

RHYTHMIC LITERACY: POETRY, READING AND PUBLIC VOICES
IN BLACK ATLANTIC POETICS

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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May, 2010

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ABSTRACT

Rhythmic Literacy: Poetry, Reading and Public Voices in Black Atlantic Poetics analyzes the poetry of the African American Langston Hughes and the Jamaican Louise Bennett during the 1940s. Through an examination of the unique similarities of their poetic projects, namely their engagement of performance to build their audiences, their experiments with poetic personae to represent vernacular social voices, their doubleness as national and transnational figures, their circulation of poetry in radio and print journalism and their use of poetry as pedagogy to promote reading, this dissertation establishes a new perspective on the role of poetry in decolonizing language practices. While Hughes and Bennett are often celebrated for their representation of oral language and folk culture, this project reframes these critical discussions by drawing attention to how they engage performance to foster an embodied form of reading that draws on Creole knowledge systems, which I term rhythmic literacy. Growing up in the U.S and Jamaica in the early twentieth century, Hughes and Bennett were both subjected to a similar Anglophone transatlantic schoolroom poetry tradition, which they contend with as one of their only available poetic models. I argue that memorization and recitation practices play a formative role in the development of their poetic projects. As an enactment and metaphor for the dynamics of colonial control, this form of mimicry demonstrates to them the power of embodied performance to reclaim language from dominant forces. This dissertation reveals how black Atlantic poetics refashions the institutional uses of poetry in early twentieth-century U.S and British colonial education for the purposes of decolonization.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An earlier version of Chapter 1 appeared in *Critical Perspectives on Louise Bennett*, a special issue of *The Journal of West Indian Literature* 17:2 (2009): 5-19.

I would like to thank my committee for all their help, guidance and enthusiasm for this project: Suzanne Gauch, Jena Osman, Harvey Neptune, and Jahan Ramazani; an extra special thanks to my main advisor Rachel Blau DuPlessis for her lightening speed and her unwavering support every step of the way.

For generous financial support thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and at Temple: The Department of English, The Center for the Humanities, and The College of Liberal Arts.

Thanks to my family, as well as to my friends who are family: James De Lorenzi, Christa Di Marco, Sarah Dowling, Lentil, Jennifer Maloy, Jed Palmer, Dan Schank, Andrea Strudensky, and Sarah Turner.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1954, the African American Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and the Jamaican Louise Bennett (1919-2006) were both guests on an episode of Alma John's daytime radio program, *The Homemaker's Club*, broadcast on WWRL, a black New York radio station. This broadcast in the early 1950s forms an ideal place for these two iconic 20th century black Atlantic poets to come together, encapsulating their shared preoccupations with emerging technologies, poetic performance and social voice. In a very practical way, the broadcast illustrates the degree to which radio facilitated Afro-diasporic community at mid-century. What did they talk about? What poems did they read? How did their poems sound when they read them aloud next to each other? What kind of rhythmic exchange did their listeners hear across the airwaves?

Even though this is the only record of Hughes and Bennett performing their poetry together, this dissertation historically substantiates a socio-aesthetic proximity between the vernacular poetry each produced in the 1940s. Positioned on the border of a number of different fields - modern and contemporary poetry and poetics, postcolonial studies, feminist studies, Caribbean literature, African American literature, black Atlantic studies, modernist studies and globalization and diaspora studies – this comparative analysis of two poets offers a fuller understanding of how poetry decolonizes language practices. While Bennett and Hughes met only briefly during their lifetimes, their poetry shares many formal and thematic affinities, previously unstudied by critics. The following chapters examine how they both respond in similar ways to the social unrest of their shared historical moment in the 1940s by reinventing the pedagogical role of the poet and the discursive space of a poem. Many of their texts from this period address the

impact of urbanism, migration, and literacy education on subjects' ability to form communities and claim a voice in the public sphere. Bennett and Hughes both primarily define themselves as poets although poetry exists for them in a range of other discursive gestures, genres and performance strategies. As a medium, poetry encourages a sociality of reading more amenable to collective action than other print genres, and I argue that this is what gives it a central place in their multi-genre artistic projects.

Bennett began her writing career in the late 1930s, and while Victorian aesthetics dominated Jamaican poetry during this time, her unique approach combines traditional forms with a modern concern for voice. She merges the English ballad with Jamaican Creole to represent working-class women's voices that articulate the social instabilities of daily life in Jamaica at the end of British colonial rule. In the 1940s, Hughes was at the midway point in his career. While the Harlem Renaissance is typically assumed to be Hughes's most productive period of poetry publishing, he actually wrote and published more poetry in the 1940s than in any other decade of his career. Like Bennett, he experiments with poetic personae to depict the voices of Harlem residents who express rising social tensions during and just after WWII.

Studying how Hughes and Bennett experiment with the technique of poetic personae to represent social voice, I argue that 1) their poetry produces voice as discourse to imagine community beyond nation, and 2) that they foster an embodied form of reading that draws on Creole knowledge systems, which I term rhythmic literacy. While their work is often celebrated for its representation of oral language and culture, this project reframes these critical discussions by drawing attention to their use of poetry to promote reading as a form of social empowerment. Poetic personae, in their texts, do not

merely serve as documentary social realism, but act as scripts of social voice for their readers to enact and perform. The second half of this dissertation examines how rhythmic literacy refashions the institutional uses of poetry in early twentieth century U.S. and colonial education in Jamaica for the purposes of decolonization.¹

Caribbean critics, namely Kamau Brathwaite and Edouard Glissant, have established how the formal characteristics of poetry are well-suited for expressing and exploring processes of creolization in the region.² In a more international context, Jahan Ramazani posits Anglophone postcolonial poetics as a discourse of social and linguistic hybridity (*The Hybrid* 179-80). Building on the work of these scholars, this project considers how Creole poetry engenders new forms of reading and interpretation. Beyond merely symbolizing creolization, hybridity and non-Western cultural traditions, Bennett and Hughes's rhythmic literacy illuminates how the physical and social contours of reading play a central role in the remaking of cultural forms and knowledges.

In his revisionary history, *The Developments of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (1971), Brathwaite explains creolization as the creation of new linguistic and

¹ While Hughes is not technically a colonized subject according to strict definitions of colonialism, many scholars have examined how the African American situation in the United States can be considered in colonial terms. For example, historian Martha Hodes calls the U.S. treatment of African Americans during slavery and segregation a form of "domestic colonialism," which helps to support U.S. "imperial expansion" abroad (242-3). In this project, I characterize Hughes's contributions to social change as part of the project of decolonization, in part because as Chapter 2 will demonstrate, he himself positioned the African American struggle for liberation as part of the wider struggle against imperialism.

² In their edited collection *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity* (1998), Baluntansky and Sourieau define Creolization succinctly, as "a syncretic process of transverse dynamics that endlessly reworks and transforms the cultural patterns of varied social and historical experiences and identities" (3).

cultural forms caused by the violent mixture of African, Indigenous and different colonial cultures (296-306). He sees the plantation slavery system and the unique Caribbean environment as the foundation of Creole culture. Developing his ideas even further in his foundational essay on Anglophone Caribbean poetry, *The History of the Voice* (1984), he proposes that what he calls “nation language” poetries respond to and engage with these linguistic histories of cultural interaction, assimilation, opposition, dominance and subversion. Distinguishing dialect from nation language, he describes it as “the submerged area of that dialect which is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean” (13). He honors Bennett as the first writer of nation language because she was one of the first writers to work completely in Jamaican Creole (26). However, he positions her poetry as a developmental stage and suggests that her use of the ballad form indicates that she is still confined by colonial aesthetics (30). Chapter one establishes how the clash between Creole speech rhythms and the English ballad form in Bennett’s poems engage the colonial tensions of her historical moment in order to unravel them, and should therefore be read on their own terms. Complicating Brathwaite’s claim that Creole poetries exist “in the tradition of the spoken word” (17), chapter four focuses on Bennett’s commitment to literacy throughout her career, and analyzes the conflicts between orality and literacy, which she invites her readers to negotiate.³

³ While very influenced by Brathwaite’s theories of creolization and nation language as a framework for understanding Bennett’s use of Creole, in this project I do not use his term nation language to characterize Bennett’s poetry because I am more interested in drawing attention to the trans-national languages and dialogues engaged by her work.

While Brathwaite understands the process of creolization as a specific Caribbean form of hybridity, Glissant's more hemispheric perspective understands creolization as a force that takes place throughout the Americas, although he does recognize that the multi-racial and multilingual roots of Caribbean cultures on small isolated islands makes the process more concentrated and intense in the region (*Caribbean* 221-222). In this project, I take a similar approach to Glissant, acknowledging it as a particularly Caribbean process while also seeing it occurring more generally throughout the Americas.⁴ I find the framework particularly useful for analyzing Hughes and for moving beyond the association of his work with an essential African American identity.⁵ Chapter two shows that he himself viewed race from a creolized and cross-cultural perspective. To put it in the influential terms of the black Atlantic scholar Paul Gilroy, he was more concerned with tracing "the routes," than "the roots" of blackness in the Americas (19). Through study of his relationship with Bennett, as well as through other circuits of exchange, this

⁴ This project also takes direction from Gustav Firmat's hemispheric approach for studying literature of the Americas, which he develops in his introduction to his edited collection, *Do the Americas have a Common Literature?* (1990), as well as Michael J. Dash's study, *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (1998), which demonstrates the usefulness of this comparative approach for literatures of the Caribbean.

⁵ In the recent collection of essays, *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes* (2007), the editors John Edgar Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar reflect on the vast amount of scholarship on Hughes in the last twenty years and present new directions. One of the underlying assertions of this book, with which I strongly concur, is that critics need to move beyond the canonical Langston Hughes of the Harlem Renaissance to offer a fuller understanding of the political and social impact of his life long career.

dissertation establishes Hughes as an important influence on Anglophone Caribbean poetics.⁶

In *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature* (2007), Leah Rosenberg critiques Caribbean literary studies for accepting the narratives put forth at independence as a starting point, which has caused critics to view “early works as weak versions of future West Indian literature” (5). Her work reflects a recent shift in Caribbean literary studies (led by scholars such as Alison Donnell, Ifeoma Nwankwo and Belinda Edmondson) away from interpreting literature written prior to independence as a developmental stage in the progression towards a national independent literature, and towards an assessment of the complexity of its global interactions and social imaginaries. Canonical approaches to early Caribbean literature tend to assume that their aesthetics are not “independent” enough, or are too reliant on Anglocentric forms. For Rosenberg, this “ironically reproduced among West Indian writers the colonial hierarchy that the British literary establishment had maintained between British authors and West Indians authors, who were seen as capable merely of imperfect imitation” (5). There is a similar tendency to interpret African American literature through the lens of black cultural nationalism, which positions Harlem Renaissance writers like Hughes as weaker than the more culturally self-determined writers of the Black Arts Movement. To counteract such linear

⁶ In his interview with Mervyn Morris, the legendary dub poet Michael Smith praises Hughes’s blues poetics as an important model for how to incorporate reggae forms into dub poetry: “You see dub poetry now? Dub poetry come out a argument, you know... We identify the same thing we find run through Langston Hughes poems. Langston Hughes have a blues mood go through it, and we just feel seh, well, we have something, and we seh boy it was the beat” (281).

nationalist trajectories, this study analyzes how the intellectual labor of Bennett and Hughes's poetics engages with the singularity of their historical moment.

Recent transnational scholarship has begun to uncover and examine the 1940s as a crucial period when intellectuals, writers and activists were analyzing globalization and working to build diasporic community. Marked by India's independence from Britain in August 1947, the 1940s are often characterized as a decade when postcolonial nationalist projects begin to gain momentum and power. In the Caribbean, Jamaica achieved partial self-government in 1944, anticipating their eventual independence from Britain in 1962. However, in his study of the U.S. occupation of Trinidad during WWII, Harvey Neptune suggests that Caribbean scholars view the 1940s not only as a turning point in the exchange of power from British colonialism to independent self-rule, but also as turning point in the exchange of power from British colonialism to American economic involvement in the region (15-6). The accelerated movement of peoples, words, and ideas across borders during WWII, combined with the rise in Americanization, anticipates our present globalized landscape, and accounts for the renewed scholarly interest in the period.⁷ Bennett and Hughes both register and explore in their poems how World War II

⁷ As well as drawing scholarly attention, the 1940s Caribbean has figured significantly as a setting in recent postcolonial fiction. Both Shani Mootoo's novel *He Drown She in the Sea* (2005) and David Chariandy's novel *Soucouyant* (2007) intertwine dual narrative threads with one dealing with the 1940s U.S occupation in Trinidad, (in the case of Mootoo, she represents a fictional island Guanagaspar, which strongly resembles Trinidad), and the other exploring Caribbean diasporic experience in contemporary Canada. While there is not space here for a sustained analysis of the dialogue that these texts create between the two time periods, both Mootoo and Chariandy suggest that the social environments of the 1940s Caribbean speak directly to contemporary experiences of globalization.

created a heightened awareness of global concerns and fostered a mutual dissent towards imperialism amongst African Americans and West Indians.

To tease out the socio-political engagements of poetry, my critical approach combines seemingly opposing methods; material analysis of the relation between social history and poetic form are supplemented by speculative close readings often encouraged by the poetic imagination of the texts under examination. Such speculative close readings pursue what Frantz Fanon identifies as poetry's role in "expressing the process of being liberated" (*The Wretched* 220), and what Robin D. Kelley calls poetry's capacity in social movements "to see the future in the present" (*Freedom* 9).⁸ For example, chapter one examines how Bennett's depiction of the tramcar represents both the lived reality of Kingston in the 1940s and simultaneously seeks to transcend this lived reality by making the tramcar into a metaphor for a more liberatory model of social community.

Potential Missed Connections

Rather than telling the straightforward story of a meeting of like minds, this dissertation explores the narrative potential of a missed connection. The following chapters restage a dialogue that only partially happened in reality between the two

⁸ Both Kelley's and Fanon's understandings of poetry are influenced by the Negritude movement, and the Martinican anti-colonial intellectual and poet Aimé Césaire's claim that "poetic knowledge," can fill in for "the great silence of scientific knowledge" on the colonial situation (134). Fanon builds on the psychological dimensions of this surrealist idea in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). For him, poetic interpretation can be used to help heal the psychological experience of racism, and to overcome how language structures an unconscious internalization of inferiority. Fanon's and Césaire's perspectives on the political use value of poetry in anti-colonial struggle inform my own critical reading strategy for analyzing Bennett's and Hughes's contemporaneous poetic projects; however, by doing so I do not mean to suggest that Negritude directly influences them.

writers, and considers why Bennett and Hughes, who shared such common concerns, did not becoming stronger writing allies in the 1940s. Bennett claims in an interview with Daryl Dance that she met Hughes for the first time in 1953, a year before their meeting on Alma John's radio show, and that at this point they became good friends:

BENNETT: I have read quite a lot of Paul Laurence Dunbar, and of Langston Hughes. In fact I knew Langston Hughes very well. Yes, he was a good friend...I met Langston Hughes first in 1953, but I had known about him before all that, but I met him personally and we became very good friends. I used to visit –whenever I would go to New York, Langston would have a sort of ‘little thing’ and have people, you know, people in the theatre come and that sort of thing, and I would do my verses and so. And I have even a picture inside with us doing a radio programme together. WWRL, with Alma John, you know. And he used to send me everything he wrote, he would send me you know...

DANCE: Before he published it or after?

BENNETT: Well, no, no, after. He would always send me something, but we did talk a lot about what he was writing, and what he was doing and we had a lot of mutual friends, you know. I liked him. (26-27)

Bennett indicates that Hughes's poetry formed a significant influence on her writing, providing her with an example of how to envision a black folk poetics, and this makes sense in terms of the age difference between the two authors. Hughes was born in 1902, and his writing career was well underway by the 1920s Harlem Renaissance period, while Bennett was not born until 1917 and did not begin writing until the late 1930s. While she identifies that they first met in 1953, Hughes's biographer, Rampersad claims that they first met in the late 1940s when Hughes was on vacation in Jamaica in the fall of 1947 soliciting work for an anthology of Black poetry, and that later when Bennett came to live in New York, Hughes threw a party for her and Arna Bontemps who was visiting from Nashville in 1953 (2: 138, 2: 228). However, Hughes did not include Bennett in his international anthology of black poetry, *Poetry of the Negro* (1949), edited with Arna Bontemps, which included a long section of work by Jamaican poets. If they had indeed

met in the late 1940s as Rampersad posits, it seems strange that he did not invite Louise Bennett to submit to his anthology, since her “labrish” (Jamaican word for gossip) poetics have perhaps more in common with Hughes’s “chit-chat” poetics than any other poet of the Anglophone Caribbean from this period.⁹ Their shared emphasis on poetry as conversation illuminates how poetry figures for both of them as a genre of social relation and connection. It seems more plausible that they met in 1953, since this corresponds with Bennett’s own recollection of when their friendship began.

When relating Hughes and Bennett’s meeting in 1947 in his biography, Rampersad describes Bennett as a “folklorist-comedienne,” which could reflect Hughes’s opinion of her, especially since this was how she was characterized by her Jamaican contemporaries (2: 228). Though Bennett adamantly asserted herself as a poet, her work was not considered legitimate or literary. Bennett explains this common misconception about her work in her interview with Scott, “They say ‘Oh you just stand up and say these things!’” (46). The “they” refers to the literary establishment in the Caribbean, which did not invite Bennett to publish in literary journals or anthologies in the 1940s and 50s because of her use of Creole.¹⁰ She was typically thought of as an entertainer, and it was not until Mervyn Morris asserted, in the Jamaica *Gleaner* in 1964, that “Louise Bennett is indeed a poet” and thus that her work should be read “seriously” that she was even

⁹ Rampersad notes that Hughes’s writings were characterized and dismissed as “chit-chat” by some of his contemporary reviewers (2: 202).

¹⁰ Earlier in the interview with Scott from 1968, Bennett describes how she was never invited to a Jamaican Poetry League meeting or invited to submit to literary journals or anthologies (46). Hughes’s contacts in Jamaica were with the Jamaican Poetry League, which partially explains why he did not invite her to submit to his anthology.

considered a writer at all. Hughes's failure to recognize Bennett's work with the Jamaican vernacular and folklore as poetic experiment is ironic since the literary value of Hughes's poetry was often dismissed by his contemporary critics because of his use of folk material and common speech. For example, a reviewer in *The Nation* once insisted that he was "merely transcribing folklore, not writing poetry" (Rampersad 145), and yet he seems to perhaps make the same assumption of Bennett in the late 1940s.

The discrepant accounts over when exactly Bennett and Hughes met, and how much they recognized the value and mutual concerns of their poetic projects provides a perfect example of what Brent Hayes Edwards describes as the *décalage* of black internationalism in his study of black intellectuals in Paris in the 1930s. He uses the French word *décalage*, which means either "a difference or gap in time (advancing or delaying a schedule) or in space (shifting or displacing an object)" (*Practice* 13), to stress that interpreting diaspora not only involves examining the connections between people and ideas but also pursuing missed connections, failed identifications, breaks, interrupted meetings and discontinuities. While Hughes's creative exchanges with male Caribbean writers such as Jacques Roumain, and Nicolás Guillén have been well documented and written about by critics, there is little evidence of the dialogues that he and Bennett may have shared, except for Bennett's own acknowledgement of their friendship that began in the early 1950s.¹¹

¹¹ Most recently see Anita Patterson's chapter, "From Harlem to Haiti: Langston Hughes, Jacques Roumain and the avant-gardes" in her book *Race, American Literature and Transnational Modernities* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2008). See also Martha Cobb's "Concepts of Blackness in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén, Jacques Roumain and Langston Hughes" (*CLA journal* 18.2: 262-272 1979), and her book *Harlem, Haiti, Havana* (Washington, D. C.: Three Continents P, 1979), as well as Edward J. Mullen's

At least a small part of the missed connection between Hughes and Bennett can be attributed to the gendered politics of the African Diaspora. As Michelle Stephens underscores, Afro-diasporic discourses consistently gender the transnational black political subject as male.¹² Within this context, it may have been difficult for Hughes to recognize an independent Jamaican woman engaged in similar cultural labor as him. Paul Gilroy's almost exclusive focus on male writers and intellectuals in his foundational study on the black Atlantic both attests to and reproduces the masculine bias of earlier historical moments.¹³ As feminist critics, have pointed out, this is not to suggest that women were not actively involved in black diasporic culture; however, their contributions have been underemphasized by their own contemporaries and in subsequent scholarly accounts.

By bringing together Bennett and Hughes, this comparative study moves beyond an identity politics based approach to postcolonial feminist literary criticism, which often

edited collection *Langston Hughes: in the Hispanic World and Haiti* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1977).

¹² In her recent article, "What is this *Black* in Black Diaspora?" (2009) in *Small Axe*, Stephens underscores the necessity of taking into account the politics of gender and sexuality in transnational race studies: "It has taken the work of black feminists to identify the traces of identities forgotten in colonial modernity as they haunt, and are signified by, conceptual erasures of gender and sexuality from discourses of race and blackness in diaspora. As a host of black feminist theorists have shown, it is not simply the case that the black political subject (as an effigy for certain diasporic, postcolonial, communities) is raced and gendered in specific ways (black, male). Also, gender itself (the operations of multiple discourses on black bodies and sexual acts) becomes secondary in the formation, construction, and performance of a political discourse on diasporic blackness. (34)

¹³ For a gender critique of Gilroy's study see Elizabeth DeLoughrey's article, "Gendering the Oceanic Voyage: Trespassing the (Black) Atlantic and Caribbean" in *Thamyris: Mythmaking from Past to Present* 5.2 (1998: 205-230).

perpetuates the gendered blind spots of previous historical moments, (not unlike Gilroy's study but from a very different vantage point). Critical studies of ethnic women writers tend to group them together, and while these are useful to consider the growth and development of female-centered traditions in different geo-political locations, they also keep the knowledge produced by women's texts out of wider transnational dialogues.¹⁴ While I find such studies, as Denise De Caires Narain's *Making Style: Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry* (2002), which establishes Bennett's formative influence on later Caribbean women poets, incredibly important, I place Bennett in dialogue with Langston Hughes, one of the most famous poets of African American modernism, to pursue alternate lines of affiliation and bring a wider attention to her work.

Following Susan Stanford Friedman's cue in her essay, "Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies," that "we must not close the curtain on modernism before the creative agencies in the colonies and newly emergent nations have their chance to perform" (427), I view the writings of Hughes and Bennett from the 1940s and 1950s in modernist terms. Chapters one and two reveal how technologies figure in their poetic experiments with social voice to critique the imperial dimensions of modernity. These first two chapters, which examine Hughes and Bennett's transnational poetics, comprise Part I entitled "Movements of Writing." Part II "Movements of Reading," investigates how they put their formal experiments with social voice into practice by inviting their readers to perform their poems. Through this

¹⁴ Alison Donnell notes how Caribbean feminist literary criticism runs the risk of reproducing the "double colonization" of women by separating women's texts into their own tradition (139).

mirrored structure, the acts of writing and reading are analyzed and contextualized as embodied social practices that exist in a dynamic relation with each other.

Chapter one, “The Lickle Space of the Tramcar in Louise Bennett’s Transnational Feminist Poetics,” argues that Bennett stages a gendered critique of the Jamaican nationalist movement during the 1940s in her poems featuring working-class women speaking out and demanding space on tramcars. This mirrors Bennett’s own use of her poetry newspaper columns in the *Jamaica Gleaner* and the leftist weekly *Public Opinion* to claim a space for her voice in a male dominated Jamaican public sphere. Her poems rhythmically enact the unsteadiness one feels on a moving tramcar through her use of British meter mixed with Jamaican Creole to symbolize the social instability of everyday life at the end of colonial rule.

Langston Hughes, like Bennett, engages technological metaphors to explore social voice and urban community. Hughes’s canonical Harlem is typically interpreted as a symbol of U.S. black cultural nationalism. However, in chapter two “Diasporic Connectivity in Langston Hughes’s Broadcast Poetics,” I demonstrate his transnational approach to Harlem in his 1940s poetry. In his rarely discussed poem “Broadcast to the West Indies,” (1943), published in the African American newspaper *The People’s Voice*, he envisions a diaspora to circumvent nation by drawing on the metaphor of radio transmission, which creates proximity between disparate geographies. Composed in the style of a radio broadcast, he uses the voice of Harlem as a singular poetic persona to make a call of solidarity to blacks in the Americas. This unitary voice dissolves into a collage of fragmented conversations on the Harlem streets in his later long poem

Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951), which provides a form to imagine interconnected communities amidst social dispersal as a resistance to imperialism.

Part II turns attention to Hughes and Bennett's mutual commitment to using poetry to teach literacy as a form of social empowerment, especially amongst children. Both poets foster performative reading by representing vernacular speech on the page, and by encouraging their readers to read their work aloud. Growing up in the U.S and Jamaica in the early twentieth century, Hughes and Bennett were both subjected to a similar transatlantic schoolroom poetry tradition, which I argue they contend with as one of their only available poetic models. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is not usually interpreted as a precursor to modernism, and even less likely to be associated with postcolonial poetics; however, I uncover evidence that reveals his didactic poetics as a formative influence on Bennett's and Hughes's re-appropriation of memorization and recitation.

Chapter three, "The Rhythmic Literacy Pedagogy of Langston Hughes," interprets Hughes's children's literature and teaching as a pedagogical enactment of his avant-garde poetics in *Montage*. I focus on two of Hughes's most uniquely didactic texts, and their related projects to promote rhythmic literacy: his chapbook; *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations* (1931), which he self-produced to distribute on his reading tour through the American South in 1931, and his interactive children's reader *The First Book of Rhythms* (1954) based on his experiences teaching poetry at John Dewey's Laboratory School in 1949. In these projects, he invites children to experience an embodied and rhythmic engagement with text. I suggest that by encouraging recitation amongst his

readers, rather than aiming to control his readers' speech, he makes the embodied process of reading explicit to give readers more agency.

Despite its history as a colonial pedagogy for enforcing Standard English, memorization and recitation remains a popular reading practice for engaging with Bennett's Creole poetry. Chapter four, "Recalling Elocution Lessons in Creole Poetry Reading," examines Bennett's poetry published in schoolroom readers, as well as her perspectives on literacy and colonial education to address her impact on postcolonial Jamaican children. I propose that Bennett uses feminine vernacular knowledge as a counter-discourse to transform the disciplinary colonial tradition of memorization and recitation into an active mode of reading aimed at social dissent.

The majority of scholarship in postcolonial literary studies focuses on fictional narrative, the genres of the novel, and more recently film. This emphasis on the role of narrative for imagining community is obviously necessary, but often overlooks how language mediates the relationship between the self and the collective, and how linguistic pluralism complicates social belonging. This interdisciplinary study of poetry reinvigorates debates about language in postcolonial studies by bringing attention not only to the politics of representation but also to the politics of reception, and how standardized languages and literacies shape which voices get heard, and which voices get silenced.

