Pryor, “Bicentennial Prayer,” *Bicentennial Nigger* (Burbank, Calif.: Warner Bros. Records, 1976).

The poem's next lines connect the historical past to the contemporary present, pointing its lens on the "blues trio" Gerald "Oatmeal Man" Ford, Ronald "Hollyweird" Reagan, and Jimmy "Skippy" Carter. We also see reference to former Nixon National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. Scott-Heron sarcastically labels Kissinger as "the Godfather of peace," and follows this by exclaiming "a piece of Vietnam!/A Piece of Laos!/A piece of Angola!/A piece of Cuba!," a reminder of the notorious military and intelligence agency incursions in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America that occurred on Kissinger's watch in the 1960s and 1970s.³³³ With references to anti-busing protests and prominent "political prisoners," the poem's final verse is a bitter lament regarding "justice, liberty, and equality" in mid-Seventies America:

It's a blues year for justice.
It's a blues year for the San Quentin Six, looking
for justice.
It's blues year for Gary Tyler, looking for justice.
It's blues year for Rev. Ben Chavis, looking for
justice.
It's a blues year for Boston, looking for justice.
It's blues year for babies on buses,
It's blues year for mothers and fathers with
babies on busses.
It's a blues year for Boston and it's a blues year
All over this country.

Here again, we see telltale signs of the blues in both repetition and stanzaic patterns. Each phrase begins with the declaration "it's a blues year for" followed by its subject, the San Quentin Six, Gary Tyler, Benjamin Chavis, Boston, and "mothers and fathers." Here this style of repetition provides a rhetorical frame and propels the narrative, allowing the

³³³ For information on these and other foreign policy matters related to Dr. Henry Kissinger, see, Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1999), Jussi M. Hanhinäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

speaker to draw attention to, and perhaps more importantly, unite the seemingly disparate circumstances of the aforementioned individuals.

Lastly, with “Bicentennial Blues” Scott-Heron registered an anti-materialist critique targeting the opportunistic commercialism that accompanied the celebration. As Joyce Ann Joyce observed “this timely album cautions Black people to be mindful of their economic-exploitative history in relation to the dominant American culture.”³³⁴ For Scott-Heron, the rash of advertisements and sales revealed a primal engine behind the bicentennial thrust, namely, consumerism. He notes that the holiday had been “violated by commercial corporations” whose attempts to capitalize on the proceedings he critiqued:

A Bicentennial year
The year the symbol transformed into the B-U-Y-centennial.
Buy a car.
Buy a flag.
Buy a map . . . until the public en masse has been
Bludgeoned into
Bicentennial submission
Or Bicentennial suspicion.

Scott-Heron’s concept of the “B-U-Y-centennial” was a timely and all-too-apt critique. Indeed, a cursory glance at a sampling of media ranging from the *New York Times* to *Time* magazine reveals a plethora of bicentennial-themed products, sales, and specials geared toward luring shoppers into stores. By linking freedom with consumerism -“buy a car/buy a flag/buy a map” - Scott-Heron critiques the way in which the holiday had been

³³⁴ Joyce, “Gil Scott-Heron: Larry Neal’s Quintessential Artist,” 75.

co-opted by commercial interests resulting in a republic whose constituents had been, in his words, “bludgeoned into Bicentennial submission.”³³⁵

Scott-Heron’s tone in this section is emblematic of the cynicism that pervades the piece and informs his pronouncements regarding the psychic state of the union at the time. Interestingly, in an essay penned for *Crawdaddy* the previous year we can see what is perhaps the intellectual genesis of the poem. Scott-Heron used his debut column in that forum to discuss a range of issues that had surfaced in the late 1960s that had “planted seeds of regression that grow rampant as 1976 approaches.”³³⁶ In part, the essay offers an analysis of America from “*inside* the body of dissent” in which Scott-Heron “suggest[ed] that after the shock of Chicago, the bloodbaths of spring, 1970, and the carnage of Attica, protest and dissent—once the certain rights of every American—became matters of life and death with which unarmed students and inner city citizens could not cope.” In his estimation, the protest and resistance that had in the previous decade “brought America to the doorstep of her Constitutional ideals” had been “temporarily derailed” by a wave of state-sponsored repression.³³⁷ As with his poem, the column highlighted the hypocrisy of these anti-democratic Law and Order measures in relation to the celebration of the nation’s founding and upcoming presidential election. Notably, several of the figures he

³³⁵ This poem was not Scott-Heron’s first take on the topic of anti-materialism. Works such as “Lady Day and John Coltrane” and “Free Will” also critiqued the forces of conspicuous consumption that cultural critics argued had become a defining feature of American society during the postwar era. The former will be discussed at length in Chapter Five.

³³⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, “After Midnight,” *Crawdaddy* (November 1975), 14.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

brought to the fore in the column later appeared in “Bicentennial Blues,” including Ben Chavis, the San Quentin Six, Ronald Reagan, and Gerald Ford.³³⁸

Apart from the text, the recording of “Bicentennial Blues” provides additional evidence of the poem’s reception at the time of its debut. Given that it was performed live in Boston on 3 July 1976, the applause, whistles, and verbal utterances that punctuate Scott-Heron’s performance give us an indication of its real-time reception. Historically, blues artists, as Mary Ellison points out, were “the accepted community spokesman (or spokeswoman) on social and political issues” and sometimes the sentiments they expressed “amounted to a musical version of widely held views.”³³⁹ In this capacity blues performers are able to “successfully sing communally rather than personally” and thereby “transform complaint into affirmation.”³⁴⁰

This interaction between audience and performer is another link between the blues and Africa. As outlined by Portia K. Maultsby, “the fundamental concept that governs music performance in African and African-derived cultures is that music-making is a participatory group activity that serves to unite black people into a cohesive group for a common purpose.”³⁴¹ African ethnomusicologist J.H. Kwabena Nketia elaborated on the communal, ameliorative qualities of the audience-performer dynamic, saying that public performance “provides at once an opportunity for sharing in creative experience,

³³⁸ Ibid., 14-15.

³³⁹ Mary Ellison, *Lyrical Protest: Black Music’s Struggle Against Discrimination* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 53-4.

³⁴⁰ Dennis Jarrett, “The Singer and the Bluesman: Formulations of Personality in the Lyrics of the Blues” in *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, Steven C. Tracy, ed. (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 196-7.

³⁴¹ Portia K. Maultsby, “Africanisms in African American Music” in *Africanisms in American Culture*, Joseph E. Holloway, ed. (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2005), 329.

for participating in music as a form of community experience, and for using music as an avenue for the expression of group sentiments.”³⁴² The idea of the “performer-audience” parallels a central BAM tenet that there be no division between the artist and the community.³⁴³ We can see this concept at work in several places in the live recording of “Bicentennial Blues.” Applause, shouts of affirmation, and whistles occur repeatedly throughout the recording, following lines such as: “it’s a Bicentennial Blues” (3:22); “Hysterical importance, historical importance” (3:40); “buy a car, buy a flag, buy a map” (4:30); “it’s a half-assed year” (5:00); “Oatmeal Man” (6:04); “Ronald Reagan, Hollyweird” (6:24); “now he acts like somebody might vote for him for president” (6:40); and, “Jimmy Carter, Skippy” (6:46). The ongoing call and response between Scott-Heron and the audience during the performance reflects yet another intersection with the blues tradition and the Black Arts Movement.

CODA

The blues held sway over Gil Scott-Heron’s aesthetic and artistic sensibilities. Conversely, his musical and poetic productions contributed to this vital tradition. With adopting the persona of the “bluesologist or “bluesician,” Scott-Heron forged a key connection to the blues tradition, illustrating how this persona functioned and evolved in the 1970s. The blues retentions and extensions that populate Scott-Heron’s productions show evidence of the many ways in which his compositions intersected with the blues. In addition to a multiplicity of stanzaic patterns particular to blues verse, he utilized retentions such as exclamatory elements, melisma, repetition, worrying the line, and

³⁴² As quoted in *Ibid.*, 329.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 338.

coded language to embellish and communicate his poetic messages. What is more, the variety of blues modalities in Scott-Heron's work further attests to his expansive formulaic vocabulary and poetic range. Viewed alongside his other compositions, the blues pieces discussed herein placed Scott-Heron among other black artists of his cohort who routinely engaged this vaunted tradition.

Besides being a creative touchstone and favored poetic form, Scott-Heron saw the blues as the poetic embodiment of the Afro-American experience. He used the blues as a vehicle for socio-political critique, consciousness raising, cultural reportage, and as a challenge to the conventional historical narrative. His formal choice of the blues as a viable and fertile means for communicating political consciousness placed him alongside other BAM poets who also saw great value in the rhythms, messages, and cultural affirmation found in blues music and poetry. Music scholar and historian Douglas Henry Daniels reminds us that the "blues are of singular significance for understanding the American historical experience."³⁴⁴ As such, the blues productions of Gil Scott-Heron constitute aural time capsules of postwar black cultural politics. These cultural productions are not mere entertainment; they are also historical documentation of the immorality and hypocrisy of the American political system that persisted in the post-Civil Rights era. Indeed, in his role as a "bluesologist," Scott-Heron helped document, define, and decode the decade of the 1970s.

³⁴⁴ Douglas Henry Daniels, "The Significance of Blues for American History," *Journal of Negro History* 70 (Winter-Spring 1985): 14.

CHAPTER 3

“WINTER IN AMERICA”: POETIC RESISTANCE IN THE AGE OF NIXON³⁴⁵

It's winter; winter in America
And all of the healers have been killed or forced
Away.
It's winter; winter in America
Ain't nobody fighting 'cause nobody knows
what to save. —Gil Scott-Heron³⁴⁶

Before the Freedom of Information Act, I used to say at meetings, "The illegal we do immediately; the unconstitutional takes a little longer." [laughter] But since the Freedom of Information Act, I'm afraid to say things like that. —Henry Kissinger³⁴⁷

Well ... life is ugly. We do what we can but the scales tell the story every time. Fear and loathing are everywhere. The swine have come home to roost. —Hunter S. Thompson³⁴⁸

The imperiled presidency of Richard M. Nixon served as the backdrop for some of Gil Scott-Heron's most memorable and consequential productions. Indeed, many of these compositions were inspired by current events, as though he had transliterated the morning headlines into verse. A critic with *Rolling Stone*, writing in 1975, hailed him for

³⁴⁵ The pre-colon title of this chapter is the name of Scott-Heron's fourth album that later became a song released on his fifth album. He explained the circumstances surrounding this turn-of-events, saying, "*Winter in America* was a concept, it was not a song at the time. The collage on the inside was done by a lady named Miss Peggy Harris. She got everything mentioned in the album in there. ... She kept saying that there ought to be a song called Winter in America [sic], and I said, Miss Harris, this whole thing is supposed to sound like winter in America. After we finished the album she still said there ought to be a song called Winter in America, so one night we sat down and wrote a song called Winter in America. We put it on the next album and it turned out to be very successful in terms of being identified with the music we were doing." Tom Terrell, "Gil Scott-Heron," *Seconds* (#46, 1998), 31. Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *Winter in America* (New York: Strata East, 1974). Gil Scott-Heron, "Winter in America" Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *First Minute of a New Day* (New York: Arista, 1975).

³⁴⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, "Winter in America," *First Minute of a New Day* (New York: Arista, 1975).

³⁴⁷ Henry Kissinger, Cable: P860114-1573_MC_b (10 March 1975).

³⁴⁸ Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist, The Gonzo Letters, Volume II, 1968-1976*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 249.

his “devastating power” as a “poet of the immediate moment.”³⁴⁹ This was especially true in the Nixon era when Scott-Heron released on average at least one album per year.³⁵⁰ During this era, his recordings spoke to issues that impacted the day-to-day lives of many African Americans; by virtue of his prodigious output, many of these missives were delivered in real-time. Songs and poems such as “No Knock (To Be Slipped into John Mitchell’s Suggestion Box),” “King Alfred Plan,” “Did You Hear What They Said?,” and “Winter in America,” offered highly attuned critiques of Nixon-era policies and the brand of archconservative – and, on occasion, highly criminal – politics that produced them.

In these works Scott-Heron addressed, among other things, the intimidation, harassment, and repression of the black community by local and national law enforcement agencies; problematic federal programs and policies, including several prominent “law and order” interventions; political assassinations; the Watergate scandal; the Apollo 11 mission; American foreign policy; and, the war in Vietnam. In this sense, these cultural productions were not mere entertainment; rather, they furthered a poetics of resistance that decried what Scott-Heron viewed as the immorality, injustice, and hypocrisy of the Nixon Administration, numerous American institutions, and the shortcomings of modern society. In addition to serving as potent political critiques, a number of his recordings forcefully articulated the pessimism and paranoia that registered within certain quarters of black America in the early 1970s, especially among activists.

Yet, there was an additional thread that coursed throughout Scott-Heron’s catalogue during this era, namely humor. The deployment of humor was an effective tool

³⁴⁹ Stephen Holden, “Review: First Minute of a New Day,” *Rolling Stone* (10 April 1975).

³⁵⁰ In addition to his prodigious recorded output, Scott-Heron racked up a considerable number of journalistic and literary publications during this time as well.

in his repertoire of contention and an inextricable aspect of his poetics. Examining works such as “Whitey on the Moon,” “H₂O Gate Blues,” and “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” will illustrate the ways in which his productions made light of contemporary events and intersected with the historical tradition of black humor. Examining the songs and poems that gave form to the concept of “Winter in America” will, in turn, shed light on the material and psychic conditions that informed the age. This line of inquiry will not only confirm Scott-Heron’s credentials as a “poet of the immediate moment” but also highlight his role as a preeminent archivist of black life and thought in the early seventies.³⁵¹

TRUTH TO POWER, TRUTH TO THE PEOPLE³⁵²

In the election of 1972, among the broad swath of African American voters, politically speaking, Richard Nixon was *persona non grata*. If his role as Senator Joe McCarthy’s right-hand man in the Red Scare was not enough to dissuade their support, his racial politics, coded rhetoric, and divisive campaign strategy were. Voter turnout in the black community decreased over the course of Nixon’s two terms. Approximately 57.9 percent of registered African-Americans voters showed up to the polls in 1968 and

³⁵¹ It should be noted that this role was wholly intentional as Scott-Heron signaled in many interviews including one from 1975 in which he stated that he considered himself and his band to be “reflections or interpreters of the black experience and life experiences “as it goes down.” Priscilla Chatman, “Gil Scott-Heron and His Music,” *Black Stars* (December 1975), 14.

³⁵² The first part of this line has its origins in the Quaker faith; likewise, the second half of this title is the creation of black feminist scholar and activist, Mari Evans. American Friends Service Committee, *Speak Truth to Power: a Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence; A Study of International Conflict* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1955).

even fewer, 54.6 percent, cast ballots in 1972.³⁵³ Among these voters, 36 percent voted for Nixon in the former contest and only 18 percent supported him in the latter, cutting this margin by half. These numbers are illustrative of a significant decline in support among the black electorate over the course of his first term as president. Reflecting on the black electorate's distrust of the Nixon/Agnew ticket, one commentator observed,

Perhaps his most objectionable tenets to Negroes were his constant emphasis on law and order, without mentioning justice; his embracing of Southern segregationists such as Senator Strom Thurmond; and his choosing of Governor Spiro Agnew-a man who man Negroes regarded as having an unsatisfactory civil rights record when he was Governor of Maryland.³⁵⁴

Among the objections to Agnew were “his opposition to bussing to integrate the schools and the practice of civil disobedience against unjust laws; then, too, there was his stance on law and order.”³⁵⁵ With Nixon's election in 1968 and landslide victory – with 60.7 percent of the national vote in 1972 - many in the black community were understandably anxious and guarded over their prospects for the immediate future.

For many, these feelings were further justified by the events that unfolded over the course of the next six years. Hit by a number of debilitating setbacks, including the assassination and jailing of key leaders, the 1972 re-election of President Nixon, the infiltration and disruption of key Civil Rights/Black Power organizations by the FBI, and the nationwide “white backlash” against court-ordered busing programs, progress in the

³⁵³ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 125.

³⁵⁴ Patricia W. Romero, *In Black America 1968: the Year of Awakening* (Washington D.C.: United Publishing Company, 1969), 25.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

movement had stalled.³⁵⁶ In addition to this opposition, by the mid-seventies many had developed a hard-bitten attitude toward the nation's political institutions and leaders. Due in part to the Watergate scandal, the so-called "peace with honor" retreat from Vietnam, and President Nixon's inglorious resignation in the fall of 1974, Beltway politics had cast a pall on American society. Additionally, many Americans lost faith in the nation's economy. Simultaneous high rates of unemployment and rampant inflation produced the phenomenon economists termed *stagflation*.³⁵⁷ Stagflation, combined with widespread gasoline shortages, landed American consumers and the economy in the doldrums.³⁵⁸ As a result, by 1972, one in nine children received welfare benefits; however, among African Americans the statistic jumped to one in three.³⁵⁹ In addition to economic hardship, black communities across the nation bore the brunt of "benign neglect," the *de facto* "hands off" policy adopted by the administration regarding issues pertaining to race and inequality.³⁶⁰ Speaking in private in the spring of 1969 Nixon "emphasized that ... the

³⁵⁶ For a full and detailed account of the COINTELPRO program, see Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret War Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988).

³⁵⁷ Edward Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 55.

³⁵⁸ The scenes of long lines at gas pumps became routine occurrences throughout America by the mid-1970s. The "oil shock," part of the larger energy crisis, resulted from a sudden and meteoric rise in oil prices, which increased 150% between October of 1973 and January of 1974. A second, less severe, shortage struck in 1978, further shaking consumer confidence and producing an economic slowdown. Berkowitz, *Something Happened*, 55 and Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2002), 129.

³⁵⁹ Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 186.

³⁶⁰ The phrase 'benign neglect' first appeared in a 1970 memo from New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan who had been appointed by Nixon to serve as the executive secretary on the President's newly established Council on Urban Affairs. In his missive, Moynihan advanced the idea that "the time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of 'benign neglect,'" In response, Nixon wrote two words: "I agree." Hence, inaction and willful disregard for minority communities was a strategy that

whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to.”³⁶¹ Thus, aptly titled, “Winter in America” provided a powerful, incisive frame that elegantly encapsulated the tone of the Nixon era as seen through the eyes of many throughout the nation.

Indeed, a number of Scott-Heron’s other recordings from this period serve as informed and informative reflections on life in Nixon’s America. Among the numbers that appeared on these LPs, the works “No Knock (To Be Slipped in John Mitchell’s Suggestion Box),” “King Alfred Plan” and “Did You Hear What They Said,” and “Winter in America” articulate the pessimism and paranoia that ran rampant throughout black America. The first of these, “No Knock,” was recorded in 1972; however, the inspiration for the work struck two years earlier. As discussed in Chapter One, in the spring of 1970, following the shootings at Kent State and Jackson State, Scott-Heron joined an envoy of black student representatives from Lincoln, Morgan State, and Howard University who met with U.S. Attorney General John Mitchell at the White House.³⁶² During their discussion, the students aired criticisms of the Nixon Administration’s oppressive law and order tactics, including the newly granted no-knock powers. “The No-Knock Law,” he recalled, “is one of the things we talked about [and]

exquisitely complemented the administration’s governing priorities and racial politics. Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005), 14.

³⁶¹ In that same conversation, he went on to say that the “problem with the overall welfare plan is that it forces poor whites into the same position as blacks.” Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 186.

³⁶² Gil Scott-Heron, Phone interview with author, 5 April 2007. Alongside other students, Scott-Heron helped bring Lincoln University to a standstill following the Jackson State killings. On 15 May 1970, local police opened fire on students at Jackson State College in Mississippi who were protesting the Vietnam War and recent Kent State killings. Twelve students were wounded and two others killed on campus. As noted in Chapter 1, black student leaders, including Scott-Heron, demanded and were granted a meeting with the Attorney General to discuss the lackluster response from federal officials to the incident. For a complete account of what became known as the Jackson State Massacre, see Terry Spofford, *Lynch Street: The May 1970 Slayings at Jackson State College* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1989).

the fact that they had passed the No-Knock under his designation as the Attorney General. And this is what caused ... the murder of Mark Clark and Fred Hampton. They used the no-knock law to go in and kill those people.”³⁶³ Scott-Heron recalled that the Attorney General responded to the criticism by noting that “he had discussed [the law] with black people and they understood it had been legislated for our benefit.”³⁶⁴

Testifying before Congress in 1970, Mitchell explained the no-knock law:

An agent may enter a person’s premises without announcing his authority and purpose only if he has obtained a search warrant from a judge and the judge has been persuaded [that] there is probably cause that evidence will be quickly and easily destroyed or that there is a danger to the life and limb of the agent.³⁶⁵

Despite Mitchell’s repeated assurances, federal and local law enforcement officers repeatedly abused their authority while conducting no-knock raids.

Authorized by President Nixon in 1970, no-knock raids quickly drew fire from lawmakers, civil libertarians, and the media alike.³⁶⁶ In 1973, the *New York Times* conducted an independent investigation into the use and abuse of the no-knock law. The nine-month study uncovered “dozens of mistaken, violent, and often-illegal police raids by local, state, and federal narcotics agents” across the country.³⁶⁷ Worse yet, at least four people, including one officer, were killed during erroneous no-knock raids. Each of these

³⁶³ Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with Author, 4 April 2007.

³⁶⁴ Shelia Weller, “Gil Scott-Heron: Survival Kits on Wax,” *Rolling Stone*, (2 January 1975), 16.

³⁶⁵ Warren Weaver, Jr., “Mitchell Asks New Name for ‘No Knock’ Authority,” *New York Times*, 21 July 1970, 1.

³⁶⁶ Congressional Research Service, *No Knock: Unannounced Forcible Entry, Historically, In the States And In The Federal District Of Columbia Court Reform And Criminal Procedure Act Of 1970 And Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention And Control Act Of 1970*, JC 605, No. 70-311 A.

³⁶⁷ Andrew H. Malcolm, “Violent Raids Against the Innocent Found Widespread,” *New York Times*, 25 June 1973, 1.

incidents stemmed from “uncorroborated tips” provided by police informants.³⁶⁸ Victims of no-knock raids included everyone from infants to the elderly in both poor and middle-class neighborhoods. For example, on the night of 20 April 1973, Laura Smith heard someone tapping on the glass of her back door. Seconds later, a sledgehammer smashed through the door and “four armed men [dressed] in civilian clothes” stormed into the Smith residence. Acting on a tip, the Chicago police officers claimed they “were looking for marijuana and some man named ‘Will.’” The address on the warrant read 9763 South Oglesby; the Smith family lived at 9763 South Crandon, one block away. Realizing their mistake but offering no apologies, the officers simply “scratched off” the warrant’s original address and wrote in the Smiths’. Ironically, James Smith was a Cook County Deputy Sheriff.³⁶⁹

Perhaps the most infamous no-knock raid occurred at the Chicago Black Panther Party headquarters. During the pre-dawn hours of 4 December 1969 police stormed the building and murdered the chapter’s two dynamic young leaders, Mark Clark and Fred Hampton.³⁷⁰ In the weeks following the raid, the BPP offered guided tours of the crime scene. Panther defense attorney Flint Taylor later recalled the reaction of “an older black woman” who shook her head in disgust and muttered, “It’s nothing but a northern

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 1.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 22.

³⁷⁰ For an unflinching account of the raid and photographs of the aftermath, see Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI’s Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2002) and Mike Grey and Howard Alk, dir., *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (1971, DVD reissue, Facets, 2007).

lynching.”³⁷¹ Hampton’s girlfriend Deborah Johnson, then nine-months-pregnant, recalled the chaos of the raid:

The first thing that I remember after Fred and I had went to sleep was being awakened by somebody shaking Fred while we were lying in bed. Saying, ‘Chairman, Chairman, wake up! The pigs are vamping! The pigs are vamping!’³⁷²

The intruding officers shot Hampton in the head at point-blank range and then dragged his lifeless body from his bed and into the doorway in hopes of disguising the blatant assassination of the BPP leader.³⁷³

As part of the FBI’s COINTELPRO operation,³⁷⁴ agent provocateur William O’Neal infiltrated the Chicago chapter of the Black Panthers and, by February 1969, had become “the ‘number three man’ in the Chicago BPP and was reportedly in line for national party office.”³⁷⁵ Years later, O’Neal admitted to providing the police with a hand-drawn floor plan of the building, including the locations of the BPP leaders’ beds. To help ensure the success and mitigate danger to law enforcement, on the night before the raid O’Neal dosed Hampton with narcotics.³⁷⁶ On December 8, four days after the raid, Cook County State’s Attorney Edward V. Hanrahan praised the officers’

³⁷¹ Henry Hampton, dir., *Eyes on the Prize, II: America at the Racial Crossroads, vol. 3 – Power, 1967-1968* (Alexandria, Va.; PBS Video, 1989).

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression*, 73.

³⁷⁴ In 1956, at the direction of Director J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI initiated a domestic surveillance operation called COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program). Initially, the program’s aim was to infiltrate the CPUSA. In the late 1960s, it morphed into a tool for the disruption and ultimate destruction of groups ranging from the Weathermen to the Black Panther Party to the American Indian Movement. For a full discussion of COINTELPRO operations, see Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression* and Kenneth O’Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI’s Secret File Against Black America, 1960-1972* (New York: The Free Press, 1989).

³⁷⁵ Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression*, 65.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 65.

“remarkable restraint ... bravery ... [and] professional discipline.”³⁷⁷ None of the participating officers ever faced charges in relation to the murders. The ambush and assassination of Hampton and Clark effectively crushed the Illinois chapter of the BPP, sending a chilling message to other black activists and organizations across the nation³⁷⁸

In spite of numerous no-knock fiascos such as those in Chicago, no-knock had staunch support from law enforcement. One DEA agent defended the actions of officers saying, “You can’t ask an agent to spend three months on a case and then expect him to announce himself politely [while] listen[ing] to every toilet on the floor flush away the evidence. You have to be a saint to do that.”³⁷⁹ DEA head Myles J. Ambrose further defended the agents: “you see these vermin selling drugs ... and you get sickened and angry and perhaps you take your frustrations and hostilities out on some guy’s bookcase. It’s not right. But how are you going to prevent it?”³⁸⁰ Lawmakers offered a sure-fire remedy. In September of 1974, Congress pulled the plug on the no-knock tactic.³⁸¹

In 1972, Gil Scott-Heron included “No Knock (to be slipped into John Mitchell’s Suggestion Box)” on his second LP, *Free Will*.³⁸² Backed by Brian Jackson on flute and percussionists Eddie Knowles and Charlie Saunders, Scott-Heron delivered an urgent, spitfire performance. In the first stanza of “No Knock” Scott-Heron describes his meeting with the Attorney General:

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 73.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 77.

³⁷⁹ Malcolm, “Violent Raids Against the Innocent Found Widespread,” 1.

³⁸⁰ Ronald Smothers, “Drug Raid Is Made At Wrong House,” *New York Times*, 2 September 1973, 22.

³⁸¹ “Senate Votes To Repeal No-Knock Drug Law Rule,” *New York Times*, 11 July 1974, 1.

³⁸² Gil Scott-Heron, *Free Will* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1972).

You explained it to me John I must admit,
but just for the record you was talkin' shit!
Long raps about No Knock being legislated
for the people you've always hated

He then repeats Mitchell's justifications for the legislation:

'No Knock!' The Man will say, 'to keep that man
from beatin' his wife!'
'No Knock!' The Man will say, 'to keep people
from hurtin' themselves!'

Then, Scott-Heron reminds listeners of the raid on the BPP headquarters in Chicago:

No-knockin', head rockin', enter shockin',
Shootin', cussin',
killin', cryin', lyin' and bein' white!
No Knocked on my brother, Fred Hampton,
bullet holes all over the place!

He then asks the Attorney General:

Who's gonna protect me from you?
The likes of you? The nerve of you!
To talk that shit face-to-face
your tomato face dead pan
your dead pan deadening another freedom plan!

Next, he offers Mitchell some pointed advice:

But if you're wise, No Knocker,
you'll tell your No-Knockin' lackies
to No Knock on my brother's heads
and No Knock on my sister's heads

Scott-Heron concludes with a warning:

and double lock your door
because soon someone may be No Knocking...
for you!³⁸³

³⁸³ Gil Scott-Heron, "No Knock (to be slipped into John Mitchell's Suggestion Box)," *Free Will* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1972) and Scott-Heron, "No Knock (to be slipped into John Mitchell's Suggestion Box)," *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate US, 2000), 60.

On the same LP, Scott-Heron warned listeners of another perceived threat to the black community. His poem, “King Alfred Plan,” exposed laws that sanctioned the preventive detention of those whom authorities regarded as a threat to the United States government and public safety. As Scott-Heron explained in a 1974 *Rolling Stone* interview, “[King Alfred Plan was] about the McCarran Act ... which makes it legal in times of civil disturbance caused by black people to remove community leaders and herd them into the detention camps [the U.S. government] already got set up.”³⁸⁴ The McCarran Act, or The Internal Security Act of 1950, demanded the compulsory registration of “communist” affiliates and authorized the detention of suspected political subversives.³⁸⁵ The McCarran Act required that all “communist-action organization[s]” register with the U.S. Attorney General and, further, authorized government investigations into the activities and membership rosters of domestic political organizations suspected of having ties to the “world communist movement.” Moreover, Title II, the Emergency Detention Act, authorized the preventive detention of those individuals who, through means of “sabotage and espionage ... constitute[ed] a clear and present danger to the public peace and the safety of the United States.” The detention of dissidents “in a time of internal security emergency,” according to Congress, was an “essential” safeguard to national security and, even, the “Constitution itself.”

Another source of inspiration for the poem came from the novel *The Man Who Cried I Am* by John A. Williams. In 1971, Scott-Heron, promoting his first novel, *The Vulture*, appeared alongside the esteemed author on Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee’s radio

³⁸⁴ Weller, “Gil Scott-Heron: Survival Kits on Wax,” 16.

³⁸⁵ *The Internal Security Act of 1950, (the McCarran Act)*, 1950, 64 Stat. 987.

program. Impressed with Williams' book, Scott-Heron appropriated elements of *The Man Who Cried I Am* - most importantly, the name of the fictive plot - for his poem, "King Alfred Plan."³⁸⁶ Originally published in 1967, this highly influential novel contained a fictive account of an international conspiracy to eliminate all people of African descent.³⁸⁷ In detailing this plot, the author included purported copies of documentation that outlined details of what he called "King Alfred":

In the event of widespread and continuing and coordinated racial disturbances in the United States, King Alfred at the discretion of the President, is to be put into action immediately.

PARTICIPATING FEDERAL AGENCIES

National Security Council	Department of Justice
Central Intelligence Agency	Department of Defense
Federal Bureau of Investigation	Department of the Interior ³⁸⁸

In the pages following this ominous passage, memos discovered by the book's protagonist, Max Reddick, further outlined the specifics of King Alfred. For example, one document purportedly from the National Security Council (NSC) boldly declared:

The Minority has adopted an almost military posture to gain its objectives, which are not clear to most Americans. It is expected, therefore, that when those objectives are denied the Minority, racial war must be considered inevitable. When that emergency comes we must expect the involvement of all 22 million members of the Minority, men women, and children, for once this project is launched, its goal is to terminate once and for all, the Minority threat to American society, and, indeed the Free World.³⁸⁹

Likewise, another memo from the Department of the Interior (DOI) noted that in the event of a so-called "Emergency," all citizens of color "will be evacuated from the cities

³⁸⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with author, 3 April 2007.

³⁸⁷ John A. Williams, *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967; reprinted Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 2004).

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 371.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 372.

by federalized national guard units, local and state police, and if necessary, by units of the Regular Armed Forces, using public and military transportation, and detained in nearby military installations until a further course of action has been decided.”³⁹⁰

Further, a missive from the Attorney General found among the collection of photostats advised that certain organizations were already under surveillance including, The Black Muslims, Uhuru Movement, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), and the National Urban League. The memo goes on to say that leaders of “some of these organizations are to be detained ONLY WHEN IT IS CLEAR THEY CANNOT PREVENT THE EMERGENCY (sic), working with local public officials during the first critical hours.”³⁹¹ The aforementioned groups represented a broad swath of black activists across the ideological spectrum. Needless to say, their inclusion in a program such as King Alfred would have been inflammatory information when the book was published in 1967, especially in light of the rebellions that erupted across the nation the following spring.

