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# CONFESSIONS OF A HIP-HOP HIPPIE

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CONFESSIONS OF A HIP-HOP HIPPIE  
THE MEASURE OF AN EMPTY CAR

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing:  
Poetry

---

by  
Tristan Douglas Acker  
June 2014

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THE MEASURE OF AN EMPTY CAR

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Approved by:

John Chad Sweeney, First Reader

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## ABSTRACT

This Statement of Purpose does not give a history of hip-hop or hip-hop poetry but rather how this particular poet fits into the current phase of hip-hop and performance poetry. In it, I discuss and explain the new pro-working class hip-hop performance poetic. This includes extensive discussion of how rap poetry conveys meaning through sound. Also discussed is the socioeconomic context for the suburban southwestern topics found in the manuscript. This statement is a parallel piece to the manuscript itself in that it explains a brown kid from San Bernardino's journey of connecting words and music for purposes of personal expression and potentially the betterment of his community. This statement also discusses my aesthetic beliefs and preferences as a sound poet with a background in performance and music.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Inlandia Journal Website (<http://inlandiajournal.org/2013/02/07/tristan-douglas/>):

“Lockworx Alleyway” February 2013

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Pacific Review: “Mentorosity” June 2013

Badlands: “Takeout” and “Insta Cred Conquistadores” Fall 2013

Dead Flowers website ([http://www.bohemianpupil.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/VOL2\\_NO3.pdf](http://www.bohemianpupil.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/VOL2_NO3.pdf)): “reanimated cigarettes” Fall 2013

El Portal: “Mabies” Fall 2013

“Crucial Churches” was published in the literary criticism textbook Street Lit in November of 2013.

Pacific Review: “Los Angeles Grippped You, Dog But” June 2014

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:  
CONFESSIONS OF A HIP-HOP HIPPIE

Section 1: The Form of Rhyming Words in an Agile and Clever Way

When I was 12, I started listening to Eminem because it was funny and subversive in exactly the way that appeals to adolescents. After branching out to the works of other rappers produced by Eminem's mentor Dr.Dre, I decided that not only were these rappers not doing anything that I could not do but they were doing it wrong. They were repeating each other's claims of having the biggest guns, penises and egos. They were re-using rhymes that they had just used in the songs before. Most importantly, they weren't talking about anything new, album after album after album. It was all crime culture, braggadocio, comic-bookish sexual escapades, and a glorification of vice and violence.

As a 12-year-old starting to learn about the nature of the world and growing contemptuous of institutions, I had no moralistic beef with the repetitive content of the rap that I was listening to but rather an artistic one: this form of rhyming words in an agile and clever way is too easy to stay doing the same thing over and over. What I didn't know then was that rap's proto-poet forbearer, Gil Scott-Heron, was saying similar things about rap music just a few short years before I started to have these thoughts. In a 1994 interview with *Billboard*, Scott-Heron said:



They need to study music. I played in several bands before I began my career as a poet. There's a big difference between putting words over some music, and blending those same words into the music. There's not a lot of humor. They use a lot of slang and colloquialisms, and you don't really see inside the person. Instead, you just get a lot of posturing. (Reynolds 17)

I quickly recognized what Scott-Heron was saying years before I could hear him say it: art demands more of us. My work has attempted to address this stagnation in rap but this is a constant struggle and not a *fait accompli*. As a socially conscious poet with a background as a working-class student, assailing society's structural powers from a moralistic perch will always be in my work. What I can do differently though is to provide the reader a window of vulnerability and honesty into myself.

Rap lost sway over me for a long time until I had the chance to study the works of Bay area rapper, Mac Dre, who perfected a calm, cocky charismatic and laid back West Coast drawl that still influences me. Eminem was the first rapper I was into and it shows in my rapping: my style is often high pitched, technical, tenacious and incisive. Mac Dre taught me how to ride the beat with simpler phrases and to let my humanity do the work for me. While Eminem might write something like, "I'll give you a mouthful/of scalpels/with alfalfa and isopropyl" stacking bars with multi-syllable internal rhymes, Mac Dre might say something

as simple as “Oh ... you didn’t know? That’s not my job” and communicate something just as powerfully, authoritatively, and, most importantly to me, enjoyably and entertainingly (Dre, track 10). Mac Dre’s style was the opposite of mine, and learning to incorporate aspects of it into my performance is largely the development that propelled me to the confident place I feel like I am now with rapping. Now I’m not afraid to slow down, lower my voice and show lots of humor and simplicity in my raps.