PART I

MOVEMENTS OF WRITING

This, in other words, is the key configuration of border thinking: thinking from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the world in dichotomies. Border thinking, in other words, is logically, a dichotomous locus of enunciation and, historically, is located at the borders (interiors or exteriors) of the modern/colonial world system. (85)

Walter D. Mignolo

On my way to the United States, after my Canadian passport, visa and boarding pass are checked by officials in the final corridor, at the Norman Manley International airport in Kingston, Jamaica, I walk by a gigantic portrait of Louise Bennett in the hallway that leads to where I board my plane. Having just attended a conference in her honor at the University of the West Indies, and spent five days researching her poetry at their library and the National Library of Jamaica, her portrait as a Jamaican national hero in this borderland setting seems more evocative of the dichotomies in her work than anything else I have found buried in the archives.¹⁵ The picture is similar to the one on the cover of the 1966 edition of *Jamaica Labrish*, and shows her whole body with her face and hands animated, as if she is in the midst of reciting one of her Creole poems. She is dressed in her peasant costume, designed by her mother in the 1930s, replete with her head-tie and red plaid skirts stitched up at the side, to appear as if she is hitching up her skirts to wade across a shallow river. This action shot symbolizes her preoccupation with performance in motion, yet the picture freezes her in time and space in this departure corridor. Despite her costume's implied pastoral setting for her movement through

¹⁵ The conference, Noh Lickle Twang: Louise Bennett the Legend and the Legacy, was held at the University of the West Indies, Mona in January 2008.

public space, in Bennett's own life she was more likely to have been walking down an airport hallway such as this one, than crossing a rural stream. Her portrait looms larger than life, yet in just a couple of short hours once my plane touches down in Miami, she will drastically shrink from public view where she is known only to a few.¹⁶ In a U.S. context, Langston Hughes, whose poems are taught in elementary schools, invoked by presidential candidates and cited on public monuments, takes Bennett's place as the unofficial poet laureate for a black cultural nationalism.¹⁷

I begin the first part of this dissertation in the departure corridor at the Norman Manley airport, as a border and an interface, what Bennett would call "a lickle space" between the Caribbean and the rest of the world, to evoke the tension between locale, nation, globalization, and diaspora, which Bennett and Hughes explore in their writing. Focusing on poems that engage the politics of everyday language practices, such as the voices of people on a Harlem street, or on a Kingston bus, chapters one and two bring

¹⁶ Despite the fact that Bennett is not well-known outside of the Caribbean, she has had a significant influence on North American popular culture. As Garnett Cadogan stresses, in her article in the *Caribbean Review of Books* published just after Louise Bennett's death in 2006: "Though hardly known to the many non-Jamaicans imitating Jamaica's taut, vibrant vernacular language today, Miss Lou has a pervasive influence on their cultural world. The young hipsters who hum Bob Marley songs, the older ones who belt out Harry Belafonte's 'Day-O,' the hippies who greet each other with 'Irie, mon', and the adolescents who shout 'Cool runnings!' are all inheritors of a world of her making."

¹⁷ Barack Obama referred to Hughes's call of a dream deferred in his campaign speeches in the 2008 election, and John Kerry invoked Hughes's poem "Let America be America Again" in his speeches during the 2004 election. In fact, he wrote a preface for a coffee table edition of Hughes's *Let America be America Again: and Other Poems* that was released in August 2004 during his campaign. While Hughes means his call for "America to be America again" to underscore the opposite - how America has never been America for African Americans, Kerry, perhaps not surprisingly, appropriates this poem in his campaign rhetoric as a straightforward patriotic call to an American past.

attention to Bennett's and Hughes's engagements with local/global dynamics in the 1940s obscured by their later legacy as national icons. Studying how they write in common speech to resist the inheritance of the English language as an instrument of social control during slavery, segregation and colonialism, I demonstrate how their poems act as scripts of social voice to imagine community beyond nation. Specifically, I analyze how they incorporate media and technologies – newspapers, radios, and modes of transportation – into their writing projects. Although typically categorized as part of an oral folk tradition, the modernist projects of Bennett and Hughes mobilize new frameworks for understanding decolonization by incorporating technological morphologies into poetic form.

Bennett's and Hughes's writings which traverse conflicting ideological terrains are aptly characterized by Mignolo's concept of "border thinking" described in the epigraph, and this reflects their own movement across actual geographic borders. Bennett traveled extensively and spent a significant portion of her life living outside of Jamaica in London, New York, Fort Lauderdale and Toronto. Yet, she is typically thought of as a national poet and studied predominantly in Jamaica.¹⁸ Like Bennett, Hughes is both an excessively national figure, and yet his many travels abroad and his work to build international community through his poetry and his cultural work suggest that a more transnational approach is warranted.

¹⁸ Bennett's work is studied primarily in Jamaica partly because of the language barrier but also because her work is published primarily by Jamaican publishers, and thus it is difficult to find a volume of her poetry in print in the rest of North America or in the UK. Though her poems tend to be found in anthologies here and there. Outside of Jamaica, Bennett's poetry gets published in anthologies of postcolonial writing, Caribbean literature, and Caribbean women's writing.

A fundamental concern of this dissertation is to further develop dialogic critical approaches and methodologies for transnational studies of poetry, called for by Jahan Ramazani in his recent book *A Transnational Poetics* (2009) (12). Similar to Charles Bernstein's arguments about a hybrid "Poetics of the Americas," Ramazani establishes cross-culturalism as a predominant force in the development of Anglophone poetry, rather than a postcolonial or minority offshoot, suggesting that poets such as Bennett and Hughes deserve a more important place in Anglophone 20th century poetry histories (3). Admittedly, Hughes has a more acclaimed place than Bennett in poetry history, in part due to the U.S. centric bias of Anglophone poetry scholarship; however, he typically holds a national place, rather than being recognized for his transnational poetics.

The following two chapters address the gaps and absences in the critical narratives of these two poets' careers created by nationalist readings: the neglect of Bennett's pre-independence poetry by critics as anything more substantial than a call for nation, the lack of discussion of Hughes's small press and newspaper poems from the early 1940s and his relationship with the Anglophone Caribbean. Chapter one focuses on what Bennett describes as the "lickle space" of the tramcar as a microcosm of Kingston. I use the Jamaican word for little to reflect her privileging of a local space that appears small and insignificant in a global landscape, and to emphasize the need to redefine the public sphere in vernacular terms. In turn, chapter two outlines Hughes's shift away from largeness, both poetically and politically, to a focus on smallness, and the locale of Harlem and its relationship to other black spaces in the Americas. My critical approach is informed by Hughes's and Bennett's calls to direct attention to smaller spaces within a transnational scope. Their attention to the politics of movement through local public

spaces within a transnational framework during WWII assert that the social unrest going on in Kingston, or in Hughes's case the 1943 riots in Harlem, are just as important as the battles being fought on the World stage in Europe.

Francoise Lionnet and Shuh-mei Shih's concept of minor transnationalism illuminates the play between local and global politics articulated by the voices in Hughes's and Bennett's poems. Inspired by Glissant's theories of creolization, they define minor transnationalism as "the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries" (7), and distinguish this from major transnationalism, which they identify as the hegemonic and homogenizing force of globalization (6). As Lionnet and Shih succinctly put it, "we [meaning scholars of transnationalism] study the center and the margin but rarely examine the relationships among different margins" (2). This dissertation foregrounds the transnational circuits of exchange between African American and Anglophone Caribbean poetry in the 1940s figured by Hughes's and Bennett's work to move beyond such a margin center approach.

Despite the fact that these two poetic traditions both share a history of the Middle Passage (among other things), there has been little study of their relationship with one another. In her book *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas* (2005), Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo argues that the ideologies of cultural nationalism have prevented scholars from examining relations between African Americans and West Indians. She points out how this obscures how "black Americas identities have been constituted as much by (and therefore can be just as well understood through) engagements with each other as by interactions with white Americas powers that be" ("Cosmopolitan" 269). In her dissertation, Nwankwo

examines the development of 19th century discourses of black cosmopolitanism in the 20th century.¹⁹ Countering the construction of Bennett and Hughes as national figures, she posits them as key forerunners to scholarship on the black Atlantic. Studying Bennett's poems that involve international travel, she illustrates how the themes of migration were central to her poetics. Building on Nwankwo's analysis of Bennett's international engagements, chapter one studies Bennett's representation of local travel on public transportation in Kingston as an extension of her poetics of transnational mobility. Ramazani concurs that Bennett's and Hughes's representation of local spaces in their poems often express transnational affiliations. He uses their writings to demonstrate how the "elasticity of poetry" makes it especially useful for exploring cross-cultural circuits and representing "global modernity's interlinking of widely separated sites" (14).

Chapter one also brings a feminist attention to Bennett's intimate and embodied representation of movement through colonial geographies. Her public persona and her poetry play a central role in the formation of post-independence Jamaican identity, yet her printed Creole words are poised on borders, and take-off towards new relationships and spaces that move beyond nation. Her preoccupation with modes of transportation as symbols for social mobility and collectivity belie her pastoral image and peasant costume, and illustrate her gendered engagements with a transnational politics of black modernity.

¹⁹ I cite both Nwankwo's book, *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas* (2005), and her dissertation "Cosmopolitan Consciousness: Inter-American Engagements in the Scripting of African-American and Caribbean Identities" (1999) because, although her book is based on her dissertation, she cuts her focus on the 20th century in her book (including her lengthy chapter on Bennett).

Chapter two explores Hughes's contribution to transnationalism through an examination of his efforts to build solidarity with the West Indies in the 1940s through his poetry and cultural work. In his article "Future Scholarly Projects on Hughes" (1987), his biographer Arnold Rampersad suggested over twenty years ago that Hughes's relationship to the Anglophone Caribbean be examined (312). There are now critical conversations on the majority of issues that Rampersad suggests for further research in his 1987 article, (including his engagements with the Francophone and Hispanic Caribbean). That Hughes's interaction with the little space of the Anglophone Caribbean has not drawn scholars' attention seems telling of the barriers of cultural nationalism discussed in the previous paragraph. Another part of the reason for this neglect is precisely because it forms a small connection in the vast network of Hughes's career, and yet this chapter argues that this small-scale transnational circuit, imagined by Hughes through the metaphor of broadcasting in his newspaper poem "Broadcast to the West Indies," plays a pivotal role in the development of his poetics of social voice. The majority of Hughes's poetry published during his lifetime was ephemeral, published in newspapers, broadsides, chapbooks and little magazines. Since these newspaper and small press poems constitute the bulk of his poetic output, it is worth considering how these poems and their contexts provide a different understanding of Hughes's social poetics.

My approach to transnational poetry criticism is indebted to Rachel Blau DuPlessis's method of "social philology," which interprets the exchange between "the historical terrain and the intimate poetic textures of a work" (1). Building on her approach, I put my close textual analysis in dialogue with contextual and material

analysis of a poem's production, distribution, circulation, and if possible reader reception, in order to more fully study what Ramazani characterizes as poetry's ability to move "in scale between the microcosmic" and "the macrocosmic," and to intertwine little spaces with global networks (16). Put another way, I relate to Mignolo's concept of "border thinking" not only in conceptual terms but also in terms of the material routes that texts travel. Studying the movements of writing is akin to Peter Middleton's concept of "distant reading," which he proposes as an alternative to close reading in poetry criticism. He illustrates how analyzing the distance a poem travels through its production and circulation allows for a consideration of "a text's intersubjective embeddedness in mutually negotiated histories of cultural and social exchange" (11). For socially-engaged poets, such as Bennett and Hughes, such an approach is not only useful, but necessary to fully understand how they expand the possibilities for their audiences to engage with their poems.

Against the backdrop of WWII, the voices being heard in the media across the Afro-diasporic social landscape were those of journalists, politicians, and soldiers, and not the voices of the black working class. However, Hughes's and Bennett's poems that circulated in the print media represent working class black voices in their local environments to address wider social-political concerns. Through contextualized material close readings, the following two chapters assess the role of the poetry newspaper column in anti-imperial discourse during the 1940s. I argue that the highly formalized nature of poetry coupled with its presentation as entertainment in newspapers provided Bennett and Hughes with a veiled site for social critique, and an opportunity to build a black audience for their writing.

CHAPTER 1

THE LICKLE SPACE OF THE TRAMCAR IN LOUISE BENNETT'S
POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST POETICS

Sometime de big strong-physic man dem
 Sprawl out bout de place
 An hooden even gi a po
 Ooman a lickle space

“Tan-Up Seat” (1949) Louise Bennett

Hurtling along Kingston’s city streets in the 1940s, crowded electric tramcars enacted modernity in motion or, perhaps more aptly, put the mobility into modernity. Passengers’ bodies crammed together and jostled against one another rhythmically as the wheels turned along the metal tracks. Louise Bennett represented the social space of tramcars and all forms of public transportation in her early poetry, illustrating that, despite her legacy for championing folk traditions, she also gravitated toward the modern. Many of her early poems employ public transportation as an everyday public space to enact the intersection of race, class, gender, colonialism, and nation in Kingston in the 1940s. Her poems about buses, tramcars, and trains—among them “Rough Riding Tram,” “Tan-Up Seat,” “Tram Car,” “New Bus,” “Fix up,” “Ole-time Tram,” “Mash Flat,” “Season Ticket,” “Accident,” “So de heat,” “Some of Dem,” “Cheap Fare Day,” and “Country Bus”—address issues of overcrowding, mechanical breakdowns, problems with government funding and maintenance of the system, and conflicts between people, and how these issues can both hinder and facilitate a subject’s mobility.

As a teenager in the mid-1930s, she was inspired to write her first Creole poem, “On a Tramcar,” after she overheard a working-class woman defending her space at the

back of the tram (Scott 47). Witnessing a woman elbowing for room on a tramcar ride helped Bennett imagine a feminist postcolonial poetics in the Jamaican vernacular and acted as a catalyst in the formation of her multigenre artistic project. Yet no critics have explored the significance of this story. Bennett's representation of outspoken women on tramcars in the 1940s contrasts with the conclusion of Thomas Macdermot's 1903 novella *Becka's Buckra Baby*, an important early work in the development of Jamaican folk literature, which depicts a woman folk character being hit and killed by a tramcar as she runs into the road. Rosenberg interprets this ending as symbolic of a white masculine modernity triumphing over a feminized black folk culture (51–55). In contrast to Macdermot, at mid-century Bennett portrays working-class women as active participants in modernity, rather than victims of it. As Carolyn Cooper argues, in *Noises in the Blood*, Bennett's women characters who elbow for space in the market or on tramcars can be read as responding to and resisting the rise in male nationalist power (60-6).²⁰

Bennett insists that women claim power in public space, even though in the 1940s the nationalist project in Jamaica, which was dominated by upper-class male elites, encouraged the privatization of women as childbearers and homemakers (Thomas 252). This chapter analyzes several of Bennett's public transportation poems published during the 1940s and discusses the significance of performance in motion in the genesis of her

²⁰ Carolyn Cooper's *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the Vulgar Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (1993) which analyzes Bennett's poetry as a "feminized discourse of voice, identity and native knowledge" (3), constitutes the most-in-depth feminist study of her work. Rhonda Cobham also asserts, in "Women in Jamaican Literature from 1900-1950," "Bennett is one of the first creative writers to register the increase of female oppression which was one of the consequences of the male assertion of racial and political power during the nationalist movement of the 1940s and 1950s" (218).

feminist postcolonial poetics. As Bennett puts it in her poem, “Solja Work,” “me hear one pon tramcar” (*JL* 97) acts as a key principle in the design of her compositional method.²¹ Her poetry, even on the printed page, is like a moving tram. Her language is never meant to sit still in a reader’s mind. In her early publications, *Jamaica Dialect Verses* (1942), *Jamaica Humour in Dialect* (1943), *Anancy Stories and Poems in Dialect* (1944), *Mis’ Lulu Sez: Jamaican Dialect Poems* (1949) and her weekly newspaper columns in *The Jamaica Gleaner* (1943-unknown) and *Public Opinion* (1948-1949), Bennett uses public transportation to stage community debates. My goal in this chapter is to open the dialogues and debates that she presents in her poems, through analysis of them in their original contexts. Throughout her career, Bennett fosters a new inclusive relationship between herself as an artist and her community, and the social dynamics of the tramcar provide her with an early model for this.

Bennett’s poem “Tan-Up Seat,” which is quoted in the epigraph, is a pivotal poem for understanding the motion of the tramcar in the formation of her poetics and her representation of gendered debates in the nationalist movement. It was first published in 1949 in *Mis’ Lulu Sez: Jamaica Dialect Poems*.²² A woman speaker expresses frustration

²¹ Throughout this chapter, Bennett’s titles will be abbreviated in parenthetical references as follows: *Jamaica Dialect Verses* as *JDV*, *Jamaica Humour in Dialect* as *JHD*, *Anancy Stories and Poems in Dialect* as *ASPD*, *Mis’ Lulu Sez: Jamaican Dialect Poems* as *JDP*, *Jamaica Labrish* as *JL*, and Mervyn Morris’s *Selected Poems* as *SP*.

²² I cite the first published version of “Tan-Up Seat” in *Mis’ Lulu Sez: Jamaican Dialect Poems* (1949), rather than the more widely available one in *Jamaica Labrish* (1966). This earlier version has less standardized spellings, which makes the Creole appear more independent from English than the version published in *Jamaica Labrish*. It is also possible that this poem appeared earlier in the 1940s in one of her newspaper columns. However, this cannot be verified because the Sunday edition of the *Gleaner* is missing on the microfilm rolls at the National Library of Jamaica and at the *Gleaner*

at the “big strong-physic man” who does not offer her a seat on a standing-room-only tramcar. She asks, “Who would even give a poor woman a little space?” The speaker’s gendered demand for “a lickle space” forms a microcosm of the anti-colonial politics of that moment, which make clear that the right to one’s own space cannot be separated from one’s right to agency and self-determination. The tramcar figures as a site of gendered conflict over communal space in Bennett’s attempts to imagine community in Kingston. In addition, her demand for “a lickle space” is an image of how Bennett became a public figure by using the discourse of poetry to gain a voice in the male-dominated Jamaican public sphere. Through her focus on public transportation, Bennett explores the different class roles assigned to women in Jamaican society, and the struggle of the colony, as she negotiates a role for herself as a socially engaged artist within these tensions.

The range of Bennett’s career from radio commentator, musician, social welfare agent, actor, and poet to children’s entertainer is incredibly impressive. So too is the range of her audience, which, as Rex Nettleford points out, cuts across class, generation, and race in Jamaica (16). She started out as a young black woman living in the colony of Jamaica writing poems in the midst of social unrest and the rise of the independence movement. She got her break when the editor of the *Gleaner*, Michael De Cordova, after hearing her perform one of her dialect poems at a dinner party, invited her to write a

company from 1943-1947 when Bennett’s column is published. This coincidental “lickle” gap in the *Gleaner* archive obviously presents a limitation for doing scholarship on her column because there appears to be no official archive of it. It also makes dating any of Bennett’s poems from the 1940s difficult. It is quite possible that many of her public transportation poems may have first appeared in her column before being published in her books.

weekly poetry column in the Sunday edition for 10 shillings and 6 pence a week, in 1943 (Narain 56). Her controversial newspaper column, “Jamaica in Dialect,” helped to build her audience and to make her a household name in Jamaica.

At the beginning of her career, she saw herself primarily as a writer, not a performer; however, as her career progressed, she became more invested in the dramatic arts. Bennett explains this in her own words in an interview with Hewitt, “You know, at the beginning of my career, I thought of myself as more quietly writing rather than being a person of the stage. Then through writing and performing, I realized that performance was one big way of getting across this thing” (77).²³ At the practical level, she turned to performance as a way to develop a broader audience for her work and to reach those who could not read. She is well known for her role in the Little Theatre Movement and her transformation of the annual Christmas Pantomime from a British tradition into an indigenous Jamaican practice.²⁴ One can view tramcars as her first little theaters of the everyday; the social dynamics and motion of public transportation help her develop both

²³ Mary Jane Hewitt’s comparative study of Zora Neale Hurston and Louise Bennett, which was her dissertation completed at the University of the West Indies in 1986, offers the most comprehensive overview of Bennett’s career and analyzes how she acts as cultural conservator to preserve Jamaican folk culture. I am greatly indebted to Hewitt’s dissertation, which provides extensive biographical information on Bennett that appears nowhere else.

²⁴ How Bennett became involved with the Little Theatre Movement is an excellent example of how she utilizes poetry in order to have her views heard in the public sphere. She published a poem entitled “Pantomime” in *Public Opinion* in 1948 (Jan. 10, pg. 8) that was critical of the whiteness of the Little Theater Movement and in response to the criticism in her poem, the members invited her to participate in the next pantomime. (Hewitt 85)

the politics and poetics of performance, which informs both her later dramatic work, and her performative reading pedagogy.

Bennett's performances of the Jamaican vernacular have been recognized for their contribution to the cultural labor of stimulating the sentiment of nationalism in the pre-independence period of the 1940s. They illustrate Benedict Anderson's claim in his famous treatise on nationalism that, to imagine community, a nation needs to share a common language (47). Critical scholarship on Bennett's poetry began after independence in the mid-sixties, when her poems began to be taken "more seriously" by critics as symbols of national culture (Morris 60). As Nettleford proposes in his 1966 introduction to *Jamaica Labrish*, "In the post-independence period when many Jamaicans are asking themselves questions about who and why they are, Miss Bennett has taken on new and important dimensions" (9).

Caribbean feminist critics, such as Carolyn Cooper, have stressed that gender politics also contribute to the neglect of Bennett's poetry by critics. The denial of artifice in Bennett's work as a black women writer relates to an overarching problem in feminist politics whereby women are not granted imaginative agency in social and political relations. Not only does this happen to Bennett in the critical reception of her work, but also her poetics themselves thematically address the need for women to be gain more imaginative agency in social and political life. In a counterfactual intervention, Cynthia Enloe questions how postcolonial nation states might have turned out differently if women would had more power to participate in the invention of nationalist movements (64). If one of the aims of feminist theory is to transform social and political relations by imagining and enacting alternatives, the continual negation of women's imaginative labor

stands as an obstacle to this project, whether it's in a literary text, in the kitchen, or as in Bennett's many poetic personae in the market higglering goods or on a tramcar demanding space.²⁵ Following from this sexist predicament that Bennett herself challenges in her poetics and that happens to her in the reception of her work, I seek to recover the complexity of the artifice in Bennett's poetics as social labor that contributes to the crucial work of imagining community.²⁶

My focus on the start of Bennett's writing career in the 1940s is motivated by trends in the related fields of postcolonial feminist historiography and Caribbean literary studies calling for more attention to discourse production by women on issues of gender and nationalism prior to West Indian independence.²⁷ Postcolonial feminists, such as

²⁵ Faye V. Harrison describes the role of higglering in a Kingston slum: "From this informal labor force also come female street vendors, called "higglers," who are responsible for distributing staple foodstuffs throughout the urban population, particularly to the poor" (179).

²⁶ Narain points out how Bennett's poems are often given one-dimensional readings because the "discussion of her work has largely been dominated by the focus on the importance of her innovative use of Creole, rather than on detailed readings of her poetry" (52). I would add that when close readings of her poetry are done they are typically of the same few poems that are frequently anthologized such as "Noh Lickle Twang," "Jamaica Ooman," "Colonization in Reverse," and "Bans O' Killing," even though she has hundreds of different poems.

²⁷ In *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Sense of Feminist International Politics* (1989), Cynthia Enloe stresses how "the history of a nationalist movement is almost always a history filled with gendered debate," and yet these debates are forgotten once the "nostalgic patriarchal interpretation of nationalism has won" (59). In turn, in "Gendered Cartographies of Knowledge, Area Studies, Ethnic Studies and Postcolonial Studies" in *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (2006), Ella Shohat proposes that women's participation in anti-colonial nationalist movements be considered part of feminist historiography even if it does not relate directly to a Western understanding of feminist concerns. For more on the relationship between gender and nationalism see the collections *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies and Democratic Futures* (1997) edited by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty and *Dangerous Liaisons:*

Anne McClintock, have established how the invention of nationalism and the imagining of community in anticolonial movements involve a culturally specific operation of gender power that demands more sustained inquiry (89). In the context of Caribbean literary studies, Alison Donnell proposes that more attention should be directed to Caribbean literature prior to the 1950s, especially literature written by women, because the Caribbean literary canon established by writers after independence “navigates a fairly smooth if highly selective and all-male crossing from colony to nation” (42). Although Bennett is certainly a part of this canon, I suggest that aspects of her 1940s poems that do not forecast a “smooth crossing from colony to nation” demand more analysis.

Performance Moves in Newsprint

Henrice Altink discusses, in “The Misfortune of Being Black and Female: Black Feminist Thought in Interwar Jamaica” (2006), how the majority of Afro-Caribbean feminist historiography focuses on slavery and emancipation, and neglects the interwar period. One can even see the neglect of the interwar period reflected in the scholarship on Bennett’s work, which begins post-independence and tends to not consider the ways that her earlier work in the 1940s and 1950s informs her later work. Altink proposes that attention be given to the production of discourse and the circulation of ideas, as well as women’s activism from this period. She examines discourses on the status of Afro-Jamaican women during this period produced by middle class women in periodicals;

Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives (1997) edited by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat.

however, she does not examine Bennett's unique contribution to these discourses through the genre of poetry, even though Bennett publishes in the periodicals she discusses, such as the *Gleaner* and *Public Opinion*.

Bennett published much of her early poetry in newsprint, first in her weekly column in the national paper the *Jamaican Gleaner* and then later in the leftist anti-colonial weekly *Public Opinion*. Her column increased newspaper sales of the *Gleaner*, which helped her gain a secure contract with them. Newspaper companies published her 1940s books in small print runs, (her first book by the *Herald* and the following three by the *Gleaner*). They were subsidized by advertisements for everyday items like soap and Red Stripe beer, which placed her poetry more within the economy of print capitalism than poetry of her era is typically situated.²⁸

According to Anderson, the newspaper and the novel are two of the most important genres for imagining community in the building of nationalism because of how they circulate in print capitalism, and he only briefly mentions that poetry may also play a particular role (24-5). He asserts that "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). For Anderson, the daily seriality of the newspaper allows readers to imagine "steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity" (26). Even though reading a newspaper is (typically) a private act, one does it with the understanding that many anonymous strangers are also reading the

²⁸ One must question how a reader confronting her poetry alongside the rhetoric of advertising that is meant to stimulate one's desire for commodities stimulates a different form of reading desire in response to a poem and might influence the affect that Bennett wishes to elicit from her audience.

newspaper at the same time. However, he does not address what particular style of imagining a newsprint poem, such as Bennett's might engender for a reader.