In addition, the piece eerily mirrored key aspects of several bills authorized by the Nixon administration. In 1970, with his observation that Washington, D.C. was “fast becoming the crime capital of the world,” President Nixon sought to seize control of the situation. With the *Federal District of Columbia Court Reform and Criminal Procedure Act of 1970*, known as the “D.C. Crime Bill,” the administration granted law enforcement several ominous extra-Constitutional powers. Besides no-knock raids, the bill ominously

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 372.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 374.

authorized the preventive detention of anyone judged by police as “likely to endanger community safety.” On 29 July 1970, President Nixon, surrounded by reporters, signed the D.C. Crime Bill into law. As the ink dried on his signature, Nixon enthused, “I hope this is only the beginning.” In fact, the bill was only one of thirteen law enforcement proposals submitted by the administration to Congress that year, and became the first submitted for the President’s signature.³⁹²

Additional developments in black America lent further credence to the threat of preemptive mass detention. By the early 1970s, numerous black leaders and organizations were under siege by local and federal law enforcement agencies. As previously noted, the FBI’s COINTELPRO operation, aided by local police departments around the country, infiltrated, disrupted, and harassed organizations, including SNCC and the BPP. Given the nature and number of these external threats, Williams’ fictive King Alfred Plan sounded entirely plausible, and in the wake of the D.C. Crime Bill, indeed possible. Huey P. Newton claimed that the purpose of the D.C. Crime Bill was to give legal cover to the campaigns of “terror, brutality, murder, and repression” already being waged against black communities nationwide.³⁹³ In 1967, the imprisoned BPP founder warned against the potential use of preventive detention:

The concentration camps in which Japanese Americans were interned during World War II are being renovated and expanded.... We are forced to conclude that these concentration camps are being prepared for Black people.... Toward people of color the racist power structure of America has but one policy: repression, genocide, terror, and the big stick.³⁹⁴

³⁹² “President Signs Bill to Fight Crime in the Capital,” *New York Times*, 30 July 1970, 18.

³⁹³ Huey P. Newton, written statement delivered by Bobby Seale, Sacramento, Calif., 2 May 1967, as quoted in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Black Panthers Speak* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2002), 40.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

In his 1969 political autobiography, *Die Nigger Die*, BPP Minister of Information H. Rap Brown also raised concerns regarding “the Plan”:

The most obvious example of genocide is in the concentration camps that America has prepared for Black people. This came about as a result of the McCarran Act of 1950, a law which establishes concentration camps. There is a part, Title II, which suspends the right of due process. That means that there goes the disillusion of all machinery hereby you would be entitled to see a lawyer or go to court. You're arrested and taken off to the camp, without having had an opportunity to state your side of the case. Not that the presentation of your case matters.”³⁹⁵

Newton and Brown appear to have based their warnings on a 1966 booklet, “Concentration Camps U.S.A.” by journalist Charles R. Allen Jr. that circulated throughout black America.³⁹⁶ Allen told of detention centers in Pennsylvania being readied for “subversives” in 1950 following the passage of The McCarran Act. Upon revisiting the facilities in 1966, he found five of the six centers in disuse. However, Allen speculated that they could potentially be used by the U.S. Justice Department to detain undesirables during an “internal security emergency” such as urban riots or student protests.³⁹⁷ Further legitimating their concerns, in May of 1968 the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) published “Guerilla Warfare Advocates in the United States.” The committee claimed that “mixed Communist and black nationalist elements” were “planning and organizing guerilla-type operations against the United States.”³⁹⁸ HUAC concluded that the detention centers provided for by Title II of the McCarran Act

³⁹⁵ H. Rap Brown, *Die Nigger Die!* (1969; reprinted Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2002), 108.

³⁹⁶ Masumi Izumi, “Prohibiting ‘American Concentration Camps’: Repeal of the Emergency Detention Act and the Public Historical Memory of the Japanese Internment,” *Pacific Historical Review* 74, no. 2 (2005): 171.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 171-2.

“might well be utilized for the temporary imprisonment of warring guerillas.” Further escalating these concerns, Deputy Attorney General Richard Kleindienst suggested that en-masse detention could be an effective tool for law enforcement in the event of an urban insurrection.³⁹⁹

By the early Seventies, the Nixon Administration’s police-state tactics had black communities nationwide on alert. Alarmed by the precedent of the McCarran Act and recent legal maneuvers by the Nixon Administration, Scott-Heron recorded “King Alfred Plan” for his second LP, *Free Will*. With his prefatory comments, Scott-Heron offers listeners a history lesson and wake-up call:

It is 1972, an election year. And once again black people are running for their lives. Reasons are things like the King Alfred Plan. The concentration camps that we used during the Second World War to house Oriental Americans are now being refurbished to confine their new residents, i.e., black people. Brothers and Sisters, there *is* a place for you in America.⁴⁰⁰

Backed by Jackson’s hypnotic flute along with the percussion of Charlie Saunders and Eddie Knowles, Scott-Heron details the “plan”:

Places are being prepared and readied
Night and day
Night and day
The white boy’s plan is being readied
Night and day
Night and day

Next, he cites Brown’s warnings and the precedent set by the “D.C. Crime Bill”:

Listen close to what Rap say
About traps like Allenwood, PA
Already legal in D.C.
To preventively detain you and me

To Scott-Heron, the term “preventive detention” echoed an earlier era:

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 171-2.

⁴⁰⁰ Gil Scott-Heron, “King Alfred Plan,” *Free Will* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1972).

The Jews and Hitler come to mind
They thought the slavery far behind
But white paranoia is here to stay
Check it out, night and day
What you think about the King Alfred Plan?
You ain't heard? Where you been, man?

Mid-poem, the percussion halts and, sounding as if he is peaking into a bullhorn, Scott-Heron "paraphrase[s] the government notice":

Should there at any time become a clear and present danger initiated by the radical elements threatening the operations of the government of the United States of America members of this radical element shall be transported to detention centers until such time as their threat has been eliminated. Code: King Alfred.

Setting the bullhorn aside, he continues:

Bullshit! I bet you say
There ain't no Allenwood, PA
And people ain't schemin'
Night and day, night and day

Using language reminiscent of Malcolm X, Scott-Heron exhorts:

In the end, unity will be thrust upon us
Night and day
Night and day
Night and day
...
Let us unite because of love
Instead of hate
Let us unite on our own
And not because of barbed wire death
You dare not ignore the things I say
Because whitey is planning
Night and day, night and day⁴⁰¹

Giving voice to a range of historical events and psychic fears, Gil Scott-Heron's recordings such as "No Knock" and "King Alfred Plan" are prime illustrations of the ways in which his recordings functioned as "survival kits on wax." Moreover, in tone and

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

substance, the poems invoked the paranoia and siege mentality shared by black activists and communities in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Gil Scott-Heron specialized in producing songs and poems that lay bare the contradictions of American democracy in regard to black citizens. One of his most moving pieces, “Did You Hear What They Said?,” is an aural history of the postmortem injustice meted out to the family of a black soldier killed in Vietnam.⁴⁰² While the war generated voluminous media coverage, not all of the stories pertained to the battles waging in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰³ Headlines such as “Black Soldier’s Burial is Held Up in Florida” and “Slain Negro G.I.’s Mother Charges Cemetery Bias” hinted at the injustice within. On at least three occasions in the early 1970s, the bodies of African-American soldiers killed-in-action were denied burial in the South.⁴⁰⁴ After reading of one such account in *The New York Times* in the fall of 1970, Scott-Heron

⁴⁰² In addition to “Did you Hear What they Said?,” several other Scott-Heron pieces reference Vietnam in passing, namely “South Carolina (Barnwell),” and “Comment #1.” Gil Scott-Heron, “South Carolina (Barnwell),” Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *From South Africa to South Carolina* (New York: Arista, 1975); Scott-Heron, “Comment #1,” *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox: A Collection of Black Poems*, (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1970), 14; and Scott-Heron “Comment #1,” *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1970).

⁴⁰³ To gain a greater understanding of the African American experience in country, see: Samuel W. Black, ed., *Soul Soldiers: African Americans and the Vietnam Era* (Pittsburgh, Pa: Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center, 2006); Cecil Barr Currey, *Long Binh Jail: An Oral History of Vietnam’s Notorious U.S. Military Prison* (Washington D.C.: Brassey’s, 1999); Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984; 1991); and James E. Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008); and, Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

⁴⁰⁴ The families of soldiers Pfc. Jimmy L. Williams of Wetumka, Alabama, Pfc. Bill Terry of Birmingham, Alabama, and Specialist Pondextuer Williams met with Jim Crow sanctions as they attempted to bury their loved ones who were killed while serving in Vietnam. Gene Roberts, “Slain Negro G.I.’s Mother Charges Cemetery Bias,” *New York Times*, 27 May 1966, 32 and, James T. Wooten, “Black Soldier Buried Among Whites,” *New York Times*, 4 January 1970, 57.

wrote “Did You Hear What They Said?” and in the process revealed how in the early 1970s Jim Crow customs persisted, even in death.⁴⁰⁵

The saga detailed in Scott-Heron’s song began when, on the morning of 8 August 1970, a VC mortar attack claimed the life of twenty-year-old Army Specialist Pondextuer Williams. Back in his hometown of Fort Pierce, Florida, Mrs. John Diehl, wishing to honor the fallen soldier’s sacrifice, donated a burial plot to Williams’ mother. However, the director Hillcrest Memorial Gardens barred the burial, citing a “whites-only” clause that appeared in the cemetery’s contracts.⁴⁰⁶ Ironically, the business had routinely advertised free burial plots for American servicemen killed in the war. Williams’ grieving mother appealed to the cemetery’s parent company, National Heritage, Inc. of Pickens, South Carolina who callously replied that her son’s burial would require a court order. Within days, a Federal District judge issued a preliminary injunction ordering Williams’ burial and forbidding cemetery officials from “in any way interfering” with the internment.⁴⁰⁷ Finally, nearly one month after his death in country, Army Specialist Pondextuer Williams was laid to rest in at the Hillcrest Memorial Gardens in Fort Pierce.

Indeed, the racial politics of the draft during the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and 1970s represent a significant challenge to the traditional narrative of the civil rights era and American history. That the escalation of the Vietnam War came on the heels of

⁴⁰⁵ In conversation with the author, Scott-Heron recalled how he first happened across Williams’ story, “There were pictures on the front page of the newspaper. I saw articles in *The New York Times* and I wrote the song from there ... that was the first time I heard anything about that.” Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with the Author, 4 April 2007.

⁴⁰⁶ “Court Tells Florida Cemetery to Bury Black G.I.,” *New York Times*, 28 August 1970, 1.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 is a coincidental, yet significant, development. For example, one thing that is often overlooked in discussions regarding Vietnam is that draft boards across the South were comprised entirely of whites. Which is to say that despite accounting for a significant portion of the population, not a single African American served on a local draft board in the region.⁴⁰⁸ Their representation did not fare much better nationally; by 1966, African Americans comprised only 1.3 percent of the total number of draft board members nationwide.⁴⁰⁹ This discrepancy yielded the likelihood that fewer blacks would receive deferments and that, in fact, African Americans from the South would likely be drafted – and perhaps killed – in significant numbers. In fact, between 1961 and 1966, African Americans comprised approximately 13 percent of the U.S. population, yet during those same years black soldiers comprised almost 20 percent of all combat deaths in Vietnam.⁴¹⁰

While numerous black Americans enlisted voluntarily, others were coerced and pressed into service by extralegal means. Besides the draft, many joined the armed forces via judicial sentences that offered the choice between doing time in prison or in the jungles of Vietnam.⁴¹¹ In 1966, “Project 100,000” allowed President Johnson to bolster sagging military recruitment levels.⁴¹² Rather than offer potential recruits inducements

⁴⁰⁸ James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 24.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴¹⁰ Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 1998).

⁴¹¹ Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984; 1991), 204.

⁴¹² A 1966 memo to President Johnson advised that, “the U.S. must send a substantial number of additional forces to VN [Vietnam] if we are to avoid being defeated there.” In the months following this recommendation, the military lowered enlistment standards and amped up recruitment efforts with schemes

such as enlistment bonuses or fast-track promotions, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara proposed that the military raise the needed troops by relaxing entrance standards and redoubling efforts to recruit minorities. Of the 350,000 men who enlisted via the program, 41 percent were African American.⁴¹³ Though this number declined in later years, the war continued to disproportionately affect the African American population. For example, in 1968, the war's deadliest year, nearly half of the soldiers who served on the frontlines were black.⁴¹⁴

Arguably, the draft and the targeted recruitment of African Americans served to shuffle potential black voters out of the body politic and into Vietnam. In Christian Appy's *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides*, several African American interviewees recalled the racial politics of recruitment. Former SNCC member and NAACP head Julian Bond gave voice to this phenomenon, saying:

I was classified I-Y, which means you're mentally, physically, or morally unfit for service. My draft board found me unfit because I had been arrested at a sit-in demonstration. But I don't think it was common to exempt civil rights activists from the draft. In fact, it seems as if southern draft boards were targeting people in the movement. The head of my draft board was later quoted in (*Newsweek*) as saying, "That nigger Julian Bond, we let him slip through our fingers."⁴¹⁵

As Bond's oral history testimony indicates, black activists in particular were often singled out as potential draftees for Vietnam and thus eliminated as threats to the political and social status quo in the South. Combined with the Jim Crowing of deceased black

including "Project 100,000." Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E.W. Kenworthy, and Fox Butterfield, eds., *The Pentagon Papers as published by The New York Times* (New York: The New York Times Company, 1971), 489.

⁴¹³ Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1984; 1991), 111.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴¹⁵ Christian G. Appy, "Julian Bond," *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides* (New York: Viking, 2003), 144.

soldiers, these tactics illustrated another contradiction in the treatment of black Americans during the Nixon era.

With “Did You Hear What They Said?,” Scott-Heron chronicled the indignities inflicted upon the mother of Pondexter Williams, and by extension the families of other soldiers who suffered the same ordeal. He once introduced the song in concert with a moving vignette: “during the height of [the Vietnam War] a body was sent home of a black serviceman. And his mother tried to take him to get buried in a local military cemetery and he was refused entrance. So in singing this song, in your mind’s eye, see a mother standing [over] a casket draped with a flag: not allowed.”⁴¹⁶ With the first verse and chorus, Scott-Heron asks listeners:

Did you hear what they said?
Did you hear what they said?
They said another brother’s dead
They said he’s dead but he can’t be buried
They said he’s dead but he can’t be buried

The chorus’ refrain conveys his incredulity:

Come on, come on, come on
This can’t be real

With the second verse, he reminds listeners of Williams’ service and sacrifice. When combined with the chorus, the irony and sarcasm becomes apparent:

Did you hear what they said?
Did you hear what they said?
They said they shot him in his head
They said they shot him in his head
Shot in the head to save his country
Shot in the head to save his country

⁴¹⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, Spoken Introduction, “Did You Hear What They Said,” performed at the Lion’s Lair, Denver, Colo., 26 February 2000. Recorded by the Author.

The third verse dramatizes the grief of Williams' mother upon learning that Hillcrest Memorial Gardens had refused her son's remains:

Did you hear what they said?
About his mother and how she cried
They said she cried 'cause her only son was dead
They said she cried 'cause her only son was dead

Then, he appeals directly to women, specifically mothers:

Woman, could you imagine if your only son dead
And somebody told you he couldn't be buried
Come on, come on, come on, come on
This can't be real

Scott-Heron closes the song with the haunting refrain:

Come on, come on, come on
This can't be real⁴¹⁷

With "Did You Hear What They Said?," Scott-Heron deftly transliterated headlines into history. What is more, the song pointed out the hypocrisy of Williams and other black soldiers sacrificing their lives abroad in the name of freedoms they had yet to enjoy at home. Thus, Scott-Heron's aural history complicates triumphalist narratives that peg the demise of racial segregation to watershed events such as *Brown v Board* in 1954 and passage of civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s. By shining a light on this hidden history of Jim Crow, Scott-Heron's song reveals the systemic and systematic ways in which institutional discrimination and injustice continued to function in the early 1970s.

Another song from this era encapsulated the dismal dimensions of life on the domestic front during the Nixon years, a ballad titled "Winter in America." A longtime fan favorite, this composition ranks among Scott-Heron's most evocative and haunting

⁴¹⁷ Gil Scott-Heron, "Did You Hear What They Said?," (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1972).

works.⁴¹⁸ In fact, one writer labeled it his “coldest, sharpest demolition of the American dream.”⁴¹⁹ Another critic singled out the track, saying it “sounded a sad death-knell for sixties hopes of transforming change.”⁴²⁰ Clearly, the work spoke to the diminishing aspirations and disillusion with American institutions that characterized the era. Notably, the song appeared not on the album of the same name, but rather on Scott-Heron’s follow-up release in 1975; however, as a concept, its roots run deep. Though Scott-Heron traced its origins to the death of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, the phrase came to symbolize the sense of malaise and dread that characterized life for many in the Nixon era:

Well, you know how they used to say, “The long hot summer’s coming?” Well, when law and order came, and the cutbacks in social programs came, and assassinations, and imprisonments and that kind of thing came, it brought about Winter in America. They killed [Martin Luther] King, they killed [President John F.] Kennedy; they whipped heads in Chicago, killed Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. They visited violence on white students for the first time at Kent State.

They gave everybody the news that to stand up from now on was going to cost you all the way to the max. And this brought about a disillusionment [sic], a certain amount of discouraging news to Americans of the younger generation who had been committed more to the ideals of America than to realities. It brought about a lesson in the now that connected them with the entire American past.⁴²¹

Tying together the collapse of congressional support for Great Society programs with the onset of Nixonian law and order machinations, including the assassination, intimidation, and imprisonment of political activists, with “Winter in America” Scott-Heron struck

⁴¹⁸ Indeed, Public Enemy front man and rap pioneer Chuck D. cited “Winter in America” as his “favorite and most influential” Scott-Heron song. Chuck D., “First Groove,” *Bikini* (August 1998), Npn.

⁴¹⁹ A.J. Barratt, “Word War Fighter,” *New Musical Express* (19 July 1986), 19.

⁴²⁰ Mike Bohem, “Still Talkin’ ‘Bout a Revolution: Gil Scott-Heron Rapped the Status Quo Long Before Rap Made it Fashionable,” *Los Angeles Times* (3 December 1992), Npn.

⁴²¹ Fenton, “Interview: Gil Scott-Heron,” 24.

upon a memorable and effective phraseology in which to frame the period of the late sixties and early seventies.

Other sources yield further insight into the title's existential underpinnings. In the liner notes to *Winter in America*, Scott-Heron spoke to the psychological shock imposed by the seasonal shift:

... Winter is a metaphor; a term not only used to describe the season of ice, but the period of our lives through which we are traveling... Everyone is moving, searching. There is a restlessness within our souls that keeps us questioning, discovering and struggling against a system that will not allow us space and time for fresh expression. We approach winter the most depressing period in the history of this industrial empire, with threats of oil shortages and energy crises.⁴²²

Though he wrote that it was a phrase that described the “overall atmosphere of the album” and “the times we were living,” characteristic of Scott-Heron, his remarks also sounded a note of optimism.⁴²³ He echoed this sentiment in his signoff, writing “we as black people have been a source of endless energy, endless beauty and endless determination. I have many things to tell you about tomorrow’s love and light. We will see you in the spring.”⁴²⁴ In an article he penned for the jazz journal *Black Fire*, he reiterated the optimism that undergirded the album: “[*Winter in America*] is a family album, an album that was conceived in an attempt to depict how warm/beautiful a black togetherness could be. It was intended to be ... a collection of thoughts about a new

⁴²² Gil Scott-Heron, Liner Notes, *Winter in America* (New York: Strata East, 1974).

⁴²³ Gil Scott-Heron, Liner Notes, *Winter in America* (New York: Ruml-Gia, 1998).

⁴²⁴ It is worth noting that his next LP was called *The First Minute of a New Day*, a title which advanced a sense of renewal and optimism. By the time of its release in 1975, an embattled President Nixon had resigned, hence the “new day.” Incidentally, renowned African American guitar innovator Jimi Hendrix, at the time of his death, was working on an album he had provisionally titled *The First Rays of a New Rising Sun*. Though conceived several years prior to *The First Minute of a New Day*, the titular similarities are striking. Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *The First Minute of a New Day* (New York: Arista, 1974).

beginning.”⁴²⁵ While this expression of optimism may seem like an internal contradiction within the extended metaphor, viewed in the balance of Scott-Heron’s catalogue, it is entirely consistent.

With “Winter in America,” Scott-Heron sought to flesh out the concept that had initially inspired the title.⁴²⁶ The first verse presented a host of naturalist references and historical metaphors that implied that the nation’s fortunes had been strangled by its sundry origins:

From the Indians who welcomed the pilgrims
to the buffalo who once ruled the plains
like the vultures circling beneath the dark clouds
looking for the rain, looking for the rain
From the cities that stagger on the coast lines
like the forest buried beneath the highways
never had a chance to grow, never had a chance
to grow.

The song’s memorable chorus expressed the disillusionment felt by many in the wake of President Nixon’s tenure and resignation:

It’s winter; winter in America
And all of the healers have been killed or forced
Away.
It’s winter; winter in America
Ain’t nobody fighting ‘cause nobody knows
what to save.

⁴²⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, “Around (And About) Midnight,” *Black Fire* (Volume One, No. 3, 1974), Npn.

⁴²⁶ Speaking to the intellectual origins of the phrase, Scott-Heron recalled, “We wanted to see if we could find something that described the whole album that wasn’t a title song that you separate from the rest of the lyrics ... We wanted to talk about all of the songs. We felt as though we had come across something that people did not understand or did not recognize but that’s the season we were going into, not for three months but for an extended period of time. A lot of the folks who represented summer and spring and fall had been assassinated. ... Bobby Kennedy and Dr. King and John Kennedy, those were folks who represented spring and summer, and they killed them. The only season left is winter. So we wanted to do an album about where we were. And we weren’t trying to depress people, hell they were living it, they already knew but we were trying to describe it and we were certainly not alone... we felt as though a part of it was the folks in charge of the political structure. They were snowmen.” Jalayha Burrell, “Fell Together: A Conversation with Gil Scott-Heron, Part 2” 19 February 2009 (<http://blogs.vibe.com/babar/2009/02/gil-scott-heron-part-2>).

The next stanza further outlines the contours of the season with references to the ‘law and order’ abuses, the stunted 1972 presidential campaign of former Alabama Governor George C. Wallace, and the “peace signs that melted in our dreams”:

The con-stitution was a noble piece of paper;
with Free Society they struggled but they died in
vain
and now Democracy is ragtime on the corner
hoping that it rains.
And I’ve seen the robins perched in barren
treetops
watching last ditch racists marching across the
floor
and like the peace signs that melted in our
dreams
never had a chance to grow.

The final refrain serves as a fitting coda, offering a candid diagnosis for the decline of activism:

It’s winter; winter in America
And all of the healers have done been killed or put in
jail.
It’s winter; winter in America
and ain’t nobody fighting ‘cause nobody knows
what to save.⁴²⁷

The allusions to “healers” who had been assassinated or imprisoned certainly struck a chord with listeners; however, the song’s final line “nobody’s fighting ‘cause nobody knows what to save” is perhaps its most devastating. Following on the heels of Watergate, Vietnam, and years of extra-constitutional machinations in the name of ‘law and order,’ this line summarized the disgust with American institutions that coursed through many quarters of society in the mid-Seventies. With poems like “No Knock (to

⁴²⁷ Gil Scott-Heron, “Winter in America,” Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *Winter in America* (New York: Strata East, 1974); Scott-Heron, “Winter in America,” *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate U.S., 2000), 62-3; and, Scott-Heron, “Winter in America,” *So Far, So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), 33-4.

be slipped into John Mitchell's Suggestion Box)" and "King Alfred Plan," Scott-Heron assailed legislation and law enforcement tactics that targeted black communities. "Did You Hear What They Said?" offered listeners an understated, yet powerful reminder that Jim Crow cast a persistent, often inescapable shadow, even for African Americans who sacrificed their lives in service to their country. Each of these recordings gave shape to the concept of "Winter in America," which, in turn, amplified the frustrations of black activists and communities nationwide.

BLACK HARDSHIP, BLACK HUMOR

Within African American culture, humor, like music, holds particular prominence; likewise, in many of Scott-Heron's works, humor is an ever-present constituent. Historian Lawrence Levine is one of many scholarly commentators who explored the subject of black humor. In his path breaking monograph, *Black Culture, Black Consciousness*, Levine analyzed the ways in which humor manifested and functioned in various cultural venues, including music, folktales, and naturally, jokes. Commenting on the poetics of black humor, he wrote, "Laughter was a compensating mechanism which enabled blacks to confront oppression and hardship."⁴²⁸ Humor, as shown in Chapter Two, was an inextricable constituent of Scott-Heron's catalog and personality. What is more, humor served as a strategic element of his so-called "survival kits," especially during the Nixon era.

One particularly transgressive function of Scott-Heron's humor was the way in which his productions roasted esteemed public figures and institutions - politicians, the

⁴²⁸ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1977), 299.

media, and Movement leaders alike - exposing what he viewed as the illogic and internal contradictions in their politics. This is certainly in keeping with the traditional deployment of African American humor. As Levine instructed, in some instances black humor centered on “the trivialization and degradation of ideas or personages normally held to be lofty or noble, and the advancement of those normally consigned to an inferior or inconsequential position.”⁴²⁹ Moreover, he reminds us that humor “allowed black folk to laugh at and thereby gain some perspective upon their own anger.”⁴³⁰ Lastly, it is important to note that laughter, like music, “transformed personal expression into collective expression” and “functioned to foster a sense of particularity and group identification” that in turn “[strengthened] a sense of group cohesion.”⁴³¹ Many of Scott-Heron’s humorous poetry and songs - peppered with intra-group slang, colloquialisms, vernacular, and idiomatic phrases - expressed a particular consciousness that united listeners in collective laughter, helping them cope with the injustices and indignities of everyday life in the early seventies.

For Scott-Heron, the use of humor enabled the poet to speak truth to power and truth to the people in a way that was at once disarming, engaging, informative, and entertaining. Several poem-performances recorded during Nixon’s presidency, “Whitey’s On the Moon,” “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” and “H₂O Gate Blues,” highlight the ways in which Scott-Heron’s works intersected with this centuries-old tradition. While these performances center on serious subjects and could be read as

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 300-01.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 324.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 359.

militant broadsides, this exegesis would require one to overlook the obvious as Scott-Heron once pointed out, saying “if you didn’t laugh, it didn’t mean it wasn’t funny to me.”⁴³² Whether or not his critics misinterpreted this crucial component, in each of the aforementioned poems, humor functions as a psychic release and safety valve of sorts for audiences, sublimating rage into laughter, helplessness into hysterics.

Among his first poems to garner national attention due to its publication in *TIME* magazine was “Whitey on the Moon.”⁴³³ Though labeled by the publication as harboring “bitterness” and presented to readers as being emblematic of militant black poetry, the tone and text are actually quite humorous.⁴³⁴ On 20 July 1969, American astronauts Neil Armstrong and Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin made history as the first humans to set foot on the surface of the moon.⁴³⁵ While this momentous event occurred on Nixon’s watch, the initial impetus for the so-called “moon shot” belonged to one of his predecessors, John F. Kennedy. President Kennedy, in a speech before a joint session of Congress on 25 May 1961, called for a mission to the moon by the end of the decade, saying the it was imperative that the United States “catch up and overtake” the U.S.S.R. in the exploration of outer space.⁴³⁶ Indeed, NASA’s success came in the midst of a much ballyhooed

⁴³² Jalayha Burrell, “Fell Together: A Conversation with Gil Scott-Heron,” 19 February 2009 (<http://blogs.vibe.com/babar/2009/02/gil-scott-heron-part-1>).

⁴³³ The poem, along with an interview with its author, was also presented to readers in the pages of the campus paper the *Lincolnian* a couple weeks later. No author listed, “Books: The Undaunted Pursuit of Fury,” *Time* (April 6 1970), 98, and No author listed, “Gil Scott-Heron,” *The Lincolnian* (1 May 1970), 3.

⁴³⁴ “Books: The Undaunted Pursuit of Fury,” *TIME*, 98.

⁴³⁵ As Melvin Small pointed out, President Nixon faced criticism by *The New York Times* for “sharing the stage with the astronauts” when he placed a call to the Apollo craft, greeting the crew by saying “Hello, Neil and Buzz, I am talking to you by telephone from the Oval Office in the White House, and this certainly has to be the most historic phone call ever made from the White House.” Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 230.

⁴³⁶ John F. Kennedy, “Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs” (25 May 1961).

“space race” between the United States and the Soviet Union, prompted in part by Russia’s success with the Sputnik mission in 1957 and launching the first human - Yuri Gagarin - into space on 12 April 1961. Wishing to demonstrate America’s technological superiority and leadership on the world stage, Kennedy commissioned Project Apollo. A little over eight years later, the United States successfully landed the first man on the moon.

Across the nation, Americans sat in their living rooms, glued to their television sets as Neil Armstrong set foot on the lunar surface and spoke the famous words, “That’s one small step for man and one giant leap for mankind.” That evening Bobbi Scott witnessed the live broadcast promptly joking to her son that “whitey’s on the moon.” Seizing upon the utterance, Scott-Heron appropriated it for the title and refrain of one of his most memorable compositions:

A rat done bit my sister Nell.
(with Whitey on the moon)
Her face and arms began to swell.
(and Whitey's on the moon)
I can't pay no doctor bill.
(but Whitey's on the moon)
Ten years from now I'll be payin' still.
(while Whitey's on the moon)
The man jus' upped my rent las' night.
(‘cause Whitey's on the moon)
No hot water, no toilets, no lights.
(but Whitey's on the moon)
I wonder why he's uppinn’ me?
(‘cause Whitey's on the moon?)
I wuz already payin' 'im fifty a week.
(with Whitey on the moon)
Taxes takin' my whole damn check,
Junkies makin' me a nervous wreck,
The price of food is goin' up,
An' as if all that shit wuzn't enough:
A rat done bit my sister Nell.
(with Whitey on the moon)

Her face an' arm began to swell.
 (but Whitey's on the moon)
 Was all that money I made las' year
 (for Whitey on the moon?)
 How come there ain't no money here?
 (Hmm! Whitey's on the moon)
 Y'know I jus' 'bout had my fill
 (of Whitey on the moon)
 I think I'll sen' these doctor bills,
 Airmail special
 (to Whitey on the moon)⁴³⁷

On the surface, the poem paints a grim portrait of urban life, drawing stark contrast between the nation's achievements in regard to the "space race" and its failings in regard to the War on Poverty; however, the work also dishes up ample servings of Scott-Heron's trademark humor, wit, and irony.⁴³⁸ For example, note the ways in which the call and response structure cleverly contrasted the subject's maladies - rat bites, doctor bills, taxes, inflation, and the decline in anti-poverty programs - against the image of the moon landing, implicitly critiquing the fiscal and social costs of the hyper-competitive "space race," especially in light of the defunding of numerous Great Society programs that benefitted the black community.⁴³⁹ However, Scott-Heron cast his critical observations in

⁴³⁷ Gil Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon" *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1970), Scott-Heron, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox: A Book of Black Poetry*, (New York: The World, 1970), 28; Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon," *So Far, So Good*, (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), 42; and, Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon," *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate U.S., 2000), 21.

⁴³⁸ While the humor present in the original studio recording is somewhat subdued, Scott-Heron's glib performance of the poem in the film "Black Wax" - accented by the presence of an astronaut suit suspended from ceiling - lends further credence to the humor thesis presented here. Robert Mugge, dir., *Black Wax* (Winstar DVD, 1999).

⁴³⁹ By the late 1960s, there had occurred a discernable shift in national priorities as dictated by the ramping up of the Vietnam War and the articulated policy of "benign neglect," which, coupled together, signaled the end of numerous Great Society anti-poverty initiatives. Nixon complained that the War on Poverty "has been a miserable failure," Nixon elected to subject the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to what aide Patrick J. Buchanan labeled a "vivisection." Many of these programs were aimed at minority communities in urban centers, who suffered disproportionately as a result, and, perhaps by design. Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 190.

witty, memorable terms that though couched in colloquial humor, were nonetheless timely and thought provoking.