## Section 2: Parallel Journeys

This program has been a parallel journey. In one sense, I have actualized myself as a poet further with forms other than rap and bent rap more towards content that I think is worthy of exploring within its paradigm. In another sense, I have grown into a familiarity with being an ambassador for hip-hop or rap to written-word focused poets in the university setting. Regarding the former, my manuscript tells the story of myself as a young brown male coming of age. He learns to balance his life as a countercultural experience-seeker and responsible hard-working Latino citizen in California’s Inland Empire of San Bernardino and Riverside counties. He deals with the passing of his middle-aged father by getting too emotionally invested in politics. He heals with the music of the past left to him by his French horn playing dad as well as the modern basketball bounce of the hip-hop he grew up with.

As an ambassador of hip-hop writing and performing to the poetry world, my manuscript shows a poetic that is about more than rhyming. Even the non-rap pieces aim for a colloquial irreverence, a city-derived frankness and humor that is certainly related to O' Hara, Ginsberg and Corso. Even the prose pieces employ a pidgin language of Spanglish, street slang, and California idiom that is both distinctly Inland Empire and hip-hop. The rap pieces are intended to be strong examples of the rap craft but also to push the envelope of vulnerability and subject matter to a place that can glorify the working class, the nerds, and the silent heroes of troubled institutions like schools and government bureaucracies. Both of these journeys in mind, the following explains the hip-hop poetic but it would not be accurate to say I represent the genre despite my desire to be associated with it. In 1994, Hip-hop's reluctant Godfather Gil Scott-Heron, in a poem to the new generation of "rappers" said:

We got respect for you rappers and the way they be free-  
weighin'

But if you're gon' be teachin' folks things, make sure you know what  
you're sayin' (Scott-Heron track 1)

To me, this is an important and prescient warning against the anti-intellectualism found in much modern pop music and especially hip-hop. In "Damage," Wendell Berry shares a similar sentiment when he writes "Only when our acts are empowered with more than bodily strength do we need to think of

our limits” (Berry, 15). To me both writers are ultimately saying: be very careful when representing your genre or subgenre, because you’ll undercut everything you hope to uplift if you represent it foolishly. It is with this advice in mind that I try not to take myself too seriously as hip-hop’s ambassador to the university. I can only explain how hip-hop came to my tongue, how I understood it and how it has made me the poet that I am.

### Section 3: In Practice

I started the M.F.A knowing I wanted to make my raps interesting to read and knowing I wanted to be a bard of the Inland Empire. This has happened, but there have been unexpected developments as well. I do feel confident that I have made the language in my raps more diverse and, more importantly, full of images.

In my work I try to paint a gritty, but not melodramatic, picture of the Inland Empire. I write it to be musical and journalistic at the same time—for to me, poetry always begins with the music I first experience it as. In “Poems are a Complex,” Robert Creeley says “In a poem I tend to hear whatever can be called its melody long before I have reached an understanding of all that it might mean” (Creeley, 76). To me, he is talking about the first time you hear a poem, the “wrapper,” the candy the poem is enveloped in. The way a poem sounds is, for me, its first impression. This is aesthetic, but it’s also political: when you bring people who are not literarily-inclined to readings at which people quietly read

poems off of their smart-phones in predictable cadence, you have to deal with the unpleasant answer to the question of why the public-at-large is not more interested in financing Arts and Letters. In post-Reagan America, we must assume that our funding is about to be cut so you must do what Reagan did: act, perform to show the masses the value of the mental vegetables (and candy) we provide. The readers and customers are not going to look for the poem, the poem must grab them by the lapels and impart to them its relevance and sharpness. That is what hip-hop is for. Yes, it's a commercial consideration but entertaining and engaging material also makes for a deeper connection with the audience. For example, in "Faultline Neighbors," I use refrain and rhyme to paint what I find emotionally evocative about the area I live in:

there is a song in our hearts that you cannot hear  
mainly cause these train tracks  
are lined with bottles of beer  
kids-with-black-shirts-and-bikes  
that would fracture the night  
thrash against a cage until their backs hurted right  
storefront chapels rehabilitate gangster veterans  
they hang with Nam Veterans, American Legion residents

In the above piece I describe the BMX-riding young men at skate-parks until they close, the Cavalry Chapels that have outreach programs for ex-felons situated

next to American Legion halls with war veterans. Lines like “storefront chapels rehabilitate gangster veterans” mix rap’s gang culture references with my personal brand of bureaucracy and politics, right down to the intentionally clunky language. These figures are disparate and easily overlooked, but so very I.E.