In Bennett's poetry newspaper column, she deploys the performative aspects of both print and oral cultures to reach the broadest possible audience. While Anderson does not address oral forms for imagining community, Brathwaite addresses how the African oral influence on Caribbean culture means that music and poetry do play significant roles in the development of Caribbean nationalisms. Many feminist postcolonial critics, such as Anne McClintock, also critique Anderson for his masculine Eurocentric understanding of nationalism and his over-emphasis on the importance of print capitalism.²⁹ McClintock points out that print capital has only been accessible to a relatively small literary elite (*Dangerous* 102). In her examination of South Africa, she argues that "the politics of spectacle" also play a strong role in the building of anti-colonial nationalism, what she describes as the "theatrical performance of invented community" (*Dangerous* 102). When Bennett performs her poetry on stage and enacts the Jamaican vernacular, her poetry clearly engages with "the politics of spectacle" that McClintock describes. I suggest that Bennett makes her first performance moves in print, and her theatrical style derives from this in some measure.

Paula Bennett (the US critic, no relation to Bennett) has identified the poetry newspaper column in her book *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipation Project of American Women's Poetry 1800-1900* (2003), as a feminized space of public discourse,

²⁹ While McClintock's critique of Anderson is valid, I think that one must also question how anti-colonial nationalisms are often more masculine and Eurocentric than they are typically assumed to be, making Anderson just as applicable in this context.

and her study offers a useful approach for analyzing Bennett's newsprint poems. She offers an explanation for how these columns originated when newspapers began to be published in North American colonies in the early eighteenth century:

Newspapers at this time "were mainly devoted to disseminating commercial and political news, it seems likely that publishers viewed these female-authored complaints as harmless filler or else as cost-free ways to create community appeal. But whatever the case, by the mid-1730s, the spaces where women's writing appeared—typically letter and poetry columns—had become the designated public sites for the discussion of gender issues (6).

While Bennett occupies a much different colony on the verge of nation in 1940s Jamaica, her column in the leftist anti-colonial weekly *Public Opinion* occupies a parallel place in the print public sphere. Her poems were not published in the literary section of the newspaper but placed seemingly at random amongst political articles, which makes them appear as filler. Her poems were often advertised on the front page beside the banner title suggesting that the editors presented it as entertainment to sell papers and to produce "community appeal."

Despite its presentation as filler or entertainment, Paula Bennett demonstrates how women's poetry in nineteenth century periodicals engages in debates on the roles of women in the new nation and had a positive effect on the development of the American women's suffrage movement (5). She proposes:

Resituating nineteenth-century American women's newspaper and periodical poetry within the tradition of social dialogue and debate from which it sprang and to which it belongs, will clarify this poetry's function as a form of public speech addressed to concrete, empirically identifiable others (5).

Placing these women's poems within their historical context illuminates how their aesthetics are manipulated to produce affect within the reader in order to persuade them of a particular position (5). Her point is that while the public sphere was male dominated,

poetry columns were seen as a place where women could have a small voice in the public sphere or, as Bennett puts it “a lickle space,” and that many women used this advantageously.³⁰ Reading Bennett’s poetry as “social dialogue and debate” is useful in terms of understanding how her poems are not dramatic monologues only designed to produce comedic relief, but should be interpreted as intersubjective propositions directed towards a reading public. The next section of this chapter will explore how the thematic metaphor of public transportation parallels her own strategies of audience building both within her poems through her use of direct address and in her production and circulation.

³⁰ An excellent example of how Bennett employed poetry as a vehicle for social critique is how she handled the negative experience of her first book publication *Jamaica Dialect Verses* in 1942. An entrepreneur George R. Bowen at the Herald Ltd. published her first book and paid her with a cheque for five pounds and 24 copies. Almost two years later, Bennett received a report from Bowen of expenses and income from book sales with a bill for the proceeds from the 24 books he had given her for 96 shillings. Bennett refused to pay this money, partly because she did not have that kind of money and so he filled a lawsuit against her. After she was served a summons, she wrote and published the poem “Ole Puss” with a harsh critique of Bowen in her column in the *Sunday Gleaner* (May 21 1944). In response to this poem, Bowen brought a another suit against the *Gleaner* company for slander and he produced the original contract that Bennett had signed with him, which he argued stipulated that he not only held the copyright on the poems she had published with him but also that he owned the rights to all of her future published poems. However, on the day of the court case many people, presumably from her reading audience, gathered at the courthouse to support Bennett and Bowen dropped all charges. (Hewitt 69-73) Considering this is Bennett’s first experience with publication, it is interesting to also speculate on how it impacted her own sense of textual authority and ownership, as well as her decision to focus more on cultivating an oral audience through performance. It also shows how as a young woman writer, she employed her actual poems to resist being taken advantage of by a man who recognized the lucrative potential of her innovative use of the vernacular.

Tramcars as Contained Little Theatres

The space of the tramcar acts as a metaphor for her to imagine the compositional space of a poem and to understand a poem as a performative social interaction between the poet and her audience. In her 1968 interview with Dennis Scott, Bennett explains the development of her compositional process and how a working-class woman's speech on a tramcar inspired her first Creole poem, "On a Tramcar":

From the time I was quite young, I wanted to write. At first I started to write things about birds, and bees and trees. But then I realized that I was not doing what I really wanted to do. There was life going on around me and people living their lives, and what I was writing had nothing to do with what was really happening around me. So then I started to take a greater interest in people—to listen to what they were saying and how they were saying it, and the first dialect verse I wrote was about a tramcar. (47)³¹

Bennett expresses her desire to create a modern poetics of the everyday. Her rejection of themes such as "birds and bees and trees" illustrates how she rejects a Victorian pastoral tradition and positions herself as a writer of modernity. She characterizes herself as a writer throughout this entire interview, which challenges the numerous interpretations of her as an unself-conscious folk performer or entertainer. Unlike Brathwaite's assertion that Nation Language writers should document the natural Caribbean environment, such as the sublime roar of the hurricane (10), and despite Bennett's investments in folk culture, she is clearly more interested in performing this in the environment of modernity.

³¹ Mervyn Morris describes this incident in his own words in his introduction to Bennett's *Selected Poems*, as follows: "One day she set out, a young teenager all dressed up, for a matinee film show in Cross Roads. On the electric tramcars which were then the basis of public transport in Kingston, people with baskets were required to sit at the back and they were sometimes resentful of other people who, when the tram was full, tried to join them there. As Louise was boarding the tram she heard a country woman say "Pread out yuhself, one dress-oman a come." That vivid remark made a great impression on her and on returning home she wrote her first dialect poem, "On a Tramcar" (iv).

Rather than exploring how the “hurricane does not roar in pentameters” (Brathwaite 10), Bennett’s poetics rhythmically enacts the roar of the tramcar made by the mechanized sounds of the tram and the voices of its passengers.

Bennett’s feminism does not propose that women should form an alternative public sphere to contest sexism, but rather that women should claim space in their existing environments. The social environment of the tramcar specifically engenders this recognition for her. It is also the site where her identification with working-class women and her political commitment to writing in dialect crystallizes. She further explains in the interview that it was “a country woman saying ‘pread out yuself, one dress-woman a come’” (47) who inspired her to write “On a Tramcar.” The performative poetics of this phrase helped her realize that she not only wanted to write “what they were saying” but also “how they were saying it.” Because her poetic techniques are aimed at translating the performative dynamics of speech, Bennett’s emphasis on recreating “how things were said” indicates how writing and performance are not separated in her poetic project. “On a Tramcar” dramatizes a class conflict that erupts when a middle-class woman tries to take a seat at the back of the bus reserved for workers carrying baskets.³² Bennett describes herself as “all dressed up” on that day, which suggests that she is the middle-class woman in the story (Scott 47). By recreating the performance on the tramcar in her poem, she negotiates her problematic class position in relation to her desired audience

³² Morrissey explains the Market Tram system for workers carrying baskets: “In the early days, extra ‘market cars’ were for on Fridays and Saturdays to transport vendors and their goods to and from market. The cars were designed with the seat backs facing towards the roadway – the space in the middle was reserved for the baskets” (18). The system was eventually abandoned because as Bennett’s poem dramatizes passengers did not follow it.

and imagines a communal identity that cuts across class lines but not across class conflict.

Bennett's attraction to the performative dynamics of the tramcar can be explained by the fact that it formed a contained microcosm of her unstable social environment in Kingston in the 1940s. In many of her tramcar poems, she dramatizes overcrowding in Kingston due to increased migration to the city from rural areas, as well as decreased funding for public transportation due to WWII and the economics of colonialism. Her description of this overcrowding corresponds with contemporary accounts. In fact, Langston Hughes describes his impressions of crowded tramcars in Kingston while on vacation there in 1947, in an essay in his *Chicago Defender* column, "Here to Yonder":

Kingston street cars are a sight to behold at rush hour time. They are open cars...From four to six in the afternoon people sling all over them, dangling perilously in the path of passing cars. Surely they must get sideswiped occasionally but I never saw it happen. All during the day, youngsters who have no pennies for fare swing on and off the trams as they run along, jumping off the side steps at every stop and then jumping on again when the car starts. The conductors do not seem to mind as long as they never actually mount the car and a seat." (Jan. 10 1948)

Similarly, in an article in *The Daily Gleaner* in 1966, Sibley recalls how "...one saw tramcars passing along the streets with people hanging on like flies to every conceivable ledge, and inside the tram was so packed that the ticket collector could not get between the benches to collect the fare . . ." (16).

In the following quotation from her poem "So de Heat," first published in 1949 in *Mis' Lulu Sez*, Bennett humorously describes the experience of the overcrowded tramcar on a hot day in Kingston:

So de tram kyar pack wid smady
Hundred sidung, thousan' stan!

Like bans a over-size fish
Eena small-size fryin' pan. (8)

Her overblown exaggeration of how many people were riding the tramcar as a “hundred sidung, thousan’ stan” conveys two things: how the extreme overcrowding of the tramcar must have felt from a passenger’s perspective and how she imagines the passengers on the tramcar as symbolic of a larger social collectivity. The embodied simile of the passengers as fish fry lessens the sense of individual identity as they sizzle together in the sweaty environment, making the boundaries between the passengers’ bodies blur together. Her emphasis on how big the fish are in relation to the smallness of the frying pan underscores how the tramcar acts as a site of containment that is bursting at the seams.

The humorous tone of this poem suggests that Bennett was drawn to the forced social intimacy that this crowding creates, whether this encouraged collectivity, as it does in “Se de heat,” or conflict between divided social groups, as it does in “Tan-Up Seat” and “On a Tramcar.” As a contained microcosm of her social environment, public transportation offered a space for Bennett to explore how global and local pressures intersect. The heightened social conflict in Jamaica during the 1940s that would have erupted in everyday spaces such as tramcars can be attributed to the broader global pressures of World War II and shortly after, and all of Jamaica’s resources being used to support Britain’s war.³³ In this poem, the pressure of the heat symbolizes these pressures reaching a boiling point, and Bennett responds with humor to diminish the tension.

³³ See Ken Post’s *Strike the Iron: A Colony at War – Jamaica, 1939-1945* (Humanities P, 1981) for in-depth history of this period.

In *Race Rebels, Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class*, the historian Robin D. Kelley discusses how what Bennett would call the fish-fry effect of overcrowded public transportation made it a site of struggle and resistance in Birmingham, Alabama, during World War II. Although Kelley's focus on the effect of segregation on the sociopolitical dynamics of public transportation in the American South represents a different social context than 1940s Kingston, some useful parallels can be made in terms of the politics of race, class, and gender on the social space of public transportation during World War II in the Black Atlantic. Kelley argues that "wartime rhetoric unintentionally undermined the legitimacy of white supremacy" in the American South by urging people to support the war to fight against Hitler's racism, thus raising consciousness of the hypocrisy of racist Jim Crow laws (55). British wartime rhetoric also had a similar effect in Jamaica by drawing people's attention to the hypocrisy of colonial racism in Jamaica.

Moreover, Bennett herself had a firsthand experience with segregation on public transportation in the American South in 1945 when she was traveling to England on a British Council scholarship. This gave her a diasporic perspective on the performative politics of this social space. In an interview, she describes this experience on her first trip abroad as the first time she "came up against any racial thing" (Dance 30). Her route to England was a boat to Miami, then a train to New York and then another boat to England. She held a first-class ticket for the train from Miami to New York, but the train authorities told her that she could not sit in the first-class section until they passed the Mason-Dixon Line (Dance 30). Even though Bennett would have been considered lighter

skinned on the race spectrum in Jamaica, within an American context of segregation she would have been considered black.

Kelley proposes that the “dramaturgical quality of social intercourse within the interior spaces of public [transportation]” makes those spaces unique sites for public resistance, because other “passengers can act as potential witnesses and allies” (72). Bennett’s own experience of racism on the train in Miami supports this claim. When she was refused a seat in the first-class section, her traveling companions insisted on sitting with her in the third-class section. Even though they were told that they could move to first class after they crossed the Mason-Dixon Line, in an act of solidarity, they insisted on sitting together in the third-class section all the way to New York (Hewitt 79). Bennett’s simultaneous experience of social exclusion and communal solidarity on her train ride is a tension, which she goes onto explore in many of her late 1940s public transportation poems.

Hewitt notes that while Bennett writes two poems about her first journey to England, “Pon a Boat” and “Pon a Plane,” celebrating social mobility, migration and travel, she does not write one about this specific train experience. Hewitt speculates that this is perhaps because it was too painful for her (362). One can argue that once Bennett returned to Kingston, her poems published in 1949 *Jamaican Dialect Poems*, such as “Tan-Up Seat,” “Rough Riding Tram,” “Tram Car,” “So de Heat,” “Some of Dem,” are in some sense responses to this experience or attempts to write the “Pon a Train” poem that she could not compose initially.

Kelley conceptualizes the social space of public transportation as “little theaters” where “passengers [can] witness, or participate in, a wide variety of skirmishes” (57). He

uses the term theater to assert a connection between the dramatic and the military sense of the word, to illustrate how even acting out verbally in public space is a form of battle. The design of buses and tramcars where seats face one another and passengers are forced to stand or sit in very close proximity to one another creates an intimacy between passengers that lends itself to collective witnessing (57). Kelley proposes that this engenders resistance by facilitating the formation of collective memory based on the everyday experience of racism, classism, and sexism (72). This “dramaturgical quality” of public transportation that Bennett herself experienced informs the development of her feminist performance poetics and how she imagines her audience. She recognized that, to expand the social impact of her artistic project, she would need to incorporate performance into her artistic project, and this required that she understand writing itself as performativity, which the theatrical architecture of the tramcar helped to facilitate.³⁴

³⁴ Kelley’s metaphor of public transportation as “little theaters” parallels the trend by Caribbean intellectuals, such as CLR James, to view the West Indian islands themselves as little theaters of larger global struggles, which the historian Harvey Neptune affirms in *Caliban and the Yankees: Trinidad and the United States Occupation* in his examination of the role of the U.S and Great Britain in 1940s Trinidad (15). Bringing these two metaphors of little theaters (public transportation and the island of Jamaica) together illustrates how the quotidian interactions on public transportation can be understood as *mise en abyme* theaters of these larger global struggles. The metaphor of the Caribbean islands as theaters raises the question of audience, and who watches these performances. For Bennett, it seems that what is important about public transportation is that these are contained spaces, which means that rather than the metaphor invoking an outside or international audience, it is the passengers themselves who are both the everyday actors of these struggles as well as the participatory audience who share the memory of the performances. By conceptualizing her audience through the social space of the tramcar, Bennett cultivates a relationship between herself and her audience to pursue a communal form of a self-determination. As a young woman writer, Bennett herself finds agency through writing and performing which makes her an active audience member in her (imagined) community on the tramcar.

The social dynamics on public transportation inform Bennett's understanding of her role both as a writer and as a participatory audience member who participates by recreating through the medium of poetry the scenes she has witnessed to expand the production of collective memory, as she does in her first poem, "On a Tramcar." By dramatizing the woman's voice in print, Bennett preserves the individual woman's experience of the conflict—and in a way continues the woman's performance—for readers to retrospectively witness and make a part of collective memory. As contained little theaters, tramcars also help her to negotiate her problematic class position in relation to her desired audience and to imagine a communal identity that cuts across class lines but not across class conflict.

In the 1950s, she liked to buy third class tickets when traveling across the island of Jamaica because she appreciated the creative energy of the people who inspire her writing (Salmon and Prince). As she describes in the following poem "Some of Dem":

So anytime yuh feel sad an
 Yuh want get joke an' laugh
 Jus' teck a train an' watch de people
 Gwine awn an' comin off (*JDP* 12)

She describes observing people on the train in theatrical terms as a light and entertaining experience, while there are no traces of her own experience in the South, one wonders how her earlier train ride in the American South influences this compositional method and her desire for racial solidarity across class. She uses the second person pronoun to address her reader directly and to show how she is not separate from her audience but merely another passenger on the train. She also goes on to emphasize how everyone

observes other passengers while riding on public transportation to show how she is not different from her audience:

Yuh ever siddung or tan up
 Pan bus, tramcar, or train
 An' watch de people weh dah come
 Awn an' go off Miss Jane? (*JDP* 10-11)

She lists the positions of sitting and standing and the various forms of transport to make her address inclusive of a range of different riders. Bennett directly addresses her audience as one passenger might do to another on a bus ride. By imagining her audience members as passengers who shared a bus or train ride with her, Bennett conceptualized an intimate and participatory audience for her writing that sought to cross class lines. Bennett modernizes the call and response dynamic in Jamaican folk culture through the setting of the tramcar.

Bennett's depiction of women speaking out in "Tan-Up Seat" and "On a Tramcar" indicates that she is drawn to public transportation because she recognizes it as a social space where women, more often than men, tend to be key actors. Many American Black feminists draw attention to the role women played in utilizing the spaces of public transportation for resistance to Jim Crow laws during the Civil Rights movement. This includes discussion of famous protests by women such as Rosa Parks and the women from the Montgomery bus boycotts, as well as more small-scale acts by women to defend their rights while riding public transportation.³⁵ More women are actors on public

³⁵ For work on black women's use of public transportation as a site of resistance in the Civil Rights Movement see: Mary Fair Burks, "Trailblazers: Women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott," *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers 1941-1965*, ed. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), 71-83; Willi Coleman "Black Women and

transportation partly because women tend to ride buses more than men, especially working class women in the American South who, during that time, may have worked as domestics and had to cross the city to travel to white neighborhoods. Also in Kingston, more women than men would have used public transportation to travel to work in the market, or to travel to middle class neighborhoods to work as domestics. Kelley claims that buses are somewhat “safer” public spaces than an open street for women to stage resistance or express discontent with the status quo (70). With other passengers as witnesses, women can speak out with less fear of male violence. She saw how on the bus, due to the social intimacy of the space, those not normally given an audience in the public sphere have a momentary chance of being heard in front of a mixed-class audience.

Lickle Spaces in Motion

As well as being contained microcosms of her social-historical moment where women play prominent roles and providing her with a way to imagine a social intimacy with her audience, the most significant aspect of public transportation for Bennett is that it is a shared space that is in motion. By relating to community through motion and migration, she begins to resolve the seeming contradiction between migration and national identity, and to explore how national identity does not get formed on the basis of a stable space, but rather through perpetual motion and contestation.

Segregated Public Transportation: Ninety Years of Resistance,” *Black Women in American History* v. 5, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Carlson P, 1990) 295-301.

In the poem “Season Ticket,” first published in *Jamaica Dialect Poems* in 1949, about the new photo identification required for season public transportation passes, she likens riding on local public transportation to the experience of migration. She suggests that the new bus passes that require photo identification are like a passport: “Like train is any boat, / Dah-pase photograph pon ticket, / Like ticket is passport” (*JDP* 56), which leads her to conclude: “Ef yuh dah-travel everyday, / Den yuh haffe agree / Fe teck pickcha, sign name an gwan / Like yuh dah-go a sea” (*JDP* 56). As in many of her other poems, Bennett uses the conversational second person address to give a sense of the poem as a familiar dialogue. She implies that those that migrate to another country in search of work are not any different than workers who merely commute everyday on the bus across the city to work. By imagining social collectivity on public transportation, she imagines all members of the collective as travelers, rather than creating a false dichotomy between those who leave and those who stay.

The fact that tramcars are a moving social space helps Bennett conceptualize social collectivity not as a fixed given, but rather as something that is in constant transformation and to understand this transformation in embodied terms. “Tan-Up” and other tram poems, such as “Ruff-Ridin’ Tram” and “Ole-Time Tram,” describe and formally enact how the movement of the tram is experienced by the passengers and how standing is much more difficult on a moving tramcar. In “Ole-Time Tram,” she is nostalgic for what she calls the “palam-pam” of the tramcar wheels moving along the tracks, as compared to the “sweet an steady” rides on the new motorized buses. This poem was written to commemorate the last tramcar run in Kingston in 1948 when buses replaced the last of the tramcars. The nostalgia expressed for the out-of-date tramcars

indicates that modernity itself engenders mourning for the past. Bennett suggests that one not only longs for a lost folk culture, but also the rapidity of modern advances. She describes how the tramcar causes the passengers to dance in celebration of its movement:

Sometime him get eena tempa
 An growl an roll an prance.
 Till we inside look like
 Boogie-woogie we dah dance! (*JDP* 94)

To describe the tram moving as “a growl” both personifies and draws attention to the unmelodic sound that the tram makes as it moves. The speaker positions herself as part of the collectivity by using the pronoun “we” and identifying herself as part of the boogie-woogie dance. Bennett’s growling tram humorously makes it sound as if the tramcar is alive and has swallowed all the passengers. The personification of the tram inversely represents the embodied experience of the passengers. The blurring of the tram with the passengers’ bodies is encouraged in the following line, “For Sometime wen Tram pack, it bleed / Me heart fe hear it squeak” (94). Again sound is substituted for embodied sensation. Bleeding is heard as the sound of squeaking. The use of sound to denote physical sensation conveys how the body experiences rhythm. The speaker of the poem hears the tram with her heart to suggest that the rhythm of her body, her heartbeat, picks up on the rhythm of the tram.

The reference to the African American musical style boogie-woogie shows the influence of African American culture on Jamaican culture during this time. Boogie-woogie was developed in the late 19th century in Texas and is said to be a carry over of West African Ostinato drum rhythms and to be inspired by the sound and rhythm of the steam engine as well as the desire for freedom and mobility that the steam engine

represented to southern blues musicians (Silvester 6). The broken octave bass line of boogie-woogie is said to mimic the broken rhythm of the steam engine that frequently accelerates, deaccelerates, chugs and thumps. This explains why Bennett might have heard the boogie rhythm in the movement of the tramcar which has a similar disjointed mechanized rhythm, as well as why she celebrates the freedom of movement that the tramcar facilitates. Similar to blues musicians, she enacts this conflict in the rhythmical structure of her poetics.

Feminist Conflict in “Tan-Up Seat”

The celebration of a moving social body in “Ole Time Tram” is contrasted in “Tan-Up Seat,” which explores the disjointed rhythm of the tramcar as a metaphor for the difficulty of standing together in solidarity. In “Tan-Up Seat,” Bennett describes how it is challenging to control one’s body on a moving tramcar, especially when standing, and to keep it still against the movement of the tramcar and other bodies: “Den wen the tram make ‘pleng’ an start, / An yuh heart start fe fail, / Teck one han heng awn pon yuh life / A one han grab de rail” (32). The lurching movement of the tram that is described as well as formally enacted through the poem’s metrics creates a sense of embodied confusion. The onomatopoeic “pleng” interrupts the rhythm of female speaker’s body. Her “heart start fe fail” and her body must follow the rhythm of the tram by grabbing onto the tram’s bar for support. At the linguistic and social level, the effect of the motion of the tramcar on individual passengers functions as a metaphor of the social instabilities happening in Kingston at this time and how these are experienced physically, especially by women. The experience of being thrown off balance by a moving tram and the need to continually

regain balance to stay standing functions in Bennett's poetics as a metaphor of both the linguistic and social instabilities of her historical moment and how individuals bear these instabilities in and through their bodies.

To fully illuminate the argument of this chapter, I will now turn to an in-depth analysis of "Tan-Up Seat," to demonstrate how the lickle space of the tramcar in Bennett's poetics contributes to a feminist understanding of decolonization. After the 1940s "Tan-Up Seat," is republished in *Jamaica Labrish* in 1966. However, it is not included in the 1982 *Selected Poems*, designed for the instruction of her poems in Jamaican schools which suggests that her demand for a women to find "a lickle space" does not fit into the nationalist vision that Bennett is meant to espouse for school children. It is most likely written in the late 1940s after Louise Bennett returns to Kingston from the UK. Bennett wrote this poem in the voice of a working class woman who is tired after a long day of work and boards a standing room only tramcar and relates her experience to an implied sympathetic listener.

The ballad form of Bennett's "Tan-Up Seat" is characteristic of many of her poems and reveals how her feminist social-political analysis embeds itself in the formal techniques of her compositional method. The poem's metrics create the experience of being on a standing-room-only tramcar. It consists of eleven, four-line stanzas, where only every second line rhymes. The alternating lines that rhyme have a consistent syllabic count of six syllables. These short lines create a sense of speed, whereas lines one and three of each stanza are longer and curb the speed of the poem. The use of rhyme in every second line recreates the broken rhythm of the tramcar that stops and starts. Bennett writes in a wavering iambic that is disrupted by the inflections of Jamaican Creole,

signified by phonetic spellings that push and pull at the formal structure of the poem. As Brathwaite suggests, iambic pentameter, the most dominant British poetic meter, functions as a tool of empire to flatten out the diversity of speech rhythms (*History* 13). Bennett employs iambic only to stage its continual derailing by the inflections of Creole. This technique is illuminated by Mervyn Morris's analysis of her poetics in his keynote address at the Noh Lickle Twang Conference. He discussed the importance of the tension between order and variation in the formal structure of Bennett's poetics that plays out in the friction between meter and rhythm. In Frederic Cassidy's linguistic study *Jamaica Talk* (1962), he describes the formation of Creole by explaining how African speech rhythms pull at the structures of English to transform both syntax and vocabulary. Bennett explores the embodied dialectical poetics of Creole through the metaphor of the moving tramcar to show how African rhythms pull English off course. Through the embodied experience of riding on the tramcar, she illustrates language development as a process of creation where the body works through language and language works through the body as it interacts with its environment. Recalling the day that Bennett rode on a tram and overheard a woman speaking in dialect as being the spark that inspired her to write in Jamaican, it is not only her eavesdropping but also her own embodied experience of riding the electric tram that allows her to feel the dialectical pull of Creole and encourages the design of her compositional method.

The sensation of push and pull that one's body feels on a tram, which Bennett rhythmically enacts in "Tan-Up Seat," begins as a linguistic push and pull with the oxymoronic title, which is the Jamaican expression for standing room only. The words *stand up* and *seat* semantically contradict one another. Her play with the phrase is an

example of how she builds on the dialectical poetics inherent in Jamaican Creole. She uses it to explore the experience of contradiction at the embodied level through the metaphor of riding a tramcar by first playing out the semantic contradiction of “stand-up seat” as a conflict of movement and positioning. How can a seat be standing up? How can one sit in a standing up seat? Is it possible to sit and stand at the same time?