Wit, humor, satire, and irony are present in abundance in Scott-Heron's signature piece, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." Called an "agit-pop classic" by one critic, the song poem presents a collage of images, catch phrases, and cultural referents juxtaposed against the churning, syncopated rhythms emanating from the profoundly capable all-star rhythm section.⁴⁴⁰ While this work is arguably his most famous, it is also his most misapprehended. As with "Whitey's On the Moon," a certain sense of humor pervades the poem. "That was satire," Scott-Heron asserted, "people would try to argue that it was this militant message" but as Scott-Heron asserted, "that was satire."⁴⁴¹ Asked about how audiences have difficulty distinguishing between his literary and literal selves, he bemusedly replied:

"The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," we thought that was hilarious. We didn't understand how they got gun-toting, bomb throwing militant out of that. "The revolution will not make you look five pounds thinner." I mean, come on, let's get what I actually said not the tone of voice I used. We're talking, "will not get rid of the nubs," "Bullwinkle and Julia."⁴⁴²

Indeed, the strident vocal delivery belied the cutting cultural satire that threaded throughout the work. The first two stanzas signified on a steady stream of cultural referents punctuated with the poem's memorable refrain:

You will not be able to stay home, brother.
You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out.
You will not be able to lose yourself on skag and skip,

⁴⁴⁰ Billed as Pretty Purdie and the Playboys, the personnel included Bernard Purdie on drums, Ron Carter on Bass, and Hubert Laws on flute. Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," *Pieces of a Man* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1971).

⁴⁴¹ Rob Fitzpatrick, "Gil Scott-Heron Interview," *The Telegraph* (17 February 2010), (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandpop/features/7257536/Gil-Scott-Heron-interview.html>).

⁴⁴² Burrell, "Fell Together: A Conversation with Gil Scott-Heron: Part 2."

out for beer during commercials,
Because the revolution will not be televised.

The revolution will not be televised.
The revolution will not be brought to you by Xerox
In 4 parts without commercial interruptions.
The revolution will not show you pictures of Nixon
blowing a bugle and leading a charge by John
Mitchell, General Abrams and Spiro Agnew to eat
hog maws confiscated from a Harlem sanctuary.
The revolution will not be televised.

Sounding off in a litany of laughable Madison Avenue-inspired catch phrases and
Hollywood stars, the third stanza reverberates with humor rather than rage:

The revolution will not be brought to you by the
Schaefer Award Theatre and will not star Natalie
Woods and Steve McQueen or Bullwinkle and Julia.
The revolution will not give your mouth sex appeal.
The revolution will not get rid of the nubs.
The revolution will not make you look five pounds
thinner, because the revolution will not be televised, Brother.
....

Beyond a literal reading of the opening lines, the remainder of the fifth stanza is rooted in
an intra-group humor of the absurd:

There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down
brothers in the instant replay.
There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down
brothers in the instant replay.
There will be no pictures of Whitney Young being
run out of Harlem on a rail with a brand new process.
There will be no slow motion or still life of Roy
Wilkins strolling through Watts in a Red, Black and
Green liberation jumpsuit that he had been saving
For just the proper occasion.

Popular television shows of the late sixties were among the subjects of sixth stanza:

Green Acres, The Beverly Hillbillies, and Hooterville
Junction will no longer be so damned relevant, and
women will not care if Dick finally gets down with
Jane on Search for Tomorrow because Black people

will be in the street looking for a brighter day.
The revolution will not be televised.

While comedic depictions of feminists, a former first lady, and white musical entertainers populated the next verse:

There will be no highlights on the eleven o'clock
news and no pictures of hairy armed women
liberationists and Jackie Onassis blowing her nose.
The theme song will not be written by Jim Webb,
Francis Scott Key, nor sung by Glen Campbell, Tom
Jones, Johnny Cash, Englebert Humperdink, or the Rare Earth.
The revolution will not be televised.

Contemporary advertising slogans for products such as Dove soap, Listerine mouthwash, and Mr. Clean liquid cleanser, and Exxon gasoline, among others, provided ample fodder for Scott-Heron's satire:

The revolution will not be right back after a message
about a white tornado, white lightning, or white people.
You will not have to worry about a dove in your
bedroom, a tiger in your tank, or the giant in your toilet bowl.
The revolution will not go better with Coke.
The revolution will not fight the germs that may cause bad breath.
The revolution will put you in the driver's seat.

The final lines of the poem/performance memorably repeated its title, assuring listeners that the activities in question would not be pre-recorded:

The revolution will not be televised, will not be televised,
will not be televised, will not be televised.
The revolution will be no re-run brothers;
The revolution will be live.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴³ Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1970); Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," *Pieces of a Man* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1971); Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," *So Far, So Good*, (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), 46-8; and, Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate U.S., 2000), 77-9.

Clearly, humor was a central component of “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised;” however, this not to suggest that the work was somehow lacking in political or intellectual substance. On the contrary, it registered a profound critique of the broadcast media and American popular culture writ-large. In fact, Scott-Heron claimed that part of the impetus behind the poem to decry the use of television to negatively condition the American public against activism:

[As] more people got involved in social protest, America fought back. ... [S]o look at this picture because here comes “Policewoman” and “The Rookies” and “The Sophomores” and “The Veterans” and “The Blue Knight” and “The White Nun.” And they be coming at you with all them guns and SWAT teams and shit, and you say, “Oh, my God, I can’t fight them. See the program now is total inertia. They’re trying to freeze-dry everybody. Suspended animation. Because they know it was activism that brought about a lot of positive changes.”⁴⁴⁴

On the other hand, however, by Scott-Heron’s admission, the “revolution” to which he referred was cerebral in nature, having more to do with broadening one’s consciousness than fighting in the streets:

A lot of times people see battles and skirmishes on TV and they say ‘aha, the revolution is being televised.’ Nah. The *results* of the revolution are being televised. The first revolution is when you change your mind about how you look at things and see that there might be another way to look at it that you might not have been shown. What you are shown later on are the results of that, but the revolution will not be televised.⁴⁴⁵

Thus, despite the overt focus on the national television media, the poem’s subtext centered on the ways in which consciousness predicates and informs revolutionary action. These subtle explications elided many who took the performance at face value, mistaking, as Scott-Heron put it, his tone for his words. That said, for many, the work functioned as an exemplar of revolutionary poetry and the emphasis here on its inherent humor should not be read as an attempt to diminish its contemporary political and cultural significance. Rather,

⁴⁴⁴ David Fenton, “Gil Scott-Heron,” *High Times* (March 1977), 24.

⁴⁴⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, “A Talk: Bluesology,/Jaws/The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *The First Minute of A New Day* (New York: Rupal-Gia, 2000).

this focus underscores the extent to which humor served as a means of conveying serious critiques.

Perhaps nowhere in Scott-Heron's catalog is this facility put to greater use than in the satirical sendup of numerous Nixon Administration scandals masterfully grouped together in "H₂O Gate Blues." Written in 1973 and included on the Strata East set *Winter in America*, the complex and crafty composition demonstrated its author's penchant for using humor as vehicle for political critique and consciousness-raising. What makes the song-poem that much more noteworthy is that Scott-Heron authored the piece months before the investigation was complete, yet he was able to accurately detail the contours of the scandal, right down to the cast of characters at its heart along with their connections to other instances of the administration's abuse of power and criminality.⁴⁴⁶ While an entire accounting of the Watergate scandal is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is necessary to outline a few of the details, particularly as they pertain to "H₂O Gate Blues."⁴⁴⁷

Watergate, shorthand for the scandal that ousted a sitting president, marked a nadir in American politics. On the evening of 17 June 1972, in Washington D.C., a group of five political operatives known as the Plumbers, led by a former F.B.I. agent G. Gordon Liddy, were arrested during a botched break-in at the Democratic Party

⁴⁴⁶ As we will see in Chapter Four, Scott-Heron's uncanny knack for predicting crisis in verse came to the fore on another composition, "Johannesburg," recorded and released the following year in 1975. Gil Scott-Heron, "Johannesburg," Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *From South Africa to South Carolina* (New York: Arista Records, 1975).

⁴⁴⁷ Several books are indispensable to navigating the myriad dimensions of Watergate: Stanley I. Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992); Kutler, *Watergate: A Brief History With Documents* (Hoboken, NJ, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Keith W. Olsen, *Watergate: The Presidential Scandal that Shook the World* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 2003); and, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, *All the President's Men*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974).

headquarters located in the famed Watergate Hotel.⁴⁴⁸ Hoping to locate documents relating to their opponents, the Republican-affiliated Plumbers - James W. McCord, Bernard Barker, Frank Sturgis, Eugenio Martinez, and Virgilio Gonzalez - were part of a well-coordinated effort to mine oppositional research on their Democratic opponents.⁴⁴⁹ Their operations targeted not only the President's opponents, but his critics as well, such as in the case of State Department employee and Pentagon Papers leaker, Daniel Ellsberg and the Kennedy family.⁴⁵⁰ Their activities were sanctioned by the Nixon campaign, specifically by aides within the Committee to Re-elect the President, or CREEP, incidentally headed by former Attorney General John Mitchell.

As the saying goes, the cover-up is worse than the crime. For Nixon, this proved doubly true as his executive obstructionism teetered dangerously into unconstitutional territory, raising the ire of even loyal White House personnel like Chief of Staff John Dean who had failed to successfully contain either the scandal or the President's self-injurious and criminal impulsivity in handling what the administration had dismissively labeled a "third rate burglary." In particular, one of the Plumbers, E. Howard Hunt, had threatened to go to the press unless the White House paid him the sum of one million dollars. Of course, other key White House personnel, namely presidential aides, H.R. Haldeman, John Erlichman, and former Attorney General Mitchell, were themselves knee-deep in the cover-up, as the American public would soon discover.

⁴⁴⁸ Keith W. Olsen, *Watergate: The Presidential Scandal that Shook the World* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 19.

⁴⁴⁹ Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, *All the President's Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 19.

⁴⁵⁰ Earlier that same year, the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist was burgled in an attempt to obtain his personal medical files in hopes of discrediting the insider critic-turned-leaker. One of the Plumbers, E. Howard Hunt, had spent time in 1969 investigating Teddy Kennedy's Chappaquiddick crash along with President John F. Kennedy's role in the Bay of Pigs and the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam. Olsen, *Watergate*, 19.

It was not until following Nixon's re-election in the fall of 1972 that the media began taking the scandal seriously. However, two intrepid reporters from the *Washington Post*, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, sensing a potential story, had taken the investigative lead following the initial report of the botched break-in. During the course of their inquiry, the pair cultivated a secret contact within the government known at the time by the codename "Deep Throat."⁴⁵¹ In a series of mysterious meetings in a D.C. parking garage, this source provided them with clues and the details regarding the identities and actions of those involved in the Watergate affair. Based in part on their reporting, in February of 1973, Congress voted to appoint a special prosecutor to investigate the allegations being leveled against the administration.⁴⁵² Archibald Cox was appointed in this position and in the summer of that same year subpoenaed hours of Oval Office recordings made by Nixon on a secret taping system that had come to light during the Watergate hearings.⁴⁵³ If extant, these tapes, could definitively answer the infamous questions, "what did the President know and when did he know it?"⁴⁵⁴

Nixon's response to the subpoena of the tapes was to ignore it, claiming executive privilege.⁴⁵⁵ When that argument was rejected he unsuccessfully sought to fire Cox,

⁴⁵¹ In 2008, it came to light that that this confidential source was Mark Felt, a senior F.B.I. official. David Von Drehle, "F.B.I.'s No. 2 Was 'Deep Throat' Mark Felt Ends 30-Year Mystery of The Post's Watergate Source," *The Washington Post* (1 June 2005), Npn.

⁴⁵² Olson, *Watergate*, 85-6.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁵⁴ Tennessee Senator and Watergate investigative committee member, Howard Baker, forwarded this infamous phrase, delivered as an interrogative, during the televised hearings. Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 285.

⁴⁵⁵ For transcripts of select conversations captured on the White House tapes, see, Stanley Kutler, *Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes* (New York: Touchstone, 1998).

resulting in what later became known as the “Saturday Night Massacre.”⁴⁵⁶ By spring, word of the depths of White House involvement first became public with the revelations of the cover-up and Nixon’s alleged approval of the Plumbers’ criminal activities. What is more, in some cases - such as with the bribery, obstruction of justice, and campaign finance violations - there was evidence of the President’s direct involvement. However, Scott-Heron had already written and indeed had been performing “H₂O Gate Blues” in concert by the time of the now-legendary live broadcast of the Watergate Hearings that took place between May and August of 1973 and riveted viewers both inside and outside the Beltway.

Living and teaching college in D.C. at the time, Scott-Heron had a front row seat to the brewing scandal from the beginning. Speaking to the origins of what one writer called his “presciently accusatory” record, he later recalled:

Right after the burglary, Brian and I figured out that Nixon did it. We almost quit dealing with that by the time they got around to impeaching the motherfucker. And now we’re ... grateful to him for giving us our credibility. He really did us a favor and we send him – he slowly tips an imaginary cap – good vibrations.⁴⁵⁷

In the wake of President Nixon’s resignation on 9 August 1974, faith in the American political system was at a near all-time low. With former Vice President-turned-convicted felon Spiro Agnew removed from office, the former Senate Majority Leader turned-Vice President Gerald Ford assumed the Presidency. Commenting on the scandals, former Nixon attorney general Elliot L. Richardson noted, “Behind the layers of secrecy

⁴⁵⁶ Several people that Nixon had dispatched to fire Cox resigned their posts rather than submit to White House pressure in the matter. In November of 1973, Robert Bork, the acting head of the Justice Department, following these high-profile departures, carried out the President’s orders, firing Cox and appointing in his place a new special prosecutor Leon Jaworski. It was at this point that the House Judiciary Committee began to consider impeachment hearings. Olsen, *Watergate*, 123-4.

⁴⁵⁷ Weller, “Gil Scott-Heron: Survival Kits on Wax,” 16.

successively peeled back by persistent investigations, we caught an ugly glimpse of the abuse of power. It has been a frightening glimpse.”⁴⁵⁸ Thus, within the space of a single year the two highest office holders in the land had each left their posts in a cloud of shame, undone by their own hubris and corruption, while a man no one had voted for occupied the White House.

Sublimating his outrage into satire, Scott-Heron filled “H₂O Gate Blues” with bitingly humorous political observations and witticisms. In the main, the song-poem is a comedic riposte to the administration’s breathtaking corruption, as well as its seeming incompetence in matters both foreign and domestic. Though named for Watergate, the work is actually a poetic indictment of Nixon Administration policies and praxis, writ large. Thus, in Scott-Heron’s song, the Watergate scandal serves as a synecdoche, a rhetorical place keeper standing in for the totality of criminality, and political underhandedness that in his view characterized the Nixon administration. Indeed, over the course of the six minute recording, he managed connect the dots regarding the break-in and cover-up while mapping the concentric ripples of corruption and injustice that precipitated the unprecedented crisis in governance. Fittingly, following the spoken intro⁴⁵⁹, Scott-Heron mimics the sound of both a telephone and the prerecorded message one hears if they are unable to connect to the number as dialed:

Click! Whirr...Click!
I’m sorry, the government you have elected is
inoperative...

⁴⁵⁸ Olson, *Watergate*, 125.

⁴⁵⁹ See Chapter Two for a discussion and analysis of the introduction, as well as other literary elements of “H₂O Gate Blues.”

Click! Inoperative!⁴⁶⁰

The first verse opens with numerous references to the Vietnam War and U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia, reserving especial critique for what the author viewed as its imperialistic underpinnings:

Just how blind will America be?
The world is on the edge of its seat
Defeat on the horizon, very surprisin'
That we could all see the plot
and claimed that we could not.⁴⁶¹
Just how blind, America?
Just how blind, Americans?
Just as Viet Nam exploded in the rice
Snap, crackle, and pop
Could not stop people determined to be free.
The shock of a Viet Nam defeat
Sent Republican donkeys scurrying down on
Wall Street
And when the roll was called it was:
Phillips 66 and Pepsi-Cola plastics,
Boeing Dow ad Lockheed –
Ask them what we're fighting for
And they never mention the economics of war.
Ecological Warfare! Above all else destroy the
land!
If we can't break the Asian's will
We'll bomb the dykes and starve the man!

America! The international Jekyll and Hyde,
The land of a thousand disguises
Sneaks up but rarely surprises,
Plundering the countryside in the name of
Fu Man Chu.

⁴⁶⁰ This witty line is a play on an infamous quote from Nixon press secretary Ronald Zeigler who stated in late-April that the President's previous statements regarding the unfolding scandal were "inoperative."
"The Nation: It's Inoperative: They Misspoke Themselves," *Time* (30 April 1973), Npn.

⁴⁶¹ After stumbling slightly over these lines, Scott-Heron repeats this stanza on the recording; however, this repetition did not appear in the print versions of the song-poem.

With the second verse, the subject switched to domestic politics, citing several recent noteworthy deaths. Here, Scott-Heron starts with a phraseology common to both the blues and the bible, the familiar refrain “how long”:

Just how long, America?
Just how long, Americans?
Who was around when Hale Boggs died?
And what was the cause of LBJ’s untimely demise?

Followed by a repeat of the chorus:

And whatever happened to J. Edger Hoover?
The king is proud of Patrick Gray
While America’s faith is drowning
Beneath that cesspool – Watergate.⁴⁶²

In the next stanzas, Scott-Heron questions the apathy of the American citizenry in regard to ameliorating the ills - ranging from inflation to executive branch power grabs - he viewed were plaguing the nation:

How long will the citizens sit and wait?
It’s looking like Europe in ’38 and
Did they move to stop Hitler before it was too
late?
How long, America before the consequences of:
allowing the press to be intimidated
Keeping the school system segregated
Watching the price of everything soar
And hearing complaints ‘cause the rich want
more?
It seems that MacBeth, and not his lady, went
mad.
We’ve let him eliminate the whole middle-class.

⁴⁶² “LBJ” is short for President Lyndon Baines Johnson who died 22 January 1973; J. Edger Hoover was the recently deceased former director of the F.B.I.; Hale Bogs was a Democratic congressman from Louisiana and the House majority leader from Alaska who died in a plane crash in Alaska in October of 1972; and L. Patrick Gray III was director of the F.B.I. for roughly one year from 1972 to 1973 before resigning after admitting to having destroyed evidence related to the Watergate case. Olson, *Watergate*.

Continuing with the theme of domestic politics, the third verse calls into question the election results of 1972 in which Nixon amassed a whopping percentage of the popular vote:

How much more evidence do the citizens need
That the election was rigged with trickery and
Greed?
And, if this is so, and who we got didn't win
Let's do the whole Goddamn election over again!

Then, Scott-Heron unloads with a litany of scandals and questionable "law and order" maneuvers that factored into his reading of the then-unfolding presidential scandal:

The obvious key to the whole charade
Would be to run down all the games that they
Played:
Remember Dita Beard and ITT, the slaughter of Attica,
The C.I.A. in Chile knowing nothing about
Allende at this time
In the past. The slaughter in Augusta, G.A.
The nomination of Supreme Court Jesters to
Head off the tapes,
William Calley's Executive Interference in the
Image of John Wayne,
Kent State, Jackson State, Southern Louisiana,
Hundreds of unauthorized bombing raids,
The chaining and gagging of Bobby Seale –
Somebody tell these jive Maryland Governors brothers to
be for real!
We recall all of these events just to prove
That Waterbuggers in the Watergate wasn't no
News!
And the thing that justifies all of fears
Is that this went down in the last five years.

Replete with references to outlaws and organized crime syndicates, Scott-Heron takes the administration to task for Watergate, calling out President Nixon as well as those in his inner circle:

And the silent White House with the James
Brothers once in command.

Sauerkraut Mafia men deserting the sinking
White House ship and
Their mindless, megalomaniac Ahab.

The next section, rooted in repetition, offers a clever way of recounting the cast of characters at the heart of the cover-up:

McCord has blown, Mitchell has blown.
No tap on my telephone.
McCord has blown, Mitchell has blown.
No tap on my telephone.
Haldeman, Erlichman, Mitchell and Dean
It follows a pattern if you dig what I mean.
Haldeman, Erlichman, Mitchell and Dean
It follows a pattern if you dig what I mean.
And what are we left with?
And what are we left with?
Bumper stickers saying Free the Watergate 500,
Spy movies of the same name with a cast of
Thousands,
And that ominous phrase: If Nixon knew, Agnew!
What really happened to J. Edger Hoover?
The King is Proud of Patrick Gray
While America's faith is drowning
Beneath that cesspool – Watergate

As the backing band plays in *rubbato*, stretching out the final chord, Scott-Heron sarcastically chants:

four more years, four more years,
four more years, four more years... of that?⁴⁶³

Given the resignation of President Nixon a little less than nine months following his second inauguration, Scott-Heron, and indeed many in black America, were spared the full brunt of a second term. As for the track, Scott-Heron said, “the poem worked well; it felt like what the album had been missing. Not just the political aspect, but ... for the

⁴⁶³ Gil Scott-Heron, “H₂O Gate Blues,” Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *Winter in America* (New York: Strata East, 1974); Scott-Heron, “H₂O Gate Blues,” *So Far, So Good*, (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), 49-52; and, Scott-Heron, “H₂O Gate Blues,” *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate U.S., 2000), 80-5.

laughs. The Watergate incident itself was not funny neither were the broader implications. But as a release, a relief of tension on *Winter in America*, it provided a perfect landing.”⁴⁶⁴ The multiple layers of satire, irony, and humor that characterize recordings such as “Whitey on the Moon,” “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” and “H₂O Gate Blues” injected a measure of levity into the cultural dialogue at a time when routine deprivation and oppression provided little in the way of laughter or comedic relief. As such, these works are illustrative of the ways in which Scott-Heron routinely tapped into the long-standing tradition of black humor, using laughter to unmask authority, assuage the sting of injustice, and persevere through the struggles of everyday life.

CODA

With “Winter in America” Scott-Heron coined a phrase that, for many, aptly eulogized the late sixties and 1970s. Viewed as an extended metaphor, it deftly framed the contradictions and shortcomings of the American political system and society writ-large in this period. In part, Scott-Heron used his works to warn against what he viewed as immediate threats to the black community, including, preventive detention, political assassinations, drug addiction, poverty, Jim Crow, the Vietnam War, ‘law and order’ policies, federal surveillance, no-knock warrants, White House corruption, and police brutality, among other issues. With songs and poems including “No Knock (To Be Slipped in John Mitchell’s Suggestion Box),” “King Alfred Plan,” “Did You Hear What They Said?,” “Whitey on the Moon,” “H₂O Gate Blues,” and “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” Scott-Heron gave substance to the concept of “Winter in America.” For

⁴⁶⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday: A Memoir* (New York: Grove Press, 2012), 179.

present day listeners these recordings function as veritable tableaux of black history, documenting not only seminal incidents but also key cultural and psychic currents.

Speaking to this quality, Amiri Baraka cited Scott-Heron as a pillar of the “centuries-old tradition of African American struggle and resistance.” Likening him to influential nineteenth-century black activist and orator Frederick Douglass, Baraka lauded Scott-Heron as one who “tells it to us, poets it to us, sings it to us, plays it for us, so we will never forget.”⁴⁶⁵ However, in addition to their archival function, Scott-Heron’s works projected messages of affirmation and efficacy that resonated with activists across the nation. Accordingly, for many, his routine releases in this era served as indispensable resources, consistently delivering real-time commentary, critique, counter narrative, and catharsis. Indeed, Scott-Heron formulated a poetics of resistance, chronicling and combating the innumerable tensions that roiled America in the Age of Nixon.

⁴⁶⁵ Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), 237.

CHAPTER 4

“FROM SOUTH AFRICA TO SOUTH CAROLINA”: THE PAN-MOVEMENT PRODUCTIONS AND PRAXIS OF GIL SCOTT-HERON

There is a revolution going on in the world.... There are many fronts within this struggle, many far flung outposts geographically isolated and distant from our mainstreams of communication. But everyone who struggles for a better life for oppressed people is an ally who could use any symbol of our concern and solidarity.... The key to our progress lies within our ability to support alliances between ourselves and Third World people. The support begins here. In solidarity with chicanos, Puerto Riquenos, Oriental Americans and Native Americans we will continue to focus on the need for justice and opportunity – Gil Scott-Heron⁴⁶⁶

Nigerian Afrobeat progenitor and political activist Fela Kuti keenly observed, “music is a weapon.”⁴⁶⁷ Popular music is often marginalized as political dialogue, however, scholar Reebee Garofalo argues for its tactical importance, noting that it is “one arena where ideological struggle ... takes place” and “issues serious challenges to hegemonic power.”⁴⁶⁸ Gil Scott-Heron, recognizing the inherent consciousness-raising capabilities of music, seized upon art as a means for speaking truth to power while simultaneously mobilizing the masses. In 1975 he struck upon an ingenious organizing strategy, one adroitly articulated by his fifth LP, *From South Africa to South Carolina*. The title, cover art, and contents of this release suggested there were links between the causes and supporters of several signal protest movements—specifically, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and anti-nuclear activism in the United States. Scott-Heron’s philosophy and approach to uniting seemingly disparate loci of political struggle

⁴⁶⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, “Liner notes,” *Bridges* (New York: Arista Records, 1977).

⁴⁶⁷ Stephane Tchall-Gadjieff and Jean Jacques Flori, dir., *Music is the Weapon* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Geffen, 2003).

⁴⁶⁸ Reebee Garofalo, “Introduction” in *Rockin’ the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 2.

could be termed *Pan-Movement activism*.⁴⁶⁹ With the release of *From South Africa to South Carolina*, Pan-Movement philosophy became an intrinsic component of his artistic and intellectual worldview. Scott-Heron's Pan-Movement activism found expression in numerous platforms, including musical recordings, extra-musical publications, and live performances.

This chapter will explore Scott-Heron's Pan-Movement productions with particular emphasis on the ways in which they united supporters of the international struggle against apartheid in South Africa and the protests against nuclear energy in the United States. First, we will examine various ways in which the philosophy of pan-Africanism intersected with and influenced Scott-Heron's cultural productions, performances, extra-musical writings, and activism. For many listeners, songs such as "Johannesburg," "Third World Revolution," and "Delta Man (Where I'm Coming From)," offered affirming messages of Pan-African consciousness and solidarity. Next, we will examine the ways in which Scott-Heron's antiapartheid activism conjoined with his efforts to aid the anti-nuclear cause. His trio of popular compositions - "Barnwell (South Carolina)," "We Almost Lost Detroit," and "Shut Em' Down," - carried messages condemning the manufacture, use, and transport of nuclear power. Additionally, Scott-Heron participated in two of the most visible and efficacious consciousness-raising groups of the post-World War II era, Musicians United for Safe Energy (MUSE) and Artists United Against Apartheid (AUAA). Not only did MUSE raise money and

⁴⁶⁹ While this was Scott-Heron's first explicit expression of a Pan-Movement philosophy, it would certainly not be his last. This organizing principle would heavily inform his future work, particularly the albums *It's Your World* and *Bridges*. On these releases, he expanded his Pan-Movement politics to include the Women's Rights Movement, Chicano/a Movement, American Indian Movement (A.I.M.), and other international human rights campaigns. While the productions that correspond with these movements are worthy of scholarly inquiry, this chapter will view Scott-Heron's Pan-Movement philosophy through the lens of his anti-apartheid and anti-nuclear activism.

awareness in the fight against nuclear power, the historic collaboration generated a national tour, film, and platinum-selling double album, *No Nukes*. What is more, in the mid-1980s, Scott-Heron and AUAA recorded an album of original material and became the subject of yet another documentary film.⁴⁷⁰ Combined, these two strains of political activism were central to Scott-Heron's career, songbook, and cultural politics.

By writing in sympathy with these causes, Scott-Heron encouraged a kinship between activists in each struggle. In doing so he illustrated a potential intersectionality within their grievances that, if properly understood, could potentially unite adherents against their respective opponents, thereby increasing feelings of efficacy and chances for success in both movements.⁴⁷¹ Much in the same way that W.E.B. Du Bois had apprehended the superior numbers of people of color worldwide and sought to unite them in a Pan-Africanist program, Scott-Heron envisioned the gains possible in linking activists among various movements in common cause. By engendering solidarity between the anti-apartheid and anti-nuclear movements, Scott-Heron forged an essential link between these two political struggles, advancing an inchoate yet wildly effective political organizing strategy. Besides his recordings, my analysis of Scott-Heron's Pan-Movement philosophy will draw upon numerous extra-musical sources, including liner notes, interviews, live monologues, and magazine columns. Taken together, these

⁴⁷⁰ Both MUSE and Artists United AUAA projects are admittedly beyond the periodization established at the outset of this study; however, they were significant and complementary extensions of Scott-Heron's Pan-Movement philosophy and activism, so their inclusion in this discussion seems entirely apropos.

⁴⁷¹ Social movement theorists hold that maintaining a sense of efficacy is crucial in sustaining to momentum of a campaign: "Optimism about the outcome of a collective challenge will ... enhance the probability of participation." Scott-Heron's songs and poems helped communicate messages of efficacy and affirmation to listeners, further emboldening and enlarging the pool of what sociologists term "conscience constituents." David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford, "Frame Alignment Processes, Micro-mobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51 (August 1986), 470.

writings and recordings allow us to better understand the ideology that undergirded some of Scott-Heron's most celebrated and memorable compositions. In addition to exploring a slice of Scott-Heron's Pan-Movement activism, this chapter will detail the ways in which his musical and extra-musical productions contributed to the eventual dismantling of apartheid and demonstrable SUCCESSES of the anti-nuclear movement.

"THIRD WORLD REVOLUTION": FREEDOM SONGS IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST APARTHEID

South African and African American cultural productions were integral to transmitting political, cultural, and historical consciousness in the struggle against apartheid.⁴⁷² Music proved to be indispensable in fostering and mobilizing mass resistance within and without South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. The anti-

⁴⁷² The literature regarding music and antiapartheid protest is small but growing, particularly as the historical records of the South African government and the musical recordings that criticized it receive increased scrutiny. To gain a better understanding of the artistic contributions to antiapartheid activism, see: Mary Ellison, *Lyrical Protest: Black Music's Struggle Against Discrimination* (New York: Praeger, 1989); Roger Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid: A History of the Movement in Britain; A Study in Pressure Group Politics* (London: Merlin Press, 2004); Reebee Garofalo, ed., *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Marie Korpe, *Shoot the Singer!: Music Censorship Today*. (London: Zed Books, 2004); Christel N. Temple, *Literary Pan-Africanism: History, Contexts, and Criticism* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005); Peter D. McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Christopher Edmond Merrett, *A Culture of Censorship: Secrecy and Intellectual Repression in South Africa* (Cape Town, South Africa: University of Natal Press, 1995); Anders Nyberg, ed., *Freedom is Coming: Songs of Protest and Praise from South Africa for Mixed Choir*. (Uppsala, Sweden: Walton Music Corp., 1984); Don C. Ohadike, *Sacred Drums of Liberation: Religions and Music of Resistance in Africa and the Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007); Grant Olwage, *Composing Apartheid: Music For and Against Apartheid* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2008); Jon Michael Spencer, *The Rhythms of Black Folk: Race, Religion, and Pan-Africanism* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1995); Gay Seidman, "Blurred Lines: Nonviolence in South Africa," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 2 (June 2000): 161-167; Bryan Trabold, "'Hiding Our Snickers': *Weekly Mail* Journalists' Indirect Resistance in Apartheid South Africa," *College English* 68, no. 4 (March 2006): 382-406; James Zug, *The Guardian: The History of South Africa's Extraordinary Anti-Apartheid Newspaper* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 2007); and, Stephen Zunes, "The Role of Non-Violent Action in the Downfall of Apartheid," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 1 (March 1999): 137-169. The role played by music in the downfall of apartheid has featured prominently in several films: *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (New York: Ato Records, 2003); Deborah May, dir., *You Have Struck a Rock!* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2007); *Sun City: Artists United Against Apartheid* (Karl Lorimar Productions, 1985); and, Connie Field, et al., dirs., *Have You Heard from Johannesburg?: Apartheid and the Club of the West* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: Clarity Educational Productions, 2006).

apartheid songs of Gil Scott-Heron, along with those by South African musicians such as Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, Mayibuye, and Zambia, communicated messages of hope, solidarity, mourning, despair, retaliation, and agency to a beleaguered people in desperate circumstances. Beginning in the post-World War II era, a bevy of international black artists - including numerous notables in the United States and Britain - joined their South African brothers and sisters in protesting apartheid. Together their activism helped focus worldwide attention on the policies and practices of white rule in the African nation. In this way, Gil Scott-Heron became one of the most powerful agents of consciousness-raising on the world stage.