O’Hara writes the pace of New York frantically but exuberantly. Ginsberg celebrates New York City and San Francisco but mournful that the artists and freaks had to seek them as refuge in the first place; his odes to his cities and America are Whitman-esque in their epic celebration and Blakean in their religious fervor. Rimbaud writes about Paris life with a nasty frankness that is honest about what such a city allows to come out at night. I write about the Inland Empire in a way that admits its frequent drought and crappy graffiti but celebrates its diversity and earnest working-class nature. I write about the Inland Empire in a way that reflects my experiences but also my suspicion that the Inland Empire is in many ways a metaphor for an America in transition from the industrial age to deindustrialization, from whiteness to brownness, from suburban ascendance to a vibrant urban struggle.

This development in my writing was a breakthrough for me because I wanted to see how far I could get writing that kind of thing without resorting to autobiography. I started the program doing pieces with more distance from the I.E. while still about the I.E., and now I feel that placing earned portions of anecdote is effective and natural. I didn’t expect these I.E. pieces to take me to such a personal place so quickly, but I should have expected it. They’ve taken

me to talking about my family and old lovers and I think it benefits my poems to intertwine these subjects.

I compare and even speak pejoratively of Los Angeles at times in my work—not out of animus for what I appreciate and recognize as one of my state’s greatest cities, but out of a desire to slap people out of their self-pity for living in a “bedroom community” or “commuter town” like Fontana or Rialto in my native region. My whole life I’ve seen them migrate to L.A. and San Francisco as soon as they could, but I’ve always wanted them to question why the Inland Empire doesn’t intrigue them in the same way and what we could do about it. In the poem “Los Angeles Grippped You, Dog But,” I write “L.A. is a meta, a post card of itself,” not to denounce the magic of Los Angeles’ entertainment industry but to celebrate the Inland Empire’s hard realities and aspirant middle class values. The poem continues:

Olvera street isn't what

it used to

be?

Nah, Olvera street's not

what

you think it is

LA's a picture of

a picture

the IE is

a concrete lunch bench

The Inland Empire didn't come off as "cool" to a lot of people before I painted it for them in a certain way. It is often seen as the boring desert suburbs outside of Los Angeles, full of hicks, crystal meth addicts and conservatives all revolving around our own Detroit in the economically blighted county seat of San Bernardino. I have been working to explain the working class values, the struggle of true artists and the ethnic working class through raps about the Inland Empire, and I have had some success in helping cultivate regional pride among my peers through my hip-hop band the West Coast Avengers and related circles of artists. I want to imbue office secretaries like myself with a smidgen of hip-hop's cool and immediate rhythmic relevance as well with pieces that observe bureaucracy and office life with a tender eye. An example of this is in "Faultline Neighbors":

they hang with Nam Veterans, American Legion residents  
steelworkers gone mechanic and short order; Colton's denizens  
I stopped by Shy Guy's spot, say "Hi", his moms is reticent

I want to take the accessible rhythms, the cachet of rap, and attach them to topics that are supposed to be boring, easily dismissed and too laborious. In



the above excerpt, I bring up my friend's aging mother who is not going to enjoy her full retirement because the firm she worked at for decades closed down just a couple years before she could have retired with her maximum benefit. I don't hear such discussions in rap much, but they are as real and working class as anything I hear in rap songs.

I try to give such characters time in my poems for the artistic juxtaposition and challenge and because I feel socially moved to do this. If it was just a political agenda, I wouldn't pursue this, but I think it's art's duty to go where it hasn't before.