The embodied confusion invoked by the title and the metaphor of the standing-room-only tram connects to the contradiction of femininity proposed in the poem when the speaker challenges the men who want her to espouse a Victorian femininity but do not give her a seat. This suggests the confusion over the role of women in the nationalist project and the conflict between women as agents in the society and the deployment of women as passive symbols of national respectability. Stand, or “tan” in Jamaican, is also typically used in the sense of “to be,” which underscores how movement and positioning in this poem pertain to identity and how one gains an identity in one’s community. This makes the woman speaker’s claim for space also a claim for her identity to be recognized.

“Tan-Up Seat” begins by the woman asking “yuh” to identify with her situation: “Yuh ever feel dead beat / An wen yuh board a tram yuh fine / Is so-so tan-up seat?” (32). Immediately the reader is invited to imagine herself on the tramcar and in the situation of the speaker. The fact that the contradiction of the title is immediately followed by an interrogative address further opens this poem as a space of dialogue and debate. The direct address to a reader creates a sense of familiarity with the woman’s voice and calls on the reader to respond to the poem. The frequent second person address in Bennett’s poems illustrates how a poem for her is primarily a performative social interaction. The poem dramatizes how Bennett conceptualizes her audience as fellow passengers on a bus

ride. In the first half of the poem, the second person pronoun “yuh” is used in the poem fifteen times, continually calling on the reader to put herself in the speaker’s place and empathize with her situation.

The speaker goes on to employ humor to gain the listener’s empathy and identification in the next stanza, by making fun of how the bumpy speed of the tram can ruin one’s hairstyle if one has just been to the hairdresser: “For be de time yuh journey en’ / Yuh head fava ole-broom!” (32). Again she underscores how the body experiences the tram ride. Her appeal to other women on how to avoid having one’s head look like an old broom references the struggles that women of African descent go through to have their hair conform to white ideals of beauty that value smooth straight hair and suggests that the speaker in the poem seeks support from other black women on the tram. This also suggests that the desired ideal “yuh” is not only a fellow passenger, but also specifically a woman passenger.

The speaker shifts from the second person to the first person “me” in the seventh stanza. The use of the first person represents the speaker’s self-possession in the expression of her feelings. Once she has gained her listener’s empathy through humor, she shifts into her political critique of the situation:

Sometime de big strong-physic man dem
 Sprawl out bout de place
 An hooden even gi a po’
 Ooman a lickle space. (*JDP* 32)

Her desire for “a lickle space” from a man who “sprawl out bout de place” reverberates beyond the tramcar as a feminist critique of public space in Kingston. The first line literally sprawls in the poem because it has a much longer syllabic count than any of the

other lines, making “big strong-physic man” take up more page space in the poem. By breaking the syllabic pattern, this also disrupts the rhythm of the poem as if the tram has just gone over a bump. Her shift from the singular “man” to “dem” (them) also suggests that this man is representative of men in general. The men possess the tram as their place, while all the “ooman” wants is a “lickle space” in that place. Again, one can interpret the gender conflict in the poem as an allegory for the anticolonial politics of that moment in which people were questioning how Jamaica could no longer be a space of empire, but become its own place, an independent country. Bennett constructs her critique in this stanza in the form of a question by asking who would give women a little space. In doing so, the speaker imagines asking the “yuh,” her idealized community of other women passengers on the tramcar, to help her claim space and respect from these men.

The speaker continues with her critique in the following stanza by acknowledging the man’s perspective and that he must feel tired, too. Yet she questions why men perpetuate a double standard toward women:

Me doan sey man kean tiard to
 But wen dem want show-off,
 Dem sey ooman is “weaka sex,”
 An ooman frail and sof”. (32)

This stanza refers directly to the project of nationalist respectability and the adoption of Victorian gender roles and family values to convince British colonists that Jamaica was capable of self-rule: or, as Bennett phrases it in the poem, when men “dem want to show off / Dem say ooman is ‘weaka sex.’” Appeals or “show offs” for self-determination to imperial powers were made through attempts to demonstrate women’s subordination, as “weaka” to men in the national public sphere. The critique of this coming from a woman

who is tired and merely wants to sit down also raises the class dimension of this contradiction and illustrates Bennett's assertion that working-class women's labor should be valued in the national community.

Deborah Thomas asserts, "The cultivation of nationalist respectability has been gendered. Indeed, the period from emancipation to independence in Jamaica has been characterized by a decline in lower-class black women's public, social, and economic power" (56). Likewise, Belinda Edmondson points out how this process begins in the late nineteenth century. "Black male leadership qualities were judged by the ability of black men to 'rule' their women, and in this respect they were found sadly wanting" (4). Specifically, working-class black women were stereotyped as outspoken and vulgar, and they were thought to be more independent than middle class and British women (4). During the nineteenth century, legalized marriage was not the common basis for social organization in Jamaica, nor was gender used to stop women from working outside the home in agriculture and other fields, which gave working-class women a degree of autonomy (Thomas 49). This is thought to be in part an inheritance of social organization during slavery. However, the nationalist project in its appeals to Britain promoted a Victorian femininity, and in turn blamed social ills and poverty on a lack of patriarchal family forms rather than on a history of colonial exploitation and slavery. This attitude illustrates how a loyalist nationalism was constructed by the Jamaican elites, which was not as anticolonial as it is often retrospectively interpreted. Bennett was keenly aware of this, and she negotiates a complicated relationship between empire and autonomy from a gendered perspective by performing the debate. She critiques the promotion of Victorian

femininity in the nationalist movement in “Tan-Up Seat.”³⁶ The metaphor of the tramcar depicts the contradictory intentions of the nationalist project in relation to the role of women. Men want women to stand beside them in their struggle for independence at the same time that they want them to sit down and be subservient. Bennett dramatizes how, in the nationalist project, women are continually knocked off balance and must embody the contradiction of a stand-up seat and be both standing and sitting at the same time.

Thomas stresses how the nationalist project closed or compromised the question of women’s roles rather than opening up a debate; a naturalization of women’s roles positioned them in the domestic space, which also kept them out of the newly emerging national public sphere (49). This can help explain why Bennett dramatizes a woman trying to lay claim to “a lickle space” on the tramcar. Bennett’s poetics cannot be separated from the project of national respectability, because she aims to achieve respectability for Jamaican Creole by putting it in poetic form. However, she also criticizes the masculine and middle-class bias of the national project and subtly opens up a debate about women’s roles. In “Tan-Up Seat,” Bennett questions both who has authority over public space and how that public space will be shared, which are two fundamental questions in anticolonial politics that typically get answered through the ideology of a democratic nationalism. Her women elbowing for space on the tramcar suggest that, for Bennett, independence begins with authority over one’s own body and personal space. However, she also shows how achieving this independence is fraught by

³⁶ She also challenges these values in her poem “Mass Wedding” which humorously critiques the Mass marriage movement led by Lady Huggins, the wife of the governor of Jamaica in 1944.

the experience of the embodied contradictions of creolization and the violent mixing of cultures metaphorized and externalized by the push and pull of the tramcar's movement. More importantly, Bennett's poetics illustrates performance as the mode to both act out and resist these embodied contradictions.

In the second to last stanza of the poem, the reader learns that the speaker does not actually address the men on the tram who do not give her a seat. Bennett writes, "But me naw sey a wud, me ongle / Grunt sof' an keep mum," (*JDP* 33). "Sof'" echoes the men's expectation that women be "frail and sof'" from the previous stanza. Bennett's performative techniques ensure that even a silent reader will hear in their minds the speaker "sey" many "a wud," but then the reader is told by her in the concluding stanza that she does not actually "seh" them. This makes the reader experience contradiction, which parallels the embodied contradictions depicted in the poem. When we learn that the speaker does not address her intended targets, it is then implied that the speaker of the poem is either talking to herself or an invisible empathetic listener about what she wishes she could have said to the man on the tramcar. The speaker does not perform a dramatic monologue, so much as a one-sided conversation that desperately desires someone to hear and validate her utterance. In this way, the reader occupies the space of the projected idealized listener who she cannot find on the tramcar who could sympathize with her situation. This poem, like many of Bennett's other poems with women speakers, refutes the framework of "double colonization" in postcolonial feminist studies and the overemphasis on the silence of postcolonial women, by depicting a woman who clearly has an articulate and critical voice in the vernacular language. She is by no means silent; the issue is that she does not have a listener, someone to hear and validate her voice and

the value of her language in her social context, which explains why Bennett asks for a “lickle space” for women. This space then is not only a request for physical space but also a request for an audience.

The man characterized in Bennett’s poem as sprawling all about the place, is likely the kind of man who forms a large portion of her 1940s newspaper readership. Even though the persona in the poem does not actually address the man directly, Bennett through the publication of her poem does voice her critique (albeit in very soft terms) of the “big strong physique men” driving the national project. Bennett’s suggests that the only way a woman can be heard is if she “grunt soft.” If she voices her critique too loudly or too directly she runs the risk of being ignored all together or else virulently attacked. In an analysis of Bennett’s later poem “Jamaica Ooman,” Carolyn Cooper characterizes Bennett’s feminist politics as “a politics of cunning.” She discusses how Bennett utilizes dramatic personae “to voice the lives of representative Jamaican women of all social classes...Indirection is the quintessential attribute, and/or dubious distinction of the crafty Jamaican woman, of whom Bennett is, herself, a prime example” (*Noises* 47). This cunning politic derives from the trickster figure Anancy in Jamaican folklore and suggests “an indigenous feminist ideology” where subtlety is privileged over direct male/female confrontation (Cooper *Noises* 48). Honor Ford Smith also connects the covert resistance of working class women “as a response to colonial patterns of domination” (250). Bennett ends the poem by explaining the speaker’s situation through the authority of obeah: “Me noh know ef smaddy obeah me, / Or is bad-luck me meet, / But every time me go pon tram? Is so-so tan up seat!” (33). In reality the economic reason for crowdedness of tramcars in Kingston in the 1940s is Empire and WWII and

how this impacted the finances of Britain and in turn Jamaica. By turning to the authority of folk culture to explain her situation, the speaker implies that neither empire nor the “big strong physique men” driving the nationalist project have authority over her. Although Cooper does not discuss this, the genre of poetry is a key element in Bennett’s “politics of cunning” in that it allows her to disguise her social critique in her formal techniques. Poetry, as opposed to journalistic prose or straight political rhetoric allows Bennett to keep her political “grunts soft” in public spaces such as the newspaper or in public performance, while still allowing them to be heard.³⁷

Bennett’s 1940s public transportation poems are central to the development of her artistic project and to understanding how she performs her feminist social critique of the Independence movement in her poetics.³⁸ Through her ballads set on tramcars that waver in and out of iambic and the inflections of Creole, she enacts the everyday intersection of race, class, and gender in Kingston in the 1940s. The mechanized sounds of modernity mix with the voices of subjects clamoring for an identity in the newly emerging national public sphere. The not-as-yet national sphere as depicted on public transportation is represented as overly crowded and as a competition for space and recognition. She illustrates how communal identity, be it local, national, or international, does not get formed on the basis of a stable space, but rather through perpetual motion and

³⁷ Bennett’s use of poetry to make direct social critique is exemplified by how she defended herself against the lawsuit brought against her by George Bown for the profits from her first book publication, by publishing a poem about him in her *Gleaner* column, which I mentioned in a previous footnote.

³⁸ Bennett learns how to drive and gets her driver’s license in the early 1950s (Hewitt 415), which may in part explain why she ceases to write about riding buses and tramcars around this time.

contestation. She destabilizes the naturalization of gender roles through her impersonation of women's voices to open up their bodies as compositional spaces to show how competing scripts of gender, class, colonialism, and nationalism conflict. In her poems, Bennett performs working-class women's agency in the public sphere to challenge the sexism of anticolonial nationalism. As McClintock argues, "Women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency" (90). Their bodies are frequently deployed in nationalist rhetoric, as symbolic of national territory.³⁹ Especially now that Bennett herself has become a symbol of Jamaican national culture, we must not forget how her positioning of women's vocal bodies on the tramcar disrupts this symbolic function of the feminine as a symbol of nationhood. Instead, she imagines community not through women's bodies but through the "lickle space" of the tramcar where women must position themselves as actors in this space.

Carolyn Cooper's controversial plenary address at the Noh Lickle Twang conference on the exclusionary nature of Louise Bennett's national funeral on Aug. 9th, 2006, which was invitation-only, illustrates very clearly how despite the fact that Louise Bennett functions as a pivotal figure and icon in the national imaginary of Jamaica, the nation that Louise Bennett may have set out to imagine and write at the beginning of her career is far from the one that has taken shape. Cooper criticized the state organizers of the funeral for making it an invitation only event when Louise Bennett spent her life

³⁹ Stephens suggests that during the early twentieth century in the Caribbean "longings for the state were captured in and embodied by powerfully gendered and sexualized metaphors—the vision of the sovereign state figured in the black male sovereign; the desire for home at a more affective level figured in the woman of color (*Black* 13-14).

trying to reach the people. She questioned why they did not make any attempt to incorporate the legacy of Louise Bennett's artistic project especially her championing of the African influences on Jamaican culture. She argued that the funeral is an example of how the postcolonial state of Jamaica still upholds white colonial patriarchal ideals. The state organizers of the funeral, some of whom were in attendance at the conference, defended their choices by explaining it as a logistic problem in terms of the seating capacity of the church and of not having the resources to keep order of such huge crowds. The fear of being able to keep order of a large crowd suggests that social control has yet to be imagined beyond authoritarian colonial rule and that the questions that Bennett addresses through the tramcar concerning authority over public space and how this public space should be shared have yet to be answered post-independence. To illustrate her argument, Cooper showed a video recording of the funeral procession through downtown Kingston to Coke Methodist Church. Bennett's casket was carried in an orderly fashion by the National Guard, while huge crowds of people were kept back by police and barricades. Many of the people in the crowd were being expressive and singing folk songs in tribute to Miss Lou. Their singing was starkly contrasted by the silent national guard marching in-step and carrying Bennett's casket. There was no boogie woogie dance, no disorder of the body, no swaying and no rhythm by the male soldiers carrying her casket, while the crowds behind the barricade sought in vain to "hold Miss Lou's hand."⁴⁰ The visual and sonic disjunction that I experienced watching this emotional

⁴⁰ "Hold my hand" was the folk song that Bennett used as theme song for her children's television show "Ring Ding." Cooper underscored how the funeral symbolically prevented the public from holding her hand, even though Bennett throughout her life had sought an inclusive audience.

video uncannily reminded me of the disjunctive rhythm of a Bennett poem and the way the ballad form and the rhythm of Creole pull against one another. The people who were excluded from the funeral singing and dancing behind the barricades were in complete disharmony with the rigid, patriarchal, colonial order of the funeral procession. Yet their simultaneity created a discordant unison that seemed to enact the contradictory colonial tensions of creolization that Bennett explores in her poetics at the embodied level.

As scholars continue to assess how the development of postcolonial feminisms differ significantly from other feminist modernities, Bennett's eclectic career as a Jamaican public figure and her women-centered folk poetics, which span the late colonial period through to the contemporary postcolonial situation, offer a unique field of study. In Virginia Woolf's modernist feminist manifesto, she proposes that a woman needs a room of her own to become a writer. Woolf underscores the need for women to find their own creative autonomy through the separation of their imaginations from their male-dominated social environments. In contrast to Woolf, Bennett's story of becoming a writer suggests that what a postcolonial woman needs to write is quite different. Bennett's poetics offer a communal feminist politics engaged in imagining social relationships beyond colonial rule. Rather than needing to separate herself from her public sphere in a locked room to devise her artistic project, the tramcar in Bennett's poetics suggests that, to write "the lickle space," what she needed was a seat on an overcrowded tramcar, to imagine herself as part of a larger social collectivity.

CHAPTER 2

DIASPORIC CONNECTIVITY IN LANGSTON HUGHES'S BROADCAST POETICS

Hello, Jamaica!
 Hello, Haiti!
 Hello, Cuba!
 Hello, Panama!
 Hello, St. Kitts!
 Hello, Bahamas!
 All you islands and all you lands
 That rim the sun-warmed Caribbean!
 Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello!
 I, Harlem,
 Speak to you!

 I Harlem,
 Island, too.

“Broadcast to the West Indies” (1943) Langston Hughes

Like Louise Bennett, Langston Hughes pursued an intimate reciprocal relationship with his audience, by experimenting with the technique of poetic personae to imagine social voice. For Hughes, poetry is not a genre of individualism, but a discourse of social connection. This is demonstrated by the epigraph from “Broadcast to the West Indies,” published on August 14, 1943, in the *People's Voice*, a leftist African American newspaper. In this poem, Hughes uses poetic persona to represent the collective voice of Harlem, and to make a call of solidarity to the West Indies. The voice of Harlem insists that it is an “island, too” and that the Caribbean islands should recognize Harlem as such. By invoking Harlem as an optimistic poetic persona, he constructs an implicit contrast between this hopeful persona and the harsh realities and racial conflicts in Harlem during the Second World War, culminating in the 1943 riots that broke out on August 1st, just

two weeks prior to the publication of this poem. Hughes's "Broadcast," composed in the style of an imaginary radio broadcast, reflects the growth of black diasporic community during WWII, spurred by an increase in the transnational flow of people and ideas often facilitated by the radio.

The international call in "Broadcast to the West Indies" underscores why U.S. scholars, such as Lorenzo Thomas, now consider Hughes not only as an American poet but also as a poet of the African diaspora.⁴¹ In his article "Langston Hughes and the Futures of Diaspora" (2007), Brent Hayes Edwards expands on this recent transnational scholarship to propose that Hughes's diaspora poetics should also be interpreted as a response to the politics of capitalist globalization. Similar to the distinction between major and minor transnationalism made by Lionnet and Shih explored in the introduction, Edwards proposes that, "the archives of internationalism can be read for a sensibility—or more precisely, a poetics—that allows diaspora to serve as a critique of the totalizing pretensions of globalization" (691). Through an analysis of Hughes's poetry and journalism written during the Spanish civil war, Edwards argues that his fractured and

⁴¹ Thomas suggests that the personae of many of Hughes's poems be read as the everyman of the African Diaspora, in his essay "'It is the Same Everywhere for Me' Langston Hughes and the African Diaspora's Everyman" (2007). The recognition of Hughes as a diasporic poet by American critics is somewhat belated. Latin American critics viewed Hughes from a transnational perspective very early on in his career. He was recognized for his poem, "I, too sing America," which resonated with Latin American critiques of Americanization. Jose Antonio Fernandez published the first international critical examination of Hughes in the Cuban press in 1930 (Rampersad 1: 178). Jonathan Scott attributes the U.S. nationalist reception of Hughes to his socialism: "in U.S. society, where the main cultural export to the rest of the world is anticommunist actions movies, the dynamic undeniable ties among Hughes, the Bolshevik Revolution, and Latin America and the Caribbean go a long way in explaining why so little has been written about these connections in the U.S academy" (2).

divergent diasporic poetics intervenes in the homogenizing process of globalization (689).

In the 1940s, through his life experiences and his travels in the Caribbean, Hughes came to recognize the connection between capitalism and empire as part of a global system that produced the African Diaspora. Thus, his efforts to create diasporic community, as in the poem “Broadcast” and through the editing of the international anthology *Poetry of the Negro* with Arna Bontemps (1949), must be understood as an attempt to disarticulate the hegemony of these two systems over black peoples’ lives.⁴² Similar to how Edwards focuses on Hughes’s texts that he wrote while in Spain, I group his texts that directly engage with the Anglophone Caribbean as a little archive to investigate the following three issues: 1) how this region informs his understanding of global politics, 2) how the radio inspires him to imagine a translocal community through a fragmented social voice, and 3) how the message of diasporic connectivity in “Broadcast” reshapes how we think about Hughes’s poetic project as a whole.

The fact that no critic has discussed “Broadcast to the West Indies,” is in part due to the fact that it was not republished after its initial publication in the newspaper the

⁴² I borrow the word disarticulation from globalization theory, and Jeff Derksen’s use of the term to describe his own poetic practice in an interview with Susan Rudy: “That is, moving away from an idea of opposition and resistance to an idea of rearticulation. That opposition and resistance has imagined itself as being outside of the debilitating structures of power, and has been critical from the exterior, whereas rearticulation is about disarticulating and rearticulating linkages within systems, to somehow rearrange structures from within” (131). Derksen’s suggestion that one can no longer hold onto the illusion of a position of critique outside of global capitalism, and that instead one can only make a critique through using the language from within to work against itself is very applicable to Hughes situation in the 1940s. I think of Hughes’s poetry as a poetics of rearticulation, rather than as a poetics of oppositional resistance.

People's Voice in 1943 until being included in Rampersad's edition of *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1994).⁴³ Yet this overlooked poem encapsulates many of the goals of his socially committed poetic project. That it was published in the black press and not included in one of his books published by Alfred K. Knopf contributes to its representative status, since it shows how he primarily used poetry to present social critique on current issues and to foster social connection with a widespread black community.⁴⁴

The poetic persona in "Broadcast" imagines a politics of voices in which intersubjective relationships provide the foundations of political communities, rather than bounded individuals. Hughes uses poetry both as a genre of action to create social connection and social change by calling out to his audience and as a genre of philosophy to produce knowledge on how voice, identity and community interact. Poetry, because it is more closely associated with the aural dimensions of language than other print genres, makes possible a departure from the scopic economy to help imagine a more aural relationship between self, other and community. "Broadcast" recasts Hughes's poetic project as an experiment in social connectivity through voice that not only draws on the traditions of black music and speech, but also the modern technology of radio.

⁴³ It is worth noting here the incredible impact of Rampersad's work as a biographer, critic and editor, on the growth of Hughes scholarship. Rampersad, who is Trinidadian, perhaps more so than anyone posthumously answers Hughes's call to the Caribbean.

⁴⁴ In her study of the Marxist activist Claudia Jones, Carole Boyce Davies discusses "the importance of journalism in transnational black organizing and for communicating anti-imperialist politics" in the 1940s (72-3). Because blacks were by in large still not able to access the academy, the black press was not only a site to disseminate information but also the main public forum for black knowledge production (Davies 10-11).

The word connectivity emphasizes that relationships between people are never static and how they waver in intensity. The word comes from the fields of computer science and mathematics and refers to the ability to make and maintain a link between two or more points in a network system. Being able to tune in and receive a radio frequency can be measured in terms of connectivity, thus what makes it an especially apt term to describe Hughes's metaphorical representation of broadcasting in his poem. Connectivity emphasizes political alliance in phenomenological terms as a feeling, rather than as a concrete reality. The word communicates how one can feel a part of a larger system without being able to tangibly see or know how that connection operates.

By contrast, diaspora has the opposite effect. It scatters people, ideas and relationships, while connectivity brings them together. This conflict of making that which is dispersed, or feels dispersed, feel or be connected motivates Hughes throughout his writing career. He experiences this not only at the diasporic level but also at the local and national levels as an African American. This conflict is akin to W. E. DuBois's concept of double consciousness, which Paul Gilroy applies more broadly to the African Diaspora. Gilroy builds on Du Boisian philosophy, in his influential study *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), to argue that "double consciousness" for modern black subjects occurs because of being forced to live both inside and outside of modernity. Du Bois defines "double consciousness" in the opening essay "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in his influential collection *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,--

an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (2).

Du Bois presents it as a split between two “warring” sides; however, I suggest that Hughes sees this split, which blurs the interior psyche with one’s external environment, as a conflict between a desire for unity and the experience of fragmentation.⁴⁵ The split happens in one’s inability to feel self-consciousness, which encourages one to seek out a consciousness of self through the other. Hughes’s confrontation of this in his poetics builds on what Gilroy describes as “a conception of connectedness which is governed by the concept of diaspora and its logic of unity and differentiation” (121). Early in his career, Hughes tries to fulfill a desire for wholeness by substituting wholeness for fragmentation by composing representative voices in his poems that can speak for all. However, his diasporic experiences help him to recognize that scattering, dispersal, and divergence cannot merely be resolved or transformed into coherence. Instead, what one needs is a different way to understand how social connections can happen through fragmentation.

Broadcasting Diasporic Connectivity

“Broadcast to the West Indies” is a pivotal threshold in Hughes’s experiments with social voice because he begins to embrace fragmentation as a mode of connectivity in and of itself. In his earlier experiments, he designed representative voices for larger

⁴⁵ Hughes acknowledges Du Bois’s writings as a primary influence in short review called “Du Bois: A Part of Me” (1965), in which he writes that, “My earliest memories of written words are those of W. E. B. Du Bois and the Bible” (*Essays* 556).

groups, as in his famous poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921).⁴⁶ Ramazani aptly describes the poetic persona in this text as a “Whitmanian all-encompassing, cross civilizational, lyric ‘I’” (“Traveling” 303).⁴⁷ Hughes continues this universalized approach to the lyric “I” throughout the 1930s. Often his poetry from this period depicts the social voice of a universal proletariat, as in his pamphlet *A New Song* (1938), put out by the International Workers Order; however, in the 1940s, he returned to an exploration of black experience in the Americas through the local space of Harlem in his poetics. This turn reflects the politics of his historical moment as well as his own personal life experiences. After a life of traveling, Hughes finally settled at a permanent address for the first time when he bought a house in Harlem in 1948 (Rampersad 2: 57). His recommitment to black politics in the United States is reflected in his pamphlet of protest poetry *Jim Crow’s Last Stand* (1943), published by the Negro Publication Society of

⁴⁶ This poem was originally published in Du Bois’s journal *Crisis* in 1921, and then republished in 1926 in Hughes’s Harlem Renaissance collection *The Weary Blues*.

⁴⁷ In an introduction Hughes wrote for a collection of Whitman’s poems in 1946, he gives his own interpretation of the value of Whitman’s collective poetic “I”: “One of the greatest ‘I’ poets of all time, Whitman’s ‘I’ is not the ‘I’ of the introspective versifiers who write always and only about themselves. Rather it is the cosmic ‘I’ of all peoples who seek freedom, decency and dignity, friendship and equality between individuals and races all over the world” (*Essays* 484). Hughes frequently upholds Whitman in his essays as an exemplary poet suggesting that he was a huge influence on him. He praises Whitman’s poetics of “human oneness” as an important example for black poetry in his essay “Walt Whitman and the Negro” (1955) (*Essays* 346). He also calls on the effectiveness of Whitman’s socially engaged writing in his speech “Writers, Words and the World” made to the Paris, Meeting of the International Writers for the Defense of Culture in 1938; he attributes to him, “the best ways of word-weaving[...]those that combine music, meaning and clarity in a pattern of social force” (*Essays* 198). His use of Whitman in an international context suggests that he not only believed in the national value of Whitman’s poetics to build community but that he also saw them as a potential model for the building of international community.