Pan Africanism, one of the most influential political ideologies and philosophies of the twentieth century, had numerous adherents, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyere, Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka, and Stokely Carmichael. Its influence on the arena of black culture was sizeable, especially in the works of musicians, poets, and composers of the post-war era, such as Gil Scott-Heron. While any attempt to reduce the totality of Pan-African thought into a single, concise, and non-contradictory definition would be futile, it is nonetheless important to have a working definition of the concept that was at the center of Scott-Heron's worldview. When assessing the Pan-Africanism of W.E.B. Du Bois – considered by many as the modern father of Pan-African thought – historian P. Olanwuche Esedibe noted that it meant “an intellectual understanding and cooperation among all groups of African descent in order to bring about ‘the industrial and spiritual emancipation of the Negro people.’”⁴⁷³ Esedibe expanded on this definition by saying

⁴⁷³ P. Olanwuche Esedibe, *Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776-1991* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1994), 3.

that in general, “Pan-Africanism is a political and cultural phenomenon that regard Africa, Africans, and African descendants abroad as a unit. It seeks to regenerate and unify Africa and promote a feeling of oneness among the people of the African world. It glorifies the African past and inculcates pride in African values.”⁴⁷⁴ The attributes outlined above roughly conform to the contours of Scott-Heron’s Pan-Africanism. Not only did he imbue his music and lyrics with numerous African retentions, during the 1970s his clothing and those of the Midnight Band often reflected an African influence and he frequently wove African folk tales and concepts into his between-song banter, interviews, and extra-musical writings.

Indeed, St. Clair Drake, one of the preeminent intellectuals of the twentieth century, observed numerous changes in the nature of Pan-Africanism in the 1960s. Noting the significance of the passing of fellow Pan-Africanists W.E.B. Du Bois and George Padmore, he labeled the period as “the end of an epoch.”⁴⁷⁵ The previous era, he noted, could be thought of as having been marked by “political” activism, while in the new era “cultural” activism would constitute a primary form of struggle. Prompted by several factors, including the onset of “neo-colonialism” in which some of the newly minted African leaders who had come to power in violent coups had little knowledge of African American or West Indian peoples, Drake concluded, “*cultural* pan-Africanism would henceforth provide a broader basis of identification and cooperative endeavor in the black world than *political* pan-Africanism and that the initiative for both aspects has

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁷⁵ Christine N. Temple, *Literary Pan-Africanism: History, Contexts, and Criticism* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 90.

passed completely from the diaspora to Africa.”⁴⁷⁶ In his estimation, a “re-Africanization process” for black Americans was the chief product of this postwar, postcolonial phase of the struggle. Underscoring the significance of culture to what he viewed as a new chapter in Pan-Africanism, Drake concluded, “The most sensitive spokesmen of an area are the writers.”⁴⁷⁷

In taking up an inquiry into the cultural dimensions of this weighty tradition, scholar and theorist Christel N. Temple suggests a new category of analysis, namely *literary Pan-Africanism*. Seeking to foster further explorations of the common ground between history and literature, Temple offers an instructive set of seven “tenets” that in her estimation undergird works of Literary Pan-Africanism, several of which are applicable here. First, these productions seek “to regenerate relationships, historical understanding, and future interaction between Africans and the descendants of the Africans dispersed through the European enslavement trade.” Also, Temple proposes that “the writer introduces mutual understanding and nurtures the relationship between Africans and African-Americans.” a keystone of most Pan-African philosophies. Lastly, she noted that the “philosophy and ideals of the narrative parallel tenets of contemporary and/or traditional Pan-African ideology.”⁴⁷⁸ By this measure, Gil Scott-Heron’s Pan-African compositions serve as a veritable embodiment of Literary Pan-Africanism. If we accept St. Clair Drake’s observations regarding the preeminence of cultural Pan-Africanism in the postwar era, it could easily be said that Scott-Heron was among its demonstrably leading figures in this epoch. Given the centrality of this ideology to his

⁴⁷⁶Ibid., 90.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 4.

worldview and repertory, not to mention the international dimensions of his celebrity, Scott-Heron ranked among the most ardent, visible, and prolific artists to take up the banner of Pan-Africanism in the 1970s.

By mid-decade, Scott-Heron's Pan-Africanism came to the fore in his productions and performances. Indeed, a number of his compositions in this era sought to bridge anti-colonial movements abroad to the burgeoning Rights Revolution in America. In 1976, one writer in the U.K. noted that Scott-Heron's compositions illustrate "a commitment to political consciousness-raising conspicuous by its absence from most contemporary black music, and a determination which seems to have evaporated from the black struggle in the last three or four years."⁴⁷⁹ When questioned about his Pan-African consciousness, Scott-Heron explained:

In America, if you're not white, you're black! At least, that's how you're classed, and that's how you're treated. Indians, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Orientals and blacks are all beginning to identify with each other much more now, so we are all on some level in the need for justice and opportunity.⁴⁸⁰ The band and I, we see ourselves as interpreter of the black experience, which is an experience that is universal throughout the black or Third World. The only way we can progress, either globally or in our own countries, is to form strong alliances between all fronts of the revolution.⁴⁸¹

According to Scott-Heron, the fight for civil rights in the United States represents only one dimension of a global revolution that included peoples in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As noted by historian Peniel E. Joseph, Pan-Africanists in America "provided visible support for and established links with existing progressive governments and

⁴⁷⁹ Mick Brown, "Gil Scott-Heron," *Street Life* 1, no. 8 (7-20 February 1976), 19.

⁴⁸⁰ Readers may bristle at Scott-Heron's use of the outmoded term "Orientals" used here to denote people of Asian descent; however, at the time this usage was acceptable.

⁴⁸¹ Lloyd Bradley, "The Homeland is Where the Hatred Is," *New Musical Express* (13 March 1982), 17.

guerilla fighters in Africa, the Caribbean, and the larger Third World.”⁴⁸² By the mid-1970s, the philosophy of pan-Africanism linked groups as disparate as the Black Panthers and the Congressional Black Caucus, and had become “the dominant mode of radical black activism” in the United States.⁴⁸³

Scott-Heron’s Pan-Africanism took root during his undergraduate years at Lincoln University. By the mid-1970s, he had assimilated elements of Pan-Africanism into his poetics and political philosophy. In song and conversation, Scott-Heron routinely cited Malcolm X among his chief intellectual influences. Tellingly, by the time of his death, Malcolm X had evolved into an ardent Pan-Africanist. In 1964 he founded the Organization for Afro-American Unity (OAAU), dedicated to uniting international liberation struggles. The Pan-Africanism espoused by SNCC leader and founding father of Black Power, Stokely Carmichael, was also highly influential on Scott-Heron. By 1971, Carmichael’s political philosophy had broadened to incorporate elements of Pan-Africanism;⁴⁸⁴ in a speech given at the University of Texas at Austin, Carmichael, by then expatriated to Guinea, assured his black audience members, “We are Africans, we are Africans.”⁴⁸⁵

By 1975, Scott-Heron had begun connecting the struggles facing people of color in America to those of their African, Asian, Native American and Latin American

⁴⁸² Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2006), 283.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁴⁸⁴ In addition to the influence of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael received inspiration from the writings of twentieth-century intellectual CLR James and George Padmore. For a full discussion of Carmichael’s introduction to Pan-Africanism, see Stokely Carmichael and Ekwume Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Turé)* (New York: Scribner, 2003).

⁴⁸⁵ Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 258-9.

counterparts. In doing so, he synthesized a unique philosophy that combined Pan-Africanism with his progressive Pan-movement consciousness. In the liner notes to *Bridges*, Scott-Heron eloquently linked the peoples and struggles of the Third World to those in the United States: “There is a revolution going on in the world. We are very much a part of it and have a great deal to contribute to the force and direction of this revolution. There are many fronts within this struggle, many far flung outposts geographically isolated and distant from our mainstreams of communication.” He also urged solidarity among various activists, arguing that “everyone who struggles for a better life for oppressed people is an ally who could use any symbol of our concern and solidarity.”⁴⁸⁶

Scott-Heron connected the various ethnic social movements in the United States and called for solidarity with their Third World counterparts. In 1977, he wrote, “There is a growing guerilla movement in Southern Africa, a period of healing and rebuilding in Southeast Asia, a movement towards economic independence in the Caribbean and we are a part of it all.” He further underscored his faith in pan-Africanism as the best hope for the movement’s future, adding:

America has the potential to undergo a bloodless revolution, in that change may come without pitched battles in the street.... The key to our progress lies within our ability to support alliances between ourselves and Third World people.... In solidarity with Chicanos, Puerto Riquenos, Oriental American and Native Americans we will continue to focus on the need for justice and opportunity.⁴⁸⁷

Scott-Heron’s Pan-Africanism inspired some of his most successful consciousness-raising material. According to rapper Chuck D. of the pioneering hip-hop group Public

⁴⁸⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, “Liner notes,” *Bridges* (New York: Arista Records, 1977).

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

Enemy, Scott-Heron elevated the cultural dialog with a “worldly discussion ... about Johannesburg when most people don’t know anything outside Pittsburgh.”⁴⁸⁸

Many activists saw clear connections between Apartheid and the Jim Crow laws that permeated America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Scott-Heron explained hearing first-hand accounts of Apartheid while at Lincoln University:

Many of the students were from South Africa. While South Africa is certainly its own animal, I still found there were similarities between our struggles. South Africans had to carry passbooks in order to go into certain neighborhoods. If we [African-Americans] were caught in certain areas here we were in trouble ... it was inevitable that we would begin to view the struggle for South African freedom as a political issue and not a civil rights issue ... as we matured as a people, traveled and came to grips with our own circumstances – it was only natural that we would learn to get away from breaking everything down in terms of white America.⁴⁸⁹

Scott-Heron later noted that “Johannesburg” has become “a ‘must’ at live concerts among people familiar with our music.... Correspondence with our South African brothers and sisters has been gratifying. Most of them have little access to what’s happening outside of that country. Their letters express relief that their situation is recognized abroad and satisfaction in knowing that a common spirit unites us.”⁴⁹⁰ Notably, Scott-Heron wrote “Johannesburg” a year before violent government crackdowns there in the summer of 1976 placed apartheid in the international spotlight.⁴⁹¹ Speaking to the song’s prescience, Scott-Heron explained, “I like to write songs about issues not because they became headlines, but because they *could* become headlines. I don’t write them after a crisis and

⁴⁸⁸ Chuck D., Interview in Don Letts, Dir., *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (London: BBC4, 2003).

⁴⁸⁹ Audreen Ballard, “A Common Spirit Unites Us,” liner notes on Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, *Johannesburg* (12-inch single, New York: Arista Records, 1985).

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ John F. Burns, “Many Arrests Reported in South Africa Mine Rioting,” *New York Times* (2 July 1976), 2.

say, “damn, wasn’t that something about South Africa.” The idea’s not that everyone who heard my song would decide the way that I have, but that, at least, they’ve got another way of looking at that problem.”⁴⁹² Throughout the 1970s, Scott-Heron, Brian Jackson, and the Midnight Band played the song innumerable times to audiences around the world, transmitting a decidedly Pan-African consciousness and message to millions.

However, before we examine Scott-Heron’s composition “Johannesburg” perhaps a few words are in order regarding the history of South Africa. Apartheid officially descended on South Africa in 1948 with the election of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party, and would remain the fabric of law and society there for over forty years. During this time, the white minority wielded power over the black citizenry by means of a series of laws designed to maintain racial separation and white authority. Building on earlier statutes such as the *Natives’ Land Act* (1913), apartheid encroached upon the sovereignty and safety of an increasingly urbanized populace of black South Africans. Like Jim Crow laws in America, legislative measures such as the *Group Areas Act of 1950*, the *Mixed Marriages Act of 1949*, the *Immorality Act of 1950*, the *Bantu Education Act of 1953*, the *Pass Laws Act of 1952*, the *Suppression of Communism Act of 1950*, and the *Native Labor Act of 1953* sought to restrict freedoms of association, domicile, movement, and employment of black South Africans. These laws established the *de jure* foundations of apartheid that undergirded society and spawned a nearly forty-year long struggle to turn back the tide of oppression engendered by white minority rule in South Africa.⁴⁹³

⁴⁹² Many Arrests Reported in South Africa Mine Rioting Many Arrests Reported in South Africa Mine Rioting

⁴⁹³ For a nuanced history of apartheid laws and their effect on black South Africans, see Neigel Warden, *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Apartheid, Democracy* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

Composed and deployed against the social and political landscape of apartheid, freedom songs were first and foremost a means of empowerment and resistance for a people under siege. Though varying in melody and meter, freedom songs share several key characteristics, as noted by religious scholar Alton B. Pollard III: “(1) they are deeply rooted in the musical poetic tradition of the indigenous peoples of South Africa; (2) they are folk expressions, chanted and sung collectively; (3) they offer counter-hegemonic models of peace, justice, and empowerment; [and] (4) they allow for improvisation to describe, explain, and map the currents of social change.”⁴⁹⁴ As an inherently unifying and empowering cultural enterprise, freedom songs, and their public performance, were politically subversive. Historian Anne Schumann observed, “while apartheid ideology stressed the separateness and incompatibility of different South African cultures, musically or otherwise, musicians challenged and undermined this premise.”⁴⁹⁵ Thus, part of their appeal and efficacy lay in the ways freedom songs transcended chasms of race, ethnicity, and class, uniting generations of South Africans in protest against the policies and pogroms of apartheid.⁴⁹⁶ While not native to South Africa, Scott-Heron’s

⁴⁹⁴ Alton B. Pollard, III, “Rhythms of Resistance” in *This is How we Flow: Rhythm in Black Cultures*, ed. Angela M. S. Nelson (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 100.

⁴⁹⁵ Anne Schumann, “The Beat that Beat Apartheid,” *Weiner Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien* 8 (November 2008), 20.

⁴⁹⁶ As noted in the liner notes for a 1965 Folkways Records LP, freedom songs are “revolutionary song[s] whose content and form not only express forcefully the mood and feelings of South African freedom fighters” that also represent “the most suitable vehicle for bridging the gap between the cultural and national characteristics of the different racial groups.” M. H. E. Manana, “Liner Notes,” *This Land is Mine* (New York: Folkways Records, 1965), 1. It is important to note that the majority of freedom songs from within South Africa were written in native South African languages such as Xhosa and Sesotho. This not only served to unite demonstrators across linguistic lines, it also rendered the oft-times hidden, or not so hidden, messages incomprehensible to white South African authorities who mostly spoke Afrikaans. Sophie Mgcina, a South African singer, noted the irony of singing in Afrikkans in front of white troops, “They used to clap hands... ‘oh these Blacks can sing so nice!’ And they clap their hands and we sing ‘We will shoot you, we will kill you’ [sings and laughs].” Lee Hirsch, dir., *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (New York: Artisan Entertainment, 2003).

Pan-Movement songs united listeners around the world against apartheid and spoke to the interrelated and intersectional nature of activism during the 1970s.

One of the key flashpoints in South African history was the infamous Sharpeville massacre. On 21 March 1960, over ten thousand black South Africans assembled at the local police station in Sharpeville to protest the pass laws as part of a nationwide strike. Outnumbered and overwhelmed, the twelve officers inside the station called for reinforcements. Within hours, nearly three hundred armed officers lined the fence with weapons trained on the crowd who were chanting slogans and singing freedom songs. As the police opened a gate to admit four protestors who wished to be arrested, dozens surged forward, someone shouted “fire!,” and a hail of bullets sprayed into the crowd. In less than a minute, 743 rounds had been discharged and sixty-nine South Africans, including ten children, had been murdered at the hands of the state.⁴⁹⁷

In the wake of atrocities such as Sharpeville, the singing of freedom songs provided one of the most visible, effective means of non-violent protest and resistance against the South African state. For example, many early freedom songs such as “Senzeni na? (What Have We Done),” “Mayibuye Afrika (Come Back Africa),” and the original anthem of the African National Congress (ANC), “Nkosi Sikeleli’ iAfrika, (God Bless Africa)” offered hymn-like pleas for a recognition of humanity of black South Africans. Following Sharpeville, as the liberation struggle within South Africa intensified, freedom songs took on a more urgent and confrontational tone. Songs such as “Izakunkatheli Akrika Verwoerd (Africa is Going to Trample on You, Verwoerd),” and “Naants’ Indod’Emnyama (Beware Verwoerd)” expressed a militancy commensurate with the

⁴⁹⁷ James Zug, *The Guardian: The History of South Africa’s Extraordinary Anti-Apartheid Newspaper* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 2007), 186.

spirit of a new generation entering the struggle. Thus, for over forty years, freedom songs were instrumental in organizing, energizing, and sustaining black South Africans in their day-to-day confrontations with apartheid.

In South Africa, as in the United States, freedom songs became synonymous with struggle and inextricable from politics. Writing on the importance of freedom songs to the liberation struggle, writer and activist Irvin Khoza observed, “their capacity to convey messages and to inspire courage cannot be underestimated.... songs were encoded with political imperatives of the day. They were integral to the victory of good over evil and are permanently etched in the collective memory of the people.”⁴⁹⁸ These sentiments echo those of singer Sifiso Ntuli who pointed out the innate power and organizing potential of music, specifically freedom songs: “Song is something that we communicate to the people who otherwise would not have understood where we were coming from. You could give them a long political speech and they still would not understand; but I tell you, when you finish that song people be like ‘I know where you guys are coming from. Death unto apartheid.’”⁴⁹⁹

Freedom songs became surreptitious and subversive agents of antiapartheid consciousness. Given the inherently democratic nature of collaborative performance and protest, music was a key weapon in the non-violent arsenal of strategies and tactics available to South Africans in their fight to overturn apartheid. Speaking to the efficacy of music as a conveyor of consciousness and call to action, Nelson Mandela said,

⁴⁹⁸ Irvin Khoza, “Liner Notes,” *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (New York: Ato Records, 2003).

⁴⁹⁹ Lee Hirsch, dir., *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (New York: Artisan Entertainment, 2003).

“African music is often about the aspirations of African people, and it can ignite the political resolve of those who might otherwise be indifferent to politics.... Politics can strengthen music but music has a potency that defies politics.”⁵⁰⁰ These testimonies make clear the historical and cultural significance of freedom songs to the antiapartheid struggle in South Africa.⁵⁰¹

The desire for near-total control over the black body by the South African state extended to cultural productions as well. Though routinely denied by authorities, the censorship of black artists, newspapers, journals, and broadcasts were part and parcel of life under apartheid. In the 1940s and early 1950s, one of the principle ways this was accomplished was through the Board of Censors. This was replaced in 1956 by the Cronje Commission, which combed information from nearly 400 sources including publishers, journals, booksellers, lawyers, librarians, and magazine editors.⁵⁰² The commission’s charge, in part, was to maintain the hegemony and “purity” of European culture in South Africa, which the white elites regarded as *die vuurtoring in die kultuur* or “the lighthouse or beacon of culture.” As noted by historian Peter D. McDonald, the commission’s cultural biases represented “an indispensable cordon sanitaire, which would keep ‘Western’ culture pure, thereby protecting ‘European’ guardianship and shoring up white political supremacy.”⁵⁰³ Passed in 1963, the Publications and Entertainments Act

⁵⁰⁰ Schumann, “The Beat that Beat Apartheid,” 35.

⁵⁰¹ For a sampling of South African freedom songs, see the following titles: “Senzeni Na?” (What Have We Done?); the ANC’s official anthem, “Nkosi Sikeleli’ iAfrika” (God Bless Africa); “Kulonyaka” (In This Year); “Izakunkatheli Akrika Verwoerd” (Africa is Going to Trample on You, Verwoerd); “Naants’ Indod’Emnyama” (Beware Verwoerd); and, “Mayibuye Afrika” (Come Back Africa).

⁵⁰² Peter D. McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and its Cultural Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 24.

(PEA) became the handmaiden of state censorship. Under the Act, artists who created and distributed “undesirable materials” were subject to suppression, including “severe fines and prison sentences.” From 1964 to 1974, over ten thousand publications were banned, suggesting that the state was actively engaged in monitoring South Africans’ cultural and intellectual output.

This aspect of apartheid became increasingly important in the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of youth culture and the role of song in fostering and nurturing black consciousness and identity within and without South Africa. In 1974, PEA was amended to reflect the South African state’s preoccupation with policing cultural productions. This revision clarified the government’s criteria for “undesirable materials” as outlined in the key statute of the new Act.⁵⁰⁴ Further, as a government publication stated, “all communist literature is banned outright.”⁵⁰⁵ South African authorities also prohibited the “airplay, sale, and possession” of recordings of freedom songs and other productions deemed “undesirable,” meaning subversive or treasonous. As a result, in the 1970s and 1980s, people were arrested and jailed for years for the offense of merely owning cassettes of freedom songs and speeches by ANC leaders.⁵⁰⁶ In addition to patrolling the content of South African cultural productions, these guidelines were applied to those from outside as well. While this repression occurred throughout the apartheid era, it intensified in the

⁵⁰⁴ The text of the law read as follows: “A publication or object shall be deemed to be undesirable if it or any part of it - (a) is indecent or obscene or is offensive or harmful to public morals; (b) is blasphemous or is offensive to religious convictions or feelings of any section of inhabitants of the Republic; (c) brings any section of the inhabitants of the Republic into ridicule or contempt; (d) is harmful to the relations between any section of inhabitants of the Republic; (e) is prejudicial to the safety of the State, the general welfare or the peace and good order.” *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁰⁵ Office of the Information Counselor, *All the Facts About South Africa* (Washington, DC: South African Embassy, 1978), 45.

⁵⁰⁶ Pollard, “Rhythms of Resistance,” 117.

1980s during the state of emergency during which the Botha administration cracked down on underground organizing and guerilla activities against the state. In his period, freedom songs were routinely banned from funerals, rallies, and other public events; however, the songs could not be silenced.⁵⁰⁷

The performance of freedom songs elicited violent reprisals from South African authorities, as evidenced by testimony delivered to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings in the 1990s. The testimony of Godfrey Teko Lesenyeho illustrated one such attack that occurred in 1986: “we were standing at a street corner. At each corner of each street there was a group of youths and we were chanting freedom songs.... As we were chanting, after a few minutes I saw a police Hippo coming and they [the police] started firing.” Caught in the middle of the melee, the ten-year old Lesenyeho ran toward home with “tear-gas now burning in my eyes.”⁵⁰⁸ Another transcript revealed similar reprisals. Zimasile Bota recalled how one evening in Adelaide in 1985 “the youth were toy-toying and singing freedom songs in the streets” when police opened fire, killing and injuring several in the crowd.⁵⁰⁹ A similar scenario played out in Khutsong township in July 1986 when local police descended upon a “night vigil” in which 700 people had gathered peaceably and were singing freedom songs. Authorities “beat them up and arrested them all.”⁵¹⁰ As the TRC testimony by numerous individuals indicated,

⁵⁰⁷ Nomakaya Mathilda Matshoba, Truth And Reconciliation Commission Testimony, Case: Queenstown, Day 1 (22.07.1996).

⁵⁰⁸ Godfrey Teko Lesenyeho, Truth And Reconciliation Commission Testimony, Case Number: 1538, Day 2 (24.09.1996).

⁵⁰⁹ Joseph Bota Zimasile, Case Number: EC0509/96, Day 1 (7. 4. 1997).

⁵¹⁰ “Mourner Sterile After 1980s Torture, TRC Told,” *South African Press Association* (November 11, 1996).

simply singing freedom songs in public had become grounds for arrest, torture, and murder.⁵¹¹

These violent crackdowns, like the refinements to the PEA policy, were part of the state's response to cultural and political developments within and without South Africa. Within the nation, a new generation of freedom fighters emerged; a cohort tired of pleading for rights and recognition, disenchanted with the tactics of non-violence and civil disobedience. Speaking to the imperative that framed this historical moment, one anonymous South African intoned, "blacks know what they must do. There is no more time for wimpish lament, self-pity, begging or praying."⁵¹² This sea change in public sentiment came to the fore in the mid-1970s. Emboldened by the Black Consciousness movement and the leadership of Stephen Biko, South African youth engaged the state on an unprecedented scale.⁵¹³ Black Consciousness philosophy, like its American corollary, Black Power, affirmed the right to political and cultural self-determination for black South Africans.

Inherent in this ideology was a critique of Eurocentric institutions and standards and a willingness to openly challenge and confront oppression in these arenas. As noted by Alton B. Pollard III, the Black Consciousness movement became a "diffuse intellectual and cultural movement of artists, unionists, journalists, church people,

⁵¹¹ For further evidence of attacks on youth by authorities see: Nonsa Nobuhle Mabuza, Truth And Reconciliation Commission Testimony, Case Number: 1116, Day 4 (05.09.1996); N.N. Dyantyi Busika, Truth And Reconciliation Commission Testimony, Case: King William's Town, Day 2, (13.05.1997); and, Amos Diko, Truth And Reconciliation Commission Testimony, Case: EC1603/97ELNMDANTSANE, Day 5 (13.06.1997).

⁵¹² Pollard, "Rhythms of Resistance," 114.

⁵¹³ Among the causalities of this crackdown by authorities was Black Consciousness activist Stephen Biko, who died in police custody on 12 September 1977. The one-two punch of the Soweto Uprising and Biko's murder prompted international outcry and focused the world's attention on the increasingly militaristic state of affairs in South Africa. *Ibid.*, 115.

teachers, nurses, physicians, and especially, secondary students.”⁵¹⁴ Indeed, it was the youth of South Africa, who initiated the next phase of struggle with the Soweto uprising.⁵¹⁵ Just as the Black Consciousness movement had spread throughout South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, international awareness and intervention regarding apartheid mounted in this period as well.

Like Max Roach before him, Gil Scott-Heron utilized his art to confront the ongoing injustice and brutality of apartheid. His song “Johannesburg” was one of the most popular expressions of international solidarity with South Africans of the 1970s.⁵¹⁶ Released in 1975 on the LP *From South Africa to South Carolina*, “Johannesburg” provided listeners with a rousing anti-Apartheid anthem and a blast of Pan-African consciousness.⁵¹⁷ Scott-Heron later told a live audience about the origins of the anthem:

One of the first songs that I wrote when I moved [to Washington D.C.] was a song that concerned, really it concerned the five nations in southern Africa that were

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁵¹⁵ Like Sharpeville, the student uprising at Soweto on 16 June 1976 was a watershed in South African history and a turning point in the struggle against apartheid. Inspired by the Black Consciousness movement, students had grown hostile to the Eurocentric educational standards and training that defined the curriculum in South African schools. Over the course of May and June, Soweto students gathered to protest the teaching of courses in Afrikaans, the lingua franca of the oppressor. On 16 June, the students amassed at Orlando West High School for another rally, replete with freedom songs and marching. Upon intercepting the protesters, police set fire to the streets and shot tear-gas canisters and rounds of live ammunition into the crowd, killing thirteen year-old Hector Peterson. His murder enraged protestors and prompted solidarity rebellions in townships across the country during which students targeted “edifices, personnel, and property,” or the outward manifestations of white rule and hegemony. In the following months, an estimated 700 people - the vast majority youths - lost their lives as a result of the student uprisings. Ibid., 114.

⁵¹⁶ One early expression of antiapartheid sentiment and solidarity, and a musical precursor to Scott-Heron, came from jazz drummer extraordinaire and unsung activist, Max Roach. The politically conscious skin man composed an instrumental ode to the suffering in South Africa entitled “Tears for Johannesburg.” Released in 1960 on his landmark LP *We Insist!: Max Roach’s Freedom Now Suite*, the song’s appearance coincided with the outcry over the massacre at Sharpeville and helped to keep the injustice of apartheid before listeners in the United States and Europe. Max Roach, “Tears for Johannesburg,” *We Insist! Max Roach’s Freedom Now Suite* (New York: Candid Records, 1960).

⁵¹⁷ Gil Scott-Heron, “Johannesburg,” *From South Africa To South Carolina* (New York: Arista Records, 1975; reissued, Ruml-Gai, 1999).

looking for liberation at the time. They were Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Tanzania. And of course since we have done those songs three of those nations have claimed independence, and we feel as though the other two are on the edge, on the verge. There are folks who are struggling in Namibia and Southwest Africa and constant reports that would encourage people who are supporters of southern Africans are suppressed to make us feel as though there is nothing is going on. As long as people want to have freedom and want to have liberation there will be things going on. And we need to keep the faith and keep the candle burning.⁵¹⁸

Scott-Heron's song generated awareness regarding the struggles of South African mine workers along with the pass laws aimed at controlling the movement and activities of the black population writ-large.⁵¹⁹ In addition to the song's inclusion on his fifth LP, his 1975 appearance on the wildly popular NBC series "Saturday Night Live!" garnered a nationwide audience, further cementing its popularity and spreading its message in the United States.⁵²⁰

The first verse of "Johannesburg" urges African Americans to keep the struggles of black South Africans in mind:

They tell me that our brothers over there
refuse to work in the mines.
They may not get the news but they need to know
we're on their side.
Now sometimes distance brings
misunderstanding,
but deep in my heart I'm demanding

The enthusiastic chorus asks for an update on the situation in South African capitol:

Somebody tell me, what's the word?

⁵¹⁸ Gil Scott-Heron, spoken introduction to "Johannesburg" in *Black Wax*, Robert Mugge, dir. (1982; dvd, WinStar, 1998).

⁵¹⁹ A. J. Barratt, "Word War Fighter," *New Musical Express* (19 July 1986), 19.

⁵²⁰ Scott-Heron and his band performed "Johannesburg" on the 13 December 1975 episode of *NBC's Saturday Night* hosted by comedian Richard Pryor. Incidentally, Pryor refused to do the show unless Scott-Heron could be the musical guest. Reluctantly agreeing, the show's creator Lorne Michaels reportedly huffed, "[Pryor] better be funny!" *TV.com* <<http://www.tv.com/gilscott-heron/person98353/appearances.html>>, (accessed, 5 May 2010).

Tell me brother, have you heard
from Johannesburg?

The song's bridge connects the struggles of people of color in the United States to those of their counterparts abroad:

I know that their strugglin' over there
ain't gonna free me,
but we all need to be strugglin'
if we're gonna be free.
Don't you wanna be free?⁵²¹

An energetic outro explicitly draws a parallel between apartheid abroad and Jim Crow at home:

L.A. like Johannesburg
New York like Johannesburg
Freedom ain't nothin' but a word, ain't nothin'
Said, what's the word?
Johannesburg!
Said, what's the word?
Johannesburg!

Say haven't you heard?
Somebody tell me
what's happenin' in Johannesburg
We don't like Johannesburg
Detroit like Johannesburg
Freedom ain't nothin' but a word⁵²²

By making these connections in his song, Scott-Heron explained the injustice of the system in terms that American listeners, particularly African Americans, might find familiar. However, despite the expression of solidarity, the majority of South Africans were unable to hear "Johannesburg" in real time; government authorities, under the

⁵²¹ Gil Scott-Heron, "Johannesburg," *Now & Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate U.S., 2000), 75; *So Far So Good* (New York: Canongate, U.S., 1990), 35; and, *From South Africa To South Carolina* (New York: Arista Records Records, 1975; reissued, Rumal-Gai, 1999).

⁵²² Absent from the liner notes and other published versions, these lyrics only appeared on the studio recording.

auspices of the revamped PEA Act, banned “Johannesburg” from the airwaves.⁵²³

Nonetheless, the song is illustrative of the ways in which cultural productions from without functioned much in the same way that freedom songs functioned within South Africa; they provided an effective tool for raising consciousness and fostering resistance to apartheid on the global stage.⁵²⁴

In 1978, Scott-Heron revisited his Pan-African and Pan-movement consciousness with the track “Third World Revolution.” By the late 1970s, freedom movements were underway throughout countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Mozambique, Guinea, Tanzania, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Angola, and South Africa.⁵²⁵ Inspired by this surge in activism, Scott-Heron authored another song that encouraged solidarity with anti-colonial movements. Recorded for his ninth album, *Secrets*, the second verse of “Third World Revolution” offers an optimistic appraisal of the future:

Ain't gon' say it will be evening,
the time it all makes sense to you.
Just takes workin' and believing
to see the whole third world come true.

Then, Scott-Heron urges others to join in the revolution:

We're gonna take this world through changes,
not the other way around.
See the world is slowly rearranging

⁵²³ Don Letts, dir., *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (London: BBC4, 2003).

⁵²⁴ By the mid-1980s, antiapartheid songs had become an undeniable facet of popular music in the United States and Britain. Artists from a variety of backgrounds, working in numerous genres, composed songs that confronted the South African state and its allies. During that decade superstars such as Peter Gabriel (“Biko”), Tracy Chapman (“Freedom Now”), Nona Hendryx (“Rock This House”), and Stevie Wonder (“It’s Wrong (Apartheid)”) assailed the polices of apartheid, bringing these issues before international audiences on record and in live performances. Peter Gabriel, “Biko,” *Peter Gabriel* (Los Angeles: Geffen Records, 1980); Tracy Chapman, “Freedom Now,” *Crossroads* (Los Angeles: Elektra Records, 1989); Nona Hendryx, “Rock This House,” *The Heat* (New York: RCA, 1985); and, Stevie Wonder, “It’s Wrong (Apartheid),” *In Square Circle* (Los Angeles: Motown/Tamla, 1985).