I like the idea of the middle class because "middle" can mean balance. This embrace of middle class values and the appreciation for the parents and service workers that do unglamorous things to keep our cities moving is something I am working to make a hallmark of the West Coast Avengers and by extension my own work. This manifests in poems where I extol the virtues of my Nissan Sentra as opposed to a Cadillac or a Lexus; or in a piece in which I faux-apologize for having a relatively stable home life as a child to rappers like 2pac and Jay-Z who have been known to put down the privileged white kids that buy their music. From "Caddy Dreams":

rappers from real hoods

steadily hatin' on us

look

I'm sorry Mr.Jay-Z and 2pac

Mom and dad raised me

with more safety than you got

keeping sister and mom and calm

while you sold crack and looked hot

I understand that

I'm probably not

as cool as you

it's the cost of being the middle-class

I'm not hatin' on you

I know you wanted a little of that

Conversations with my father and his cultural influence permeate my work, even the raps. In “Starshape Pitfall Stampede” I refer to my father’s views on my ambivalence about Christian faith and respond that if I were to see a city like mine be truly prepared and compassionate for those hardest hit by crises, such

as Hurricane Katrina, I would be more inclined to believe in the divine. My attachment to the region and my exploration of that is in conversation with my family's longstanding discussions about faith. From "Starshape Pitfall Stampede":

and it's all true, my dad said such ideas was lukewarm  
disdained my cultural relativism, knew him a truth-form  
sometimes I want me a truth-form  
but first give me new-norms  
so when the needy come stampeding  
cities survive more than two storms

The following is another line where I try to blend a hippie's hedonism "taking a toke"—with the intellectual's appreciation for the heritage of art's movements such as the ones my father introduced me to—"Baroque". We are not conservative hicks in the I.E. We are multitudinous, we are diverse, and we are hybrids. From "Serious Music"

sometimes I take a toke  
listen baroque  
and romantic

## Section 4: Sound

Sound is central to rap poetry; it is oral first and written second. In the following excerpt from “Route 66 revisited”, I use rhyme and stylized pronunciation to create a musical and conversational piece of poetry. “Rimbaud” rhymes with “sick flows”. “Baudelaire” rhymes with “loud hair”. “Loud hair” doesn’t strictly rhyme with “Baudelaire”, but the sound is there. It gives a euphonic drawl to the soft syllables of *laire* and *hair*. *Got there* and *rock layer* continue this use of drawl to make words that don’t actually rhyme sound like they do, at the same time as connecting conversational sentences. *Sayers*, *there*, and *layer* function as rhymes even though all 3 of those words don’t rhyme, strictly speaking—contorting pronunciation to make them musical gives a sense of quick descent and momentum from the beginning of the poem. From “Route 66 Revisited”:

me and Sham? is like Rimbaud and Baudelaire

rhymesayers

with sick flows and loud hair

whoa what you got there?

a rock layer?

In the following section, the rhyme pattern evolves mid-verse. Initially, *quieted* rhymes with *riots hit* but the next two rhymes add a syllable: *lion in it/ try n hit it*. Again this has the effect of music and conversation. The quick mumble of

"*lion in it*" adds colloquialism to the stanza while still maintaining and even deepening the rhyme. "*Try n hit it*" quickly follows and doubles the rate at which the rhymes come at the reader. By the next line "Mad Men aim to market women," the rhyme has evolved into a new rhyme pattern to become: "in it/ hit it/ spinnin'/ women'/ sinnin'/ win it." These rhymes are pleasing in their complexity but also their conversational nature. They celebrate the music in conversational non-literary speech. When they come together pronounced quickly, the sound of the poem washes over the reader with a quick and tight cascade of social commentary about the limits of the presidency, the contradictions in how we present ourselves, the commercialization of female sexuality, and the corruption in religious institutions. In the poem "Route 66 Revisited," the rhymes evolve mid-verse:

like Obama  
I've been quieted  
in reaction  
to when the riots hit  
gotta be careful like a cat  
though my heart feels like a lion in it  
try n hit it, targets spinnin'  
Mad Men aim to market women  
like chaplains in the darkness sinnin'  
I'm out to win it

The following excerpt from the same poem embeds a one-syllable rhyme among a series of five three-syllable rhymes. *Days-like-these/blaze-my-trees* followed by *F-D-R/ get-me-far/ emp-/ ty/ car*. *Feel my knees* keeps the rhythm of three even though all three of its syllables don't rhyme with each other the way *days-like-these* and *blaze-my-trees* do. Again, this piece relies on the cadence of conversation to make it understood. The phrase "Say it won't get me far" works on the assumption that the ear will fill in gaps in spoken language, as the word "they" is before "call it FDR", is also implicitly there before "say it won't get me far" as in "they say it won't get me far." From "Route 66 Revisited":

I've wondered why  
there wasn't more days like these  
where I can't feel my knees  
after I blaze my trees  
they call it "FDR," say it won't get me far  
commute the kingdom  
learn the measure of an empty car