America. His renewed focus on Harlem and the voices of its inhabitants is reflected in his small press poems such as “Broadcast,” as well as his three poetry books written during the 1940s: *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), *One Way Ticket* (1949) and his more famous bebop suite of poems that depict Harlem as “a community in transition,” *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951). This last book in the list, *Montage*, composed in 1948, will be examined in the conclusion of this chapter to demonstrate the dramatic shift in scale in his artistic vision, from the desire to “speak in the name of black millions” to a representation of small inchoate voices from the locale of Harlem in a disjunctive montage (170).⁴⁸

“Broadcast to the West Indies” exemplifies how Hughes enacts his politics of diasporic community through his experiments with poetic form. Designed as a mock radio broadcast, the poem reflects the influence of his political radio journalism during the Spanish civil war and WWII. In Spain, he gave shortwave radio broadcasts to the U.S on the political situation, and during WWII, he worked for the Department of State giving radio broadcasts to the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean (Rampersad 2: 39). The fact that “Broadcast to the West Indies” presents an African American perspective on America’s involvement in the war is most likely inspired by his actual radio broadcasts to the Caribbean on the state of the war. The five largest black weekly papers, including the *People’s Voice* that published “Broadcast” began a campaign during WWII called the “Double V” to challenge the hypocrisy of American racism while fascism was being

⁴⁸ The line “I, speak in the name of black millions” (170), opens Hughes’s poem, “A New Song,” first published in *Opportunity* in January 1933 and then later included in the booklet *A New Song* (1938), put out by the International Workers Order.

fought overseas. The double victory called for an ending of totalitarianism overseas and the ending of unequal treatment of African Americans. The American government feared that this campaign lowered black morale in the war effort and conducted an investigation of the newspapers (Simmons 80-1). “Broadcast” echoes much of the sentiment of the “Double V” campaign. While he was able to work as a radio journalist, he was frustrated by the rejection of many of his dramatic radio scripts, including his famous Jesse B. Semple stories, which he originally proposed as a radio script and then ran as a column in *The Chicago Defender* when no station would pick it up.⁴⁹

Many scholars have recently begun to assess the impact of the radio on modernist poetics. Too often this work focuses primarily on canonical Anglo-American modernist figures.⁵⁰ Despite Hughes’s radio work, there has not been an in-depth study on the

⁴⁹ The popular radio show “Amos and Andy,” which features exaggerated minstrel performances by “white men in aural blackface—‘sounding’ black” is an example of the racism prevalent on U.S. radio in the 1930s and 1940s (Savage 6-7). Savage suggests that as an aural medium the radio produced anxiety over the ability to be able to clearly identify racial difference since this is usually done through the visibility of “blackness” in someone’s skin. The black racial stereotyping through voice in shows such as “Amos and Andy” was an attempt to reassure a white listening audience that racial difference can still be clearly produced and controlled outside of a visual economy.

⁵⁰ Even the most recent 2009 collection, *Broadcasting Modernism* (2009), edited by Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle and Jane Lewty, primarily focuses on canonical modernist figures. See also Todd Avery’s *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics and the BBC, 1922-1938* by Todd Avery (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), which focuses on the Bloomsbury Group, and Timothy Campbell’s *Wireless Writing in the Age of Marconi* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2006) on Ezra Pound’s work in radio. For more diverse examinations of the impact of radio and other sound reproduction technologies on avant garde poetics in the 20th century, see Adelaide Morris’s edited collection *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* (U of N. Carolina P, 1997).

influence of radio on his poetry, nor on African Diaspora poetics more broadly.⁵¹

While he idealizes the radio for its abilities to facilitate connections in “Broadcast,” he was also very critical of white control over the technology. In 1943, Hughes expressed this sentiment in the following inflammatory statement: “Personally, I DO NOT LIKE RADIO, and I feel that it is almost as far from being a free medium of expression for Negro writers as Hitler’s airplanes are for the Jews” (Rampersad 2: 75). This was Hughes’s response to an invitation by the mayor of New York, Fiorello La Guardia, to help him develop a series of radio programs, called “Unity at Home—Victory Abroad” aimed at calming the increasing racial tension in the city during World War II. While he agreed to help the mayor with the project, he did not hold back his opinion about the exclusivity of radio. His comparison of black writers to the Jews dramatically underscores how U.S. World War II rhetoric, which sought to mobilize a war on fascism abroad, revealed the hypocrisy of American racism at home and fostered a cross-cultural consciousness around discrimination in locales such as Harlem. In the possessive phrase “Hitler’s airplanes,” Hughes positions the agency of a technology not with the medium

⁵¹ The small amount of scholarship on the BBC radio program “Caribbean Voices” that featured literary readings by Caribbean writers broadcast from London back to the Caribbean in the 1940s and 50s begins to question the role of the radio in the development of African Diasporic literatures: see Glyne Griffith’s essay “Deconstructing Nationalisms: Henry Swanzy, *Caribbean Voices* and the Development of West Indian Literature (*Small Axe* 10 (2001): 1-20). In addition, in his essay “Frantz Fanon’s Radio: Solidarity, Diaspora and the Tactics of Listening,” Ian Baucom does a literary reading of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* using Fanon’s own theorizing of “radio-listening” as way to create postcolonial and diasporic collectivities. In his discussion, Baucom notes how Fanon’s emphasis on the radio is not unique in postcolonial critique and that the “novels, films, plays, histories of the postcolonial are littered with radios” (17). Hughes’s poem “Broadcast” can also be considered as part of this literary investigation into the use of radio to facilitate anti-imperial critique.

itself, but rather with the human who owns the technology. His comments parallel Frantz Fanon's assessment of the radio in Algeria under French colonial rule in the 1940s as an agent of the colonizer's voice. Yet Fanon also proposes that in the 1950s the voice of Algeria began to emerge through radio broadcasts, and he upholds the medium itself as unique form for imagining a resistant social voice (*A Dying* 83). Despite his condemnation of the radio in the aforementioned quotation, Hughes, like Fanon, recognized the possibilities of broadcasting to both conceptualize and enact collectivity between people, places and ideas often across social and geographic borders.

"Broadcast to the West Indies" was published the same year as he was invited to work on the radio program "Unity at Home – Victory Abroad." In his poem, Hughes counters the national unity he was asked to exhibit in the radio broadcast, by offering a critical perspective on America's involvement in the war, directed toward an international black audience. Unlike his state sponsored radio journalism during the Spanish civil war and WWII, Hughes engages the formal qualities of poetry to imagine possibilities for the technology of radio to bring about cross-cultural social connections that exceed white control.

The poem's design encourages a reader to hear the persona as an amplified voice appearing on the radio. It consists of eleven stanzas, ranging from three to twenty-seven lines each. The lines are frequently indented particularly when Hughes is listing names of places or commonalities between the West Indies and Harlem. The frequent indentations suggest a voice pausing to create emphasis. The combination of indentations, with repetitions, and the use of plain vocabulary, all combine to evoke a familiar broadcasting voice. Hughes employs the technique of listing to make it sound

like the speaker's voice is amplifying as it goes through each island on the list: "Hello, West Indies! / Hello, Jamaica! / Hello, Haiti! / Hello, Cuba! / Hello Panama! / Hello, St. Kitts! / Hello Bahamas! / Hello! Hello! / Hello, West Indies!" (275). The exclamation points at the end of each line make the speaker sound like he is calling out.⁵² The repetition of hello requests confirmation, as if the reader must confirm that his voice is successfully being broadcast across the airwaves. The cumulative effect encourages emotional identification, and a sense of solidarity.⁵³ Harlem's call is never answered by the West Indies in the poem; however, the repetition of hello that open and close the poem create an echo, as if the speaker of Harlem is so desperate to make a connection that he answers his own call.

Solidarity in Harlem is asserted through "vast explosions in the air" between its residents and West Indians. The poem is both a call for connectivity, "You for me and I for you" and a call for a collective struggle for liberation: "FREEDOM! / FOR FREEDOM! / WE PREPARE!" (275). The capitalizations of these lines in the concluding stanza of the poem add to the sense of a radio voice amplifying. Hughes intends to dissuade West Indians of the imperial representation of the United States by the Axis powers:

⁵² While the gender of Harlem is not made explicit in the poem, I assume that Hughes intended a male voice, because of the masculine militaristic rhetoric he uses, and since the type of broadcasting voice he emulates would have been predominantly male during this time.

⁵³ The hailing of the islands by the speaker Harlem can be considered as a form of Althusserian interpellation. The speaker calls on the islands to recognize him as part of a black transnational identity. Regardless of the content of the message, the very act of the call asserts that "you and I are always already subjects" and that our subjectivity depends on one another (Althusser np).

They say—The Axis—
 That the U.S.A is bad:
 It lynches Negroes,
 starves them pushes them aside . . .

Those things are partly true
 They say—the enemy---
 via short wave every day. (273-4)

Hughes acknowledges that the radio is used as an instrument of war. He agrees that what the Axis says about the United States is “partly true,” departing from American nationalist war rhetoric. He asks West Indians to recognize black Americans in Harlem as distinct from white America: “Listen, West Indies, they are not the U.S.A” (274). Hughes’s implied American citizen becomes an inhabitant of Harlem and not a middle class white American, thereby challenging white-dominated assumptions about American identity.

According to the poem, West Indians and Harlemites have the following things in common, “Suffering, / Domination, / Segregation – / Locally called / Jim Crow” (274). By giving each item on the list its own line, Hughes emphasizes the common, parallel and similar experiences of racial oppression. The list of commonalities also stresses that Jim Crow is not just “segregation” but also a form of “domination” that causes “suffering.” Hughes makes no separation between colonial racism in the Caribbean and American racism when he identifies that “suffering, domination and segregation” are “locally called Jim Crow.” He acknowledges larger imperial social forces at work. As well as establishing Hughes as a poet of the African Diaspora, this poem also indicates how he engages with the project of anti-imperialism.

In the subtitle for the poem, “Radio Station: Harlem / Wave Length: The Human Heart,” Hughes idealizes radio technology as a way to imagine an emotional frequency on which African Americans and West Indians could connect. When one listens to the radio, one responds not only to the meaning of the words that one hears but also to the sound of a person’s voice, which creates an emotional effect. Sarah Wilson’s essay “Gertrude Stein and the Radio” (2004) in the *Broadcasting Modernism* (2009) collection discusses how the immediacy of social connection created by radio influenced Stein’s compositional method, because she could imagine her audience listening to her voice as she wrote. In “Broadcast to the West Indies,” Hughes explores a similar “capacity of voice to mediate social connection” (Wilson 268), which fills him with the sense that everyone in the West Indies is listening to his call.

His focus on creating an emotional connection as the foundation for a political solidarity is conveyed later in the poem when Harlem insists that “We care for each other” (275). He insists,

But there’s a direct line
From your heart to mine –
West Indies – Harlem!
Harlem - West Indies! (274)

In this stanza, Hughes does not distinguish between the different islands, but instead calls on the West Indies collectively. Again, the use of the dashes creates the sense of a radio beam or wave, allowing him to imagine both an amplification and projection of voice across time and space.

Because radio transmission enacts proximity between disparate geographies, it helps Hughes maintain a diasporic vision that is not compromised by the local.

“Broadcast to the West Indies” shows how Hughes envisions being able to toggle between a diasporic blackness and the locale of Harlem and to imagine different places speaking to one another in real time. While the personification of Harlem as one coherent voice with the capacity to call across a vast distance to the Caribbean still has traces of grandiosity, there is also a shift towards a more particularized and fragmented use of voice. The repetition of hello across imaginary radio static begins to fracture an all-encompassing “I.” Hughes shifts from a relation to the transnational through an abdication of the particular through his poems that use a universal social voice in the 1930s to a desire to reach the transnational through the representation of local voices, or voice as locale as he does in “Broadcast to the West Indies.” The “I” in “Broadcast” represents both the inhabitants of Harlem and (potentially) African Americans more broadly, but remains an “I” bound to place as it expresses relation through its repeated calls to the West Indies. Verbs like “speak” and “sing” occur frequently in poems by Hughes, illustrating how the politics of voice form a central concern for him throughout his career. In the development of his poetics, “Broadcast to the West Indies” shows how Hughes began to understand the act of “speaking” as inextricably linked, not only to self-representation, but also to calling on an other, as a necessary precursor to an “I.”

The Italian feminist Adriana Cavarero distinguishes voice from vocality in *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005). Her concept of vocality helps to illuminate Hughes’s exploration of “speaking” in terms of identity formation. She uses the term vocality rather than voice in order to disrupt the conflation of voice with subjectivity and to emphasize the embodied materiality of vocal production:

Precisely because speech is sonorous, to speak to one another is to communicate oneself to others in the plurality of voices. In other words, the act of speaking is relational: what it communicates first and foremost, beyond the specific content that the words communicate, is the acoustic, empirical, material relationality of singular voices. (13)

In terms of Hughes's "Broadcast to the West Indies," this conveys how it is his repeated utterances to the different islands, and not necessarily the content of the calls themselves that communicate relationality between Harlem and the West Indies. There is never one voice for Cavarero but always at least two yoked in resonance, thus providing a different understanding of ontology where a subject becomes through a relationship with an other. She challenges the Cartesian ontological assumption of "I think therefore I am," which posits being through internal consciousness in an autonomous subject. Rather, she proposes "I voice therefore I am" as a way to assert relationality between subjects as a precondition for being-as-becoming. Through his experiments with voices, Hughes enacts this kind of ontology of voicing in his poetics. This is why it is so important that "the Negro speaks of rivers" and does not just think about them. For Hughes, this creates a better foundation for social connection and community across difference. Reading his poems as calls underscores how his many "I"s that "speak," such as "I, Harlem" in the "Broadcast to the West Indies" poem, should be read in relation to the other that they call out to.

Reading his poems as calls for social connection helps to illuminate how he seeks to create proximity and dialogue between different voices. The transnational community between Harlem and the West Indian islands in "Broadcast" should be read as one of many different communities that Hughes constructs in his rhetorical poetics. Hughes's efforts to build a black audience, specifically by calling on his readers to perform his

poems, (which will be discussed in the following chapter), reflects his desire to feel, encourage and hear social connection through his writings. Recognition of Hughes's poems as calls that are often transnational in scope shifts attention away from the identity of the speaker onto the people he or she addresses, and onto what he or she is calling for. This moves beyond a focus on racial identity in Hughes scholarship, which as Meta DuEwa Jones recognizes, in her article "Listening to What the Ear Demands: Langston Hughes and His Critics" (2002), results in "racial coding" and "over-simplification" in the close reading of his poems (1146). The multiple meanings of the word call, as in to cry and shout, to project one's voice across space, to call or converse with someone on the telephone or radio, to summon a person to be present, to call one's attention to an issue, to make an appeal, and to visit, illuminate how Hughes engages vocality in his transnational black politics.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Hughes's diasporic vision in "Broadcast" is his insistence on the commonality between Harlem and the West Indies through the metaphor of Harlem as an "island too." The personification of Harlem resonates both geo-politically, and interpersonally, as a metaphor for the self to suggest that these two cannot be separated:

I, Harlem,
Island too.
In the great sea of this day's turmoil
I Harlem,
Little land, too. (273)

The "great sea of this day's turmoil" refers both to local turmoil of the riots and also the broader turmoil of WWII. He points out Harlem's isolation from the rest of the United

States and, more specifically, the rest of Manhattan through the image of Harlem as an island “within an island:”

I, Harlem,
Island within an island, but not
Alone. (273)

This three-line stanza takes the shape of an island itself in the poem. The enjambed line break between “but not” and “alone” makes the claim that Harlem is not alone seem more ambiguous. Isolating the word “alone” on its own line emphasizes the emotional meaning of being alone. The ambiguity surrounding the claim underscores the speaker’s deep desire to connect with the West Indian islands. Referring to Harlem as “an island within an island” designates how it is separated culturally and politically from the rest of the island of Manhattan. This island metaphor signifies the white othering of racialized space to explain the process and effects of segregation. Though Harlem remains separate from the white dominated island of Manhattan, Hughes suggests that this interior isolation engenders possibilities for diasporic connection beyond one’s immediate environment:

Bordered by the sea that washes
and mingles
With all the other waters of the
World. (273)

Through the metaphor of water, Hughes conveys the mixing of different people.

Hughes frequently uses geographic metaphors - islands, oceans, rivers or mountains - to explain racialized social relations, which reflects his interest in how social environments both engender and restrict the formation of culture and community. His most famous use of geographic metaphor is in his statement on black poetics, “The Negro

Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) where a mountain symbolizes some black artists’ desire for white culture. While Hughes’s racial metaphor of a mountain approaches black art from an individualized perspective, in terms of what prevents individual black artists from using black culture as their material, his use of an island suggests an isolated self who longs for a broader racial community. This demonstrates how Hughes increasingly becomes more invested in intersubjectivity and communal identity as a means to creative production. The isolation of islands helps Hughes to identify the effects of the othering of blackness in the United States and to connect the legal framework of Jim Crow segregation in the South with a more pervasive social, cultural and even psychological segregation, occurring throughout the United States - and, as he demonstrates in “Broadcast,” in the Caribbean as well.

“On the Trail of West Indian Poetry”

In addition to “Broadcast to the West Indies,” a key text for exploring Hughes’s heightened interest in the Caribbean in the 1940s is the anthology, edited with Arna Bontemps, *Poetry of the Negro: 1746-1949*, first published in 1949 by Doubleday, and then reissued in 1970.⁵⁴ The original assemblage of the anthology, as well as the

⁵⁴ Due to space, this chapter does not analyze the poetry in the anthology, but rather considers the anthology as a whole and its logic and organization in terms of Hughes perspective on diaspora. For a discussion of the actual content of some of the poems see Scott’s section on the anthology in *Socialist Joy* (166-186). In his analysis, he identifies Hughes’s development of an “anthological aesthetics” of collage. Scott relates this to Hughes’s socialism, though he does not take into account the significance of Hughes’s international focus on the West Indies. Frequently he even refers to it in his analysis as a collection of “African American poetry,” which is surprising due to his own criticism of the limited national focus by American critics on Hughes in other parts of his book. He does acknowledge that the anthology is important for showing that “African

reconfiguration of the later edition addresses key cultural debates about black poetics in the Americas that point to larger debates pertaining to racial identity and afro-diasporic community. Compared to the figurative call in “Broadcast,” this project literally calls on poets of the Caribbean to submit their writing. *Poetry of the Negro* is the first of ten anthologies that Hughes would go on to edit in the next twenty years of his career (Scott 166). His attraction to the genre of the anthology demonstrates his growing investment in collective creative production over individualized creativity in the later years of his career. Hughes and Bontemps conceptualized the original edition of the anthology as an international collection of black poetry, but ended up focusing almost exclusively on the United States and the Caribbean, with a very short section on Africa that includes the work of only one poet. The Africa section is included under the Caribbean section and listed as if it were just another Caribbean island.

The anthology can be viewed as Hughes’s attempt to produce an answer to his earlier figurative call in “Broadcast.” However, this call is limited to the 1940s, as the 1970 edition cuts the Caribbean section entirely, to make space for new younger African American poets. An examination of both editions, illustrates the degree to which Hughes’s earlier ideal of solidarity could not be realized in practice. While both editions present problematic race politics, the original edition’s uneven international scope holds the potential for a more liberating and less essentialist and less nationalist image of blackness than the later edition.

American poetry belongs to a greater non-American tradition” (185), yet the fact that he does not fully engage with the transnational dimensions of the project illustrate the deep embeddedness of nationalizing tendencies in Hughes criticism.

The original 1949 edition contains three large sections: “Negro Poets of the U. S. A.,” “Tributary Poems by Non-Negroes,” and “The Caribbean.” The anthology includes submissions from 145 writers, roughly half of which over are not from the U.S. in the original edition. The section on “Negro Poets from the United States” is the largest and includes work by Bontemps and Hughes as well as such poets as Phillis Wheatley, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Dunbar, Anne Spencer, Jean Toomer, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Jesse Redmond Fauset, Melvin B. Tolson, Countee Cullen, Richard Wright, Robert E. Hayden, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks. The Caribbean section has sub-sections for the following different islands: Jamaica, British Guiana, British Honduras, Barbados, Trinidad, Haiti, Martinique, French Guiana, and Cuba, as well as the continent of Africa.⁵⁵ The section on Jamaica includes the most poets from any one island. While Bennett is not among them, there are many other well-known poets from this period, including Claude McKay, Roger Mais and Una Marson. The reason there are more poets from Jamaica than any other island is likely due to the fact that Hughes traveled there in November 1947 to solicit work for the anthology, or as he elaborates, in one of his travel essays in his “Here to Yonder” column in *The Chicago Defender*, his three reasons for going to Jamaica were: his need for a vacation, his desire to be in a place where there is no Jim Crow and because he is “on the trail of West Indian poetry” (“Holiday” 12). Hughes’s pursuit of West Indian poetry illustrates his fascination with

⁵⁵ The American section is arranged chronologically. Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley who were both born in Africa and brought over as slaves, are the first two poets in the anthology. Scott points out that the anthology begins and ends with African born women, since the last section includes the poetry of Aquah Lalaah, a woman from Sierra Leone (185).

blackness in the Americas, and his view that New World blackness forms a new and unique culture that is distinct from African culture.⁵⁶ His focus on Jamaica in the anthology, beyond being the pragmatic result of his trip there, also suggests that Hughes felt a specific affinity between African American poetics and Anglophone Caribbean poetics. His traveling there to work on the anthology illustrates how he facilitated a black poetics of the Americas not only in his poetics but also through his cultural work.

The discrepancy in how blackness is defined in the United States and the West Indies created conflict for Hughes in his solicitation of work from certain West Indian contributors who did not consider themselves “black” and didn’t want to be included in an anthology of black poets (Rampersad 2: 155). Hughes responds to this difficulty in a letter to Bontemps,

It should be made clear (for the sake of the critics and also for the comfort of the West Indians—whom one drop of white blood makes white, and not the other way around as it is here) that we have drawn no line in our anthology, using the work of all poets who write even obliquely on Negro themes, peoples, or lands (Nichols 235).

In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes expresses disdain for black writers who emulate white culture, which helps to explain his frustration at the West Indian poets who were not comfortable identifying themselves as black, according to American definitions.

⁵⁶ In his article, “Africa/America: Fragmentation and Diaspora in the Work of Langston Hughes” (2002), Jeff Westover analyzes Hughes’s representations of Africa in his poetry, and discusses Hughes’s trip to the West Coast of Africa in 1923. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes describes how he was called a white man by an African man, and how this made him feel like an outsider (103). Westover proposes that this trip caused the first rupture in Hughes’ desire for a unified black diasporic community (1212). It also presented to him a cultural specific idea of blackness, rather than an essentialist one.

This resistance towards racial identification as the uniting theme of the anthology shaped how Hughes and Bontemps define the parameters of the anthology in their short two-page preface. They make clear that “the title of this volume has somewhat more reference to a theme and a point of view than to the racial identity of some of its contributors” (vii). They propose that the anthology is based on “the Negro’s experience in the Western world” (vii). Rather than insist on an essential racial identity, they focus on shared experiences in the Americas and on race as a cultural production of modernity.

Not only is blackness loosely defined in the anthology, there is also a lengthy section entitled “Tributary Poems by Non-Negroes,” which includes poems from a diverse range of white poets such as Elizabeth Bishop’s “Songs for a Colored Soldier,” Walt Whitman’s “The Runaway Slave,” William Blake’s “The Little Black Boy,” William Wordsworth’s “To Toussaint L’Overture,” and Vachel Lindsay’s “The Congo.” From a contemporary perspective, many of these poems, such as Lindsay’s “The Congo,” do not seem very tributary, as they recapitulate racist ideologies that associate blackness with primitiveness. Keeping in mind Hughes’s affinity for physical geography metaphors, they may have also been playfully invoking the idea of a stream or river that flows into a larger lake. They imply that white writers are still connected to the imaginary of blackness in the Americas even if this is often an antagonistic relation. The use of the word tributary suggests that Hughes believes segregation between the two cultures is impossible.

Hughes’s inclusion of white poets might appear as a conservative and accommodating gesture from the perspective of a late 1960s Black Arts aesthetic.

However, since he saw segregation as one of the most destructive forces in American racism, the presentation of white and black poets together counteracts the cultural effects of the Jim Crow laws.⁵⁷ In addition, Scott points out that the section of non-Negro poetry shows how Hughes and Bontemps “rejected identity politics as a literary or cultural method of struggle against the ideology of white supremacy” (168). At the same time, the separation of poems by “Non-Negroes” also shows that Hughes and Bontemps did maintain somewhat of a color line in the anthology, despite their desire to appease West Indian poets uncomfortable with being identified as Black.

Nwankwo draws attention to how the 1972 re-edition of the anthology cuts all of the Caribbean poets, except for Claude McKay who is moved to the American section, which graphically exemplifies how Hughes’s early transnational work in the 1930s and 1940s is forgotten in the critical reception of his work (“Cosmopolitan Consciousness” 25).⁵⁸ The stated editorial reason for cutting the section on West Indian poets was economic pressures from the publishers who had capped the number of pages, which led Bontemps and Hughes to decide to make more space to include younger black American

⁵⁷ In a letter to Bontemps, Hughes expresses his sentiment on this issue in response to white reviewers who were critical of the inclusion of white poets: “My feeling is that they [meaning reviewers] are still for strict segregation when it comes to poetry—as most ‘white’ anthologies attest—since they leave us out entirely” (quoted in Rampersad 2:160).

⁵⁸ Claude McKay’s reclassification in the later edition of the anthology is an excellent example of Americanization in poetry reception, and the resistance to analyzing poetry transnationally. It typifies his critical reception, where he is either categorized as a Harlem renaissance writer or as a Jamaican poet, and very rarely analyzed as both.

poets by excising all of the international writers.⁵⁹ Many of the new poets included in this edition were part of the Black Arts Movement such as Dudley Randall, LeRoi Jones, Bob Kaufman, Ishmael Reed, and Askia Muhammad Touré. Rather than suggesting a transnational black poetics of the Americas, the 1972 anthology asserts a national African American poetry tradition. Nwankwo highlights how this reconfiguration of the anthology to include Black Arts Movement writers erases West Indian and African American cultural exchange, which she attributes to the 1960s and 1970s cultural ideologies of Black Nationalism in the U.S and postcolonial independence in the Caribbean (“Cosmopolitan Consciousness” 25). These ideologies, while clearly being liberating vehicles, also muffle earlier diasporic calls and connections from the 1930 and 1940s, such as Hughes’s call for solidarity in “Broadcast to the West Indies.”

The 1972 edition is divided into only two sections: “Negro Poets in the U.S.A” and “Tributary Poems by Non-Negroes,” thus re-inscribes the color line between black and white and neglects the ways that nation and migration complicate this simplified binary. Black poetics gets positioned only in relation to what they are not – whiteness -

⁵⁹ The cutting of the Caribbean section appears to have been Hughes’s idea after his initial meeting with the publishers at Doubleday. He proposes the idea to Bontemps after the meeting in a letter dated January 28, 1965: “To keep it approximately the same number of pages, but at the same time adding twenty or so new Negro poets, and adding samples of those white poets who have written significantly about the Negro since 1950, I proposed dropping in its entirety the ‘Caribbean’ section, and placing Claude McKay in the U. S. A. group, our first section” (Nichols 470). He does not elaborate on his reasoning for this, nor does he express any sense of loss over cutting the Caribbean section, and Bontemps accepts his proposal without question. Nwankwo explains this in her dissertation as a sign that “even this Pan-Africanist when pushed clings to the national” (“Cosmopolitan Consciousness” 25). It is unclear to me how one should interpret Hughes’s decision and whether it should be seen as evidence of his personal ideological shift towards a black American nationalism during this time or if it is more of a reflection of the historical moment.

rather than through geographic difference. In contrast, the third section of Caribbean poets in the original edition complicates binaristic conceptions of race because Hughes and Bontemps did not identify the West Indian poets on either side of the color line, engendering multiple understandings of blackness.