⁵²⁵ Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans: African American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 311.

can't nobody stop us now.

The song's final chorus reminds listeners of their agency in affecting change in society:

It's the Third World Revolution
and we're standing at the gate.
You can add to the solution
while the world is taking shape.⁵²⁶

Scott-Heron's dedication to anti-apartheid activism spilled over into the 1980s, culminating in his participation in an historic artistic uprising and boycott. In 1984, he joined forces with Artists United Against Apartheid (AUAA), a prominent anti-apartheid campaign by a cadre of international musicians. Formed in 1985 and led by guitarist Steven Van Zandt, AUAA was composed of over fifty musicians that directly confronted the policies of apartheid and the Botha administration at the outset of the state of emergency in South Africa. Joining Van Zandt were notables such as Bob Dylan, Bonnie Raitt, Jimmy Cliff, Bono, Kashif, Eddie Kendrick, David Ruffin, Kurtis Blow, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, Tony Williams, Miles Davis, Ringo Starr, George Clinton, Keith Richards, RUN-DMC, Jackson Browne, and Bruce Springsteen.

Culling top talent from the worlds of rock, rap, R&B, pop, reggae, and jazz, AUAA represented a virtual showdown between the music industry and the South African state. Specifically, AUAA was organized to draw attention to and initiate a boycott of the \$90 million South African luxury resort known as Sun City. Located in Bophuthatswana – a so-called “independent homeland” – Sun City, in the words of one South African musician, represented “an Afrikaner's paradise in a black man's

⁵²⁶ Featuring instrumental backing by Brian Jackson on synth-drums and synth-bass, Leon Williams on tenor saxophone, Greg Phillinganes on assorted electric keyboards, and Barnett Williams on congas, Gil Scott-Heron handed down a spirited, bluesy lead vocal. Gil Scott-Heron, “Third World Revolution,” *Secrets* (New York: Arista Records, 1978).

nightmare.”⁵²⁷ Sun City catered to a white, and often international, clientele and was part of the South African government’s effort “to win back foreign favor by camouflaging the reality of a system whose intent [was] not desegregation but the creation of an all-white South Africa.”⁵²⁸

The racial and economic politics of Sun City did not go unnoticed. Disgusted by the sight of systemic poverty within meters of such unmitigated wealth and excess, guitarist and producer Little Steven decided to bring together like-minded artists to record an LP of material protesting of apartheid and to elicit their solidarity in a boycott of the resort. In addition to educating audiences about the facts of life under apartheid, Little Steven and co-producer Arthur Baker named and publicly condemn fellow musicians such as Linda Ronstadt, Rod Stewart, Queen, and the O’Jays, all of whom had recently played Sun City in defiance of the United Nation’s call for a cultural boycott to further isolate the South African regime.⁵²⁹ Discussing the project, scholar Mary Ellison noted that it was “quintessentially a collaboration of music and action. It was a marshaling of ideas and personalities, of music and the music industry to represent the situation in South Africa accurately and help to change it.... It was an act of confrontation and solidarity.”⁵³⁰

The LP’s centerpiece and first single, “Sun City,” pointed out the injustices inflicted by the apartheid regime:

⁵²⁷ Dave Marsh, *Sun City by Artists United Against Apartheid: The Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 8.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵³⁰ Ellison, *Lyrical Protest*, 100.

Relocation to phony homelands
Separation of families I can't understand
23 million can't vote because they're black
We're stabbing our brothers and sisters in the back
I ain't gonna play Sun City

The song critiqued American foreign policy in regard to South Africa:

Our government tells us we're doing all we can
Constructive engagement is Ronald Reagan's plan
Meanwhile people are dying and giving up hope
This quiet diplomacy ain't nothing but a joke

Another verse vowed support for the cultural boycott:

Bophuthatswana is far away
But we know it's in South Africa no matter what they say
You can't buy me, I don't care what you pay
Don't ask me Sun City because I ain't gonna play
I ain't gonna play Sun City⁵³¹

In addition to his contribution to the title track, Scott-Heron had an outsized role on another composition on the album, namely “Let Me See Your I.D.” On this number, Scott-Heron contributes several spoken monologues and sings the titular refrain. Interestingly, the melody and lyric for this section of the song originated in the coda of another Scott-Heron song, “Johannesburg.” He is backed by a roster including Miles Davis, Mele Mel, Kurtis Blow, the Fat Boys, Scorpio from Grandmaster Flash, and Nigerian musician and singer, Sonny Okosun. In addition to bringing together artists across generations and genres, more importantly, the track united otherwise seemingly disparate musicians from America and Africa – the Black Atlantic as it were - against apartheid.

Recalling the message and musician behind “Johannesburg,” album organizer and co-producer Little Steven wanted to secure Scott-Heron's participation “from the moment

⁵³¹ Artists United Against Apartheid, “Sun City,” *Sun City* (New York: EMI/Manhattan, 1985).

we first started to record.” However, contacting the poet down proved challenging, “He’s a very difficult man to find-I mean we were calling phone booths and stuff,” recounted Van Zandt. “Finally we tracked him down in Martha’s Vineyard. But the rooms didn’t have any phones. So I called the desk and tried to explain what I wanted. At that moment, Gil’s bass player was walking by and he recognized my name ... so he took the call and we got Gil.”⁵³² Scott-Heron returned to New York the following weekend, meeting up with Little Steven at famed Hit Factory for what became the “Let Me See Your I.D.” session. Once in the studio he “quickly developed his ... rap while his group chimed in on the choruses.”⁵³³ On the record, Scott-Heron’s spoken verses are sandwiched between raps by eighties sensations Mele Mel, Kurtis Blow, and the Fat Boys. Befitting of his status as a musical elder, Scott-Heron’s incisive words provide a necessary historical and anecdotal context for the anti-apartheid freestyles of his collaborators. Accompanying each of Scott-Heron’s soliloquys is the legendary Miles Davis, who blows strings of sixteenth note slurs, deftly weaving between the poet’s syllables like a butterfly gliding on a spring breeze.

Scott-Heron’s initial commentary offers a humorous yet adroit analysis of the ways in which television programming holds sway in framing political issues, codifying cultural norms, and legitimating terminology:

I was watching TV the other night and who should appear but you know Walter ‘Concrete’ and the blues. And it occurred to me how much of our vocabulary we seem to get from TV nowadays; calling things whatever they call them, even if it’s collect. The first thing that occurred to me was like, Third World. You know, like, you ask somebody from here, like, where is the Third World? They might say ‘Oh man, I know, I know, it’s a disco. You go about three blocks and take a left.’ Or they might tell you the Third World is a new health food restaurant. I

⁵³² Marsh, *Sun City by Artists United Against Apartheid*, 41.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 41.

know the first time I heard there was trouble in the Middle East I thought they was talking about Pittsburgh”⁵³⁴

In his second rap, Scott-Heron again riffs on media semantics, this time questioning the locution “casualties” that was often used to denote human deaths:

The word “casualties” comes up a lot. In South Africa, they seem to make it feel like there’s a battle against, between isms going on; between one good ism and one bad ism. But what they’re talking about nightly is South Africans die of casualties. “There were eight more casualties in South Africa.” Nothing causal about that. Nothing casual about standing for freedom. My grandmother used to say that “If you don’t stand for something you’ll go for anything.” We stand against apartheid. Stand against apartheid.

The third of Scott-Heron’s interludes offers insight into the development of his consciousness regarding the particulars of apartheid in South Africa and the relationship to law enforcement tactics in America:

I had never met anyone from Southern Africa until I started going to school. I was going to Lincoln University down in Pennsylvania. There were South African refugees who was there, who were, many of them were athletes and we started to compare experiences and such. And they were telling me that when you walk around in South Africa you got to carry this little black book with you that tells everybody whether you’re supposed to be in a given area or not. ‘Damn, that’s like my life, ‘cause I got to do that when I go to Philly. Let me see your I.D., let me see your I.D.’”

Scott-heron’s final rap describes the necessity and impetus behind the artists’ boycott and the album’s title track:

You see, the thing about “I ain’t going to Sun City” is that it is somehow about the South African government. Sun City is described as though it somewhere else, not connected to South Africa or apartheid. It’s like somebody in Manhattan trying to describe the Bronx to you as another country as though it is no longer connected to New York. Let me see your I.D.

Other night I was watching TV again and I seen that Falwell had been a representative of the American people over in South Africa, over there taking a fall for somebody. Somebody in here said “hey, what about the separation between church and state?” I said “especially this church and that state.” We stand

⁵³⁴ Artists United Against Apartheid, “Let Me See Your I.D.,” *Sun City* (New York: EMI/Manhattan, 1985).

against apartheid. Stand against apartheid. Let me see your I.D., let me see your I.D.

Ultimately, the AUAA project proved highly successful as a consciousness-raising venture and inspiration to other mainstream musicians. As scholar Neal Ullestad observed, “‘Sun City’ challenged musicians to consider the deepest implications of their work and their success ... and challenged the audience to consider the world situation in light of specific policies and their effects.”⁵³⁵ In addition to a top forty single and music video, the project spawned a feature-length documentary that aired on MTV and a companion book that bombarded readers with evidence regarding the manifold injustices of apartheid. Mary Ellison noted the significance of the project, writing “the record and video have been widely used in the United States as educational tools. Schools study the song and the horrors of South African racism through an educational pack, and teachers are provided with accurate information and coherent ideas to help them explain the reality and the song.”⁵³⁶ By utilizing a multimedia platform, AUAA was able to reach a wide intergenerational audience most likely sympathetic to the group’s positions regarding South Africa and the cultural boycott. Thus, AUAA and the Sun City campaign dealt a severe blow to apartheid on the international stage, affirming not only the inherent power of song, but also its efficacy as a tool for liberation.

Pan-Africanism became a dominant intellectual influence and focus of activism for Scott-Heron throughout the latter-Seventies and well into the Eighties. Accordingly, his music and performances connected and amplified the connections between people of color abroad and those in the United States. Addressing this strand of his political

⁵³⁵ Neal Ullestad, “Rock and Rebellion: Effects of Live Aid and ‘Sun City’,” *Popular Music* 6, no. 1 (January 1987), 73.

⁵³⁶ Ellison, *Lyrical Protest*, 101.

thought, Scott-Heron explained his motivations, saying “We have done a number of songs, we hope, that have strengthened our connection with the Third World. Because it seems as though often times there are attempts to split us up – divide and conquer – keep us at odds with one another so that we never define the things we have in common. But we have more things in common than we do that separate us.”⁵³⁷ Notably, his Pan-African productions were part and parcel of an ongoing and salubrious dialogue. From the onset of apartheid in 1948 to its demise in 1994, freedom songs were key to revolutionary struggle in South Africa. Not only was Gil Scott-Heron able to draw attention to apartheid among international audiences, his celebrity and activism intensified the cultural boycott, further isolating the beleaguered state. In this sense, Scott-Heron’s freedom songs were more than merely a soundtrack of the struggle; they, too, aided in toppling apartheid in South Africa.

“AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY DESTROYER”

Of the many environmental issues that came to the fore during the Seventies, none proved as galvanizing as the debate over nuclear energy. During that decade nuclear energy facilities located in geographically disparate locales such as California, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina became the loci of protests and the foci of the international media. Indeed, names such as Rocky Flats and Three Mile Island are synonymous with the fear and loathing toward nuclear energy espoused by anti-nuclear activists around the globe.⁵³⁸ In the mid 1970s, Scott-Heron recorded three critiques of

⁵³⁷ Robert Mugee, dir., *Black Wax* (New York: Winstar Entertainment, 1982).

⁵³⁸ These facilities, located in Colorado and Pennsylvania respectively, were infamous for accidents relating to the storage and production of nuclear fuel. Three Mile Island will be discussed in greater detail later in

nuclear power: “Barnwell (South Carolina),” “We Almost Lost Detroit,” and “Shut ‘Um Down.” Although the decade marked the apex of the anti-nuclear movement, activists had staged the first public protests twenty years earlier.

Beginning in the late 1950s, several grassroots organizations challenged the testing of nuclear weapons in the United States.⁵³⁹ These groups – Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) and Women’s Strike for Peace (WSFP) – organized thousands of Americans in protests nationwide.⁵⁴⁰ In the early Sixties, the movement gained momentum with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*.⁵⁴¹ Aided by Carson and a host of new eco-activist organizations including Citizens for a Better Environment, Friends of the Earth, and Science in the Public Interest, by the early 1970s environmentalism had gained numerous adherents nationwide.⁵⁴² In fact, President Richard Nixon, faulted as a man of “bold rhetoric and mild action” on eco-issues, christened the 1970s as the “environmental decade.”⁵⁴³ Dedicated to raising public

this chapter. For more information on the controversy surrounding Rocky Flats see: Len Ackland, *Making a Real Killing: Rocky Flats and the Nuclear West* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2002) and Anna Gyorgy & Friends, *No Nukes: Everyone’s Guide to Nuclear Power* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1979).

⁵³⁹ Though downplayed by the Atomic Energy Commission, the discovery of radioactive fallout in Troy, New York in 1953 following nuclear weapons testing in Nevada prompted the concern of physicists, politicians, intellectuals, and lay persons nationwide. Noted intellects such as Albert Schweitzer, Norman Cousins, and Dr. Eric Fromm lent their voices and reputations to the growing chorus of anti-nuclear activists. Margarita Garza, “The Antinuclear Power Movement and the Crisis of the U.S. Nuclear Power Industry, 1953 to 1989,” (PhD diss., University of Texas, May 1990), <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/~hmcleave/357Lgarzachap3.pdf>, (accessed, 12 June 2005), 1, 2.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁴¹ Carson’s book focused public attention on the ecological threats that stemmed from the use of chemical pesticides, such as the defoliant DDT. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

⁵⁴² Slocum-Schaffer, *America In The Seventies*, 131.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 133. The designation of the Four Corners region as a “National Sacrifice Area” offered critics with a devastating example of Nixon’s duplicity regarding environmental matters. Garza, “The Rise of the Antinuclear Power Movement,” 5.

awareness of ecological issues, these organizations amplified environmental consciousness throughout the early 1970s.

In 1975, 26-year-old Gil Scott-Heron joined the growing chorus of activists who questioned the safety of nuclear power. Incorporating an anti-nuclear protest into *From South Africa to South Carolina*, Scott-Heron deftly bridged two seemingly disparate worlds of protest: Pan-Africanism and the Rights Revolution. In particular, the song registered opposition to the Chem-Nuclear storage facility that operated outside Barnwell. When explaining his initial interest in the anti-nuclear movement Scott-Heron recalled, “I got involved in this issue when I started to research ... the depository at Barnwell, South Carolina. I found out the life expectancy of some of the toxins was 480,000 years, and [they] had [been] buried ... in lead containers that had a life expectancy of approximately thirty years.”⁵⁴⁴ Additionally, Scott-Heron cited that “construction problems” related to the alleged use of “substandard material” in building the Barnwell plant further stoked his concerns.⁵⁴⁵

Scott-Heron’s first anti-nuclear composition “Barnwell (South Carolina)” targeted the Barnwell Waste Management Facility built in 1971 by Chem-Nuclear. The site housed low-level radioactive waste and was the first of its kind to operate in the United States.⁵⁴⁶ Engineers designed the plant to hold a maximum capacity of approximately 31 million cubic feet of waste, including items such as “contaminated wood, concrete, glass,

⁵⁴⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, Liner notes, *No Nukes: From the MUSE Concerts for a Non-Nuclear Future*, Madison Square Garden, 1979 (1979; reissued, Los Angeles: Elektra, 1997), 29.

⁵⁴⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, Liner notes, *From South Africa to South Carolina* (New York: Arista Records, 1975; reissued, Rumal-Gai, 1999).

⁵⁴⁶ “Chem-Nuclear Systems, L.L.C.,” *Chem-Nuclear Systems, L.L.C.: A Proven Record of Safe, Efficient Waste Disposal*, 1997, <<http://www.chemnuclear.com/disposal.html>> (4 November 2012), 1.

metal, fabric, paper, and resins.” Since the radioactive material was carted in by rail, the Barnwell facility posed a potential hazard to thousands of other communities across the nation. Though monitored by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, the potential dangers associated with the long-term storage of radioactive waste troubled Scott-Heron.⁵⁴⁷ He reminded readers of *Sing Out!* magazine about the issue, noting that “people aren’t paying enough attention to nuclear waste. The wastes are placed directly in the ground in lead containers, exposing the atmosphere to nuclear dangers. One of the biggest nuclear waste deposit sites is Barnwell, South Carolina—a rural area where black people live. The companies use the pitch that it’ll help the area economically and they minimize the danger involved. People living in those areas would not ordinarily be offered this type of high paying job. There’s a very shaky equation involved.”⁵⁴⁸

Throughout the 1970s, the Barnwell facility played host to numerous protests and consciousness-raising campaigns by anti-nuclear activists. The facility was completed in 1975, though it remained inoperative until 1978 due to hearings regarding the safety and viability of plutonium as a source of nuclear fuel.⁵⁴⁹ In the spring of 1978, a local organization called the Palmetto Alliance sponsored a demonstration at the plant that lasted two days, marshaled 1,500 protesters, and resulted in 285 arrests. A statement issued by the group read, in part:

The corporation that owns the Barnwell Plant are known as criminals by most countries of the world. In America we know them as Standard Oil and Gulf. This year the taxpayers gave the Barnwell Plant \$14 million to keep the operation

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁴⁸ “South Carolina,” *Sing Out!* 27, no. 6 (1979), 20.

⁵⁴⁹ Gyorgy, *No Nukes*, 422.

financially viable.... [It] is the only commercial nuclear fuel reprocessing facility in America. It has the capacity to handle the spent fuel from every nuclear reactor presently functioning in America. Without reprocessing of spent fuel there will be no plutonium.⁵⁵⁰

Released in 1975, the same year the plant was constructed, “Barnwell (South Carolina)” is a prime example of Scott-Heron’s early forays into Pan-Movement activism. With his vocals punctuating the percussion-laced backing of the Midnight Band, he issues a rousing call-to-arms:

I heard they buildin’ a fact’ry
down in South Carolina
with a death potential controlled by
government designers.

The second stanza imputes the safety of the facility, calling it a “great big bomb that’s tickin’”:

It will house atomic wastes
and be a constant reminder
that they’re buildin’ a great big bomb
that’s tickin’ in South Carolina.

The song’s chorus poses stark questions about the lack of mass public outcry regarding the plant.⁵⁵¹

Whatever happened to the protests
and the rage.
Whatever happened to the voices of
the sane?
Whatever happened to the people who
gave a damn?
Or did that just apply to the dyin’
in the jungles of Viet Nam?

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 422.

⁵⁵¹ It is worth pointing out that the song was released prior to the protests mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. In fact, it could be argued that Scott-Heron’s song played a significant role in drawing attention to the facility.

The final verse reveals the dangers that the facility in Barnwell poses to other communities:

I heard they buildin' a fac'try down in
South Carolina
and the trains will roll cross country
with their cargos behind 'em.
They could take a million lives, my friend,
but need I remind you
that they got no respect for human life
in South Carolina?⁵⁵²

Scott-Heron viewed this song as a milestone in his catalog: “I considered the song important for a couple of reasons. It was our first song to state our concern about nuclear power: we questioned the safety of plutonium creating plants.... And certain information surrounding the Savannah River plant indicated that there might be construction problems. (Testimony submitted to the Senate in 1983 included an admission that substandard material was used by the contractor.)”⁵⁵³ Combined with the effects on communities of color located near the plant, these worries undergirded Scott-Heron’s anti-nuclear critique.

In 1977, Gil Scott-Heron revisited anti-nuclear protest with the hauntingly evocative composition, “We Almost Lost Detroit.” The song, featured on *Bridges*, took inspiration from the best-selling book of the same name, authored by scientist John G. Fuller. The non-fiction novel detailed the partial-meltdown of a Fermi-II nuclear reactor located a mere 30 miles outside of the Michigan metropolis. Fuller’s gripping narrative highlighted the incalculable hidden costs of an energy source that proponents touted as

⁵⁵² Gil Scott-Heron, “Barnwell (South Carolina),” *From South Africa to South Carolina* (New York: Arista Records, 1975; reissued, Ruml-Gai, 1999).

⁵⁵³ Bradley, “The Homeland is Where the Hatred Is,” 17.

imminently safe and “too cheap to meter.”⁵⁵⁴ Indeed, Fuller’s account of the incident confirmed the fears of industry critics and anti-nuclear activists.

On the afternoon of 5 October 1968, the Enrico Fermi II breeder reactor at the Detroit Edison power company’s Laguna Beach facility experienced a near-meltdown. Around 3:05 p.m. Mike Wilber, an assistant engineer, made several alarming discoveries: the control rods that regulated energy production were three inches further away from the core than safety standards allowed and the temperature registered 120 degrees hotter than normal. Fuller described the tense opening moments of the crisis:

[at] exactly 3:09 p.m. the air horn began blasting – two blasts every three seconds. Then, over the intercom a laconic announcement: ‘Now hear this. The containment building and the fission product detector building have been secured. There are high radiation readings, and they are sealed off. Do not attempt to enter. Stay Out. Both buildings are isolated. This is a Class 1 emergency. Stand by for further instructions.’⁵⁵⁵

Then, at 3:20 p.m., engineers gave the critical orders to “scram the reactor.” Following this emergency shutdown, the recalcitrant rods “finally closed down fully,” thereby averting further overheating. However, given the high temperatures in the reactor’s core, “all signs seemed to be pointing to a fuel melting situation.”⁵⁵⁶ At that precise moment the Laguna Beach facility transformed into a nuclear powder keg.

Soon thereafter, someone identifying himself or herself as being with Detroit Edison phoned the Monroe County Sheriff, Charles Harrington. The caller informed the sheriff that “there was something wrong at the new Enrico Fermi Atomic Power Plant ... the cause of the problem was uncertain [and] that the situation should not be publicized

⁵⁵⁴ Harvey Wasserman, Liner notes, *No Nukes: From the MUSE Concerts For A Non-Nuclear Future, Madison Square Garden, 1979* (1979; reissued, Los Angeles: Electra, 1997), 26.

⁵⁵⁵ John G. Fuller, *We Almost Lost Detroit* (New York: Reader’s Digest, 1977), 196-7.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

... more information would follow.”⁵⁵⁷ Fearing a public panic, Harrington “decided to wait it out.” Accordingly, Sheriff Harrington never recorded the call on the police blotter. By all accounts, the Fermi II fast breeder reactor at Laguna Beach came within seconds of experiencing a full and catastrophic melt-down.⁵⁵⁸ As one engineer remarked apocalyptically, “Let’s face it, we almost lost Detroit.”⁵⁵⁹ However, county residents were never warned of the impending danger and the public did not learn of the event until Fuller’s novelistic portrayal in 1975.⁵⁶⁰

In addition to the near-meltdown at Laguna Beach, Scott-Heron’s song “We Almost Lost Detroit” referenced another anti-nuclear icon and movement touchstone, namely, Karen Silkwood. In 1972, Silkwood - a 28-year-old, white divorced mother of three - went to work as an analyst at the Kerr-McGee Metallography Laboratory on the banks of the Cimarron River near Crescent, Oklahoma.⁵⁶¹ In the spring of 1974, Silkwood became the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Worker’s Union (OCAW) health and safety representative for the Kerr-McGee facility. That July she tested positive for nuclear contamination.⁵⁶² On 13 November 1974, Oklahoma highway patrol officers

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid. 1.

⁵⁵⁸ In addition to endangering Detroit’s sizeable population, such a disaster would have irrevocably devastated the region. The pastoral patchwork of rural Monroe County brimmed with nearly 3,000 farms including 250 commercial dairy operations. Additionally, the partial melt-down at Laguna Beach posed a personal threat to Scott-Heron because his “father, two brothers, sister and step-mother all lived in Detroit.” Ibid., 69 and Gil Scott-Heron, Liner notes, *Bridges* (New York: Arista Records, 1977).

⁵⁵⁹ Fuller, *We Almost Lost Detroit*, 231.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁶¹ Richard Rashke, *The Killing of Karen Silkwood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981), 9.

⁵⁶² Silkwood believed she had been intentionally contaminated in retaliation for her whistle-blowing activities at the Crescent facility. Plant officials denied any conspiracy against Silkwood. Instead, Kerr-McGee management countered that she had contaminated herself in order to gain sympathy and publicity. Garza, “The Rise of the Antinuclear Power Movement,” 7.

responded to a report that a white Ford Pinto had crashed into a concrete culvert alongside Highway 30, two miles outside of Crescent. There, amid the mangled wreckage, officers found Silkwood's lifeless body.⁵⁶³ In an interesting perhaps not altogether impertinent coincidence, on the evening of her death, Karen Silkwood had been en route to Oklahoma City to discuss plant safety with a national union representative and a reporter from *The New York Times*. In the months leading up to the meeting, she reportedly had amassed lengthy documentation of safety violations at the Kerr-McGee facility. With a national union representative on hand, Silkwood intended to present her evidence to the reporter.⁵⁶⁴ However, officers at the scene recovered no files or documentation. For many, Silkwood's whistle-blowing activities at Kerr-McGee and her scheduled meeting with a *Times* reporter cast doubts on the nature of her death. As a result of publicity garnered by the Silkwood case and significant quantities of missing plutonium, Kerr-McGee's Crescent facility closed in 1975.⁵⁶⁵ As a result of her untimely and suspicious death, Karen Silkwood became a Seventies feminist icon and an anti-nuclear martyr.

Besides honoring Silkwood, Scott-Heron dedicated "We Almost Lost Detroit" to members of the Clamshell Alliance. Founded in 1976, the Clamshell Alliance was a

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁶⁴ In the spring of 1974, Kerr-McGee stepped up production at the facility, forcing many employees to endure the stress and exhaustion of twelve-hour shifts and seven-day work weeks. To make matters worse, management had not properly informed employees about the dangers of and proper methods for handling radioactive materials. A report filed with the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) by Silkwood and fellow union reps cited 39 recent incidents of neglect or safety violations at the lab. Eventually investigators found that 73 workers at the plant had been contaminated over the previous four years. Rashke, *The Killing of Karen Silkwood*, 14, 22-23 and Garza, "The Rise of the Antinuclear Power Movement," 7.

⁵⁶⁵ Coworkers recalled seeing her clutching a thick file of paperwork as she left for the meeting. Authorities later ruled that the deadly wreck had been an accident and, despite questionable markings on the rear bumper, concluded that no other vehicles had been involved. Garza, "The Rise of the Antinuclear Power Movement," 7.

grassroots coalition of New Hampshire residents who opposed the construction of the Seabrook Nuclear Power Station.⁵⁶⁶ On 30 April 1977, inspired by the direct action strategies employed in the Civil Rights Movement, 2,500 “Clams” illegally occupied the Seabrook construction site in protest.⁵⁶⁷ The following year, on 8 June 1978, a crowd of supporters 10,000 strong gathered in solidarity to protest at the embattled Seabrook site. Eventually the staunch opposition and protracted legal wrangling bankrupted the Public Service Company of New Hampshire. Inspired by the Clams, similar citizens coalitions formed to protest the construction of nuclear projects across the country.⁵⁶⁸ Their courage, resolve, and victory heartened many anti-nuclear activists, including Scott-Heron.

Released in the fall of 1977, “We Almost Lost Detroit” stands as one of Scott-Heron’s most potent songs and evocative recordings. By calling attention to industry cover-ups in both the Karen Silkwood and Laguna Beach controversies, the track offered fuel to the consciousness-raising efforts of anti-nuclear activists. With the first verse, Scott-Heron paints an unflattering image of the Laguna Beach facility:

It stands out on a highway
Like a creature from another time
It inspires the baby’s question (‘Mama, what’s that?’)
They ask their mothers as they ride.

The first chorus echoes a theme common to several Scott-Heron compositions, the safety of children:

⁵⁶⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, “Liner notes,” *Bridges* (New York: Arista Records, 1977).

⁵⁶⁷ Paul Gunter, “Clamshell Alliance: Thirteen Years of Anti-Nuclear Activism at Seabrook, New Hampshire, U.S.A.,” *Ecologia Newsletter*, no. 3 (Jan. 1990), <<http://www.ecologia.org/newsletter/year90/jan90c.html>> (accessed, 14 October 2012).

⁵⁶⁸ Clamshell Alliance spin-offs included the Oystershell Alliance in Louisiana, the Abalone Alliance in California, the Sunflower Alliance in Kansas, and the Crabshell Alliance in Washington. Garza, “The Rise of the Antinuclear Power Movement,” 8.

But no one stops to think about the babies
Or how they would survive
And we almost lost Detroit this time.
How would we ever get over losing our minds?

With the second verse and chorus, he handily connects the two infamous cover-ups:

The sheriff of Monroe County
Had (sho' 'nuff) disasters on his mind
And what would Karen Silkwood say to you
If she was still alive?
That when it comes to people's safety
Money wins out every time
And we almost lost Detroit this time
How would we ever get over losing our minds?

The last chorus reminds listeners of the high stakes in the nuclear power gamble:

You see, we almost lost Detroit that time.
Almost lost Detroit that time.
And how would we ever get over
...
Cause odds are,
we gonna lose somewhere, one time.⁵⁶⁹

In 1980, Gil Scott-Heron issued his most stinging anti-nuclear rebuke, “Shut Um Down.” Released in the wake of the closest brush with nuclear catastrophe in American history, the song spoke to the anxieties of many across the nation. In the spring of 1979, a radiation leak at the Pennsylvania nuclear power plant known as Three Mile Island (TMI) endangered the lives of citizens up and down the eastern seaboard, in what became “the major symbol of the controversy over nuclear power in the United States.”⁵⁷⁰ Built on the banks of the Susquehanna River by Pennsylvania’s Metropolitan Edison power company,

⁵⁶⁹ Gil Scott-Heron, “We Almost Lost Detroit,” *Bridges* (New York: Arista Records, 1977) and *Now & Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate U.S., 2000), 56. Keyboardist Brian Jackson, drummer Reggie Brisbane, bassist Danny Bowens, guitarists Fred Payne and Marlo Henderson, saxophonist Bilal Sunni-Ali, trumpeter Delbert Taylor, and percussionists Barnett Williams and Tony Duncanson provide the tracks ethereal yet bluesy atmosphere.

⁵⁷⁰ Slocum-Schaffer, *America In The Seventies*, 138.

like the Laguna Beach facility, TMI operated just miles outside of a populous urban center, Pennsylvania's capital Harrisburg. On the afternoon of 28 March 1979 - in a series of events that eerily echoed *The China Syndrome* - a pump and valve failure resulted in a partial core meltdown of the reactor in the TMI-2 unit.⁵⁷¹ Worse still, investigators discovered that the TMI-2 malfunction had leaked radiation "into the atmosphere around the plant."⁵⁷² Once in the wind, the leak at TMI posed an imminent threat to the cities along the Atlantic Coast.

The Three Mile Island crisis unfolded over several tense days as engineers struggled to cool the reactor and prevent the further release of radioactive materials. On March 28, CBS anchor Walter Cronkite labeled TMI as "the first step in a nuclear nightmare," adding that the situation could potentially end in a "nuclear meltdown."⁵⁷³ During the crisis, Americans sat anxiously glued to their television sets, watching as nearly 144,000 people from Harrisburg and surrounding towns evacuated their homes.⁵⁷⁴ On 1 April, three days after the initial warning sirens had sounded at TMI, experts successfully shut down the reactor, ending the harrowing crisis. Under pressure from activists and consumers alike, following the TMI crisis utility companies cancelled orders for eleven nuclear reactors in the United States.⁵⁷⁵ The incident also unnerved many

⁵⁷¹ Released twelve days before TMI, the movie starred Jane Fonda, Michael Douglas, and Jack Lemmon. The crisis boosted ticket sales and the film gained a bump in popularity in the weeks following TMI. The movie dramatized an accident and cover-up - including a Silkwoodesque car chase - that unfolded at a fictitious nuclear facility in California.

⁵⁷² Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 129.

⁵⁷³ J. Samuel Walker, *Three Mile Island: A Nuclear Crisis in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2004), 103 and Berkowitz, *Something Happened*, 129.

⁵⁷⁴ Slocum-Schaffer, *America In The Seventies*, 138.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

industry supporters, including President Jimmy Carter who, following TMI, viewed nuclear power as an “energy source of last resort, not the wave of the future.”⁵⁷⁶ The fallout from Three Mile Island signaled the death-knell of public support for nuclear power and dashed the industry’s ambitions in the United States.