Yet, the extra syllable in "they" would not work within the poem's rhythm. This crystallizes my poetic: using conversational language to make hip-hop

rhymes sound natural and unforced. The phrase ultimately became “they call it FDR/ say it won’t get me far” which due to the mind’s ear, not only communicates the meaning but can do so forcefully when performed. The following excerpt from “Starshape Pitfall Stampede” is one of the most intense and long runs of multi-syllabic rhymes in the manuscript:

Meta-Millennials who can't afford them a son  
or a daughter, air and water are things I can hardly safely secure for  
me  
now littles me-s got needs for perpetuity?  
look: between you and me, this world deserves scrutiny  
before you procreate stupidly and think it's all good because you're  
gluten-free  
truthfully two could play the world's-two-saddest-flutes for me  
for having eyes that's tuned to see the truth could breathe so brutally  
so totally, I know I got pitfalls too  
mainly cause I tell you every time that I call you

Often hip-hop rhymes go on non-sensibly, and while maintaining some of the whimsy and willingness to contort pronunciation that characterizes much rap, I attempt to push against this trend in “Starshape” and elsewhere. This poem is an admonition to the young and hip about child-rearing which is really a

commentary on the disparity between trends for the luxurious and the needs and expenses of the working class so affected by the recent economic recession. The performer should sound like he is barely hanging on to the roller coaster of the line as it delivers rhymes in rapid-fire succession. That is why “two” and “truth” are used multiple times (though in different forms) throughout this section.

The main section of rhymes here *perpetuity/ scrutiny/ stupidly* are delivered quickly. In hip-hop, it is a game of endurance to keep a complex rhyme pattern going. Part of the art is to impress listeners with how long one can keep up the rhyme, to keep them guessing as to what combination or contortion of words the performing poet uses to fit the rhyme and communicate the meaning.

Other reasons for crafting a rapid-fire rhyme section like the are transhuman in nature. During performance, a piece like this is where a rapper or MC, Master of Ceremonies, shows her strength of mouth muscle. The click of punctuated sounds in *perpetuity/stupidly/scrutiny* provides the percussive opportunity for display of strength. Hip-hop comes from a cultural tradition of people that feel oppressed and who use poetry and music to feel empowered. The artist wants to escape the powerless body into the powerful, sharp, biting and ferociously delivered words, the vocals, the *rap*. In his essay “Damage”, Wendell Berry warns against “too much power” and “too little knowledge” (Berry, 13). It is the wisdom of such admonitions that made me want to study poetry in the academic setting as opposed to simply drawing upon ghetto frustration for



hip-hop inspiration. My poetic is concerned with tightening the marriage of the literary and the fire-escape-view politics of hip-hop.

Hip-hop verses can be considered as modern sonnets. The 16-bar rap verse is the standard unit of verse on a three-and-a-half-minute-long rap song. A bar is approximately enough time on the record for one couplet. At 18 bars, "Faultline Neighbors" is the best example of a "rap verse" in this collection, included here in its entirety:

There is a song in our hearts that you cannot hear  
mainly cause these train tracks  
are lined with bottles of beer  
Kids-with-black-shirts-and-bikes  
that would fracture the night  
thrash against a cage until their backs hurted right  
Storefront chapels rehabilitate gangster veterans  
they hang with Nam Veterans, American Legion residents  
steelworkers gone mechanic and short order; Colton's  
denizens  
I stopped by Shy Guy's spot, say "Hi," his moms is  
reticent  
"they closed down the cement plant at 10 and Rancho  
can't retire but the pension's remnants substantial"

Hipsters in Montclair strokin' pens against banjos  
Nathan said he used ukes for the truth and damsels  
shopliftin' comics with roadies from Hesperia  
They commute down the hill, work in Cucamonga area  
turned 21 got gigs at bars in the village  
back then invitin' me on a petroleum pilgrimage  
There is a painting in our eyes that you cannot see  
because the smudge from the fog and the smoke from the  
weed

We got a P.O. box  
in most tri-county parking lots  
Nor Cal style gas-brake-dip for the start-n-stop  
they talk about Vallejo, but not about Rialto  
like we talk about *sopranos* but don't talk about the  
*altos*

I used to hate the tweakers now I know I can't fault  
those  
whose parents just brought home empty-promise-filled  
nachos

There is a burning in my core that I don't want to ignore  
Neighbors at *No Jumping* signs who grab their skateboards  
and soar