These debates over black identity that Hughes encountered while working on the anthology did not prevent him from continuing to idealize Jamaica as a space of authentic blackness in the New World in his travel essays in the *Chicago Defender*. He conveys his affection for Jamaica in gendered terms in the following quotation:

My new love is Jamaica. She is dressed in green, and her face is dark and beautiful as any in the world...her fruits are luscious and rich, and the clean blue sea is all around her, kissing her chocolate feet. (“Holiday” 12)

He goes on to state that Jamaica is the loveliest island he has ever visited. Ironically, Hughes represents Jamaica as an exotic black woman, not unlike mainstream tourist magazines for resorts in Jamaica both from this period and the present. He oscillates between the dominant American imperialist relationship to the Caribbean islands, as a place of travel and leisure, and a desire for a more liberating relationship between black Americans and black Jamaicans. This image of Jamaica as a sensuous woman illustrates how gender and desire participate in the problematic formation of a feeling of diasporic connection. He represents the island as an attractive black woman to encourage his black American middle class readers to feel desire for the culture of the island, a culture which he upholds as more authentically black than African American culture, and by extension more free: “One of the wonderful things about Jamaica is that it is a black man’s land. (True, it is an English colony but the English are not much in evidence. At least not to the eye.”) (“The Colors” 14). One wonders how the Jamaican poets who did not want to be

considered black in his anthology fit into this idealization of Jamaica as a black man's land. In part it is the lack of Jim Crow in Jamaica, and the mobility that Hughes experiences while traveling there that encourages him to represent Jamaica in romanticized terms.

When one considers his idealization of Harlem as a West Indian island in "Broadcast," his representation of Jamaica as an embodiment of authentic blackness in his travel essays, and the conflicts he experienced putting together the anthology from West Indian writers, it is clear that the trail of West Indian poetry didn't quite lead Hughes where he had perhaps hoped to go. To conclude this chapter, the following section examines how these diasporic ideals and experiences influence the development of his poetics, as he encounters discontinuity more directly in his formal experimentation through the technique of poetic voice.

Reading the Transnational Call in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*

While Harlem speaks as one coherent voice in "Broadcast to the West Indies," in Hughes's poetic series *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), this unitary voice becomes a series of multiple fractured voices. One cannot identify a unified call throughout *Montage*; rather what one hears are voices that overlap and interrupt one another, while calling out to various interlocutors who are not always easily defined. This 42-page text, consists of 88 short poetic fragments, making it his first extended serial long poem.⁶⁰ The

⁶⁰ His few experiments previously with the serial poem in the early 1940s consisted of no more than about 10 short poems; "Madam to You" depicts the single voice of a working class woman in Harlem and "South Side: Chicago" explores the landscape of this Chicago neighborhood in a few different voices. Both series are

different fragments depict declarations, disagreements, pronouncements and dialogues between tenants and landlords, lovers, friends and people passing in the street. The diverse personae are identified as women, men, school children, dancers, singers and musicians. The montage of images goes through the Harlem streets by a parade, a corner meeting, buses, taxis, neighborhood stoops, a funeral procession and into cafes, classrooms, dive bars, apartments, dance halls, jam sessions, movie theaters, college dances, the Y and underground into the subway. Hughes not only documents voices but also the general sound-scape of Harlem, recording the noises and music that engender what he describes as, “The boogie-woogie rumble / Of a dream deferred?” (388). Not unlike Bennett’s celebration of it to describe the collective movement of people on a tramcar in her poem, Hughes poses this “boogie-woogie rumble” as a way to posit what the diverse noises of Harlem call out for in their collective composition. Like Bennett’s public transportation and market poems, *Montage* depicts people moving through urban space and interacting with one another to explore what Hughes describes in his authorial statement as the “riffs, runs, breaks, and disctortions of the music of a community in transition” (387).

Montage explores how to engender connectivity amongst discontinuity. As Hughes describes in the poem, “I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you: / hear you, hear me—we two—you me, talk on this page” (410). The proliferation of pronouns and verbs emphasize the break in a unified subject, and the move towards intersubjectivity. The poem takes the form of a conversation with the words “talk on this page.” Hughes

published in *One Way Ticket* (1949). The serial form offers Hughes a way to pluralize social voice.

records the movement of voices to explore how “we two—you me” can become the basis for collectivity. The unitary poetic voice of Harlem in “Broadcast” dissolves into a series of fragments in *Montage* that leaves the reader to pick up the pieces and supply the connections.

Hughes’s geographic metaphor of Harlem as “an island within an island” in “Broadcast” is echoed in the lines a “*Dream within a dream, / Our Dream Deferred*” (429), in “Island [2]” in *Montage*. There is no “Island [1]” in *Montage* suggesting that he intentionally designs this poem to figure as a fragment with no precursor.⁶¹ Reading these two poems together one cannot help but hear the echo of “Island, too” from “Broadcast.” While the metaphor of “a dream within a dream” is a gesture of interiority that implies a turning inward, using “Broadcast” as an intertext encourages one to hear Hughes’s various poetic voices in *Montage* as calling out across time and space to pursue collectivity.

His presentation of “a distortion of a community” in *Montage* echoes his earlier poetic idealizing of diasporic community in “Broadcast to the West Indies” and the difficulties he experienced, while trying to put these ideals into practice, particularly while when he was editing *Poetry of the Negro*. Hughes composed *Montage* in the same month as he was putting the finishing touches on the *Poetry of the Negro* in September

⁶¹ Eventually Hughes retrospectively names a poem he had previously written as “Island [1].” It is a poem that he originally published in the *Minnesota Quarterly* in the spring of 1950 called “Wave of Sorrow.” He re-titled it as “Island[1]” when he published it in his *Selected Poems* (1959). This 8-line poem is about an island that the speaker longs for far off in the distance. It is clearly not a metaphor for Harlem as it is described, “Its sands are fair:” (376), although there is nothing that would identify it as a Caribbean island beyond this.

1948.⁶² The compilation of poets in the Americas, who had disjunctive perspectives on race and poetry, would have been on his mind when he wrote his local montage of voices in Harlem (266).⁶³ While Scott asserts that Hughes's aesthetic mode in the late 1940s can be characterized as "anthological collage" through his analysis of *Poetry of the Negro*, he does not mention *Montage*. This is surprising both because of the simultaneity of the two projects and because of Hughes's explicit reference to it as a collage poem (166). His representation of local disjunction and fragmentation in Harlem is typically read as a reflection of the social unrest in Harlem in the 1940s, and as a nationalist symbol of the deferral of the American dream for African Americans. The majority of criticism on *Montage* focuses on Hughes's formal experimentation with bebop rhythms and its connections to an African American poetic tradition without examining how his call of "a dream deferred" is transnational in scope.⁶⁴

⁶² Hughes describes writing *Montage* in a letter to Bontemps that mainly focuses on his business regarding the anthology: "And I have completed a new book I wrote last week! We will NOT put no parts of this in the Anthology. One more listing—and I expire! No kidding—a full book-length poem in five sections called *Montage of a Dream Deferred*" (Nichols 236).

⁶³ Hughes's translation of Nicolas Guillén's book of poems, *Cuba Libre* from Spanish into an African-American vernacular was also published in 1948. Nwankwo discusses this as yet another example of his cultural work to facilitate a black transnational poetics in the Americas. She interprets his translation as engaging "black connectedness," while also affirming "black difference" ("Langston" 60). Guillén's poetry would have been an other black voice from the Americas that would have been on Hughes's mind while he was composing *Montage*. In addition, the process of translation, which inevitably involves loss, and distortion of the original text could have also had a formal impact on Hughes's innovation of montage.

⁶⁴ See Lenz, Gunter H. "The Riffs, Runs, Breaks, and Distortions of the Music of a Community in Transition: Redefining African American Modernism and the Jazz Aesthetic in Langston Hughes' *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and *Ask Your Mama*." *The*

Evidence that Hughes relates to Harlem as a symbol of the black diaspora, rather than African American nationalism, is contained in the poem itself. In ““Good Morning,” he recognizes Harlem as a diasporic space made up of immigrants not only from the American South but from other parts of the African diaspora in the New World: “planes from Puerto Rico, / and holds of boats, chico / up from Cuba Haiti Jamaica, in buses marked New York / from Georgia Florida Louisiana to Harlem Brooklyn the Bronx” (426). The salutary title of this poem “Good Morning,” which is repeated in its body poem acts as a call for recognition and friendship.

The different Harlem personae are often identified as subjects of migration usually from the rural South who reflect on how they came to live in Harlem. Hughes acknowledges how traveling causes the “dream” to be “deferred” towards the end of *Montage*:

*There’s a certain
amount of traveling
in a dream deferred.* (427)

The reference to “traveling” shows that this poem is not only about voices moving through the local setting of Harlem but also movement, migration and diaspora. There are a few other places where Hughes italicizes particular lines in *Montage*. The italics signal an alternative authorial voice that comes from outside the social landscape of Harlem. In this particular authorial statement, travel and by extension migration become the cause of the “dream deferred.” One can interpret this “traveling” as a reference to the forced migration of blacks to the Americas because of slavery, as well as to internal

Massachusetts Review 269-282; and Lowney, John. “Langston Hughes and the ‘Nonsense’ of Bebop.” *American Literature* 72.2 (2000): 358-385.

migration within the Americas due to economic pressures in the Caribbean islands and American the South that forced blacks to migrate North. Similar to Bennett's juxtaposition between public transportation in Kingston and international travel, Hughes does not separate between internal and international migration by black subjects. He identifies how continual movement and migration make the formation of community difficult. The line can also be read more personally as a comment on how his travels have made him recognize the unevenness of diasporic community, and how his dream of one is continually deferred.

In the poetic fragment "Brothers," Hughes counteracts this unevenness by asserting an African diasporic fraternity between the U.S, West Indies and Africa. He positions Africa on equal terms with the U.S.A and the West Indies, rather than as a site of origin:

We're related—you and I,
 You from the West Indies,
 I from Kentucky.

Kinsmen—you and I.
 You from Africa,
 I from the U.S.A

Brothers—you and I. (424)

The use of "you and I" personalizes this politicized statement, again underscoring how Hughes conceptualizes transnational relations through interpersonal ties. When read isolated from the rest of the poem, the voice does not sound much different from the unified voice of Harlem in "Broadcast." However, in the context of *Montage*, a poem of disjunctive voices that do not seem to be speaking to one another, this voice takes on a much different tone. The voice is clear in its fraternal call to a "you" across the African

diaspora, yet the clarity of this call is overwhelmed by the static created by the other fragments.

The fragment called “Likewise” follows “Brothers.” The title makes a transition between the two fragments and implies a connection, yet the reader must synthesize the two disparate tones and subjects on their own. “Likewise” begins with a list “The Jews: / Groceries / Suits / Fruits / Watches / Diamond rings / THE DAILY NEWS” (424). Stylistically it is very different than the clear call made in “Brothers” as the list unfolds into a questioning of Jewish culture in Harlem with different voices interjecting and questioning “What’s the use? / What’s the Harlem / use in Harlem / what’s the lick?” (424). The poem concludes with the lines, “Sometimes I think / Jews must have heard / the music of a / dream deferred” (425). Hughes acknowledges that his recognition of a “dream deferred” does not only apply to African Americans, but to an inter-racial diaspora.

Hughes’s suggestion of an inter-racial diaspora illustrates how he views culture in creolized terms. While his authorial statement identifies the poem as working with bebop rhythms, he does not call the poem “bebop of a dream deferred.” Through the use of the European cinema term “montage,” Hughes refers to a system of editing that reconstructs the narrative to reorganize parts of its overall impression. By linking the African-American musical innovation of bebop with the modernist European film technique of montage, he acknowledges how cultures overlap and intermix. Montage comes from the French word *monter*, which means to mount. Through his formal experimentation, which merges montage with bebop, Hughes demonstrates how climbing

the racial mountain involves viewing cultures not as discrete essential entities, but as formed through hybridity.

Formally, the poem's avant garde experiments with multiple poetic voices and seriality seem to make a radical departure from Hughes's previous work; however, when read in conjunction with "Broadcast" one can see a clearer connection between his earlier and later work with poetic voice. In this poem, he moves away from 'speaking for' towards 'speaking polyvocally' in his poetics. Both of his approaches reflect his experiments with poetic form to imagine community, and call out for social connection, yet the kinds of calls that he makes are very distinct from each other. In *Montage*, the calls depend on the reader to make connections between the different fragments and voices. This pressure to answer his calls and to enact his ideals of connectivity in the reading process will be the subject of the next chapter.

Hughes's commitment to a transnational black politics in the Americas must not only be analyzed thematically in his poetics, but also analyzed with an awareness of how he engages in social critique through his experiments with poetic form, since many of his texts that are not explicitly or thematically about diaspora also speak to transnational concerns. Both "Broadcast" and *Montage* demonstrate his use of poetry as a discourse of voices to enact social connectivity and encourage relation between people, places and ideas often across social and geographic borders. Hughes's investment in defining himself primarily as a poet despite the range of cultural work that he does reflects his strong belief in poetry as a discourse that both enacts social connection through the act of reading and explores how social connections are made. Hughes demonstrates that it is in

the “lickle spaces” where connectivity happens, between “we two—you me” who feel moments of a collectivism through our relations with one another.

Hughes’s poetics, as well as Bennett’s discussed in the opening chapter, offer insight into how to think about small particularities and voices within a transnational scope, which in our contemporary moment of globalism has become an even more pressing issue. Gayatri Spivak’s question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” which she asked well over twenty years ago, remains a deeply perplexing issue not only in academic discussions but in global politics as well. While many scholars interpreted her to be insinuating that the subaltern cannot speak, Spivak makes clear in her subsequent work that the subaltern most definitely speaks; however, systems of representation – namely standardized languages and literacies, prevent their voices from being heard, especially by transnational audiences.⁶⁵ This is what makes so poignant Hughes’s call to the Caribbean through the voice of Harlem, and Bennett’s tramcars where she imagines a space for working-class women’s voices to be heard. Through such poetic personae, they explore the slippages between speaking and being heard. Hughes might characterize these slippages more aptly as deferrals between the voices of new political subjects and the audiences that emerge to respond to them.

⁶⁵ See Spivak’s revision of her 1983 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in the chapter “History” in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999).

PART II

MOVEMENTS OF READING

We should try to rediscover the movements of this reading within the body itself, which seems to stay docile and silent but mines the reading in its own way: from the nooks of all sorts of “reading rooms” emerge subconscious gestures, grumblings, tics, stretchings, rustlings, unexpected noises, in short a wild orchestration of the body... To read without uttering the words aloud or at least mumbling them is a modern experience, unknown for millennia. In earlier times, the reader interiorized the text; he made his voice the body of the other; he was its actor. Today, the text no longer imposes its own rhythm on the subject, it no longer manifests itself through the reader’s voice. (175-176)

Michel de Certeau

Let’s Make a Rhythm. (2)

Langston Hughes

While the two previous chapters focused on movements of writing - Bennett’s compositional process as a moving tramcar, and Hughes’s broadcast poetics as a way to mobilize diasporic connectivity – Part II examines the other half of textual performance, what de Certeau describes in the epigraph as “movements of this reading.” I consider the little spaces that Hughes’s and Bennett’s poems create for readers to move through in new ways. Like de Certeau, both were deeply invested in the politics of everyday practices, especially those relating to language, such as the voices of people on a Harlem street, or on a Kingston bus. Critics typically stress Hughes’s and Bennett’s interest in the orality of everyday language practices; however, the following two chapters bring attention to their commitment to promoting reading as an emancipatory practice, and to making readers aware of how they are possessed by everyday language performances.

In the opening sentence of his children’s reader, *The First Book of Rhythms* (1954), cited in the epigraph, Hughes invites his readers to “make a rhythm” (2), by

asking them to literally draw lines on the page with a pencil. He generated the ideas for this book while teaching poetry for a semester at John Dewey's Laboratory school in Chicago in 1949. The last chapter concluded with a discussion of how Hughes began to place more responsibility on the reader to co-create meaning in his later experimental text, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.⁶⁶ *The First Book of Rhythms* illustrates how he enacts this avant-garde practice pedagogically in his children's literature and teaching. Bennett, like Hughes, encourages her readers to view a poem as a performative social interaction. On her television show *Ring Ding*, she invites her live studio audience of children to recite poems with her, by having them join her on stage.

Many black subjects in the Americas were forced to adopt English and negotiate literacies during slavery, colonialism, and segregation, which reshaped the relationship between literacy and freedom. Both Bennett and Hughes engage in this transformation in their poetic projects by refashioning traditional methods of poetry reading. Though both share de Certeau's view of reading as embodied, Bennett and Hughes challenge the idea that reading in modernity is a predominantly silent act. Instead, they encourage their readers to manifest their poems through their own voices and Creole knowledge systems. Hughes's and Bennett's poems do not, as de Certeau phrases it, "impose" "rhythm on the subject," rather they invite their readers to "make a rhythm" with them.

In his essay, "The New International of Rhythmic Feeling(s)" (2007), Fred Moten proposes that the "interactive rhythmic feel" of Afro-Diasporic music provides a model

⁶⁶ The fragment "Theme for English B" in *Montage*, which features a young black student who questions the relationship between his Western education and his African American culture, suggests that the classroom and the development of a student-centered black pedagogy was on Hughes's mind when he composed this long poem.

for cross-cultural relations and negotiations (39). He draws on the jazz musician Charles Mingus's concept of "rotary perception," to theorize rhythm, quoting the following from Mingus:

If you get a mental picture of the beat existing within a circle you're more free to improvise. People used to think the notes had to fall on the centre of the beats in the bar at intervals like a metronome, with three or four men in the rhythm section accenting the same pulse. That's like parade music or dance music. But imagine a circle surrounding each beat – each guy can play his notes anywhere in that circle and it gives him a feeling he has more space. (quot'd in Moten 38)

Mingus's circular model of rhythmic collaboration helps to conceptualize spatially the relationship between reader and writer that Bennett and Hughes cultivate, and their departure from the metrical verse recitation tradition by encouraging reading rhythmically around, rather than on, the beat. While the "rhythmic feel" of a Hughes poem is quite comparable to a participatory jazz model of improvisation, in a Bennett poem, a reader feels more conflict between British English and the multidirectional rhythms of Creole.

The emphasis on orality, voice and music in the critical reception of Bennett and Hughes's poetics overlooks the importance of reading as a form of social empowerment in their work, and how oral and musical traditions inform their approaches to literacy. Bennett and Hughes move beyond an oppositional understanding of the relationship between subjugated folk cultures and an imperial modernity to envision hybrid forms and voices. Paul Gilroy argues that to view oral performance "as [the] simple power of a latent but omnipotent Africanity, is to trivialize the urgent question of cross-cultural trafficking and to obscure its potential and actual political effects" (16). My examination of reading as performance in Hughes and Bennett illuminates how they creolize aspects

of their Western education in literacy and literature, specifically memorization and recitation, with African descended oral and musical cultural traditions. Their poetic projects help to establish Gilroy's claim that performance "was central to the process of cultural intermixture" (15), and an important political strategy in Black Atlantic cultures.

This section builds on the Latin Americanist Walter D. Mignolo's call for more attention to literacy in postcolonial literary studies. He discusses how new postcolonial literatures, especially when experimenting with vernacular forms, not only establish new literary conventions, but new forms of literacy as well. As he puts it, "the very concept of literature presupposes the official language of a nation/empire and the transmission of a cultural literacy built into them," and accordingly, he calls for cultural critics to bring more attention to "literacy the missing and complicitous word between languages and literatures" (221). His use of the word "complicitous" underscores how literature and literacy practices operate in tandem to legitimate certain languages and dismiss others. This is why it is important to frame Bennett's production of vernacular *literary texts* as an intervention in the use of colonial literature to transmit Western literacy.

One of the largest commonalities in the careers of Bennett and Hughes is their mutual belief in the value of reading poetry for children. As Hughes writes in his essay "Children and Poetry" (1958), "[c]hildren are not nearly so resistant to poetry as are grown-ups" (*Essays* 363). Because children are still developing their literacy they are more open to responding to a poem's invitation to adopt a more creative form of reading. In fact, the predominant way that Hughes's and Bennett's poetry lives in the postcolonial present is in the minds of children in the United States and Jamaica, who are assigned to read and often recite their poems in classroom settings; a result of their own promotion of

education during their lifetimes. Thus, I return to an examination of their own perspectives on the pedagogical potential of poetics to inspire “emancipatory literacy.”

The education theorist Paulo Friere uses the concept of “emancipatory literacy” to describe his efforts to establish literacy programs that use the oral languages of the learners in the postcolonial African countries of Sao Tome and Principe and Guinea-Bissau in the 1970s and 1980s. He maintains that students need to be able to learn how to read in or through their native languages, even when they are oral languages. He challenges the association of literacy “with the transmission and mastery of a unitary Western tradition” (3). For him, this involves teaching a form of reading that interprets “the text and the world dialectically” and that encourages literacy as “an unfolding critique through the process of dialogue” (Giroux 8). His view of literacy “as a form of cultural politics” essential to the process of decolonization relates directly to Hughes and Bennett’s own work to stimulate new forms of literacy through their vernacular poetics.

Bennett and Hughes both experienced education as an ideological state apparatus – used to perpetuate hegemony, (to put it in Althusserian terms) – Bennett under British colonialism in Jamaica and Hughes in segregated American schools in the early twentieth century – though both recognized the value of education to empower individuals and communities. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, a former student of Althusser, explains the contradiction of institutionalized education, “If we are not educated, we cannot think at all, yet if we are educated we risk being dominated by ready-made thoughts” (quo’td in Mignolo 261). Literacy, involving everything from grammatical rules to practices of reading, establishes the patterns for “ready-made thoughts.” Hughes and Bennett use their

poetics to upset the rhythms of conventional literacies and to disrupt the patterns of hegemonic knowledge in order to stimulate new modes of thinking.

19th Century Elocution and Schoolroom Poetry in the Black Atlantic

In the nineteenth century there was a proliferation of rhetoric handbooks and elocution manuals in the Americas, which contained poetry as well as speeches and other texts for memorization and recitation. Scholars trace the popularity of elocution back to the elevation of English as a scholarly language and the invention of the printing press, which fostered the standardizing of the English language in eighteenth century Britain.⁶⁷ While spellings and punctuation rules were established, ideas about proper pronunciation and demeanor were also advanced to standardize (and control) speech practices. Examining elocution in the nineteenth century U.S., Dwight Conquergood stresses how elocution played a central role in teaching the proper alliance between voice, body, and language (149).⁶⁸ Mark Morrisson suggests that this “heightened concern with the purity of English speech arose as the English school system expanded and reached out to more working-class children,” especially after the Elementary Education Act in 1870, which

⁶⁷ Thomas Sheridan’s *Lectures on Elocution* (1762) and John Walker’s *Elements on Elocution* (1781), published in London in the late eighteenth century were the first texts to consider elocution in an English context and to promote the idea of a proper and “natural” way of speaking.

⁶⁸ In his essay, “Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech,” Conquergood examines “how enslaved and working class people “redeployed” elocution “for their own subversive ends” in the nineteenth century (142). He argues that while “elocution demonstrates how hegemony works: that is, what is really cultured and acquired masquerades as ‘nature,’ thereby concealing its invention and artifice (145), it also “provided other opportunities for filching the master’s texts in order to raid knowledge, reroute authority, and undermine power” (154).

made elementary education compulsory in Britain (28). However, this was not only internal to English society. These fears over the purity of English were exacerbated as the British education system (and along with it the English language) was exported to the colonies. In the following two chapters, I examine the transatlantic schoolroom poetry tradition as a central part of English language education experienced by black writers in colonies such as Jamaica, as well as in the United States. I argue that Hughes and Bennett both contend with this tradition as one of their only available poetic models.

In her book *Schoolroom poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry 1865-1917* (2005), Angela Sorby provides an overdue analysis of postbellum schoolroom poetry in the United States. She traces a transatlantic genealogy connecting British schoolroom poetry by writers such as Shakespeare, Cowper, Hemans, Burns and Tennyson, with the New England Schoolroom poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. She defines the tradition loosely, to include any poets whose work frequently appears in schoolroom readers from this period. In her study, she focuses on poets, like Longfellow and Whittier who actively promoted and developed memorization and recitation as a central part of the transatlantic tradition. She analyzes the postbellum public school system's obsession with Longfellow's poetry and his persona (2). By 1900 Longfellow's work was taught in almost every school in America, most frequently assigned were the book-length narrative *Song of Hiawatha*, along with the shorter lyrics "Psalm of Life," and "Excelsior."

Longfellow is not usually interpreted as a precursor to modernism, and is even less likely to be associated with postcolonial poetics; however, I offer evidence in the

following two chapters that establishes his work as a formative influence on Hughes and Bennett's pedagogical poetics. Much like them, Longfellow built a diverse and eclectic reading audience, and through this gained a uniquely iconic status as a national poet. Longfellow provided for Hughes and Bennett an early, albeit problematic, example of how to become a "New World" poet of the people by combining European languages and literature with American culture and folk traditions.

Chapter three examines Hughes's identification of *Hiawatha* as his favorite poem as a child in his autobiography *The Big Sea*. In Chapter four, I analyze Bennett's poem, "Sammy's Intres," which depicts a Jamaican mother memorizing and mis-reciting "Excelsior" because her son has been assigned to memorize it in school. Bennett's poem indicates that Longfellow's poetry was also frequently taught in the Anglophone Caribbean. The speaker's unfaithful recitation, in which Bennett intentionally distorts lines from the original "Excelsior," indicates how she challenges "the parrot fashion" of colonial schoolroom poetry reading.

In his essay, "Longfellow in the Aftermath of Modernism" (1993), Dana Gioia explains that Longfellow has not been interpreted by critics as a precursor to modernism because his didactic poetry in standard meter represents the tradition that modernism rebelled against. In response to the overt didacticism of schoolroom poetry, "Anglo-American Modernism banished overt didacticism from high art" (Gioia 79). While canonical modernist poets, like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, rejected the Victorian idea of poetry as a form directed primarily at children, Hughes and Bennett did not view using

poetry to instruct children as a fundamental problem.⁶⁹ However, they sought to change how poetry was used as a teaching tool to prevent it from being used in a disciplinary way to enforce Standard English grammar and pronunciation. To help their readers resist the hegemony of white culture, they not only provide readers with representations of black culture, but also teach their readers how to poach from Western texts. Borrowing from some of the practices of memorization and recitation, they innovate how poetry teaches and what it teaches to cultivate a mode of literacy that inspires social dissent rather than perpetuating social control.