In 1979, following the catastrophe at Three Mile Island, Gil Scott-Heron joined forces with one of the most visible anti-nuclear coalitions, Musicians United for Safe Energy (MUSE). Spearheaded by SDS stalwart Tom Hayden and a small cadre of prominent musicians such as Jackson Browne, Jim Hall, Bonnie Raitt, and James Taylor, MUSE promoted the development of sustainable, ecologically sound energy alternatives under the belief that “organic energy, like wind and solar, would prove a better bargain.”⁵⁷⁷ Judging by the sizeable crowds at MUSE-sponsored rallies and concerts around the country, hundreds of thousands agreed. In addition to spreading anti-nuclear consciousness, the MUSE-sponsored “No Nukes” concerts brought together a diverse collection of Seventies superstars, including Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt, The Doobie Brothers, Chaka Kahn, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, James Taylor, and Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band.

In fact, the “nuclear nightmare” at TMI encouraged vociferous anti-nuclear protest from many diverse sectors of American society, including consumer advocates, feminists, peace activists, concerned mothers, and the elderly.⁵⁷⁸ Throughout the fall of 1979, Gil Scott-Heron lent his talents to MUSE by participating in a series of widely

⁵⁷⁶ Berkowitz, *Something Happened*, 129.

⁵⁷⁷ Wasserman, “Liner notes,” *No Nukes*, 2.

⁵⁷⁸ “Antinuclear Rally to Have Rock Stars,” *New York Times* (6 September 1979), C22.

publicized rallies and concerts. In qualifying his support for the organization and their brand of musical activism he admonished, “if a nuclear power plant goes up, it doesn’t just take out the people who are not artists, it takes the artists too. So the artists should damn well concern themselves with that...”⁵⁷⁹

On 23 September, he performed at an anti-nuclear rally at the Battery Park city landfill in Manhattan. Broadcast on over 200 radio stations nationwide, the five-hour event featured a host of musicians and guest speakers protesting nuclear energy and promoting the upcoming MUSE concerts in New York City and Washington D.C.⁵⁸⁰ Notably, Scott-Heron opened these shows and performed searing versions of his anti-nuclear classics “Barnwell (South Carolina)” and “We Almost Lost Detroit.” His live performance of the latter song appeared on the best-selling *No Nukes* LP and accompanying documentary film released that winter.⁵⁸¹

Inspired by Three Mile Island, Scott-Heron rounded out his anti-nuclear trilogy with “Shut ‘Um Down,” featured on *1980*. “Shut ‘Um Down” reaffirmed his previous antipathy toward nuclear energy, leaving little doubt as to Scott-Heron’s opinion on the matter. By associating “rumble,” “earthquake,” and “power,” the first verse adroitly frames the recent crisis at Three Mile Island:

⁵⁷⁹ “Gil Scott-Heron: Educate, Agitate, and Organise,” *New Musical Express*, (30 April 1983), 7.

⁵⁸⁰ In his memoir, Scott-Heron recalled his participation in these events, writing: “There was a weeklong series of concerts being held by ‘M.U.S.E.’... I hadn’t had a lot of time to get myself together for that one because we had only been invited about two weeks in advance of the event... We opened with ‘South Carolina,’ slowed it down a touch with ‘We Almost Lost Detroit,’ and closed with ‘The Bottle.’ I guess I noticed all of the film and recording equipment all over the apron, but I honestly hadn’t given much thought about making the cut that would give me space on the vinyl or in the film. That was a bonus.” *Ibid.*, C22 and Gil Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday: A Memoir* (New York: Grove Press, 2012), 220-21.

⁵⁸¹ *No Nukes: From the MUSE Concerts for a Non-Nuclear Future, Madison Square Garden, 1979* (1979; reissued, Los Angeles: Elektra, 1997).

Did you feel that rumble? Did you hear that sound?
Well it wasn't no earthquake, but it shook the ground.
(It) made me think about power; like it or not

And reminds listeners of a basic tenet of environmentalism:

I got to work for earth for what it's worth
'cause it's the only earth we've got.

The second verse underscores the dangers of human oversight:

I've heard a lot about safety and human error.
A few dials and gauges is just a wing and a prayer.
If you need perfection and that's what it takes
Then you don't need *people*, can't use *people*,
You know people make mistakes!

The final chorus outlines Scott-Heron's solution to America's "nuclear nightmare":

Shut 'um Down!
If that's the only way to keep them from melting down!
Shut 'um Down!
If that's the only way to keep them from melting down!⁵⁸²

With thematically related messages that bridged the chasm between rural communities of color in the South, urban enclaves in the mid-West, and disparate locales in the Northeast, "Barnwell (South Carolina)," "We Almost Lost Detroit," and "Shut 'Um Down" are emblematic of Scott-Heron's Pan-Movement cultural productions. Indeed, Scott-Heron's anti-nuclear songs and involvement in MUSE brought his music and message to audiences from coast to coast. What is more, by virtue of his frequent European tours, Scott-Heron took these songs and his anti-nuclear message before an international audience. Due in part to the conscious-raising efforts of activists including

⁵⁸² Gil Scott-Heron, "Shut 'Um Down," *1980* (New York: Arista Records, 1980). The track featured a unique line-up, including Scott-Heron on rhythm piano, Brian Jackson on drums, keyboard bass, and various synthesizers, Marlo Henderson on guitar, Maxine Waters Waddell, Julia Waters, and Marti McCall on background vocals, and a horn section comprised of Gordon Goodwin, Bill Watrous, and Denis Sirias.

Scott-Heron, the construction of new reactors slowed to a crawl in the United States following the crisis at Three Mile Island in 1979.

CODA

Gil Scott-Heron's Pan-Movement productions and activism were integral to his identity as an artist, cultural worker, and public intellectual. Beginning in the mid-1970s, he consciously sought to bridge the gap between seemingly disparate causes, most notably the anti-apartheid and anti-nuclear movements. Both struggles were waged on the world stage, turning Scott-Heron's international celebrity into a highly effective platform for political activism. Most important, however, is that compositions such as "Johannesburg," "Third World Revolution," "Let Me See Your I.D.," "South Carolina (Barnwell)," "We Almost Lost Detroit," and "Shut 'Em Down" highlighted not only the interrelatedness of the two movements but also brought attention to key streams of activism that flourished as the Black Power era came to a close. Subsequent releases such as *Bridges*, *It's Your World*, and *Secrets* expanded the reach of his Pan-Movement activism beyond anti-nuclear and anti-apartheid issues to a host of other causes, including the Chicano/a movement, the Women's movement, the Prisoners' Rights movement, the labor movement, and the American Indian Movement.

It was his Pan-Movement activism that, in part, allowed Scott-Heron to transcend the demise of the BAM without forsaking its aesthetic tenets or sacrificing the political content inherent in his earlier productions. What is more, due to his inimitable talents and major label affiliation, he made significant inroads into mainstream music over the course

of the decade, bringing issues that threatened the well-being of black communities worldwide before increasingly larger and more racially diverse audiences.

Through his cultural productions and live performances, Scott-Heron engendered consciousness regarding anti-apartheid and anti-nuclear politics and fostered a Pan-Movement dialog that engaged and informed audiences and adherents worldwide. The title of his fifth LP, *From South Africa to South Carolina*, serves as a concise summation of his Pan-Movement philosophy. In using geographical designations to signify the two issues, Scott-Heron highlighted not only the diasporic connections between black South Africans and black South Carolinians, but also the similarities in the systemic, state-sponsored oppression meted out to both populations.

Moreover, by virtue of this titular connection, along with the juxtaposition of songs pertaining to each of the two issues on the same album, Scott-Heron asserts the interrelatedness of anti-nuclear and anti-apartheid protest, and, indeed, activism worldwide. His cultural productions not only drew connections to the intersectionality surrounding seemingly unrelated campaigns, his musical activism bridged the gap between struggles waged by people of color worldwide and those of grassroots activists in the United States during the 1970s. In this way, Gil Scott-Heron's Pan-Movement compositions documented and gave voice to signal struggles of the postwar era.

CHAPTER 5

AND THEN HE WROTE "...AND THEN HE WROTE MEDITATIONS": THE COLTRANE POEMS AND SONGS OF GIL SCOTT-HERON

I remember it vividly. Its impact on me was immediate. The first time I heard the ["love supreme"] chant, the spirituality, the mix of instruments, the way the solos were set up, the way the tune was done, the length of it at almost 20 minutes long—I got lost in it. I was literally taken aback... I found tranquility and peace in this record. It gave my life balance. – Gil Scott-Heron⁵⁸³

Any music which could grow and propagate itself as our music has, must have a hell of an affirmative belief inherent in it. Any person who claims to doubt this, or claims to believe that the exponents of our music or freedom are not guided by the same entity is either prejudiced, musically sterile, or just plain stupid or scheming. Believe me... we all know that this word 'Freedom' has a hell of a lot to do with this music. – John Coltrane⁵⁸⁴

Gil Scott-Heron, like his peers in Black Arts Movement, often exalted the works and personas of black musicians in his cultural productions. Among them, one artist, John Coltrane, reigned supreme. For evidence of this we need look no further than one of the key formal innovations associated with the BAM, the Coltrane poem. In giving name to this literary phenomenon, Kimberly Benston posits that the Coltrane poem "has, in fact, become an unmistakable genre of contemporary black poetry ... and it is in this genre that the notion of music as the quintessential idiom, and the word as its annunciator, is carried to its technical and philosophic apex." He attributed some of its appeal as a textual canvas to the "tirelessness of Coltrane's experimentalism."⁵⁸⁵ Indeed, the combination of Coltrane's tireless musical inventiveness and appreciation for international musics coupled with his unrelenting spiritual seeking served as model of the

⁵⁸³ Jon Bennet, "Gil Gets on the 'Trane,'" *Mojo* (August 2001), 31.

⁵⁸⁴ Leonard L. Brown, "In His Own Words: Coltrane's Responses to Critics," *John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

⁵⁸⁵ Kimberly Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 120.

ideal artist for many Black Arts adherents in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁸⁶ As James Smethurst pointed out, the “twinned ideas of the free jazz artist as hero and of an avant-garde art that is both cutting edge thematically and formally ... found their most powerful and developed articulation” in the works of the BAM.⁵⁸⁷ For Scott-Heron and many other BAM artists, the jazz practitioner “is not merely the custodian of an authentic folk culture or even the conscious avant-garde artist; he is the leader of rebellion against postwar conformity and the spiritual agent of the politically powerless.”⁵⁸⁸

Christened by Amiri Baraka as the “Malcolm in the New Super Bop Fire,” Coltrane figured prominently in the works and psyches of BAM artists. In addition to identifying with his musical explorations and innovations, many in the BAM projected a connection between Coltrane’s politics and his cultural productions such as “Love Supreme,” “Alabama,” and “Giant Steps.” By most accounts, this was a fair and accurate assumption. According to historian Manning Marable, Coltrane, “the most influential

⁵⁸⁶ In order to gain a better understanding of the life and music of John Coltrane, several biographical treatments are indispensable. For examples, see Bill Cole, *John Coltrane* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1976); Ashley Kahn, *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane’s Signature Album* (New York: Penguin Press Books, 2003); Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2000); J.C. Thomas, *Chasin’ the Trane* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976); Eric Nisenson, *Ascension: John Coltrane and his Quest* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995); and, Ben Ratliff, *Coltrane: The Story of a Sound* (New York: Picador, 2008). Additionally, there are several critical volumes that examine Coltrane’s cultural significance to black artists in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, see Kimberly Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Leonard L. Brown, ed., *John Coltrane and Black America’s Quest for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); James C. Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me: African American Culture and the American Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Frank Kofsky, *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s* (Atlanta: Pathfinder Press, 1998); and, Meta DuEwa Jones, *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry From the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2011). To supplement these biographical and critical selections, it is equally important to read Coltrane’s own words and articulations regarding his music and cultural politics. See Chris Devito, *Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010) and Carl Woideck, ed., *The John Coltrane Companion: Five Decades of Commentary* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 1998).

⁵⁸⁷ James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 75.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

saxophone artist of the 1960s, was deeply influenced by Malcolm's [Malcolm X] style of rhetoric and by his political philosophy of black nationalism."⁵⁸⁹ These philosophical connections resonated strongly with many in the BAM, leading Larry Neal to proclaim Coltrane's music "a central force in the emerging ethos of the black artistic consciousness."⁵⁹⁰ In another parallel, Coltrane, like Malcolm X, gained in stature following his death in the summer of 1967 and influenced audiences beyond black community. His passing, as James Hall noted, "heightened the commitment of his followers rather than lessening his impact." He adds that Coltrane "projected a powerful if insouciant spirituality and was very much a bridge figure between liberals and radicals, whites and blacks, Americans and Europeans, and musicians and other artists."⁵⁹¹ By this measure, if jazz were a religion as suggested by Ted Joans, then the personage of Coltrane to the Black Arts Movement is that of a holy figure - a high priest, a mojo man, and patron saint - all rolled into one.⁵⁹² Armed with a sound that challenged dominant Western harmonic conventions and cultural productions that served as sonic mirrors of black life, the figure of Coltrane provided BAM artists with a the raw materials for summoning proscriptive models of racial and cultural identity found in many Coltrane poems.

In assessing this enormous impact and the posthumous nature of John Coltrane's influence in the 1960s, James Hall coined the term "Coltrane culture" to describe the "body of myths, rituals, and representations that utilize Coltrane or his work as a point of

⁵⁸⁹ Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking Adult, 2010), 465.

⁵⁹⁰ Larry Neal, *Visions of a Liberated Future* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989), 125.

⁵⁹¹ James C. Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me: African American Culture and the American Sixties*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 115.

⁵⁹² Ted Joans, "Jazz Is My Religion," *Black Pow-Wow* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 71.

focus.”⁵⁹³ He asserts that, “given the limitations of his abstract musical practice in performing the kinds of cultural work that he had in mind in shaping his artistic identity, the fullest extension of his cultural critique would be made by his followers” and “those who recognized the value of the discourse of black music.”⁵⁹⁴ The Coltrane poem is without question the most conspicuous and active node of Coltrane culture. However, one of Scott-Heron’s most striking interventions in the genre came in the form of the “Coltrane song.” The Coltrane song is distinguished from the Coltrane poem by the presence of not only musical accompaniment but also in the merger of melody to lyrics that typically differentiate the two forms. Given the privileging of music over poetry in the worlds of commerce and media - along with Scott-Heron’s significant international popularity - Coltrane songs such as “Lady Day and John Coltrane” are among the most well-known exponents of Coltrane culture. Indeed, the ways in which Gil Scott-Heron and other BAM poets seized upon the music and figure of John Coltrane in their cultural productions are indeed striking. Scott-Heron’s Coltrane poems and Coltrane songs project his immense respect for the artistry of their namesake. Moreover, his contributions to these genres signal a historical shift in political and cultural consciousness among African American artists within and without the Black Arts milieu.

This chapter will interrogate the saxophonist’s substantive influence on Scott-Heron’s poems, soundscapes, and musical development. However, in order to contextualize the complexities of Scott-Heron’s Coltrane poems, we will first examine the ways in which literary scholars and Black Arts theoreticians and poets have assessed the music, persona, and legacy of John Coltrane. Then we will interrogate the texts of

⁵⁹³ Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me*, 149.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

Scott-Heron's four Coltrane Poems, "Lady Day And John Coltrane," "And Then He Wrote Meditations," "Tomorrow's Train," and "Spirits," along with a number of other representative works within the genre. Utilizing these productions we will analyze the numerous ways in which the music and persona of John Coltrane manifest in Scott-Heron's compositions, specifically: as a means of transportation, a train, that can carry black listeners to stations of higher consciousness; as a traveler/seeker/composer whose musical journeys represent new pathways to higher consciousness; as an extended metaphor sliding between the axes of freedom/liberation and oppression/annihilation; and, as a spiritual guide and patron saint. Furthermore, we will see how Scott-Heron utilizes the platform of the Coltrane poem and Coltrane song to advance a critique mainstream society in America during the 1960s and 1970s.

In examining Scott-Heron's soundscapes, we will consider a number of Coltrane poems written by his fellow BAM compatriots that share similar conventions. In addition to Scott-Heron, artists such as Jayne Cortez, Stephen Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubuti, and Michael S. Harper were instrumental in fashioning the subgenre. However, each artist has an individual connection to Coltrane and proceeds accordingly in verse. As Meta DeEwa rightly observed, "age and access have refined the contours of many jazz poets' relationship to Coltrane's music."⁵⁹⁵ Here, she seems to suggest that the fact that Coltrane's death in 1966 and thus absence from the studio and stage limited his exposure to new, younger listeners. For this audience, their aural encounters with John Coltrane are posthumous and facilitated through his recordings, often handed down from older siblings, parents, or other relatives; or, such as in the case of Gil Scott-Heron, many

⁵⁹⁵ Meta DuEwa Jones, *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry From the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 86.

listeners became familiar with this historic repertory while at university, where he imbibed Coltrane among other “jazz heavies” in late night listening sessions in the dorm rooms. Thus, DuEwa’s observation regarding “age and access” is axiomatic in the case of Scott-Heron. As such, this chapter will also historicize Scott-Heron’s relationship to John Coltrane and demonstrate the nature of the saxophonists influence, both culturally and aesthetically, during Black Arts era. This line of inquiry, along with a close reading of Scott-Heron’s Coltrane poems and songs, will further ground him in the BAM and highlight the aesthetic, textual, and formal similarities shared by Black Arts participants.

A NEW DAY, A NEW AESTHETIC: JOHN COLTRANE AND THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

John Coltrane is arguably the most lauded and ubiquitous musical presence in the cultural pantheon of the Black Arts Movement. In fact, BAM theorists and poets routinely invoked him as an exemplar of the consummate Afro-American artist. Larry Neal proclaimed Coltrane’s music “a central force in the emerging ethos of the black artistic consciousness.”⁵⁹⁶ That Neal and many of his literary peers would look to an avant-garde musician for cultural aesthetics is not unique to the BAM. As noted by literary historian James Smethurst, the figure of the musician as radical revolutionary, cultural icon, and bridge between artist and community traces back to at least the Bebop era of the 1940s.⁵⁹⁷ This synergistic influence and aesthetic resonated strongly with writers such as Ralph Ellison. One can find testimony to the influence of an earlier jazz innovator Charlie “Bird” Parker and his impact on this particular generation in an essay by Ellison entitled, “On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz.” The esteemed author notes that

⁵⁹⁶ Neal, *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 125.

⁵⁹⁷ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 73.

Parker was a “suffering, psychically wounded, law-breaking, life-affirming hero” who “captured something of the discordancies, the yearning, romance and cunning of the age and ordered it into a haunting art.”⁵⁹⁸ African American literary scholar, Kimberly Benston elaborates on this connection between literature and music noting that “the artist-hero in modern African-American writing is, typically, a musician ... for it is only in music, the literature seems to say, that renovated aesthetic conventions can touch upon both the pure energy and improvised wit deemed necessary for survival in the black diaspora.”⁵⁹⁹ Viewed in this light, it is fair to say that what Charlie Parker was to the post-Harlem Renaissance generation of black literati, John Coltrane was to the BAM.

Armed with music that challenged dominant Western harmonic conventions and radical cultural politics, Coltrane provided a revisionist model for black history and identity. Over the course of the late 1960s and early ‘70s, Coltrane functioned as a musical touchstone and common denominator that bridged the disparate voices and poetics of BAM adherents. Scholar Leonard L. Brown, speaking to the traditional context from which Coltrane emerged, analyzed the especial, interconnected relationship between black musical tradition and the black community writ-large in the following terms:

These musicians were part of a community and shared common experiences as black Americans. As pioneers, they collectively conceptualized and created the performance and stylistic approaches based on black cultural aesthetics. Much of this music was rooted in practices of African ancestors, and it often reflected adaptations and innovations resulting from black American experiences. Acknowledgement of life’s difficulties and themes of ‘perseverance,’ ‘resilience,’ ‘hope,’ and ‘freedom’ can be found in much of this music.⁶⁰⁰

⁵⁹⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Living With Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 262-64.

⁵⁹⁹ Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 119.

⁶⁰⁰ Leonard L. Brown, *John Coltrane and Black America’s Quest for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

Moreover, Brown emphasized one of the principal functions of the Music in black culture, namely, “This was music that made people want to dance and freed them of the daily hassles of America’s segregated practices. It was music that expressed the full range of black life experiences.”⁶⁰¹

While certain critics and audiences fail to understand the ways in which instrumental music could be used to communicate messages of affirmation and resistance, Coltrane himself spoke of this potentiality, noting:

Any music which could grow and propagate itself as our music has, must have a hell of an affirmative belief inherent in it. Any person who claims to doubt this, or claims to believe that the exponents of our music or freedom are not guided by the same entity is either prejudiced, musically sterile, or just plain stupid or scheming. ... we all know that this word ‘Freedom’ has a hell of a lot to do with this music.”⁶⁰²

This acknowledgement reinforces the arguments advanced by other musicians and scholars regarding the dialectic between racial politics and musical praxis in the postwar era. As Lorenzo Thomas argued, bebop, in the hands of practitioners such as Randy Weston, Dizzy Gillespie, Art Blakey, and Max Roach, was an inherently political music. The impetus for the music was rooted in “the creative and explicit expression of racial pride that is logically and inextricably linked to the musicians desire for artistic recognition and economic self-determination.” Read in this light, bebop represented a “development of African American cultural nationalism that identifies the evolution of popular performance style toward a more sophisticated or ‘serious’ art form as well as a

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁰² Ibid., 17.

social and political statement.”⁶⁰³ This is not an insignificant precedent. As noted by James Smethurst, numerous musicians, poets, and other practitioners within the BAM adopted this aesthetic as well, resulting in the Black Arts Movement being what he aptly termed a “popular avant-garde.”⁶⁰⁴

The question of Coltrane’s politics and the extent to which they manifested in his music was a contentious issue, especially in light of the saxman’s posthumous appropriation by many in the BAM. It is clear from extant scholarship that John Coltrane was, in fact, quite attentive to developments in the Civil Rights Movement and black cultural politics. Salim Washington tells us that the master sax man “was intensely interested in the struggles of black people. He read books about black culture and regularly paid attention to the ways in which the civil rights struggle had captured the imagination of the nation.” According to Washington, Coltrane “on at least one occasion” went to listen to a speech by Malcolm X. According to his daughter, Syeeda, the musician “loved his people” and the family routinely discussed politics during meals.⁶⁰⁵ These facets of Coltrane’s personality and political consciousness lead Washington to speculate on the metamorphosis in his sound. He posits that “there seems to be a connection between [his] attempts to find a new way to play music in his late phase and

⁶⁰³ Lorenzo Thomas, *Don’t Deny My Name: Music and the Black Intellectual Tradition* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 97.

⁶⁰⁴ James Smethurst, “‘Pat Your Foot and Turn the Corner:’ Amiri Baraka, The Black Arts Movement and the Poetics of a Popular Avant-Garde,” *African American Review* 37, no. 2/3 (Summer-Autumn 2003), 261.

⁶⁰⁵ Salim Washington, “Don’t Let the Devil (Make You) Lose Your Joy: A Look at Late Coltrane” in *John Coltrane and Black America’s Quest for Freedom*, ed. Leonard Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 144.

what might be seen as the social experiments” of the Movement in the 1960s.⁶⁰⁶ Judging by the response to Coltrane’s music within the Movement, the influence was reciprocal.

In fact, numerous scholars have weighed in regarding Coltrane’s profound cultural currency within certain quarters of the African-American community. In his essay “John Coltrane and the Practice of Freedom,” Herman Gray examined the iconography that has risen behind the legendary sax man. His aim lay in interrogating the ways the “figure or legend of Trane as distinct from Coltrane came to be constituted ... not just as a figure from the past but also as a cultural trope in our present.” In doing so, Gray seeks to understand how and why Coltrane is continually “nominat[ed]” as a “representative of black freedom” by African American poets and intellectuals.⁶⁰⁷ He argued that this process occurs, in part, “through the image of and stories we tell about Trane and such concepts as freedom, politics, authenticity, or sincerity we attribute to him an emblem (and a suitable one, to be sure) of spiritual searching, political radicalism, cultural nationalism, modern (black) collective consciousness, and Third World Internationalism.”⁶⁰⁸ Salim Washington draws our attention to the emotional, transcendent qualities particular to performative culture in the black musical tradition:

Repetition, and most especially trancelike states induced in part by such repetition (such as the interjections used by charismatic preachers and their audiences, or the choruses sung by congregants, or the music and choreography enjoyed in a spirited, dance-oriented party ... invite the listener (or dancer, or singer) to become a listener/participant, to enter into a sacred space where the paradigmatic acts and words of the gods and ancestors are brought alive in the here and now.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 147.

⁶⁰⁷ Herman Gray, “John Coltrane and the Practice of Freedom” in *John Coltrane and Black America’s Quest for Freedom*, ed. Leonard Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁰⁹ Washington, “Don’t Let the Devil (Make You) Lose Your Joy,” 133.

Scholar Emmett G. Price III is equally superlative in his assessment of the saxophonist's legacy, saying that "in the realm of black music, John Coltrane stands boldly and authoritatively as a twentieth-century prophet whose expressions gave meaning, whose communication provided direction and whose sound rang forth as an antidote to a prolonged mid-twentieth century period of chaos and turmoil for blacks in the United States and beyond."⁶¹⁰ When addressing the appropriation of Coltrane in the public imagination, Leonard L. Brown noted that the saxman's truncated surname offered ample metaphorical and semiotic connotations: "and his name, 'Trane' is suggestive of the period because it's a powerful symbol that is also associated with African American spirituals, and conveys the image of a train ... the moving, the running away, the getting away, the going to a better place, is all part of the metaphor." George Russell, when asked what felt were some of Coltrane's "significant achievements," replied that:

everything he did was not only significant; it was monumentally significant. The scope of what he has left is on a monumental level as an inheritance to us, and at the key of that inheritance is this very essence of the music and that essence is originality and innovation on a high level that carries within it the imprint of the originator and the innovator and carries with it the essence of that innovator.⁶¹¹

The observations by Gray, Washington, Brown, Russell, are indicative of the immense cultural and intellectual influence of John Coltrane in musical circles and beyond.

For Scott-Heron, the figure and music of John Coltrane held life-changing qualities that were instrumental to his development as a composer and writer. He recalled

⁶¹⁰ Emmett G. Price III, "The Spiritual Ethos in Black Music" in *John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom*, ed. Leonard Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 159.

⁶¹¹ George Russell, "Coda: George Russell on John Coltrane" in *John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom*, ed. Leonard Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 219.

his relationship to the tenor saxman, saying that one of the main insights he gained away from Coltrane's music and career was:

that [I] could only succeed if I followed the ideas in my mind. The dreams ... I knew that at 19 I wasn't going to be given a lot of support as a novelist. I knew I was going to face a lot of criticism and I might not get back to [Lincoln University] to graduate. I had to follow my own mind. So I had to listen to people and see example of people that had been successful in spite of the criticism. I think I got that from *A Love Supreme*.⁶¹²

In his 2012 memoir, Scott-Heron recalled another realization he gained from listening to Coltrane's music: "you had to keep reaching. I think when you stop reaching, you die.... After you think you've accomplished something, there's a tendency to relax. There's always a need for you to feel there's something else you need to do, something else you need to grasp."⁶¹³

While Coltrane's music provided inspiration for Scott-Heron's novelistic aspirations, it was also a major contributing factor to his innovations regarding the fusion of music and poetic texts:

The first time I heard the ['love supreme'] chant, the spirituality, the mix of the instruments, the way the solos were set up, the way the tune was done, and the length of it at almost 20 minutes long – I got lost in it. I was literally taken aback. I was a piano player and I wanted to do vocals. I had started to write songs but I hadn't done a whole lot. From starting off with the chant, the album moves into other areas, but it has a sort of symmetry and cohesiveness that I wanted my music to have no matter where I went with it.⁶¹⁴

That he was entranced and "taken aback" by the combination of the chant and the musical accompaniment is no small matter. Combined with the recordings of Oscar Brown Jr. and the Last Poets, the influence of John Coltrane and "A Love Supreme"

⁶¹² Bennett, "Gil Gets on the 'Trane," 31.

⁶¹³ Gil Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday: A Memoir* (New York: Grove Press, 2012), 196.

⁶¹⁴ Bennett, "Gil Gets on the 'Trane," 31.

cannot be overstated. It is also worth noting that Coltrane and Scott-Heron shared the same producer in the persona of Bob Theile. The esteemed impresario and owner of Flying Dutchman had served as an executive producer at Impulse! Records and been responsible for a number of that company's releases, including nearly all of Coltrane's LPs. In fact, this is among the reasons that Scott-Heron sought out Theile regarding the possibility of recording his compositions. He recalled that Theile's association with Coltrane "attracted us [Scott-Heron and Jackson] to Flying Dutchman. Bob Theile was starting his own label and we felt as though is he had that kind of contact with Archie Shepp and if he could produce John Coltrane then hell if he couldn't produce us."⁶¹⁵ Thus, in many ways John Coltrane exerted a powerful and enduring influence on his aesthetics, compositions, and career. Indeed, this admiration for Coltrane's music translated into several soundscapes and songs - signature pieces in Scott-Heron's repertory - works that will be the subject of the next section.

TO REFLECT AND SERVE: COLTRANE AS A PSYCHIC MIRROR AND SPIRITUAL RESOURCE

Scott-Heron, along with many other BAM adherents, drew an enormous amount of inspiration and influence from the persona and music of John Coltrane. Many including Sanchez, Neal, Lee, Joans, Baraka, and Cortez viewed the fiery saxophonist as integral to and inextricable from African American culture and poetics. As such, Neal posited John Coltrane as a material resource available to black poets and writers, who, in

⁶¹⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, Interview with author, 7 April 2007. He also cited Theile's commitment to documenting various currents of black cultural politics of the 1960s and 1970s as having influenced his decision to seek out the Flying Dutchman label: "Everyday that I knew him (an I'm sure before and after), Bob Theile was working on a deal to record what was going on in music and society, particularly black music (jazz and blues) or the individuals who were saying things and doing things and taking part in things that would turn this society around." Gil Scott-Heron, Correspondence with author, 14 May 2007.

turn, transformed ‘Trane into a valuable resource and psychic mirror available to black people. One way that BAM poets accomplished this was by holding up John Coltrane and his music as a metaphorical means of transportation capable of delivering readers/riders to destinations of personal discovery and development. This follows Neal’s observations regarding Coltrane’s potentialities as an aesthetic, artistic, and life resource for diasporic peoples. In keeping with his theoretical dictates, Coltrane, as a black musician, fulfills what Neal sees as the black artist’s responsibility to guide, sustain, and uplift the masses through their works.

To better understand this phenomenon as it pertains to Scott-Heron’s works, we will examine several other Coltrane poems by his contemporaries, namely Jayne Cortez and the Last Poets. Their texts illuminate the ways in which certain artists projected black music as a proscriptive model for and means to black liberation. The figure of John Coltrane serves as an extended metaphor in several compelling ways in “How Long Has Trane Been Gone.” Taking its title in part from the well-known blues “How Long,” Cortez invokes Coltrane as a trope of transcendent “blackness” and a paradigmatic model of black masculinity. For example, early in the poem, Cortez reminds listeners who invented the blues and jazz and reclaims these genres as specifically black art forms that can ably speak to and for African Americans: “will you forget/forget about the good things/like Blues & Jazz being black/Yeah Black Music/all about you.” Tying this deficit of memory to Coltrane’s death, she asks, “how long has that Trane been gone.”⁶¹⁶

Here, we see another important metaphorical construct at work, that of ‘Trane as a train. Playing on his last name, Cortez casts the saxophonist as a rail car, and more

⁶¹⁶ Kimberly Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 314, 315.

importantly, one carrying a crucial cargo. Kimberly Benston observes this trope at work in this piece and others, writing, “poets variously reimagine ‘Trane’ as a flexible vehicle of their modernist irruption, the perpetual revolution of desire under the mobile sign of blackness.”⁶¹⁷ For Cortez, this train carries black listeners into knowledge of their musical and historical heritage. Specifically, she posits Coltrane as a reflection and revelator of the black experience, arguing that he “had the whole of/life wrapped up in B flat,” meaning his horn, the saxophone, commonly referred to as a B flat instrument.⁶¹⁸ Thus, in her estimation, Coltrane’s sax is a repository of knowledge, wisdom, and life experiences that lies in wait for those willing to listen.

Likewise, Scott-Heron utilized the unconventional spelling and metaphor in two of his poems “And Then He Wrote Meditations...” and “Trane.” In the former, the speaker is narrating a spiritual and spatial journey of a primordial John Coltrane who, over the course of the poem, travels through a certain hell, and, by the end, ascends to a higher plane of existence. In his prefatory comments Scott-Heron explained, “This poem is specifically for the master of the tenor saxophone, the immortal John Coltrane. There have been a lot of poems written mentioning Coltrane contributions to black music but none specifically about him that I know of and none that go into what I consider his greatest piece, “A Love Supreme,” and I wrote this with “A Love Supreme” in mind.”⁶¹⁹ Scholar and critic Robin D.G. Kelley, writing in the liner notes to the reissue of *Free Will*, summarized the saxophonist’s role in the poem, noting that “Coltrane is presented

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁶¹⁸ Benston, *Performing Blackness* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 314.