I have a feeling there's a mess for which I'll have to  
confess  
problems I should probly fix instead I choose to express  
I used to stop for troubled drivers on the overpass  
Now I hand 'em disability checks and hope they'll last  
but first to Baker's by the credit union  
and hope walkers emerge from desertscaapes better-humans

Lines 1, 22, and 35 begin “There is a,” which establishes parallel structures. The poems “Pocketwatch faces Mecca” and “Serious Music” from the manuscript also use recurring phrases: “and that is when I pray” for the former and “dad, this is my music” for the latter. While “Faultline” is a verse or rap sonnet, the others are ballads of about a dozen stanzas each. The recurring phrase gives some steadiness, some familiarity for the listener and reader following the rapid fire downhill descent of mid-tempo and up-tempo rap verses.

I feel like I've got these I.E. poem-songs down pretty tight now which means I can produce a concise rap-verse that synthesizes my personal politics, my observations on the region, with my desire to use language musically and provocatively. “Musical” means its rhythm and internal tongue-produced percussion sounds are pleasant and keep the readers’ eyes and ears moving along through to the end of the piece. Euphony and assonance as well as heavy use of layered complex rhyme are other tools to make my works “musical.” I can

express images, ideas, vignettes through them all while keeping them musical and watching the syllable counts.

### Section 5: The Wider Net of the Hip-Hop Poetic

I have made sure to keep experimenting with non-rhyming forms. I do a lot of pieces that are three paragraphs on different but related subjects or themes. So that barbecue spot by Randall and Pepper? It's actually a Hawaiian barbecue spot. So when I was walking between it and the Chinese spot there was a man with a gray unkempt head, stuttering his feet towards me, not quite mustering the verve to ask me for ... anything.

Often these paragraphs will allude to an I.E. location or event, or a character mentioned in a rhymed piece. These prose breaks allow me to meditate longer on aspects of my life and the I.E. that the rhyming works just bounce around. I have a few poems in which dialogue or conversation turns into free verse, I like the humorous detour they offer in addition to the frank texture they give the work. It is a tendency of mine to try to enshrine the colloquial into spoken art, to celebrate the tongue of my generation and culture. Here is an example in the poem "When I Was 20, I went to Sacramento by myself to take a civil service with the state to be a clerk":

"Yo, I hear you guys can't even hang out in front of liquor stores

down there—that true?”

“Hell yeah, they’ll send the riot squad in if 50 brown cats are whooping  
it up at 7-11”

A poem doesn’t need to be a quoted conversation to sound conversational. The apostrophes in the following excerpt from “birds in the wash” replace the letter “g” at the end of verbs. The “verbing” (*eyein’*, *grindin’*) crawls the reader musically and conversationally to the end of the sentence. The iambic enunciations on the last two syllables in *remember* echo the other verbs like *eyeing* and *grinding*. The content of such a line replays a scene that people in the Inland Empire have seen a thousand times over. From “birds in the wash”:

But you can’t fool her Abuela, like she don’t remember  
a suitor for her daughter, eyein’ you dirty from the kitchen  
grindin’ corn before you drive off all screechy

I have long confessional poems about friends, lovers and my recently deceased father that I feel have the potential to round out the speaker in the view of the reader when read in the context of my other types of pieces.

From “Reanimated Cigarettes”:

if my dad came up to me today  
reanimated and making orc jokes  
about the Hobbit and he asked me  
for a cigarette, i wouldn't say no

I also have a method in which a verse goes back and forth between non-rhyming slam and rhyming slam. My M.F.A. colleague Lawrence Eby once said to me, that pieces like this ease the non-rap familiar reader into the kind of rap that I write. The poem "WTF's a basement" reveals the music in conversational speech:

The Buildings is all  
boarded  
up n clamped-down  
gate key  
    for rent  
dark tint  
    armed guard  
no public  
restroom!  
what the fuck's a basement?  
they got 'em

in Wisconsin  
they got 'em in  
Ohio  
they got 'em  
out in  
Illinois  
'seen 'em stretch for miles  
Cali's got crawlspaces  
only room for  
                    small-faces  
complex  
                    add-on  
                    always  
in hallways