Sorby studies the effects of schoolroom poetry on readers, as well as how the social uses and reading practices of these poetics contributed to an “archive of popular memory” in the late nineteenth century (xiii). Through memorization and recitation, students were trained to look for meaning in sound, rather than through images, because sound helps to convey affect in performance, which “produced language as a somatic experience, located not outside the body but within it” (xxx). By “turn[ing] internal monologue into a collective experience” (xvi), memorization and recitation of poems facilitated intersubjective engagement.

Sorby concedes that schoolroom poetry had “a negligible influence on modern and postmodern poetry” because its purpose is “not to engage with literary history but rather to make social history by forming communities” (xxvi). However, I argue that this performative sociality is precisely what Bennett and Hughes put to use. Contrary to Sorby’s claim, schoolroom poetry has had a significant influence on the development of

⁶⁹ Gioia argues Pound and Eliot were actually influenced by Longfellow’s construction of a cosmopolitan American poet identity who must study poetry in foreign languages and master various verse techniques (89).

postcolonial poetics in the Americas. The pedagogy of schoolroom poetry, which promoted embodied reading and the use of “poetic performances to build interpretive communities” (xxvi) appealed strongly to Hughes and Bennett’s use of poetry to imagine community and build reading publics.

The performative elements of black diasporic poetry, such as spoken word and dub, descendants of Hughes and Bennett’s vernacular poetics, can be traced back to nineteenth century memorization and recitation practices. I draw attention to this Western influence to provide a more nuanced picture of the process of creolization in poetry histories and to demonstrate the power of readers to reinvent poetic traditions for their own purposes. Memorization and recitation offer an opportunity to understand how Western and African practices converge to form new approaches to reading and textuality. As David Scott cautions, we must be wary of our desire for the romance of the postcolonial narrative, which can encourage us to believe that a poem is more culturally independent from its colonial history than it initially appears.⁷⁰ In turn, when we assume that any sign of a Western tradition in a literary work is synonymous with the colonization of the author, we overlook the complexity of the operations of colonial power and how it is often disrupted from within. Sorby acknowledges that even though poetry memorization and recitation was part of an authoritarian pedagogy, the embodied performative dimension of the practice offered an unavoidable amount of “interpretive freedom” (xiv), which Hughes and Bennett celebrate through their reappropriation of this tradition.

⁷⁰ See Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke UP, 2004).

Reader Methods

A central concern in postcolonial scholarship is the process through which colonized subjects become authors of their own histories, rather than the passive recipients of dominant cultural discourses. However, scholars have yet to fully consider the role of actual reading practices in this ideological work, and how the physical and social contours of reading contribute to the reappropriation of textual meaning. In the *Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau gives “a political dimension to everyday practices” such as reading, which he defines as a form of “poaching” (xvii). Through the concept of poaching, he challenges the “assimilation of reading to passivity” (169). He underscores how one reads not only with one’s mind but also with one’s body. As black readers forced to read, memorize and recite Anglo-American and Anglo-British literatures in school, Bennett and Hughes were well aware of the ways that reading forces internalization and that readers must appropriate from texts according to their own needs and interests. These experiences inspire them to invite a more active form of reading by poaching from 19th century British and American traditions of schoolroom poetry to develop their pedagogical poetics.

De Certeau’s concept of reading has helped book historians formulate critical approaches to excavate reading histories. As one of the founders of the field, Roger Chartier discusses how those trying to excavate histories of reading must contend with the fact that reading “rarely leaves traces” and “is scattered in an infinity of singular acts”(2). Chartier goes on to stress that “reading is always a practice embodied in acts, spaces, and habits” (3). Elizabeth McHenry’s *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African-American Literary Societies* is one of the first book history studies to

direct attention to minority readers. She examines the fraught spaces that African American readers occupy in the nineteenth century, due to being legally denied the right to learn how to read during slavery. She argues that the focus on oral traditions in African American studies has obscured the examination of black subjects as readers during that time, particularly “the literary activities of free blacks and the legacy of the antebellum institutions that they built to promote reading and share texts” (3). To McHenry, “we must be willing to look in new directions at the various reading cultures that existed in black communities,” and we need “to decenter formal education as the primary institutional force behind the reading of literature” (10). Especially for poets like Hughes and Bennett, who placed such an emphasis on creating their reading publics, it is essential to consider how readers interact with their poems, and how their innovations in form, production and distribution sought to create new reading communities. My study draws attention to the ways that Bennett’s and Hughes’s poetry initially circulated outside of “formal education” through live performances, newspapers, radio broadcasts and, in the case of Bennett, through her television show *Ring Ding*. Each chapter begins with a focus on Hughes’s and Bennett’s personal experiences as readers, to understand how their perspectives on reading and empowerment inform the development of their poetic projects; I navigate the movements of reading that Bennett and Hughes engender in their poems, as well as in their cultural work, to establish rhythmic literacy as a performative and social practice in black modernity.

CHAPTER 3

THE RHYTHMIC LITERACY PEDAGOGY OF LANGSTON HUGHES

In a letter, Arna Bontemps shares his excitement with Hughes about an article in the *New York Times* that covers “a rumble” at East Orange High School in New Jersey that erupted when “provocative negro poetry” was performed at a school assembly on Nov. 2nd 1966 (Waggoner 31). He writes, “it is good to know that kids react explosively to you-all’s poetry” (Nichols 266). This recitation of black poetry in the mid-twentieth century stands in stark contrasts to the idea of recitation as an antiquated 19th century elocution pedagogy, aimed at teaching children “correct” speech and behavior. Weeks after the forming of the militant Black Panther party and on the cusp of the Black Arts movement in the United States, it is not surprising that a seemingly minor moment of social unrest caused by the performance of black poems at a high school in a small New Jersey town composed mainly of Caribbean immigrants would have elicited concern and been covered as a national story in the *New York Times*. The black teacher was dismissed from his position as the advisor of student council for selecting verses to be read by students from an anthology of black poetry.⁷¹ Even though the high school principal denied “reports that there had been anything like a riot or a rumble after the assembly” (Waggoner 31), in his letter, Bontemps reads between the lines of the newspaper article to celebrate young readers using the performance of black poetry as means of social dissent.

⁷¹ While the anthology is not named in the *New York Times* article it could have been one that Bontemps and Hughes edited, since they edited many of the major black literature anthologies during this period, such as *The Poetry of the Negro* discussed in the previous chapter.

In the *New York Times* article, the principal of East Orange high school “pointedly distinguished between the printed word, which might not be objectionable, and the manner in which it is presented” (Waggoner 31). He claimed that the problem was not so much with the content of the poems, but in how the students performed them. While he likely makes this distinction so as not to seem as if he is claiming that black poetry is in itself transgressive, his separation between a poem and its performance raises a primary concern of this chapter— how reading practices play an important and often decisive role in the consequences of a poem’s meaning. This *New York Times* story about a public disturbance of reading that occurred at a predominantly black high school in the mid-sixties encapsulates Hughes’s life long project to inspire communities of young readers with his poetry and to foster performative modes of reading. Hughes promoted active reading through the design, production and circulation of his poetry. By encouraging recitation amongst his readers, rather than aiming to control his readers’ speech, he makes the embodied process of reading explicit to give readers more agency. Building on bell hooks’s claim that “the roots of black performative arts emerge from an early nineteenth century emphasis on oration and poetry recitation” (hooks 212), I trace how Hughes reappropriates and indeed reinvents this predominantly Western tradition. The previous chapter discussed Hughes’s innovative use of poetry to facilitate social connection and community in the context of diaspora. This chapter builds on these ideas by analyzing how he uses poetry performance to inspire young readers to make social connections through their textual practices.

During the majority of Hughes’s life, literacy was not only ideologically intertwined with the rights of citizenship, but also a legal reality. Even though African

American men were enfranchised in 1870 and African American women were enfranchised in 1920 (through the women's suffrage movement), literacy tests were a prerequisite for voting until the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Hughes's commitment to promoting literacy in black communities cannot be separated from this political reality. He cultivated his audience not only through his publications, but also through public talks, readings, and teaching. While he published many books of fiction, poetry and non-fiction specifically for children throughout his career, he made no rigid distinctions between his poetry for children and his poetry for adults. In his search for an inclusive audience, he made his poems accessible to a broad range of literacies. This chapter examines the specific role he envisioned for poetry in his rhythmic literacy pedagogy. I focus on two of his most uniquely didactic texts: his chapbook; *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations* (1931), which he self-produced along with Prentiss Taylor, to distribute on his reading tour through the South in 1931, and *The First Book of Rhythms* (1954) based on his experiences teaching poetry at John Dewey's Laboratory School in 1949.

After his disillusionment with elitism and white patronage during the Harlem Renaissance, he decided to go on a reading tour to the south to bring his "poetry to the people," and to make literacy more accessible to black children in the Jim Crow South (*I Wonder* 41). The cheaply priced chapbook he sold on this tour contains dramatic monologues with instructions in the margins for how to perform them to inspire readers to stage their own performances of his poetry. His earlier use of poetry recitation in his chapbook directly connects with his experimental performative approach to reading, which he develops in *The First Book of Rhythms*. In this latter book, he uses the theme

of rhythm as an analogy for an embodied interactive mode of reading, which builds on, and indeed reinvents, recitation practices. These two projects are contextualized by examining Hughes's childhood experiences with reading and poetry, particularly his negative encounters with poetry memorization and recitation, which he discusses in the first volume of his autobiography, *The Big Sea*. The analysis of these key texts demonstrates how Hughes uses the performative qualities of poetry to put his politics of literacy into practice both formally in his texts and socially through his pursuit of a community of young readers.

Scholars such as Paul Gilroy have underscored the importance of performance in Black Atlantic cultures as a strategy for taking agency in the process of creolization. In their recent collaborative book, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics and Belonging*, Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak expand on performativity as a resistant mode of cultural and linguistic intermixture in their discussion of Latino communities living in the U.S. As Judith Butler illuminates in her previous work, "the meaning of a performative act is to be found in this apparent coincidence of signifying and enacting" (*Excitable* 44). She discusses with Spivak how performances of national identity are complicated and disrupted by multilingualism. They analyze the 2006 Latino street demonstrations in Los Angeles and San Francisco where illegal residents sang the U.S. national anthem in Spanish to ask whether these performances "actually fracture the "we" in such a way that no single nationalism could take hold on the basis of that fracture?" (61). Butler and Spivak suggest that these protests, which simultaneously espouse strong patriotic sentiments while also disrupting the ideological foundations of that patriotism, illustrate how "there can be no radical politics of change without performative

contradiction” (66). They propose that “the contradiction must be relied upon, exposed, and worked on to move toward something new” (67). In my analysis of Hughes’s poetry, I build on Butler and Spivak’s concept of performative contradiction first to establish that contradictions in a text should not negate political readings, and second to understand how a more subversive form of performative reading emerges from, and often exposes the contradictions of memorization and recitation practices.

Nothing is more contradictory in Hughes’s writing than his relationship to American nationalism. When Hughes and his readers recite the opening line of his famous poem, “I, too, sing America” the claim to citizenship often signifies ambivalently much like the illegal Mexican immigrants in 2006 singing the Star Spangled Banner in Spanish. The poem can be interpreted as strongly patriotic, and simultaneously deeply critical of America. Being able to interpret what happens when opposing sentiments such as these intersect in his poems, especially in performances of his poems, provides a more nuanced understanding of the socio-political implications of his poetic project.

The inclusion of his poem “Dreams,” in *The American Citizens Handbook*, published by the National Education Association of the United States in 1941 seems to be one example of his straightforward loyalty.⁷² The manual was designed for those who have reached voting age, or for those who have been newly naturalized, as well as for educators to use in grade schools. The book has chapters, such as “Your Citizenship,” “Heroes of American Democracy,” and “Great Charters of American Democracy,” and

⁷² I was unable to locate evidence surrounding the inclusion of Hughes’s poem in this citizenship manual and whether he was solicited to submit to the collection or if he pursued the editors to be included.

“Facts for Every Citizen.”⁷³ Hughes’s poem is included in the chapter “A Golden Treasury for the Citizen,” as a “selection for memorizing” along with other short poems, excerpts from sacred texts, and speeches.⁷⁴ Joan Rubin discusses how the inclusion of poetic texts in this citizenship training manual illuminates how memorization and recitation played a significant role in producing national subjects, and nationalist sentiment (235-241).⁷⁵ The introduction to the “Golden Treasury” chapter targets young children directly and promotes the use of memorization and recitation in the classroom to cultivate upstanding national subjects who “shall have a common mind” (345).

Hughes’s short eight-line poem “Dreams” encourages children to “Hold fast to dreams / For when dreams go / Life is a barren field / Frozen with snow” (368).⁷⁶

Unlike his late 1940s long poem, *Montage* that confronts the deferral of the American

⁷³ *The American Citizens Handbook* was originally published in 1941 to coincide with the “I am an American Citizenship Day” celebrations. It was republished by the United Nations in 1946, and 1968 and sold steadily during this time. (Rubin 236)

⁷⁴ The selections for memorization are more multicultural than one might expect and include Christian texts such as the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer as well as texts such as “Proverbs of Hindustan” and the “Sayings of Mohammed.” Other poems besides Hughes’s include Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Builders,” and “The Arrow and the Song,” a few poems by Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Kahil Gibran’s “The Prophet,” Leigh Hunt’s “Abou Ben Adhem,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” several excerpts from different Shakespeare plays, Alfred Tennyson’s “Ring Out, Wild Bells,” and William Wordsworth’s “Character of the Happy Warrior.”

⁷⁵ Rubin also discusses the role of poetry memorization and recitation in promoting national identity in her analysis of verse recitation classes in Settlement Houses during the Americanization movement in the 1920s (186-192).

⁷⁶ “Dreams” was originally published in the periodical *The World Tomorrow* in 1923, and then later republished in Hughes collection of children’s poetry *The Dream Keeper* (1932).

dream for African Americans, this poem does not seem as if it was intended to create a “rumble” in its young readers. It holds no trace of a racial politic, unless one interprets the barren frozen snow as an encrypted symbol of Eurocentric Whiteness, but there is no other evidence in this sparse poem to support such a reading. If one were to only examine this poem in isolation, without looking at the other texts that will be discussed in this chapter, one would assume that Hughes did not challenge the “official verse culture” of memorization and recitation in any way whatsoever.⁷⁷

The simple moralistic poem, “Dreams,” exemplifies why Hughes’s children’s literature has been interpreted as the most conformist of his literary production. As Rampersad astutely notes in his biography, Hughes was prone to confusing the marketplace with the people, and his children’s literature, perhaps more so than any other of his writings exemplifies this schism between a socialist vision and a desire to earn a living as a writer in the capitalist U.S. (1: 221). Since he published the majority of his children’s books in the 1950s after he had disassociated himself from socialism after his interrogation by the McCarthy Commission in 1953, scholars have classified his work for children as an attempt to redeem himself as a loyal American. However, recent scholars such as Giselle Anatol, Jonathan Scott, Steven Tracy, Julia L. Mickenberg and Katharine Capshaw Smith have challenged the assumption that Hughes’s children’s literature be read as his most conservative writing and begun to assess the conflicting politics of his children’s texts. In fact, Julia L. Mickenberg argues that leftist writers such as Hughes

⁷⁷ I borrow the phrase “official verse culture” from Charles Bernstein who uses it throughout his writing to describe contemporary mainstream poetry culture.

who were blacklisted because of McCarthyism found work in the children's publishing industry and often found a way to subtly promote leftist ideals in their texts that went undetected partly due to the assumption of children's literature as a conservative genre (14-5). Scott suggests that rather than promote his socialist politics thematically he enacts them formally in *The First Book of Rhythms*. Smith proposes that despite the nationalist integrationist politics of his children's picture books with Arna Bontemps, he still also offers a transnational perspective. Building on this scholarship that recognizes Hughes's children's literature as rife with ideological contradictions, I examine how Hughes uses poetic form to teach new and emerging readers how to navigate these contradictions through their own performances.

In "Langston Hughes and the Children's Literary Tradition" (2007), Giselle Anatol argues that Hughes seeks out children as his readers because he views them as one of the most disempowered groups in American society (243), which also explains why, in order to counteract this, he depicts them as empowered in his poems. Anatol views the lack of critical discussion of Hughes's children's literature in the context of a more widespread discrimination towards children's literature as a subject worthy of literary study. This, I would argue, is quite comparable to the situation of Louise Bennett. Hughes's seemingly "simple" poems that are easy enough for a child to read have meant that his work has not been "taken seriously" by critics. Yet Anatol points out that because children's literature socializes children and teaches them appropriate roles and behaviors, and I would add socially appropriate modes of reading, it warrants critical investigation. As one of the most widely taught African-American poets in contemporary U.S. schools, critical assessments of his views on the pedagogical role of poetry are long overdue.

The many young speakers in Hughes's poems portray his preoccupation with young black people as agents of social change, the most famous of these being the "darker brother" who claims a spot at the family dinner table as a symbol of his rightful place in the American national community, in "I, Too."⁷⁸ On his southern reading tour he would conclude each of his performances with a reading of this poem, underscoring how he sought out the self-possessed black youth as his ideal reader (*I Wonder* 59). Children, as compared to adults, typically have the least amount of agency to make definitive readings. To counteract this, Hughes encourages poetry performance to give children the power to make their own meanings from what they read and by extension what they experienced.

Hughes's lifelong commitment to reaching an audience of children with his writing extends back to the very beginning of his career. His first publication in 1921, when he was only 19, was in *The Brownies' Book*, a children's magazine begun by W. E. Du Bois in 1919 and edited by Jesse Fauset. Du Bois started the magazine, the first periodical in the U.S for black children, to offer them positive representations of black culture "to counteract the preponderance of negative stereotypes in books and magazines aimed at the children's market" (Tracy 80).⁷⁹ In her book, *White Supremacy in*

⁷⁸ Hughes's representation of empowered children in his poems can be connected to racial uplift campaigns from the early twentieth century, which often used the black child as a symbol of social progress (Smith iii).

⁷⁹ For an extended study of *The Brownies' Book* see Violet Joyce Harris's dissertation *The Brownies' Book: Challenge to the Selective Tradition in Children's Literature* (U of Georgia 1986). In her article, "Race Consciousness, Refinement, and Radicalism: Socialization in *The Brownies' Book*", Harris explains how editing *The Crisis* made Du Bois aware of black children as a neglected reading audience. He received many inquiries from children about the magazine, and in response they published a

Children's Literature: Characterizations of African Americans, 1830-1900 (1998),

Donnarae MacCann surveys popular children's texts from the antebellum and post-bellum period, (to which Hughes himself would have likely been exposed while growing up) and examines how the majority of African American characters are portrayed as the happy slave, or else as stupid and lazy. Steven Tracy argues that Hughes's production of children's literature stemmed from his experiences of racism as a child and his desire to provide children with socially validating representations that he was not able to find when he was young (79).

In *The Brownie's book*, Hughes published two short stories and a couple of Mexican children's games that he learned while he was visiting his father in Mexico. His sharing of Mexican children's games with American children shows how from the very beginning of his career he viewed writing as a useful medium for cross-cultural exchange and the promotion of folk traditions. As well, the magazine encouraged an interactive form of reading, as it was designed for adults and children to read together to cultivate social connections between generations (Tracy 81). The fact that in his first print publication he offered children ways to play and interact with one another, rather than merely to read, symbolizes how he sought to cultivate an audience who would not only engage in solitary textual contemplation but also action, activity and community.

As his first publication for children based on his time in Mexico indicates, the majority of his children's literature was influenced by his travels, and encouraged cross-cultural understanding, especially between peoples in the Americas. His efforts to build

"Children's Number" annually, which Du Bois claimed was the most popular issue of the publication each year, which led him to start *The Brownies' Book*.

transnational community in the Americas discussed in the previous chapter extend to his writing for children indicating that for Hughes, fostering diasporic connectivity must begin at a young age. In the 1930s, he collaborated with Arna Bontemps on the children's picture books *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti* (1932) and *The Pasteboard Bandit* (published posthumously in 1997). The first book about Haiti was written shortly after Hughes returned from a trip to Haiti in 1931, and likewise the *Pasteboard Bandit* was written shortly after he returned from a trip to Mexico in 1935. Both of these stories focus on cross-cultural interaction. *The Pasteboard Bandit* is about a friendship between a young Mexican boy Juanito Perez and an American boy Kenny Strange who immigrated to Mexico with his family. *Popo and Fifina* depicts a brother and sister living in Haiti who move with their family from the country to the city.

In her book *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (2004), Katharine Capshaw Smith analyzes Hughes and Bontemps literary collaborations for children, including these two picture books. She notes that part of the reason for the lack of critical attention to these works is because Hughes and Bontemps clearly discuss in their letters how these projects for children were motivated by the need to make money.⁸⁰ However, regardless of their monetary intentions, she asserts that their letters also reveal that their children's projects were not devoid of political inspiration. Bontemps's celebration of the riot at East Orange school cited at the beginning of this chapter is only but one example. Their children's books show how they "were increasingly interested in the

⁸⁰ Despite their interest in making money, the financial success of their children's project was extremely uneven. While *Popo Fifina* was an instant commercial success that sold many copies, they were unable to even find a publisher for *The Pasteboard Bandit* during Hughes's lifetime, and it was just released in 1997.

potential of aesthetics to change readers' viewpoints on race" (Smith xxv). In her discussion of their picture books set in Haiti and Mexico, she acknowledges that even though they exoticize the characters, their settings also show that Hughes and Bontemps were committed to providing U.S children with an international perspective. While Capshaw focuses on Hughes's fiction for children, I bring attention to how poetry provides formal modes for Hughes to teach children how to read and interpret difference.

Hughes's Literacy Narrative in the Big Sea

Before moving to my analysis of Hughes's pedagogical poetry projects, I will examine his education, which he presents in the first volume of his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940). He makes clear in his literacy narrative that he was unable to feel agency as a reader until he became an adult. As well as lending insight into the development of Hughes's ideas on poetry and reading, through the creative retelling of his own experiences, he offers a critique of literacy and literature as forms of socialization for young black readers in early twentieth century America. His first autobiography spans the first thirty years of his life, and concludes with the ending of the Harlem Renaissance. He opens with the epigraph, "Life is a big sea / full of many fish. / I let down my nets and pull," and then echoes this in the closing lines of the book: "literature is a big sea full of many fish. I let down my nets and pulled. I'm still pulling" (335). Hughes uses the metaphor of fishing to describe the acts of reading and writing. These interrelated opening and closing lines show that Hughes doesn't distinguish between life and literature.

The title *The Big Sea* refers not only to the opening epigraph, but also to the opening scene, which begins in medias res with Hughes as a young man working as a sailor on a boat headed from a New York port to Africa. He throws the books he owns overboard, and then goes back to reflect on his childhood that has led up to this moment. He commences his life story as a big sea of books that he must actively reject in order to become a writer:

Melodramatic maybe, it seems to me now. But then it was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart when I threw the books into the water. I leaned over the rail of the S.S. *Malone* and threw the books as far as I could out into the sea—all the books I had had at Columbia, and all the books I had lately bought to read... Then I straightened up, turned my face to the wind, and took a deep breath. I was a seaman going to sea for the first time—a seaman on a big merchant ship. And I felt that nothing would ever happen to me again that I didn't want to happen. I felt grown, a man, inside and out. Twenty-one. (3)

Hughes had just dropped out of Columbia University after his freshman year frustrated by the racism of both the curriculum, and his fellow students (Rampersad 1: 54-6). Throwing his books overboard represents his rejection of his socialization in Western culture and literacy, and his desire for a connection to an African past: “You see, books had been happening to me. Now the books were cast off back there somewhere in the churn of spray and the night behind the propeller” (4). His casual second person address to his reader is characteristic of the conversational style he uses in his autobiography, showing how in his prose, like in his poetry, he strives to make a personal connection with his readers.

Hughes's reference to the ocean to explore creolized black experience in the Americas is yet another example of how his work anticipates Gilroy's theories of the Black Atlantic. Reading the opening of his autobiography where he positions himself as a

young man sailing back to Africa, one also cannot help but think of later works by Caribbean poets, like Glissant, Brathwaite and Nourbese Philip who explore the Atlantic ocean and the Middle Passage as symbols of black cultural memory. Particularly, projects like Nourbese Philip's *Zong!*, which explores the atrocity of enslaved African peoples who were thrown overboard during their journey to the Americas. Hughes counteracts this oppressive history by depicting himself as a young black man with the freedom of mobility to journey back to Africa on his own accord. Rather than being lost in a sea of books, he positions himself as a sailor. The only author of any of the books thrown overboard that he names is the white journalist H. L Mencken who was well-known during that time for writing a linguistic history of the development of American English, as a derivative of British English (4). He selects Mencken as symbolic of the world of letters that he must reject. In contrast, Hughes seeks to define the development of a less Anglo-centric American vernacular. Similar to de Certeau's metaphor of reading as poaching, Hughes uses the metaphor of fishing to claim agency for himself as a reading subject. By casting his books into the ocean, he rejects Anglo-American literacy and literary traditions. Yet, he negotiates a position of power to cast his nets back into the sea to reappropriate aspects of these traditions, such as poetry recitation.

After this opening scene, Hughes relates stories of his early childhood and his experiences with poetry and recitation. He explains how he began to write poetry when his classmates elected him as the class poet because "my classmates, knowing that a poem had to have rhythm, elected me unanimously—thinking, no doubt, that I had some, being a Negro" (24). Hughes, who at this time went to a predominantly white school, depicts his entrance into writing through an event of racial stereotyping. This early

childhood experience also provides insight into Hughes's later challenge of this stereotype in *The First Book of Rhythms* where he presents rhythm as model for the interconnectedness of living things, rather than as a marker of racial identity. He states that prior to this "it had never occurred to me to be a poet before, or indeed a writer of any kind" (24), and he even stresses for rhetorical effect that he didn't particularly like poetry. By staging his initial adoption of a poet identity in a racially fraught classroom setting, he emphasizes poetry as a didactic medium intertwined with racial difference. From within the interpellation of the racist stereotype, which Hughes takes on in order to reject, he suggests that the discourse of poetry has the potential to signify and teach racial difference in more positive terms.