⁶¹⁹ Gil Scott-Heron, “...And Then He Wrote Meditations,” *Free Will* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1972).

here as a cultural warrior defying the night, a carrier of tradition bridging Africa with the New World whose premature death represented something of a sacrifice.”⁶²⁰ We find the locomotive metaphor beginning in line twelve as the “walls” speak to the embattled saxophonist, instructing him to “Rise up train, the answer is just beyond the next wall, Rise up train, the answer is just, beyond, the next wall / The train rose up, no one had ever so thoroughly defied the night.”⁶²¹ Here, we see “train” struggling and ultimately defying considerable obstacles in his - and by extension black Americans’ - progress on his/their journey to the metaphorical Promised Land.

Another example of this convention is found in the lyrics for “Tomorrow’s Trane,” a selection that appeared on the *Bridges* LP released in 1976. As Scott-Heron recalled, the song, like several others from the same album, was “done with live and lively crowds packed inside Paul’s Mall on Boylston Street.”⁶²² The song’s refrain invokes Coltrane by name as Scott-Heron urges listeners that “the time is now . . . Get on tomorrow’s Trane.” Though properly spelled, as in Cortez’s poem, here, the persona of John Coltrane operates as a metaphorical mode of transportation. In “Trane,” the saxophonist represents the embodiment of Larry Neal’s ideal of the black artist as a public servant and pathway to higher dimensions of a decidedly “black” consciousness. Moreover, for both Cortez and Scott-Heron, John Coltrane is transformed into a metaphorical vehicle that can carry black listeners/readers closer to Neal’s aesthetic vision for black art. Further, the lyrics for Scott-Heron’s “Trane,” align with Neal’s prescription of Coltrane’s music as a psychic unguent and indispensable cultural resource.

⁶²⁰ Robin D.G. Kelley, Liner Notes, *Free Will* (New York: RCA/Bluebird, 2001), 8.

⁶²¹ Scott-Heron, “...And Then He Wrote Meditations.”

⁶²² Gil Scott-Heron, Liner Notes, *It’s Your World* (New York: Ruml-Gia, 2001).

Another Coltrane song by Scott-Heron, “Lady Day and John Coltrane,” illustrated various ways in which the form was used to register social critiques. As with “And then He Wrote Meditations...” Scott-Heron used this composition as a platform to impugn what he saw as the hollowness of society and the consumer culture in postwar America. With the second verse, Scott-Heron criticizes mainstream America as being filled with “plastic people with plastic minds on their way to/plastic homes.” Moreover, he charges that most were leading a vacuous, treadmill-like existence in which “there’s no beginning, there ain’t no ending/just on and on and on and on.”⁶²³ As with Cortez’s poem, here we see mainstream society portrayed as a relatively soulless and aesthetically bankrupt model for African American life.

This appears again in “And He Wrote Meditations...” wherein he labeled Western culture using a number of terms that, taken cumulatively, describe what could be termed an existential poverty of being. Employing words such as “darkness,” “emptiness,” “vacuum,” “voids,” “non-existence,” and “the night,” he creates a spatial dimension devoid of any matter or substance, a place he later describes as a “once placid nightmare of soundlessness.” Here again, Scott-Heron’s language signals a key critique common to other BAM poets, that of American society being riddled with death and decay, unfit for inhabitation and unworthy of salvation. Black culture, by contrast, is a (desti)nation full of warmth and welcome, a figurative home and literal space of, by, and for descendants of the Diaspora. The poem’s first verse contains several of the above descriptors:

Straddling the darkness, he controlled the bucking thrusts and rode on
Into the emptiness that he alone would try to fill
Into the middle to try to be the bridge between spirits
“Expand!” he screamed
The vacuum was aroused, suspicious and alarmed, who would dare?

⁶²³ Gil Scott-Heron, “Lady Day and John Coltrane,” *Pieces of a Man* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1971).

...
we have no need for your emotion here, we have no emotion here

He even racialized a portion of this fictive space, christening it “ebony nothingness.” We see a similar metaphorical construct in another Scott-Heron composition, “Lady Day and John Coltrane,” which also contains a critique of contemporary American society.⁶²⁴ On the surface the song is a poetic homage to two of Scott-Heron’s favorite musicians, BAM icons John Coltrane and Billie Holiday; however, as with “And Then He Wrote Meditations...” a portion of the work is devoted to describing the feelings of alienation, depression, and hopelessness:

Ever feel kinda of down and out and don't know
just what to do?
Livin' alla your days in darkness, let the sun shine
through⁶²⁵

In the above verse, we find the existential poverty of being applied again in relation to American society. Here, Scott-Heron use of the term “darkness” could be read as a descriptor for one’s state-of-mind, life fortunes, or the depressive state of American society in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Concomitant to this phenomenon was the byproduct of artistic alienation, both at the individual and community levels. For many BAM critics, the experiences of black musicians, much like their cultural productions, were reflective of the problems that had

⁶²⁴ Though Scott-Heron is credited as the sole author, he acknowledged Brian Jackson’s musical contribution in his memoir, noting, “All I’d had for that song at first was a bass line and a chord thing with it. I never would have been able to really hook up that progression properly if Brian wasn’t there when I got into it; he opened it up, picked it up, and took it to where I sang it. I didn’t know anything about suspended fourths and all that, which is what the song is based on, so Brian was integral.” Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday*, 159.

⁶²⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, “Lady Day and John Coltrane” on Gil Scott-Heron, *Pieces of a Man* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1971); “Lady Day and John Coltrane,” *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Canongate US, 2000), 46; and, “Lady Day and John Coltrane,” *So Far, So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), 28.

historically beset African American community writ-large. Speaking to the engines of black oppression in the late 1960s, critic, essayist, and poet A.B. Spellman pointed out that “alienation is a part of the artist’s situation in a capitalist industrialist society. For the black musician, it meant alienation from his black brothers ... [since] there simply are no institutions set up in the ghetto to facilitate the growth of black art.”⁶²⁶ He concluded “the twin problems of alienation and economic control of jazz by white men, are the two most distressing problems confronting the New Music.”⁶²⁷ Noted critic and scholar Ron Welburn echoed these sentiments when he drew connections between the imperative for cultural autonomy and the socio-economic fortunes of African American musicians: “black culture cannot be separated from economic and political consideration ... the success of political, economic, and educational thrusts by the black community will depend on ... the extent to which we are able to control our culture.”⁶²⁸ Welburn concluded that, “our music is key to our survival.”⁶²⁹

Lorenzo Thomas pointed out that the historic suppression of black musicians was institutional, and, to a large degree by design:

In order to pretend that the African American was inferior, American society had to *prevent him* from excelling – hence the prohibitions created by segregation. Furthermore, it became impossible to accord jazz its rightful place because the notion of ‘white supremacy’ could not be defended once it was admitted that

⁶²⁶ A.B. Spellman, “Not Just Whistling Dixie” in *Black Fire*, eds. Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal (Baltimore, Md.: Black Classic Press, 2007), 167.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁶²⁸ John D. Baskerville, “Free Jazz: A Reflection of Black Power Ideology,” *Journal of Black Studies* 24, no. 4 (June 1994), 488.

⁶²⁹ Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for the Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2009) 139.

black people had created (and continue to create) the most vital and distinctive of American art forms.⁶³⁰

Read in in this light, “Lady Day and John Coltrane” and “And The He Wrote Meditations...” reflect Black Arts proscriptions in several key ways. First, we see a similarity to Larry Neal’s critique of Western culture as a dying, soulless, and morally bankrupt enterprise. We also see the theme of individual alienation that BAM critics, including Welburn and Spellman cautioned against.

Take for example the second stanza of “Lady Day and John Coltrane” in which the speaker interrogates the feelings of alienation and isolation generated by the superficiality of modern society he described previously:

Ever feel that somehow, somewhere you lost
your way?
And if you don't get help you won't make it
through the day

Scott-Heron returns to this theme in “And The He Wrote Meditations...” as the speaker asks himself “do I recognize a part of me that is dying in the crevices of all these bleak skulls[?]”⁶³¹ In this line, we get the impression that the speaker is beginning to notice evidence of the death inherent in his surroundings and by extension in his own being. However, perhaps the most powerful indictment of society is found beginning in line thirty:

in this place we will gladly tear the flesh from your body
here we will gladly crush your skull and pour acid on your exposed and rotting
brain
But we never let you die
We hold you here alone and worst of all aware of all that we do to you
We hold you captive here in hell

⁶³⁰ Thomas, *Don't Deny My Name*, 80.

⁶³¹ Scott-Heron, “...And Then He Wrote Meditations.”

In this passage, we see the speaker give name to his surroundings: “hell.” Not only is hell portrayed here as a vast nothingness in which physical and psychic torture are the norm, it is also a place where disembodied voices – accompanied by “screams of pain and anger” - cry out words of warning “Go Back! Go Back, go back” in an attempt to thwart the escape of seekers such as the poem’s protagonist.⁶³² These voices and screams could be interpreted as broadsides against non-conformity and further exploration; macabre mechanisms of control in a Bosche-esque landscape characterized by eternal deprivation, alienation, and brutality. In both “Lady Day and John Coltrane” and “And Then He Wrote Meditations...,” Scott-Heron amplified a common Black Arts critique of Western culture, turning these productions into platforms of protest that critiqued what he perceived as a stifling status quo and coercive conformity that characterized mainstream society.

For Scott-Heron, as well as for Cortez and others, John Coltrane serves as a gateway to and repository of a diasporic cultural heritage and practice. In fact, Coltrane’s horn communicates “words of comfort/words of Africa/words of welcome” to African Americans.⁶³³ In these lines, Cortez suggests that Coltrane’s music is a psychic salve and a griot-like conveyor of and link to a lost African heritage. “Words of welcome” could be thought of as both an invitation and greeting; an invitation to share in a black heritage and a greeting for those who make the visit. Cortez goes further, calling Coltrane a “true image of black masculinity like Malcolm,” one whose name “should ring/throughout the

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 315.

projects.”⁶³⁴ For Cortez, Coltrane becomes an idealized representation of “true” black masculinity. By placing him alongside Malcolm X, she lifts him into the pantheon of black male, anti-Western revolutionaries. However, in doing so she also inscribes and privileges a narrow reading of black masculinity. One might ask, where in her idealized, hetero-normative masculinity is there room for the gay or bisexual black male? Or, put another way, does her reification of black masculinity via Malcolm X and John Coltrane preclude the possibility of a non-heterosexual masculinity?

It would appear that, for Cortez, this trope of masculinity is indeed exclusionary and deterministic, leaving little space for deviation from the stifling heteronormativity that is routinely inscribed within the dominant culture in America. In doing so, she alienates an already marginalized segment within the African American population. In her estimation, Coltrane offers the ideal father figure and co-parent for “mothers with sons” living in “the projects” who “need the warm arm of his music/like words from a Father.”⁶³⁵ Notice that here Cortez capitalizes the letter “F” in the word father. This seems to suggest that, for her, Coltrane’s music or “words” take on a metaphysical significance akin to Christian notions of a Heavenly Father, or omniscient, omnipotent being capable of worldly intervention. Thus, when read through Neal, in “How Long Has Trane Been Gone” we see John Coltrane operating as an extended metaphor representing both a train that carries memories of the Afro-American musical tradition and a transcendent paradigm of reified “blackness” and black masculinity.

We see further evidence of Coltrane as a metaphorical means of transit in Gil Scott-Heron’s “Trane.” Written to the tune of Alice Coltrane’s composition, “Gospel

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 315.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 315.

Trane,” “Trane” was recorded in 1976 and appeared on the double-album entitled *It’s Your World*. This Coltrane song features four verses each written in AAB, a common stanzaic pattern found in blues poetry. Additionally, there are two single-line refrains, one following the second verse and one that appears at the end. In addition to casting Coltrane as rail train, parts of the song echo Neal’s clarion call for black musicians to create intellectual and emotive art that serves the psychic needs of the black community.

One sees evidence of this, for example, in the third verse where Scott-Heron calls for “music that implores, music that explores/Music that implores, music that explores ... we need you.”⁶³⁶ These lines express a need for the production of more music that mirrors Coltrane’s probative and improvisatory recordings. Moreover, Scott-Heron’s invocation of music that “explores” comports with Neal’s call for black art unfettered by Western conventions of form and function.⁶³⁷ As mentioned, critics famously derided Coltrane’s music as “anti-jazz”; however, for those like Scott-Heron who associated concepts of political liberation with Coltrane’s compositions, the sax man’s sound, as described in the song’s first verse, was “music sweet and clear”:

People can you hear music sweet and clear?
People can you hear music sweet and clear?
People can you hear music sweet and clear around you?⁶³⁸

That the music is “around you” implies a certain level of accessibility, suggesting perhaps that not only is Coltrane’s music obtainable, it is culturally ubiquitous or popular. The song’s refrain urges listeners to act “now,” though leaves it up to the individual listener to decide what their particular course of action or task may be: “The time is now. / Our

⁶³⁶ Gil Scott-Heron and Alice Coltrane, “Trane,” *It’s Your World* (New York, Arista, 1976).

⁶³⁷ Neal, *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 22.

⁶³⁸ Scott-Heron and Coltrane, “Trane.”

strength is how. / Get on Tomorrow's Train." Here, as in "How Long Has that Trane Been Gone" we see the persona of John Coltrane cast as a metaphorical locomotive that will help transport listeners to "tomorrow" or in other words, the future. Furthermore, with the words "our strength is how" Scott-Heron's words impart a sense of collective efficacy and self-confidence.

Interestingly, these feelings are not that dissimilar from what he claims to have gained from Coltrane's music when he was an aspiring novelist. Lastly, it is important to note that the lyrics to the song's verses are delivered in a very chant-like style. Given Scott-Heron's affinity for the chants contained in Coltrane's studio recording of "A Love Supreme" this parallel is striking and likely not a mere coincidence. In the song's final verse, Scott-Heron sings the line, "music from the spirit helps you when you hear it." However, the repetition inherent in the stanza makes it sound more like an incantation or chant than a song lyric:

Music from the spirit helps you when you hear it.
Music from the spirit helps you when you hear it.
Music from the spirit helps you when you hear it.

Given Scott-Heron's professed adulation of Coltrane's "Love Supreme" chant, these lines and their performance could be read as a recognition of and tribute to the psycho-spiritual support that he and others accessed through the works John Coltrane. Here, as in "Lady Day and John Coltrane," "And The He Wrote Meditations..." and "How Long Has That Trane Been Gone," we see the figure of Coltrane pressed into service as a source of psychic restoration, a means of metaphorical transit, and a pathway to earlier musical forms and traditions that historically had provided significant sustenance and support to many within the black community throughout the twentieth century. That Scott-Heron

and others would theorize Coltrane's music, and indeed the Afro-American musical tradition writ-large, speaks to a perceived deficit of cultural and institutional memory in the media discourse regarding black music. Undoubtedly, many of these poetic critiques were heightened by the passing of John Coltrane in 1967 and arose out of a desire to both memorialize his cultural contributions and shape his legacy for audiences in the following decades.

A COLTRANE SUPREME: COLTRANE AS A BLACK DEITY, METAPHYSICAL FORCE, ENLIGHTENED SEEKER, AND CULTURAL PROPHET

For Larry Neal and other BAM theorists and poets, the figure of John Coltrane offered black audiences a cultural touchstone and talisman. Many in the BAM needed little convincing and numerous poets deploy the figure and music of Coltrane within their works in precisely this fashion. Even his initials - J.C. - contain a divine connotation. Thus, between Neal's veneration of 'Trane and the saxophonist's premature death in 1967, it is easy to see how John Coltrane assumed a metaphysical and metaphorical presence within the Black Arts Movement. For the self-described "black Beat" and BAM poet Ted Joans, the sax man is "the great pope John, John COLTRANE."⁶³⁹ With his 1969 composition "In Homage to a Heavy Loaded Trane, J.C.," he pays poetic tribute to the recently deceased sax man. This work renders Coltrane as a fiery musician cum messenger. Joans' language in "Homage" speaks of Coltrane as a preeminent jazz stylist and lamented cultural prophet, but also as a model of masculinity. Like Cortez, Joans opens a gendered space within the poem that appropriates, implies, and inscribes

⁶³⁹ This solicitous sobriquet could be read as a play on the name of the late pontiff, Pope John XXIII who had died several years earlier in 1963. Ted Joans, "Homage to a Loaded Trane, J.C.," *Black Pow-Wow* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 71.

Coltrane, and specifically his music, as a transcendent trope of black masculinity. For example, Joans praises Coltrane's "Sheets of sound / MASCULINE MUSCLE MOODS OF BLUES / S e r p e r t i n e screams of happiness."⁶⁴⁰ These lines, like "How Long Has Trane Been Gone," invoke gender; however, Joans ties his reified masculinity to blues music with Coltrane as the connector and conductor.

This intersectionality of music and masculinity could represent the beefy sound of Coltrane's horn, or provide another means of delineating the blues initially created by black musicians from those later copied by whites. The first and last lines – "sheets of sound" and "serpentine screams of happiness" – seem to suggest a Neal-esque refusal of Western aesthetics that Joans also locates in Coltrane's music. Consider how the phrase, "sheets of sound," was initially a pejorative used by some critics to describe Coltrane's music before his fans, like Joans, appropriated it as a positive descriptor. Viewed in this light, one person's "sheets of sound" is another's "screams of happiness." Thus, these two lines could be thought of as representing both the anti-Western facets of Coltrane's music that attracted Neal and that repelled white critics. These sentiments are reinforced in the following lines: "hot molted masses of marvelous messages / And heavy anger / Pouring forth from fiery throats."⁶⁴¹ Here Joans, like Neal, hears Coltrane's music as bearing "marvelous messages," "heavy anger," or other specific meanings that transcend its instrumental essence and communicate with black listeners. Thus, to Joans, as to Neal, John Coltrane assumes the role of a cultural prophet, a black Moses with a "fiery throat," who, even in death, leads listeners out the proverbial wilderness of Western culture.

⁶⁴⁰ Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 111.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

Another Coltrane song by Gil Scott-Heron, “Lady Day and John Coltrane,” also casts the musician in a metaphysical role. Unlike in the majority of Coltrane poems, “Lady Day and John Coltrane” does not explicitly connect Coltrane to conceptions of “blackness” per se. Instead, Scott-Heron casts the persona of Coltrane as a metaphysical presence that can be invoked in one’s hour of need, very much like a Christian might call on Jesus Christ. However, the presence of a co-heroine, Billie “Lady Day” Holiday, opens up a gender-balanced space rarely encountered in the Coltrane poem. This is a significant extension and addition to the form. This usage also runs counter to the gender politics of Cortez’s Coltrane poem discussed earlier wherein heteronormativity is heavily inscribed and black women are given short shrift. This also runs somewhat counter to the gender politics of aural iconography. In Larry Neal’s analysis, it was primarily male musicians such as James Brown, Albert Ayler, John Coltrane, and the Temptations who were central to annunciating and recalibrating black aesthetics.⁶⁴²

While Neal name checks the Supremes along with these male musicians, it seems almost like an afterthought and that female contributions and considerations are deemed secondary in this cultural project. Speaking to the politics of poetic representation, Farah Jasmine Griffin observed that:

Billie Holiday, or her absence, generates a longing expressed in writing. This writing results in a new thing – a new Holiday, a new poem, or both. She becomes part of the poem, the new thing, which then becomes part of the lexicon that defines her. Because we have access to the poem and not to “Holiday,” the poem transforms the very meaning of Billie Holiday.⁶⁴³

⁶⁴² Neal, *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 20.

⁶⁴³ Farrah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: One Word/Ballantine, 2002), 151.

Given the legions of talented, dedicated female artists working within the BAM, and in African American culture writ large, this omission seems problematic and unnecessarily limiting. In fact, one could argue that for all the language regarding the death of Western conventions and cultural practices generated within the BAM, the inscriptions and implications of patriarchy, and thus, oppression, remain. When viewed in this light, Scott-Heron's revisions to this gender deficit take on a heightened sense of importance.

Notably, with "Lady Day and John Coltrane," Holiday and Coltrane share co-billing and equal status. For Scott-Heron, the pair constitutes a divine duo that listeners can call upon for succor in their daily lives. Here, Scott-Heron, like Neal, seizes upon Coltrane as the West's antithesis, a savior and superhero who "rides in on his saxophone" coming to the rescue of his culturally alienated and otherwise stranded listeners. The presence of a co-heroine inscribes a gender-balanced pantheon. Not only is this presence unique within the Coltrane poem genre, the saintly portrayal of Holiday along with the ascription of cultural agency to a female musician is also quite striking. As Meta DuEwa Jones states, "if a woman in jazz is a muse, then it follows that she cannot also be the master of the music."⁶⁴⁴ However, it is worth noting that in Scott-Heron works, Holiday at once serves as muse and master, angel and savior.

Farah Jasmine Griffin also registers a gendered critique in reference to Holiday, noting "throughout history we have evidence of male poets containing female voices, particularly singing voices. The female voices are often otherworldly and dangerous, like those of the Sirens and can only be represented in written form through the pen of a male poet." She also states that Amiri Baraka's writings on Holiday in some ways conform to

⁶⁴⁴ Meta DuEwa Jones, *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 155.

this literary precedent, observing that “in the earliest writings he describes her voice and analyzes and interprets its meaning. In the last, he is an artist who is inspired by and inherits from her, builds upon her artistic legacy in order to acquire his own voice.”⁶⁴⁵

In Scott-Heron’s case, the latter observation is especially apt. As with Baraka, Billie Holiday had a measurable influence on the development of Scott-Heron’s literary voice. In the liner notes for his debut recording, he recounts the ways in which her vocal style directly impacted his musicianship:

Nobody else phrases like her! What was very important to me as a writer was absorbing the atmosphere on a Billie Holiday record. She couldn’t be playing all of the instruments but she *controlled* THEM ALL BECAUSE [sic] she created the atmosphere around which each piece was built. Similarly a writer has to control the atmosphere. And for me, the kind of atmosphere I’m after is immediate reader involvement.... You read *The Vulture* and you see something’s happening right away and things keep happening.⁶⁴⁶

Thus, for Scott-Heron, Holiday is viewed first and foremost as an artist – a master musician and arranger - firmly in control of her surroundings in the studio and on the stage. In this sense, Holiday is viewed as the prime mover and musical leader masterful enough to dictate the auricular and aesthetic “atmosphere” that resulted in her sound. By elevating her talents above her tragedies, Scott-Heron’s “Lady Day” stands in contrast to the portrayals of Holiday that haunt the poetry of some of Scott-Heron’s contemporaries.⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., 155.

⁶⁴⁶ Nat Hentoff, “Liner notes,” *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (New York: Flying Dutchman, 1970).

⁶⁴⁷ According to Sascha Feinstein there are roughly “sixty poems about Billie Holiday.” Additionally, there are twenty-one that “name her and four in which she is mentioned.” By this accounting, Holiday is the second most-celebrated musician in jazz poetry. In fact, only John Coltrane has amassed more distinctions in this regard. Given her abiding and formidable significance to poets and their productions, further scholarship is needed to map out the various nodes of the Holiday poem. Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 152.

Though a full accounting of these differences is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is perhaps instructive to cite a couple brief examples to illustrate this point. Consider Rita Dove's rendering in "Canary" that reifies Holiday's "burned voice" and "ruined face" while inscribing her substance abuse with the lines such as "Now you're cooking, drummer to bass, / magic spoon, magic needle."⁶⁴⁸ Dove's stanzas outline the contours of critiques levied against Lady Day in her lifetime, whether it be commentary on the perceived diminished quality of her singing voice in the latter years of her career or the salacious public spectacle of her heroin addiction and attendant arrests. Likewise, Baraka's *Billie Holiday* - based in part on direct quotations attributed to the singer - situates her in the milieu of prostitution, namely a "whore house." Here, Holiday said "that she 1st / heard part of her own voice, (Bessie and Louie)."⁶⁴⁹ This accurately refers to Holiday's remembrance of discovering the music of Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong, and by extension, her interest in music and desire to sing.⁶⁵⁰

However, in "The Lady", written in 1987, her musical artistry is subsumed within riffs more focused on her voice as a conduit for remembrance of the failings of democracy and a deficit of desire in contemporary America: "People say / no one says the word / "Hunger" / "Love" / I want to remember."⁶⁵¹ In contrast, Scott-Heron's *Billie Holiday* is a figure who, in conversation, he regarded as a masterful musician and in verse, a divine yet immanently accessible presence.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 156.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid, 154.

⁶⁵⁰ Billie Holiday with William Duffy, *Lady Sings the Blues: The Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006), 9-10.

⁶⁵¹ Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 154.

Within the stanzas of “Lady Day and John Coltrane,” Holiday assumes a Mary-like role, although, unlike with Jesus and Mary, there is no hierarchical, familial relationship implied regarding Coltrane and Holiday. Rather, the pair constitute a divine duo that listeners can call upon in troubled times or when in need of a psychic support. In the chorus, we see their personas recast as metaphysical presences that can be invoked in one’s hour of need. Here, Scott-Heron posits Coltrane and Holiday as sources of restorative, cleansing power: “You could call on Lady Day! / You could call on John Coltrane!” He further assures listeners that together, “they’ll wash your troubles, your troubles away.” The partnership between Coltrane and Holiday offers listeners a spiritual tag team that can serve as a source of solace and regeneration. As Griffin observed, for many poets, Holiday “is that messenger from the other side, she is ‘our Lady;’ she is ancestor turned orisha (divine beings from the Yoruba pantheon)...”⁶⁵² Indeed, in Scott-Heron’s songpoem, the figure of Billie Holiday serves as a resplendent resource for spiritual survival and liberation.⁶⁵³ Coupled with an equally supernatural, superhero-esque portrayal of John Coltrane, this pairing reflects another striking way in which BAM aesthetics and iconography - not to mention blues modalities - find interpretation within Scott-Heron’s corpus.

In addition to Cortez, Joans, and Scott-Heron, poet, novelist, dramatist, and cultural critic Stanley Crouch also portrays Coltrane as a restorative figure of religious significance. We find evidence of this trope in Crouch’s poem “The Revelation (for John

⁶⁵² Ibid., 158-9.

⁶⁵³ The inscription of Holiday as a psychic liberator echoes Baraka’s assessment in “Dark Lady of the Sonnets” in which he writes, “once you have seen it or felt whatever thing she conjured growing in your flesh. At the point where what she did left you singing, you were on your own. At the point where what she was was in her voice, you listen and make your own promises.” Jones, *The Muse is Music*, 154.

Coltrane).” In this work, published in 1972, the speaker beseeches the saxophonist to grant him transcendence from without and freedom from negative forces within in a manner commensurate with Neal’s idealized, iconographic vision of ‘Trane. For example,

Crouch begins with an incantation:

to tremble in prayer and trepidation
to tremble against trepidation in prayer
Screech Scream Cry
to tremble in prayer against trepidation
Screech-screech Holler Cry Scream ...⁶⁵⁴

Here we see the narrator engaging in call and response “prayer” dialogue in which Coltrane or more specifically, the sounds of his horn, provide the response with its “screech scream cry” and “screech-screech holler cry scream.” This contrasts with, and perhaps reinforces, the narrator’s awe as he “tremble[s] in prayer and trepidation.”

However, we notice that in the fourth line, after hearing the response of ‘Trane’s horn, that narrator sublimates his uneasiness into prayer and deploys both against his inner “trepidation.”⁶⁵⁵

Mid-poem, we see further evidence of Crouch’s deification of Coltrane:

Father, Father, understand me
Maker, Purification, Psalm of Warmth within Light
understand the reverent screams
of this confused devotee ...⁶⁵⁶

While Crouch’s capitalization of the “f” in “Father” makes the religious connection explicit in the text, it is the lines that follow that suggest that John Coltrane is on the receiving end of this prayer. If read through Neal’s lens, here Coltrane as the “Maker”

⁶⁵⁴ Stanley Crouch, “The Revelation (for John Coltrane),” *Ain’t No Ambulances For No Niggahs Tonight* (New York: Richard W. Baron, 1972), 48.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

could represent the creator of a new anti-Western jazz, the communicator of a new consciousness, or, simply, the prime mover. Moreover, Couch's invocation of "Purification" as a spiritual synonym for Coltrane the Father mirrors Neal's faith in 'Trane's music as an example of the expurgation of Western influences from the psyches and productions of black artists. Finally, the narrator asks this divine being to "understand the reverent screams / of this confused devotee" which further cements the impression that the supplicant is directing his communiqués to the trope of John Coltrane the Heavenly Father. Thus, in "The Revelation," as in "Lady Day and John Coltrane," we see Coltrane's music, and, by extension, Coltrane himself operating in a metaphysical, deific role.

The influential Harlem-based BAM group the Last Poets also enter into the Coltrane poem dialogue in this manner. However, in contrast to many other works in this distinct and distinguished canon, the Last Poets have embedded their meditations on Coltrane within a work named for Charlie Parker. "Bird's Word" is a tribute to past jazz masters in which the figure of John Coltrane figures quite prominently. Like "Jazz is My Religion" and "Homage to a Heavy Loaded Trane," this poem portrays 'Trane as a cultural prophet and black healer. For example, "Bird's Word" posits Coltrane as Parker's heir apparent as jazz royalty. As previously mentioned, when viewed in generational terms, the elevation of John Coltrane by many BAM artists mirrored the way in which their postwar predecessors had esteemed Charlie Parker. The Last Poets speak to this tradition with their reverence for Trane's metaphorical and metaphysical healing powers:

... and along came 'trane!
Who blew away all the pain, all the pain, all the pain, all the pain, all the

pain, all the pain, all the pain, all the pain, all the pain
in the name of all the Black people on the Planet Earth ...⁶⁵⁷

Here we see Coltrane cast as a pan-African savior, one who “blew away all the pain” of black people. The word “blow” in this passage performs a signifying function. In jazz parlance, to blow means to skillfully play one’s instrument or to take a solo break within a song. Read in this way, Coltrane’s playing/blowing acts as a source of redemption and restoration for Diasporic peoples worldwide. This could also be read as being synonymous with Neal’s faith in John Coltrane as a cultural redeemer and representative model of “blackness.” However, with their portrayal of Coltrane as one who “blew away all the pain / in the name of all” black people worldwide, the Last Poets imbue the sax man, and his music, with metaphysical, Christ-like powers.⁶⁵⁸

As the poem continues, we see Coltrane portrayed in a more conventional BAM light. Here, ‘Trane represents the ultimate anti-Western cultural warrior whose music has a liberatory quality and potential:

As Brother ‘trane blew to the East
To destroy the beast
And bring back Peace to Black People!
And everybody heard the majestic word of ‘trane’s horn,
Telling us of a *Love Supreme* for Black People,
that grew strong, and on, and on, and on, and on, and on, and on ...⁶⁵⁹

Viewed through Neal’s lens, in these lines ‘Trane’s Eastern-oriented playing functions as a weapon against “the beast” or Western culture that had strangled black identity and constrained black consciousness in America. For the Last Poets, like Ted Joans, Coltrane’s saxophone is an instrument of communication that, in addition to its musical

⁶⁵⁷ Abiodun Oyewole and Umar bin Hussan with Kim Green, “Bird’s Word,” *On a Mission: Selected Poems and a History of The Last Poets* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 48.

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

serenades, speaks a “majestic word” to black listeners. Besides being a bearer of “peace,” in this verse Coltrane’s music offers a message of an undying, transcendent, and spiritual message or a “*Love Supreme*.”⁶⁶⁰ This last phrase is an invocation of one of Coltrane’s signature albums and compositions, “A Love Supreme.” In this context, the phrase is meant to signify Trane’s contribution to not only the jazz tradition, but to the African American community writ-large.