#### Section 6: Wigtionary

When I was 16 and bored in chemistry class, I would scrawl the phrase "wiggly woo" on notebooks but I would never utter it because I knew how ridiculous it was. Later that year I went on a camping trip with poets and musicians in the Cucamonga Mountains. I found myself analyzing the city light organisms of the urban center below, describing everything as "incrazable" and joyously exclaiming "wiggly woo!" throughout the night. So exuberant were my *wiggly woos*

that I have been “Wiggy woo” to those close to me ever since. I learned that night that we must embrace the madness on our tongues and give voice to the ridiculousness in the middle of our minds. Since then I have had other “wiggy woo”s, “shiminy biminys” and phrases that just felt good to say. People would understand these phrases as part of my Wigtionary lexicon even if I had never told them the definition. They could tell from the way I uttered them and where I placed them in a sentence what it was I was trying to say. I believe this is what Donald Hall is referring to when he coins the term “milk tongue” in his seminal essay “Goatfoot, Milk tongue, Twinbird” to describe pre-lingual and intuitive mouth-pleasure when “[the baby’s] small tongue curls around the sounds, the way his tongue warms with the tiny thread of milk that he pulls from his mother”(Hall 148). I think we should embrace Hall's “milk tongue” as long as what we proclaim is sincere. I find my jabberwocky gobbledygook is some of the sincerest stuff I say and write.

The lexicon derived from my embrace of the “wiggy woo” utterances makes up the *wigtionary*. Terms from the *wigtionary* can be called “wiggisms.” My thesis collection is organized by *wigtionary* entries that are theme umbrellas for the sections that follow. This sets up the collection as a document that defines and charts my Inland Empire world and how I see it. For example:

Wigtionary Entry:

*Inland Empire* [in-luh nd em-pahyuh r]

**noun**



1. Desert suburbs an hour east of Los Angeles; San Bernardino and Riverside counties; areas with 909 and 951 area codes

**Synonyms and related terms:**

The I.E.

Gate city

Edge city

Bedroom communities

Commuter towns

The Murder Capital of the World in 2007

California's Detroit

Where I had my first kiss at a middle school dance

and learned to feel free on a bike by the gated off washes

Where the best Mariscos cooks in East L.A. went to retire

**adjective**

1. Of or relating to the I.E.

**Example sentences:**

We were Inland Empire chillin'. Blazin' in the wash, watching birds try to help each out of ditches.

Of course the "wigtionary" language owes a debt to Long Beach's Snoop Doggy Dogg and his 70s funk predecessors for pioneering "izzle" and "iggidy" as a musical scat bridge language from jazz to hip-hop. One day when I looked up "wiggly woo," I found some people online chasing a rare flying squirrel in Europe that they called the "wiggly woo". I found a website that sold funky wigs. I started understanding more the power of manifesting and manipulating reality through words.

#### Section 7: Evolve or Die – Why Poetry Must Sing

You can produce great art by articulating the romanticizing of your life well. I'm straight up skeptical of non-musical, non-humorous poetry. Not for being bereft of talent or intelligence but for what I often perceive of its deadness on the page, its untranslatability. This could be just a symptom of life in the West but I suspect the time is not there to read poetry that doesn't sing itself. Part of this is just my assessment of the market, manifest in an insecurity that most people won't engage challenging writing—but part of this is from my musical background, my preferences as a "sound" poet. I am listening to a poem even when I read it to feel how its music affects me. From "Starshape Pitfall Stampede", the following excerpt of mine is 3 lines but there are at least 6 rhymes embedded within it:

Embrace the taste that's laced in the ace that we

sparkin'

I'm parkin' in the red zone, droid done hit a dead zone

Voices echo that's why we speakin' on the headphones

The music of this moves the sentence along in a way that the reader is not “waiting for” or decoding. It can wash over them in a cascade of sound. “Embrace the taste that’s laced” is a short utterance but it rhymes twice. “Red zone,” “dead zone,” “echo,” and “headphones” all share an assonance that layers the rhyme pattern. This is work intended to sing out and grab the attention of those not predisposed to supporting an art form they know mainly as folks quietly reading off of a printed page in a quiet coffee shop. I know that is poetry quiet and loud, written and spoken, for insiders and outsiders is necessary for a diverse art form but I’m concerned with the perception that poetry is insulated in an academic tower, structurally out of touch with the working class. Poetry is under siege from a culture with too short of an attention span to be so passive in the face of the future. Conversely, hip-hop has too much to offer print, the academy and the larger world of art to continue being anti-intellectual and dismissive about the literary and academic community. My parallel journey leads me to become a bridge in this important evolution and marriage of hip-hop and written poetry.

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APPENDIX  
THE MEASURE OF AN EMPTY CAR