Moreover, for the Last Poets, as for Neal, Coltrane’s messages to black people are reified in the timbres and tones of his music, where they “grew strong” and perpetuate “on and on.” Lastly, in “And Then He Wrote Meditations...,” Gil Scott-Heron also characterized Coltrane as a seeker, a “black traveler” struggling against formidable obstacles to escape “hell:”

The faint throb of warmth lay vibrating just beyond the harrow of hell
Was a magnet, pulling and reaching, drawing him on,
Come, hell has passed, for you said the wind
And the rhythms of heaven absorbed him⁶⁶¹

This verse is followed by Scott-Heron chanting “a Love Supreme, a Love Supreme, a Love Supreme” perhaps suggesting that Coltrane’s signature song emerged after his passage through this metaphorical hell and absorption into “the rhythms of heaven.” Thus, in “Bird’s Word,” as in “In Homage to a Heavy Loaded Trane, J.C.,” “Lady Day and John Coltrane,” “Revelations (for John Coltrane),” and “And Then He Wrote Meditations...,” we see the figure of John Coltrane operating as a cultural prophet, black deity, metaphysical force, and a musical seeker/sojourner.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁶¹ Scott-Heron, “...And Then He Wrote Meditations.”

COLTRANE THE CONQUEROR / COLTRANE THE DESTROYER: COLTRANE AS A TROPE OF HEALING AND DEATH

In addition to utilizing Coltrane as a psychic mirror and black deity, BAM poets have also inscribed the saxophonist and his music as destructive forces with the means to annihilate the perceived enemies of black people and black culture. We will see how Scott-Heron, Sonia Sanchez, and Tony Medina give name to and combat these oppositional forces by transforming ‘Trane’s music into a metaphorical weapon and agent of their destruction. In these works, Coltrane functions as a metaphorical entity sliding between the axes of oppression/annihilation and freedom/liberation. This deployment of Coltrane contrasts mightily with the more positive ones presented in the previously analyzed works; however, as will be shown, it is not out of sync with BAM theories regarding either the function of John Coltrane’s music or black art.

Coltrane, and specifically his music, is employed as a instrument of torture and death in Sonia Sanchez’s work, “a / coltrane / poem.” Though this is not the sole function his compositions and playing serve here, by virtue of Sanchez’s infinitely creative and wholly unorthodox use of spelling and capitalization, these sections of her poem possess an intensity and that commands the attention of her readers. Sanchez sets the stage for this confrontation by invoking and incanting Coltrane’s signature song in a manner reminiscent of a call to arms, “a/love/supreme. lovesupreme a lovesupreme. . . . lovesupremealovesupremealovesupreme for our blk people.”⁶⁶² Next, she names those whom she perceives as being enemies of black Americans:

⁶⁶² Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 321.

BRING IN THE WITE/MOTHA/fuckas
ALL THE MILLIONAIRES/BANKERS/ol
MAIN/LINE/ASS/RISTOCRATS (ALL
THEM SO-CALLED BEAUTIFUL
PEOPLE) ...

Sanchez specifically calls out the “WITE/MOTHA/fuckas,”

“MILLIONAIRES/BANKERS,” and “ASS/RISTOCRATS” or the bankrollers and promoters of what Neal critiqued as the bankrupt and dying Western culture.⁶⁶³

Continuing her poetic critique, Sanchez names the “ROCKEFELLERS,” “MELLONS,” “VANDERBILTS,” and “FORDS,” indicting these elites with murder, noting that, in her estimation, these are the ones:

WHO HAVE KILLED
WILL CONTINUE TO
KILL US WITH
THEY CAPITALISM/18% OWNERSHIP
OF THE WORLD. ...

Viewed through the prism of Neal’s analysis, these lines could be thought of as speaking to both the literal and psychic murder of blacks via the stranglehold of the West’s bankrupt culture and values, including the dialectic between the ideologies of white supremacy and black inferiority. To Sanchez, the punishment must fit the crime: she calls for retributive violence: “PUSHem/PUNCHem/STOMPem ... STRETCH they necks ... TORTURE / THEM FIRST AS THEY HAVE / TORTURED US WITH PROMISES.”⁶⁶⁴ However, by interjecting six lines of “Trane-esque wails, like,

“screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeCHHHHHHHHHHHH /
SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEECHHHHHHHHHHHH ...” in between “STRETCH they necks”

⁶⁶³ Ibid., 321.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid., 321-22.

and “TORTURE / THEM” she seems to suggest that Coltrane’s music would make an appropriate weapon with which to render payback to these elite offenders.⁶⁶⁵ In this sense, then, we can see the trope of Coltrane as a figurative and literal destroyer of Western culture at work in Sanchez’s text, single-handedly accomplishing with his music a principle and stated aim of the BAM.

However, there is another metaphorical representation of Coltrane at work in Sanchez’s “a / Coltrane / poem,” that of Coltrane the Conqueror, the BAM-esque balm for and redeemer of black consciousness. We see this in the poem’s opening lines in which Sanchez reflects on Coltrane’s consciousness expanding powers. She notes that

my favorite things
is u/blowen /
yo/favorite/things.
stretchen the mind
till it bursts past the con / fines of
solo / en melodies.
To the many solos
of the
mind / spirit ...⁶⁶⁶

These lines speak directly to the belief in the innate potential of Coltrane and his music to carry black listeners into a new state of self-awareness and consciousness. Accordingly, Sanchez’s playful invocation of Coltrane’s “My Favorite Things” takes on a signifying role. By testifying to the tune’s ability to expand one’s “mind / till it bursts past the con / fines of / solo / en melodies,” she is highlighting Coltrane’s innovations in musical harmony and form that Neal praised as being emblematic of how black artists should challenge and deconstruct Western conventions. Moreover, Sanchez notes the song’s ability to lead listeners beyond the material world and into an inner space, one of the

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., 321.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., 321.

“mind / spirit” where they can hear the “many solos,” or meditations/musings within themselves. Thus, Sanchez’s poetic use and placement of Coltrane’s innovative and impassioned re-harmonization of the Roger and Hammerstein classic is a pointed example of Neal’s call for a new black art and aesthetic that would dislodge any lingering vestiges of Western culture in the collective psyche of black Americans. In this sense, then, we see John Coltrane functioning as a liberator of black consciousness and a destroyer of Western art forms, culture, and aesthetics.

Like Sanchez, poet and author Tony Medina also employs ‘Trane as a metaphorical murderer and combatant of oppression. In “Coltrane Spoke to Me One Night,” we see Medina making similar use of the sax man’s music as the weapon of choice with which to retaliate for the crimes and injustices that Western culture has inflicted on African Americans. For example, he begins the piece with an observation regarding the innate and inordinate power he attributes to ‘Trane’s sound:

what came out of his horn
was murderous, the world
come undone in the belly
of his song. Sound
cursing the night for centuries of insomnia ...⁶⁶⁷

Here, he draws our attention to what Neal would view as Coltrane’s contribution to the paradigmatic and teleological shift in consciousness afforded by black artists. To Medina and Neal, ‘Trane’s music is a “murderous” weapon and a call to consciousness that curses “the night for centuries of insomnia.” Analyzed through the lens of Larry Neal, “insomnia” could mean the seemingly never-ending reign of the ever-present ideology, white supremacy that permeates American society. In this reading, Trane’s “sound”

⁶⁶⁷ Tony Medina, “Coltrane Spoke to Me One Night” in *Role Call: A Generational Anthology of Social and Political Black Literature and Art*, eds. Tony Medina, Samiya Bashir, Quray Ali Lansana (Chicago: Third World Press, 2002), 30.

becomes an agent of remonstrance and revenge. As in Sanchez's "a / Coltrane / poem," here 'Trane's sound is reified as a metaphorical weapon to be wielded against the corrupt values of the West.

Medina pushes the metaphorical envelope further by also invoking the man and his music as a redemptive, regenerative force for African Americans. This sentiment is shown in the celebration of Coltrane's music as "the breaking off / of locks and chains," or as loosing the shackles of the West and its hegemony and psychic enslavement of black people. Further, Medina cites 'Trane's sound as positive and healing force, noting that in listening to it, "this is what it means to be alive, awake, sober / feeling the welts and whip / marks evaporate from the flesh." Medina also invokes Coltrane's music as a cure for addiction, writing that "this is the skin toughening / up to break the needle."⁶⁶⁸ In these lines the needle could be thought of as containing an illicit substance such as heroin; or, it could also be viewed as the deliverer of the narcotic that is Western culture. Viewed in this light, 'Trane's music offers a means for black people to not only liberate themselves from their psychic chains, but to also kick their dependence on what Neal viewed as a poisonous and dying culture of the West. Thus, in "Coltrane Spoke to Me One Night" as in Sonia Sanchez's "a / coltrane / poem," we can see the tropes of both Coltrane the Destroyer and Coltrane the Conqueror operating side by side in the textual trenches of these compositions.

Standing in contradiction to these two works is Gil Scott-Heron's Coltrane song entitled "Spirits." This is a rather unconventional Coltrane composition in that its namesake is not referenced in the lyrics; however, owing to its especial relationship to the man whom Scot-Heron dubbed the "master of the tenor saxophone," the composition is

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., 30.

worthy of consideration. Interestingly, like “Tomorrow’s Trane,” Scott-Heron put lyrics to a Coltrane composition, in this case one by John Coltrane, “Equinox.” Much like the former, “Spirits” is another showcase for Scott-Heron’s deep and abiding faith in the ameliorative power he finds inherent in the music and persona of John Coltrane.

Speaking in an interview following the album’s release, Scott-Heron explained the impetus behind the song:

One of the spirits I appreciate in terms of his own voice is John Coltrane. One song we do (‘Spirits’) is a John Coltrane tune called ‘Equinox.’ That tune is based on his birthday (23rd September). There are two days each year of cosmic balance – March 20th and September 23rd. These are the days when the sun is directly over the equator and both day and night are exactly twelve hours long. So the balance of spirits (of darkness and light, north and south) is what motivated the song, what the lyrics try and describe.⁶⁶⁹

That Scott-Heron had crafted a fictive kinship with Coltrane is not out of character for Black Arts adherents. BAM participant/scholar Kalumu Ya Salaam addressed this phenomenon, writing that for his cohort, “every individual’s relationship to ‘Trane’s music is personal-it’s sort of like a Protestant religious connection in which one communicates with God unmediated by the intercession of a priest. But the relationship is also formal. We refer to him by his surname, Coltrane, rarely by his given name John or his spiritual name Ohnedaruth.”⁶⁷⁰

As noted by Scott-Heron, the idea of naturalistic symmetry and “cosmic balance” are the central themes of “Spirits.” Perhaps not coincidentally, this notion of symmetry manifests in the song’s stanzas, too. The piece is divided into three verses with three lines to a verse. Musically, “Spirits” - like the original Coltrane recording on which it is based - is a minor blues performed in 6/8. While Coltrane is not the subject of the piece nor

⁶⁶⁹ James McCarthy, “Gil Scott-Heron: Spirit Level,” *Straight, No Chaser* (Autumn 1994), 32, 35.

⁶⁷⁰ Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me*, 127

does the saxophonist appear in the piece, the spiritualism and seeking often ascribed to Coltrane by Black Arts poets is clearly present throughout. The first verse speaks of the constant pace of daily life and the need for equilibrium in one's endeavors:

The world spins around us
We search for a balance
The secrets lie in darkness and light

The third line above seems to reference the "cosmic balance" Scott-Heron alluded to regarding the natural symmetry between day and night that occurs on 20 May and 23 September, Coltrane's birthday. The Coltrane song's next verse offer concise metaphysical reflections on human nature, the meaning of life, and the existence of a higher power:

Our lives are like treasures
Unveiled as perfection
A gift to us from spirits on high⁶⁷¹

The final verse resonates with the scholarly observations regarding the persona of John Coltrane as an agent of deliverance and unity. Price declared that "through his sound" Coltrane "depicted an alternative to hatred, pain, evil, and chaos by speaking love, reconciliation, a sound that spoke of survival, hope, and liberation."⁶⁷² The succinct geographical metaphor "Equator. Divider" could be read as a signal for racial divisions in the United States and throughout the world. In contrast, the next and final lines of the Coltrane song – "Equate us. Combine us. To seek the answers beyond our sight" ring a hopeful message for the possibility of reconciliation and reunion between the seemingly divided peoples referenced in the first line of the stanza. Likewise, the final line of the

⁶⁷¹ Gil Scott-Heron, "Spirits" *Spirits* (New York: TVT Records, 1993) and Gil Scott-Heron, *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate U.S., 2000), 51.

⁶⁷² Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me*, 161.

enjambéd couplet, “to seek the answers beyond our sight,” signals the need to petition the “spirits” for enlightenment regarding what James Baldwin might call “evidence of things unseen.” Taken together with “a / Coltrane / poem” and “Coltrane Spoke to Me One Night,” “Spirits” represents a critical and contradictory intersectionality in the Coltrane poem genre. With the first two we see Coltrane cast as a destructive force, unleashed upon the oppressive and cloistering culture of the West with murderous and vindictive fury; however in these works, Coltrane is also held up as being a force for good and a source of redemption to the black community. Likewise, in “Spirits” Scott-Heron delivers a philosophical message focused on the need for balance in one’s everyday life and a desire for peace and equality among all people on earth.

CODA

As reflected by the Coltrane poem canon, the music of John Coltrane held enormous sway over Gil Scott-Heron. It is fair to say that the music of John Coltrane remained a touchstone and inspiration for the rest of his life. Speaking in 2001 about the persistent inspiration of Coltrane’s music and its continued presence in his daily life, he recounted:

I bought the CD [Love Supreme] not long ago and I can listen to it any time, when I’m trying to get some work done in the house. It gives me some privacy. And I still recognize that kid. I still want to write, I’m still interested in music, still feel the same optimism in whether music can be important and whether I made the right decisions. I think I have.⁶⁷³

Indeed, Scott-Heron’s Coltrane poems communicate his respect for the music and life of John Coltrane. Likewise, those by Jayne Cortez, Ted Joans, Gil Scott-Heron, Sonia Sanchez, Stanley Crouch, The Last Poets, and Tony Medina, convey a wide array of

⁶⁷³ Bennet, “Gil Gets on the ‘Trane,” 31.

themes, including racial consciousness and identity, consumerism, capitalism, conformity, black history, and the black musical tradition. In their works we see John Coltrane metaphorically transformed into a train that can carry black passengers to higher states of racial self-awareness. In other instances we see the venerated saxophonist transformed into a cultural prophet, metaphysical agent, and black deity capable of worldly intervention. However, Sanchez and Medina inscribe the figure and music of John Coltrane in a metaphorically paradoxical manner. Rather than being a savior, these works cast the saxophonist and his music as weapons of Western destruction and instruments of torture and murder. However, paradoxically, through these compositional acts of creative destruction, Coltrane is cleansing the world anew for its black inhabitants, bringing redemption and renewal in their wake. Lastly, within each text, Coltrane functions as a redemptive and accessible resource, and, perhaps more importantly, as an example of a black artist whose productions possess an innate and otherworldly power. Therein lies a significant metaphorical paradox of the Coltrane Poems.

In addition to lauding and reimagining their namesake, Coltrane poems and songs often reveal glimpses into the cultural and aesthetic politics of their author. Indeed, noted feminist scholar and author bell hooks argues that one's aesthetic sensibilities serve "as the foundation" of one's artistic endeavors, but each artist "interprets" and "inhabits" that aesthetic space in different ways.⁶⁷⁴ Scott-Heron's Coltrane poems and songs serve as prime examples of hooks' statement. On another level, these works also serve as poetic tributes to the musician who served as Larry Neal's exemplar of the black artist. By reifying Coltrane in verse, Scott-Heron's compositions help keep the name, legacy, and

⁶⁷⁴ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1999), 30.

artistic spirit of the pioneering saxophonist alive for generations of audiences and readers who are likely too young to have more than a passing familiarity with the man or his music. Thus, it could be said that, in many ways, his Coltrane poems and songs are repositories of cultural memory and sites of critical discourse regarding American society in the 1970s.

EPILOGUE

GIFTS FROM THE SPIRITS

In truth I call what I have been granted the opportunity to share what I call ‘Gifts’. They have been gifts from the Spirits – so perhaps these songs and poems are ‘spirituals.’ – Gil Scott-Heron⁶⁷⁵

Contemporary spirit
Untamed Proud Poet
Rough Healer
He is His – Gwendolyn Brooks⁶⁷⁶

Though best known as a firebrand poet and songwriter, Gil Scott-Heron authored numerous compositions that, as he said, spoke “to the full 360 degrees of the black experience.”⁶⁷⁷ That critics who attempted to define his artistry solely on the basis of “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” overlooked these selections was a constant source of frustration for Scott-Heron. The former, as he explained, was:

the only song that a lot of people heard on [*Pieces of a Man*]. They didn't hear the one after that, which was called ‘Save the Children,’ or the one after that, which was called ‘Lady Day and John Coltrane,’ or the one later on that was called, ‘I Think I'll Call it Morning.’”⁶⁷⁸ “I didn't get tagged with those; I got tagged with ‘The Revolution Will Not Be Televised’ ... that's what they carried with them as their image and their description of me.”⁶⁷⁹

Indeed, Scott-Heron’s catalog contains a number of compositions rooted in sentimentality, optimism, and aspiration - hardly the fare of a “‘radical’ and ‘militant’

⁶⁷⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, *Now and Then...: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate, 2000), xvii.

⁶⁷⁶ Gwendolyn Brooks, “Untitled” in Gil Scott-Heron, *Now and Then...: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate, 2000), Npn.

⁶⁷⁷ Shelia Weller, “Survival Kits on Wax” *Rolling Stone* (January 2, 1975), 16.

⁶⁷⁸ Gil Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday: A Memoir*, (New York: Grove Press, 2012), 159.

⁶⁷⁹ Jalayha Burrell, “Fell Together: A Conversation with Gil Scott-Heron, Part 2” 19 February 2009 (<http://blogs.vibe.com/babar/2009/02/gil-scott-heron-part-2>).

and ‘muckraker.’⁶⁸⁰

When considering his entire catalog, one should bear in mind Scott-Heron’s own assessment of his compositions, or what he called “Gifts.” In the liner notes to his penultimate album *Spirits*, he offered a pointed summation of his contributions to postwar black expressive culture, “In truth I call what I have been granted the opportunity to share what I call ‘Gifts’. They have been gifts from the Spirits – so perhaps these songs and poems are ‘spirituals.’⁶⁸¹ This formulation and locution, though eloquent, is not entirely without precedent. Scott-Heron’s strategic choice of words owe a debt to and establish a kinship with another twentieth century black intellectual-activist, esteemed scholar W.E.B. Du Bois.⁶⁸²

In his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois devoted the final chapter to a discussion of black music, specifically the Spirituals or what he called “Sorrow Songs.” This sacred body of song, the bedrock of twentieth-century black gospel, was, for Du Bois, an exemplar of Afro-American musical expression in the late nineteenth century. Picking up on this train of thought over a hundred years later, music scholar Ingrid

⁶⁸⁰ Gil Scott-Heron, “Introduction,” *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate, 2000) xv.

⁶⁸¹ Gil Scott-Heron, *Now and Then...: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate, 2000), xvii.

⁶⁸² Du Bois argues that the Spirituals, which had been honed out of centuries of enslavement and resistance, functioned as a “gift” to civilization on behalf of millions of anonymous bondsmen and bondswomen: “And so by fateful chance, the Negro folk song – the rhythmic cry of the slave – stands to-day not simply as the sole American music but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas.” Du Bois declared this music to be a “gift of story and song - soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land.” Moreover, he hailed this music, conceived and composed solely by black folk, as the only discernibly American contribution yet to have emerged from the young nation. However, there was a reciprocal aspect to the notion of this gift; for Du Bois, inherent in the transaction was some sort of acknowledgement, if not reciprocity, from the recipients, i.e. white Americans. In short, in exchange for the sublime gift of the Sorrow Songs, white Americans would acknowledge the undeniable humanity and inherent potential of their black countrymen and women. As Du Bois gently asked of his readers, “would America have been America without her Negro people?” W.E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Eds. Henry Louis Gates and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 154.

Monson proposed a similar supposition, “that jazz and African American aesthetics were for the twentieth-century American music something that like what spirituals were for the nineteenth century.”⁶⁸³ If we accept Monson’s premise that twentieth century “jazz and African American aesthetics” are the cultural corollary to the Sorrow Songs, then Scott-Heron calling his compositions “Spirituals” and “gifts from the Spirits” takes on multiple meanings. This choice of words established a firm link to Du Bois, placing Scott-Heron in dialog with one of the prime intellects of the twentieth-century.

It is worth pointing out the strong parallels between Scott-Heron and Du Bois regarding one of the key humanistic functions of black music. Notice Scott-Heron’s use of the word “gifts.” Though not especially concerned with changing the way white Americans thought of black people, like Du Bois he was a performer who gave consideration to his audiences, both those who heard him live and those listening at home. While it is impossible to know for sure if Scott-Heron’s choice of the word “gifts” was an intentional reference to the thought of Du Bois, the commonalities are apparent. In noting that his compositions were “gifts from the Spirits,” Scott-Heron decided that, in turn, they were “spirituals.” We should certainly not confuse Scott-Heron’s brand of spirituals with the body of black sacred song that shares the same name. However, in light of Monson’s suggestion of giving equal privilege to twentieth-century African American aesthetics, Scott-Heron’s request is not entirely without merit.⁶⁸⁴

Though his talents as political commentator and artistic spokesperson came to the fore in terms of his critical reception, his skills as conventional songwriter and recording

⁶⁸³ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007), 314.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 314.

artists are vastly underrated and speciously overlooked. As noted, the lack of a holistic consideration of his catalog was an annoyance for Scott-Heron:

I would hope that people, who would listen to more than one, would have more than one impression of the kind of artist I am. See, you're not responsible for the ones that people hear. You put them all out there and you hope they hear them all if they are trying to evaluate who you are as an artist.⁶⁸⁵

Most of Scott-Heron's non-topical songs were centered on sentimental or uplifting themes. Works including "Back Home," "A Very Special Time," and "Your Daddy Loves You" demonstrate another side of his songwriting and were featured on LPs alongside his political fare. The lyrics to the latter provide an alternate glimpse into the "mind of Gil Scott-Heron":

Sweet little brown-eyed girl
now that you're sleeping
I've got a confession to make,
secrets that I've been keeping:
Me and your mama had some problems,
a whole lot of things on our minds.
But lately when we look at you
we know that we've been wasting time
nearly all the time

Your daddy loves you
Your daddy loves his girl
Your daddy loves you.
Your daddy loves his girl.⁶⁸⁶

We see this sentimentality displayed again on "A Very Precious Time," from the *Winter in America* record:

Was there a touch of spring,
and did she have a pink dress on?
and when she smiled her shyest smile
could you almost touch the one?

⁶⁸⁵ Burrell, "Fell Together: A Conversation with Gil Scott-Heron, Part 2."

⁶⁸⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, "Liner notes," *Real Eyes* (New York: Arista Records, 1980).

...
was there the faintest breeze,
and did she have a ponytail?
and could she make you feel ten feet tall
walking down a grassy trail?
And wasn't your first love a very precious time?⁶⁸⁷

And "A Lovely Day" showcased Scott-Heron's penchant for affirmative, upbeat themes:

Flowers woke up bloomin',
Put on a color show just for me.
Shadows dark and gloomy
I tell them all to stay the hell away from me.
Because I don't feel like believin'
Everything I do got to turn out wrong
When vibrations I'm receivin'
Say hold on brother! Just you be strong

All I really want to say
Is that problems come and go
But the sunshine remains.
Just look around, I think we've found
A lovely day.⁶⁸⁸

These "Spirituals" represent a small sampling of his non-topical songwriting but offer an example of a well-rounded tunesmith who could speak to various contours of the human condition. These are songs that, in concert with his other creative offerings, provided listeners with messages of psychic sustenance, not to mention encouragement and affirmation. In this sense, Gil Scott-Heron's description of his compositions as "Spirituals" serves as an apt and effective sobriquet.

⁶⁸⁷ Gil Scott-Heron, "A Very Precious Time," *Winter in America* (New York: Strata/East, 1974).

⁶⁸⁸ Scott-Heron, "Lovely Day," *Now and Then...: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate, 2000), 58, and Scott-Heron, "Lovely Day," *From South Africa To South Carolina* (New York: Arista, 1975).

SPIRITS PAST, SPIRITS PRESENT

Listening to Gil Scott-Heron's lyrics, one would be hard-pressed to reach a conclusion regarding his religious affiliation. Which is not to say that traces of religious thought are absent; rather, the way in which these pieces manifest are revealing of a teleology that shares commonalities with African spiritual beliefs. One of the first encounters with the Spirits came with "Trane (Tomorrow's Trane)," which appeared on the 1976 LP, *It's Your World*: "music from the Spirits / helps you when you hear it."⁶⁸⁹ Scott-Heron outlined his thoughts regarding the Spirits in various forums over the years, from interviews to liner notes to songs. In the following passage from his memoir, Scott-Heron drew attention to the Spirits, speaking to the role he felt they had played in his terrestrial affairs:

I believe in "the Spirits." Sometimes when I explain to people that I have been blessed, and that the Spirits have watched over me and guided my life, I suppose that I sound like some kind of quasi-evangelist for a new religion. I am not and do not have a personal church to promote. I believe, however, to paraphrase Duke Ellington, that at almost every corner of my life there has been someone or something there to show me the way. These landmarks, these signals, are provided by the Spirits.⁶⁹⁰

While presumably aware of the religious implications of his words, Scott-Heron sought to distance himself from doctrinaire or institutional religious thought, noting that he was not a "quasi-evangelist" and did not "have a personal church to promote." However, he conceded, that nonetheless "the Spirits" had "watched over me and guided my life." He also admitted that he "often credit[ed] the Spirits with things I cannot righteously credit

⁶⁸⁹ Gil Scott-Heron and Alice Coltrane, "Trane (Tomorrow's Trane)" *It's Your World* (New York: Arista Records).

⁶⁹⁰ Gil Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday: A Memoir* (New York: Grove Press, 2012), 5.

any other way.”⁶⁹¹ In the introduction to *Now and Then*, Scott-Heron wrote about the creative process and what, at times, appeared to be a lack of conscious control over the resultant words and music. Indeed, Scott-Heron goes so far as to credit the Spirits as a co-author:

I would like to personally claim to be the source of the melodies and ideas that have come through me, but that is just the point. Many of the shapes of sound and concepts have come upon me from no place I can trace, notes and chords I never learned, thoughts and pictures I’d never seen - and all as clear as a sky untouched by cloud or smog or smoke or haze. Suddenly. Magically. As if transferred to me without effort.’⁶⁹²

At this point it is probably worth examining Scott-Heron’s understanding of who or what the Spirits are. In short, they represented one’s ancestors. Scott-Heron addressed this matter on his final album, *I’m New Here*:

I believe that the Spirits are your parents, and their parents, and their parents, and their parents. And they are the bloodstream that runs through your body constantly, because they want you to live on because they want to live on. And they are all the time to tell you shit that if you would just spend a few minutes with yourself, you would hear them.”⁶⁹³

Further, he once related to an interviewer that one’s spirit was “the part that will continue after the other parts are no longer ... [here].”⁶⁹⁴ So in this sense, the Spirits are one’s kin tracing back generations, who, in the interest of lineal propagation and a desire to ensure their descendants’ success in life, take an active role in their affairs. When relating the idea behind the title of his 1993 record *Spirits*, Scott-Heron expanded on this sentiment, saying, “If I try to put odds on some of the things that have happened that have helped me

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., 312.

⁶⁹² Gil Scott-Heron, *Now and Then...: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (New York: Canongate, 2000), xvii.

⁶⁹³ Gil Scott-Heron, “Parents (Interlude),” *I’m New Here* (London: XL Records, 2010).

⁶⁹⁴ Burrell, “Fell Together: A Conversation with Gil Scott-Heron, Part 2.”

to appreciate my music and have other people appreciate it, the odds would just be incredible. And I think it's [the] spirits.⁶⁹⁵ In addition to providing guidance and self-reflexive wisdom, he also felt that these forces brought a certain sense of equilibrium to one's life, or as he put it, "the spirits will help you balance things."⁶⁹⁶ The parallels with world religions, including Christianity and Islam are apparent; however, arguably the Spirits are by and large of secular orientation.

It is worth pointing out that Scott-Heron's Spirits could also act in malevolent ways. In the nadir of his cocaine addiction, a former girlfriend, Monica De Latour, drew attention to this apparent contradiction. In a story published in the *New Yorker* just prior to his death, journalist Alec Wilkinson described this change in outlook:

On the door of their apartment, he would post menacing remarks, which would change every few weeks or months. One said, "For all visitors we despise, I will pray to 'the spirits' that you and all who conspire with you condemn your souls. You have been seen. You are known. You will be paid." He believed the bad spirits came with crack, and to counteract them he would give money to charities.⁶⁹⁷

Interestingly this notion of good spirits and bad spirits - undoubtedly fueled by paranoia resulting from drug use - closely mirrors the function of the trickster, a reoccurring figure in African folklore that could be friend or foe, changing places on a whim.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁵ James Ledbetter, "The Message," *Vibe* (August 1994), 70.

⁶⁹⁶ Willard Jenkins, "Gil Scott-Heron: Spirits Renewed," *Jazz Times* (Vol. 24, No. 7 September 1994), 46.

⁶⁹⁷ Alec Wilkinson, "New York Is Killing Me," *The New Yorker* (August 9, 2010), 31.

⁶⁹⁸ For more on the trickster in African and African American culture, see: Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

That said the Spirits that Scott-Heron spoke of on recordings were of a benevolent, ancestral nature. He invoked them by name in “Don’t Give Up,” a song that addressed, among other things, his addiction:

I didn’t matter if it was a child or and adult
There was absolutely no one that I could not insult.
So that I could isolate myself somewhere off to the side
And continue to juggle all the possible whys
The warmth I wanted to generate so well
Had turned into a frozen hell
And the discouraging injustices I felt
Had pinned me somewhere inside a drug-infested cell
Where those who told didn’t know and those who knew didn’t tell
And I could continue to feel sorry for myself

Don’t give up (Spirits say don’t give up)
Yes it’s time to stop your fallin’
You’ve been down long enough
Can’t you hear the spirits callin’
Yes it’s the Spirits
Can’t you hear it

The Spirits appeared in several other songs, including the aforementioned “Trane (Tomorrow’s Trane)” and the title track to his 1993 recording *Spirits*:

Our lives are like treasures
Unveiled as perfection
A gift to us from spirits on high ⁶⁹⁹

Notably, these lines echo Scott-Heron’s philosophy regarding music as a gift; however, in this instance life itself is a “gift” from “spirits on high.” In Scott-Heron’s music and writings the Spirits were portrayed as a supernatural inspiration and balancing force. What is more, the Spirits represented a non-denominational, secular gospel. This concept, much like his Pan-Movement activism, acted as a unifying principle for seemingly disparate audiences. By placing sole emphasis on the ancestral origins of the Spirits,

⁶⁹⁹ Gil Scott-Heron and John Coltrane, “Spirits,” *Spirits* (New York: TVT, 1993) and Gil Scott-Heron, “Spirits” *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron*, 51.

Scott-Heron presented a largely non-doctrinal teleology; there was no supreme being, no celestial abode, no eternal damnation, only an ethos of redemption and an afterlife in which one joins their ancestors in caring for succeeding generations.

Scott-Heron's death in 2011 brought a forty-one year career to a close. In that time, he published two novels, two poetry volumes, dozens of journalistic features and op-ed columns, and a posthumous memoir. During the same period, he was responsible for seventeen studio albums and several live releases, not to mention his numerous television and film appearances. Among other topics, his works famously engaged the policies and politics of former presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush. In concert and in interviews he addressed issues related to the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Publications such as the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Black Panther*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American* routinely ran feature-length stories, performance notices, and reviews that championed his music, spotlighted his service to the black community, and offered evidence of his enormous popularity, cross-cultural appeal, and prominence as a public intellectual.⁷⁰⁰ By almost any measure, Scott-Heron was a prolific, internationally renowned, critically acclaimed talent who enjoyed an artistically profitable career.

Gil Scott-Heron was a respected voice in black America for over four decades. However, one should consider the totality of his productions and not surrender to an essentialized reading of his artistic identity. After all, as he rightly pointed out, for every "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" there is a "Your Daddy Loves You," and for every "Red Black and Green (The Liberation Song)" there is a "Don't Give Up." That

these songs received less critical attention is not the fault of their author, nor does it reflect the value of these songs for his listeners. Indeed, songs such as “A Lovely Day,” “I Think I’ll Call It Morning,” “17th Street,” “Your Daddy Loves You,” “Spirits Past,” “Don’t Give Up,” and “A Very Special Time” showcase an overlooked side of Scott-Heron’s songwriting. These “spirituals” were for the most part apolitical, yet they were essential ingredients in his so-called “survival kits on wax.” With works such as these, coupled with his trademark political verse, Gil Scott-Heron gave voice to “the full 360 degrees of the black experience” in the postwar era.⁷⁰¹

⁷⁰¹ Weller, “Survival Kits on Wax,” 16.

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