His dislike of poetry as a child stemmed from negative experiences with memorization and recitation of poems. These are important to analyze in order to understand his reappropriation of this practice in *The Negro Mother and other Dramatic Recitations*. His mother used to frequently recite poems at the Inter-State Literary Society, which was founded by his grandfather.⁸¹ He relates his disdain for his mother's melodramatic performances and how he was forced to perform with her:

⁸¹ Hughes' experiences with the oral performance of poetry as a young black child in the South were not unique. According to bell hooks, "As young black children raised in the post slavery southern culture of apartheid, we were taught to appreciate and participate in 'live arts'. Organized stage shows were one of the primary places where we were encouraged to display talent. Dramatic readings of poetry monologues, or plays were all central in these shows. Whether we performed in church or school, these displays of talent were seen as both expressions of artistic creativity and as political challenges to racist assumptions about the creative abilities of black folks. We performed for ourselves as subjects, not as objects seeking approval from the dominant culture. In our all-black schools and churches, performance was a place of celebration, a ritual play wherein one announced liberatory subjectivity" (211). hooks's comments indicate that despite originating as a Euro-American tradition, black southern communities, such as

...she recited long recitations like “Lasca” and “The Mother of the Gracchi,” in costume. As Lasca she dressed as a cowgirl. And as Cornelia, the mother of Gracchi, she wore a sheet like a Roman matron. On one such occasion, she had me and another boy dressed in half-sheets as her sons—jewels, about to be torn away from her by a cruel Spartan fate. My mother was the star of the program and the church in Lawrence was crowded. The audience hung on her words; but I did not like the poem at all, so in the very middle of it I began to roll my eyes from side to side, round and round in my head, as though in great distress. The audience tittered. My mother intensified her efforts, I, my mock agony. Wilder and wilder I mugged, as the poem mounted, batted and rolled my eyes, until the entire assemblage burst into uncontrollable laughter. (25)

The tone of this passage suggests that Hughes disliked both the poem and the way his mother performed the poem. In order to deal with the contradiction of being on stage with her despite his unwillingness to do so, he resists the seriousness and formality of the performance by bringing humor to the stage, and appropriates the performance through mockery. This playfulness anticipates Hughes’s casual and informal poetic style. This anecdote also lends insight into the importance of embodied reading for Hughes. Rather than speaking or interjecting, he makes faces to distract attention away from his mother’s performance. He conveys his interpretation of his mother’s performance through his bodily gestures, thus performing his “reading” with his body. In the very last sentence of the quotation, Hughes’s physical gestures and the poem become grammatically confused with the action of the poem, as he “mugged,” the poem “mounted.” His actions convince the audience of his interpretation of his mother’s performance, which teaches him the power of the body on stage in a poetry performance. He goes on to explain that when his mother found out that he had caused the audience to laugh that “he got the worst whipping I ever had in my life” (25). He humorously adds that through this punishment

the Intra-State Literary Society founded by Hughes’s grandfather, begin to appropriate this tradition in the late nineteenth century.

he “learned how to respect other people’s art” (25). Yet this also teaches him to associate poetry with bodily experience, as a form of dissent while he is on stage, and then through his punishment as a form of disciplinary control.

In her essay, “Standing on the Burning Deck: Poetry, Performance, History” (2005), Catherine Robson analyzes the recitation favorite “Casabianca” by Felicia Hemans. She discusses children’s embodied experiences of memorization and recitation in the late 19th and early 20th century in the United States and Great Britain (148). Her study suggests that Hughes’s experience was not unlike many children of this period who were threatened or were subject to “beating as a punishment for inadequate recitation” (156). Robson draws a parallel between the use of physical punishment to enforce memorization and recitation and the practice itself as a vehicle for “bodily correction” of a child’s speech and/or demeanor and carriage (156). While Hughes views poetry as a didactic medium, his negative childhood experiences encourage him to challenge its use in disciplinary pedagogies.

In order to show that his punishment for disrupting his mother’s performance did not sway his resistance to poetry being used as a disciplinary force, he relates how he uses his body to prevent being required to recite poems in the following passage:

Nevertheless, the following spring, at a Children’s Day program at my aunt’s church, I, deliberately and with malice aforethought, forgot a poem I knew very well, having been forced against my will to learn it. I mounted the platform, said a few lines, and then stood there—much to the embarrassment of my mother, who had come all the way from Kansas City to hear me recite. My aunt tried to prompt me, but I pretended I couldn’t hear a word. Finally I came down to my seat in dead silence—and I never had to recite a poem in church again. (25-26)

His recollection of being “forced against” his will “to learn” a poem reflects early 20th century poetry recitation pedagogy. However, Hughes refuses to recite this poem, by

pretending he has forgotten his lines. He does not even give the name of the poem in his autobiography to stress that he has resisted being forced to internalize the poem. By showing how he resists memorization and recitation as an authoritarian method of reading, he stresses that children have agency as readers. The nineteenth century pedagogy of poetry memorization and recitation aims to control the reader's body; however, Hughes shows how he uses his body to refuse this control by being silent. As Robson describes it, poetry performance engenders a hyper-awareness of physicality, "inasmuch as the anticipation, and then the actuality, of performance was often attended by symptoms of the fear of failure—clammy palms, shaking legs, and pounding hearts" (157). Regardless of whether one enjoys reciting a poem or not, one becomes aware of one's body in an entirely different way when on stage. Hughes becomes aware of how his body could be used to contradict through performance the meaning of poems that he was forced to learn, and to present his own attitude to them in terms of their content, form or history.

Despite Hughes's dislike of poetry recitation as a child, he clearly also recognized the liberatory potential of the practice, since he chooses to perform his own poetry in churches as an adult on his reading tour in the South in 1931. Hughes reappropriates memorization and recitation as a method of distribution for his poetry, and as a way to inspire children towards a more active and empowered form of reading on his tour. Rather than design poems that aim to control the bodies of his readers, Hughes innovates the form and content of his poems to encourage his readers to embody their own experiences of the poem.

I, Too, Sing *Hiawatha*

Hughes acknowledges the influence of the schoolroom poetry tradition in his autobiography when he mentions that “the only poems I liked as a child were Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s. And *Hiawatha*.” (26) While it is not surprising to hear that Dunbar inspired Hughes as a child, since Hughes’s depiction of vernacular voices builds directly on Dunbar’s folk poetics, his preference for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha* (1855) at first perhaps seems more strange. It is likely that Hughes would have encountered this poem in a classroom setting, since it was an extremely popular text in U.S. schools in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for memorization and recitation. Since Hughes names few poets and poems in his autobiography, his choice to mention *Hiawatha* suggests that Longfellow’s poetics formed an important early influence on his exploration of poetry as a pedagogical form, and his reappropriation of recitation as a community-building practice. Admittedly, *Hiawatha*’s predominant themes of language, community, and race are all topics that Hughes deals with in his poetry, although from a very different subject position; however, examining this incongruous influence helps to more fully illuminate Hughes’s refashioning of verse recitation.

Published just prior to the civil war, *Song of Hiawatha* was immensely popular when it was first released, selling over thirty thousand copies in the first six months (Jackson 475). As soon as it was published, recitations of the poem in classrooms, literary societies and community events proliferated, which continued well into the

twentieth century.⁸² The release of the poem in 1855 coincides with the height of minstrelsy's popularity from 1846-1854 (Lott 9). In a period of intense racial conflict and anxiety about the end of slavery, the popular poem repeated the colonial narrative of peaceful conquest over Native Americans as a displacement of whites' anxiety over the role that free African Americans would play in the national community. By re-staging a colonial narrative of racial harmony between whites and Native Americans, the poem also completely elides African American history as part of the national narrative. One has to question why Hughes found the poem so compelling, despite its deeply problematic racial politics.

Scholars have criticized Longfellow's appropriation and misuse of Indian source material and his colonial misrepresentation of Native American history, as well as how he perpetuates stereotypes of Native Americans.⁸³ The poem ends with Hiawatha peacefully welcoming the whites, and telling his community to listen to their message of Christianity: "Listen to their words of wisdom / Listen to the truth they tell you" (168). The arrival of "the pale-faces" saves the Native groups from discord with one another. Hiawatha dies at the end of the poem as his people and the white visitors, "Watched him floating, rising, sinking, / Till the birch canoe seemed lifted / High into that sea of

⁸² To stress that recitations of *Hiawatha* were not only performed in the 19th century, Gaul analyzes the annual Hiawatha Pageant that has been performed by the white community in Pipestone, Minnesota, for the last sixty years, 1948-2008. The pageant's run just ended despite the fact that Gaul describes protests, as far back as the 1970s, by the American Indian Movement to stop the pageant (411). The fact that *Hiawatha* has continued to be performed up until recently suggests another avenue for postcolonial analysis of poetry recitation.

⁸³ See for example Eric J. Sundquist's "The Literature of Expansion and Race" and Helen Carr's *Inventing the American Primitive: Politics, Gender and the Representation of Native American Literary Traditions*.

splendor” (168-169). While one cannot know exactly what Hughes’s experience of this poem may have been, his fondness for the poem stresses how individual reader reception complicates critical literary histories. How does one reconcile and understand how *Song of Hiawatha*, a deeply racist poem, may have inspired one of the greatest African American poets of the twentieth century, whose work is championed for his anti-racist politics?

Hiawatha's mixture of cultures and languages provided an example, albeit a problematic one, for Hughes to imagine how he could transform black American folk culture into black literature. Longfellow transforms a folk tradition into a literary tradition by putting Native American material in an English poem interspersed with Ojibwa words using the European meter of trochaic tetrameter, which he takes from the Finnish epic *Kalevala* (Jackson 472). It also provided Hughes with an understanding of the performative potential of recitation. In his essay, “Ten Ways to Use Poetry in Teaching” (1951), he offers *Hiawatha* as an example of a poem that educators could use for a “Poetry Costume Party in which folks come dressed as “The Ancient Mariner,” or “Hiawatha” and recite each his own poem—which gives an added incentive to the memorizing of poetry” (*Essays* 321). Ironically, dressing in costume was not an added incentive for Hughes when he performed with his mother as a child. His essay exhibits how he embraces the pedagogy of memorization and recitation, despite his dislike of the practice as a child. Six out his ten suggestions for teaching poetry in this essay involve using some form of recitation or reading aloud. His suggestions for recitation, rather than promote rote memorization, invite students to be more creative in their interpretation and

presentation of the poems.⁸⁴ Yet his proposal that children should dress up as Native Americans to perform *Hiawatha* in the 1950s indicates that Hughes was not as completely adverse to minstrelsy, as he appears to be in earlier poems such as “Minstrel Man,” at least when it involves another race.⁸⁵

Sorby suggests that the poem was popular for recitation in schools because it narrates how natives become literate citizens, which mirrors a child’s learning process: “Like *Hiawatha*, American students moved from orality to literacy from barbarism to social competence” (5). In the prologue, Longfellow instructs the audience to read the poem as an elegy, describing the lines of the poem as a “half-effaced inscription” in “some neglected graveyard /... For a while to muse, and ponder /.../ Stay and read this rude inscription, / Read this Song of *Hiawatha*!” (4). By beginning with this scene, Longfellow positions the speaker of the poem as a reader and underscores how the action that takes place in the rest of the poem is part of a far-off past. Yet when readers perform this poem on stage, they embody the culture that is supposed to be represented as dead.

⁸⁴ In his essay, Hughes suggests other strategies that involve recitation, such as having children study folk poems and then inviting them to make up their own to recite as well as having children recite a poem as a group in a Choral Speech or Verse Choir. Gayle Rubin discusses how American educators began to promote this as a mode to recite poetry in the Interwar period as way to teach proper elocution through collective activity while learning from one’s peers (136-138). His most playful suggestion is his idea for a “Poetry Quiz Party” where students read aloud a poem and then the class must guess what country it is from, who the author is, and the title. He suggests that if they cannot figure out the title, “let the members of the class give it a title of their own choosing” (321). As these various interactive exercises show, Hughes presented recitation in a playful manner, and he encouraged his students to be creative in their performances.

⁸⁵ Gaul discusses how there was a resurgence of “playing Indian” during the Cold War to fulfill “a longing for community,” which resulted in a rise in performances of *Hiawatha* during this time (410). Hughes’s suggestion to use the poem in schools could have also been influenced by this problematic cultural trend.

Hughes may have witnessed or actually experienced how recitations have the power to re-animate the culture which Longfellow claims has disappeared to create “performative contradiction.”

In her study of the performance history of *Hiawatha*, Theresa Strouth Gaul argues that the use of poetic performances of the poem to build community parallel the thematic exploration in the poem of “an idealized social unity” between different Indian nations that culminates in the arrival of the whites who ensure that a peaceful community will continue after Hiawatha’s death (409). The rhetoric of Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* makes readers feel part of a national collective, premised on a shared preliterate native culture through the figure of Hiawatha. Hughes’s enjoyment of this poem as a child may have been because he identified with the feeling of national collectivity that the poem inspired, something that he frequently writes about not being able to feel as an African American child growing up in the early twentieth century. It was likely the only poem he read as a child in which he could imagine an American identity through a hero who was a man of color, and he may have felt a personal connection to the figure of Hiawatha through his own Native American ancestry.⁸⁶ To echo Butler and Spivak’s book title, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, in *Hiawatha*, Longfellow, a white Euro-American ventriloquizes the ancient native hero, Hiawatha, to sing the nation in a version of English that absorbs its

⁸⁶ The suggestion that Hughes may have been influenced by the poem because of his own Native heritage opens up an area for further study in terms of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s impact on North American Native literature. For instance, the late nineteenth century First Nations poet E. Pauline Johnson explicitly acknowledges that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha* played a formative influence on her desire to write about her own Native Canadian culture. Her sister designed her buckskin and feather costume for her performances based on pictures of the women character, Minnehaha, in her illustrated copy of the poem (Johnson xvii).

preliterate past. In turn, readers of this poem are given the opportunity to perform their national identities through this native hero from an ancient past. Yet the scope of the community imagined during the performance will vary depending on the subjectivity of the reader.

Recitation as Distribution

On his reading tour to the South in 1931, Hughes uses the nineteenth century Euro-American tradition of schoolroom poetry and public poetry recitations led by writers like Longfellow to build self-determined black communities.⁸⁷ With his chapbook *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations*, he takes every aspect of cultural production into his own hands including both production and distribution and travels through the dangerous Jim Crow South to advocate a poetics for the people. While the recitation form of the poems in the chapbook are less experimental than some of his earlier blues poems from the Harlem Renaissance, the entire tour represents one his most innovative projects in its use of poetry to inspire emancipatory literacy.

On November 2nd 1931, with his friend and driver Radcliffe Lucas, he set out in a Model A Ford sedan packed full of books and drove across the Mason Dixon Line on a

⁸⁷ The literary historian, James Smethurst acknowledges the enormous influence that Hughes had on the formation of the Black Arts Movement in the mid-sixties. His formal experiments with black cultural musical traditions provided an example to Black Arts poets such as Amiri Baraka, for how to fashion a black poetics free from the domination of white American culture. However, I suggest that none of his projects anticipate the Black Power principle of self-determination more than his reading tour and his chapbook, despite his reliance on nineteenth century Anglo-American aesthetics. See both, Smethurst's essay, "Don't Say Goodbye to The Porkpie Hat:" Langston Hughes, the Left, and the Black Arts Movement," and his book, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*.

seven-month reading tour through the Jim Crow South. Packed in his car were copies of *The Negro Mother*, as well as single broadsides of poems that were in the chapbook for those who could not afford to purchase the book, as well as his first book *The Weary Blues* (1926), which he arranged with the publisher Knopf to sell at the a reduced rate of a dollar. He also brought with him a small exhibition of black literature to display at his readings to promote the work of other black authors. He drove all over the south using “poetry as a passport” performing at black colleges, schools and churches (*I Wonder* 42). Remarkably, Hughes managed to make a profit from book sales and speaker fees even though his primary audience was the black population hardest hit by the depression (Rampersad 1: 226).⁸⁸ Hughes describes the success of the tour in the following quotation:

The end result was that almost every evening for months was booked solid, and sometimes Sunday afternoons, as well. In this way we kept a full itinerary, driving several hundred miles a week, and I introduced my poems to every major city, town, and campus in the South that year. No matter, how small a dot on a map a town was, we did not scorn it, and my audience ranged all the way from college students to cotton pickers, from kindergarten children to the inmates of old folks homes. (*I Wonder* 55)

While his description of the breadth and diversity of his audience most likely represents his ideal, rather than the reality, it shows Hughes’s effort to reach a broad range of readers. In reality, the vast majority of his audience would have been young children and college students because he most often read at educational institutions, since he booked

⁸⁸ He sold approximately 2750 copies of *The Negro Mother* for 25 cents, as well as 1000 broadsides of five different poems, which he would occasionally give away, as well as copies of *The Weary Blues* (Davey 237). Davey quotes Hughes in a letter to Taylor requesting that he send more broadsides, which were priced at 10 cents. Hughes writes, “I shall probably give most of them away, as I read to so many little youngsters who have no money, and who ask me for poems” (237). This shows how his primary goal was to not make a profit but to get his poetry into the hands of young black children.

the majority of his tour engagements using the *Negro Year Book*, a catalogue of black schools and colleges. He also placed ads in black newspapers and magazines, such as *The Crisis* and *The Amsterdam News*, to encourage black readers in southern communities to contact him to arrange readings, thus employing readers themselves to help him create his audience (Davey 228). The ad in the *Crisis* offered a free copy of *The Negro Mother*, for a one-year subscription of the magazine, illustrating how Hughes promoted not only his own work, but also other publications to foster a black public sphere.

A year after his reading tour Hughes published his first book-length collection of poetry for children, *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (1932) when Effie Lee Power, a white librarian from his old high school in Cleveland, invited him to compile a collection of his poetry for children. His experiences with his young audiences in the South undoubtedly contributed to his ideas for this book; however, he does not include any of his recitations from *The Negro Mother*, underscoring that his chapbook poems were specifically composed for a black southern audience. *The Dream Keeper*, published by Knopf, was aimed at an integrated audience of black and white children. Intended for use in schools, this collection featured many of his previously published poems from his Harlem Renaissance publications. Poems included ranged from famous poems such as “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “I, Too”, and “The Weary Blues,” to lesser known poems such as “Youth,” “Po’Boy Blues,” “Song for a Banjo Dance,” and “Homesick Blues.” As the titles indicate, there were many poems that use blues forms and vernacular language. As well, many have international references or settings, such as “Mexican Market Woman” and “African Dance,” which show his efforts to present children with transnational subjects. Hughes also includes his poem “Minstrel Man,” which exposes

the damaging psychological effects of the minstrel tradition on black subjectivity. The short sixteen line poem, concludes with the following biting lines: “Because my feet / Are gay with dancing, / You do not know / I die?” (61).⁸⁹ By including this poem, Hughes invites his young readers to confront the minstrel stereotypes of “the happy negro” popular in children’s literature of this time.

Hughes’s understanding of the essential role that youth can play in the building of community is conveyed in the last declarative socialist line of the poem “Youth” that concludes the *Dream Keeper*: “We March!” (77). As the last line, it reads like a challenge that calls on his young readers to come together in action and move in rhythm as readers, and with one another. The word march suggests a demonstration of force and purposeful walking with a goal in mind. This line illustrates Hughes’s desire for his young readers to use poetry to help them form communities of dissent like the students at East Orange High School; however, he does not put these politics into practice in this particular text, but in his chapbook for the Golden Stair Press by promoting recitation.

Hughes started the Golden Stair Press to publish the chapbook for this tour because of the difficulties he experienced with Knopf, who marketed his books primarily to white readers and were unwilling to stock his books in black bookstores.⁹⁰ As previously stated, none of the poems included in the chapbook were republished in any of his subsequent books suggesting that the poems were composed specifically for his target

⁸⁹ “Minstrel Man” was originally published in *The Crisis* in 1925, and then in Alan Locke’s anthology *The New Negro* (1925).

⁹⁰ See Lorenzo Thomas’s discussion of Hughes’s treatment by Knopf in *Extraordinary Measures*. He argues that Hughes “was held in low esteem by his own editors at Knopf” because of racist assumptions about the quality of African-American poetry (4).

audience of black southern children. Hughes's intended audience for this text is key for understanding how he challenges the minstrelsy tradition through his appropriation of recitation. The twenty-page pamphlet includes six short poems with instructions for how they are to be recited. Each poem is written in the voice of a black character: a soldier, a young student, a mother, a rich man, a poor man and a clown. These different voices represent black stereotypes common in white representations of African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, rather than the black mammy, he offers a strong empowered black mother who has led the way to freedom for her children. He presents a black clown who refuses this designation at the conclusion of the poem, "I was once a black clown / But now-- / I'm a man!" In her essay, "Building a Black Audience in the 1930s: Langston Hughes, Poetry Readings, and the Golden Stair Press," Elizabeth A. Davey argues that Hughes's tour exemplifies his work to build a black audience throughout his career (223). She proposes that Hughes engages with black stock characters in order to subvert them in the content of the poem (231). I stress how the subversion of the black stereotypes only becomes fully realized as a "performative contradiction" when the poems are recited.

Hughes capitalizes on the crossovers and slippages between minstrelsy and elocution by offering dramatic monologues for young black children to challenge minstrel stereotypes. As Dwight Conquergood explores, "elocution existed in dialectical tension with minstrelsy" in the nineteenth century: "Whereas blackface minstrelsy was a theatrically framed mimicry and parody of blackness, elocution can be thought of as the performativity of whiteness naturalized" (149). Hughes offers children scripts, which

invite them to subvert minstrel stereotypes by recasting them formally in the style of elocutionary recitations.

Hughes was motivated to make literacy more accessible for black subjects in the Jim Crow South, after he returned from his trip to Haiti and Cuba in 1931, demonstrating yet again how his transnational experiences inform his poetic project. His ideals of Haiti as the first free black republic in the Americas were discouraged when he witnessed the extreme poverty of the black underclass. He underscores the relationship between inequality and literacy in Haiti when he writes, “Most of Haiti’s people without shoes could not read or write, and had no power” (*I Wonder* 28). His idea for the tour crystallized when he visited the black education activist Mary Bethune on his way back from Cuba. She invited him to read at her school, and then she urged him to bring his “poetry to the people.”

Hughes sought to counteract the limited access to printed material and education in South. In his autobiography, he writes about his own difficulty finding copies of the black national paper, *The Chicago Defender*, while he was traveling there. He also tells a story about trying to buy a copy of the *New York Times* in the white waiting area of a train station because there was no newspaper stand in the colored waiting area, and then being ordered out of the white waiting area by a policeman who forced him to leave the train station along the tracks because he forbid him to use the front door again (*I Wonder* 53). The fact that he was trying to buy the *New York Times* symbolizes the disparity over access to literacy in the North as compared to the South. Rather than discussing the lack of literature available, he uses the example of newspapers to emphasize the importance of this print form to build a black public sphere. Hughes’s representation of his own

determination to procure a newspaper by crossing white lines of segregation also shows how he sought to empower readers to fight for their own access to literacy.

Hughes's targeting of young black students at black schools and colleges in the South in the 1930s anticipates the significant role that black students would play in the civil rights movement.⁹¹ His recognition that the "Dark Youth of the U.S.A.," (the title of one of the chapbook poems that he produced as a broadside to distribute on his tour) could become a powerful force in black liberation was realistic in terms of the population in the South where according to a census in 1930, there were 2,817,137 black youth between the ages of 10 and 25, and 57.1% of the southern black population was under 25 (Johnson 59).

Hughes's method to provoke youth into action was by offering them poems to perform. Through writing instructions for readers, he negotiates his understanding of the politics of performance. Even though the recitation style of his poems in *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations* are unlike his blues experiments in *The Weary Blues*, at his readings he read from both books suggesting that he felt that both types of poetry were relevant for his Southern audiences. While the chapbook poems seem less modernist than his blues poems, Davey points out that Hughes breaks from the 19th century recitation tradition through his layout, design and marginal instructions (233-234). The chapbook has a column in the left-hand margin entitled, "The Mood," which explains how a performer should recite the poem and what kind of music should

⁹¹ Offering the example of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, an important black left political group that formed in 1937 in Louisiana, Smethurst discusses how it was primarily black college students who mobilized the grass roots civil rights movement in the South (319).

accompany it. For instance, in his poem, “The Black Clown,” he writes in the left hand margin, “*But now a harsh / and bitter note / creeps into / the music. / Overburdened. / Backing away / angrily. / Frantic with humiliation*” (151). These dramatic and emotional cues resemble his use of italicized instructions in the right-hand margin in his later experimental work *Ask You Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961). These musical instructions, rather than the literal directions in *The Negro Mother*, take a figurative tone: “*Bop / blues / into / very / modern / jazz / burning / the / air / eerie / like / a neon / swamp- / fire / cooled / by / dry / ice*” (521). As much as the form of the poems in *The Negro Mother* harkens back to a nineteenth century tradition of recitation, they also led Hughes to develop a more experimental poetics of performative reading. Choreographing actual reader performances, during the act of composition helped him to imagine how to foster reader agency formally in his texts, which he develops in *The First Book of Rhythms*.

Reading as Rhythm

In *The First Book of Rhythms* Hughes presents children with an inclusive model of collective literacy using rhythm to underscore our interconnectedness. This book marks his return to children’s literary projects in the early 1950s. It was part of his series of First Books commissioned by the publisher Franklin Watts. Each book picked a theme and the reader was meant to introduce children to it. As well as *The First Book of Rhythms* (1954), other titles from the series include *The First Book of Negroes* (1952), *The First Book of Jazz* (1955), *The First Book of the West Indies* (1956) and *The First Book of Africa* (1960). As the titles indicate, aside from *The First Book of Rhythms*, the

topics were designed to educate children on black diasporic cultural themes. He also published a series of biographies. Titles from this series include: *Famous American Negroes* (1954), *Famous Negro Music Makers* (1955), *A Pictorial History of the Negro* (1956), and *Famous Negro Heroes of America* (1958).⁹²

All of these books were designed to bring African diasporic history and culture into newly racially integrated U.S. classrooms. Hughes celebrated *The Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954 that ended racial segregation in schools, and these books contribute to the development of more inclusive curriculums (Johnson 7). However, *The First Book of African Americans* has also been interpreted as a sign of Hughes's increasing conservatism after his interrogation by the McCarthy Commission in 1953. This charge is based on the fact that he did not include any African Americans who were associated with communism. Most notably, he does not include entries on W. E. Du Bois and Paul Robeson. However, Jonathan Scott defends Hughes by citing his own explanation to a friend in 1965: "It was at the height of the McCarthy Red baiting era, and publishers had to go out of their way to keep books, particularly children's books, from being attacked, as well as schools and libraries that might purchase books..." (quot'd in Scott 190). This statement shows that Hughes wanted to get his children's books into educational settings, and that he was aware that any explicit radical politics would prevent them from being published. While his children's books from the 1950s

⁹² Other children's publications by Hughes include, *The Sweet and Sour Animal Book*, an alphabet book written in the 1930s with illustrations by students from the Harlem School of the Arts, and published posthumously in 1994; and *Black Misery* (1969), which explores the ugliness of racism that black children undergo in the U.S through captions written by Hughes and black and white illustrations by Aruni. This was the last book Hughes ever wrote, and it was published just after his death. He also included a section of children's poems in *Langston Hughes Reader* (1958).

seem to espouse a more conservative U.S patriotism, he situates the national within a transnational framework by publishing books on Africa and the West Indies in the series, illustrating that his commitment to promoting an international perspective does not change substantially in the 1950s. The transnational scope of Hughes's children's publications contextualizes his efforts to foster new modes of reading through his experiments with form in *The First Book of Rhythms* and *The Negro Mother and other Dramatic Recitations* as part of his larger project to build a reading audience open to the interpretation of social difference.

While *The First Book of Rhythms* is not explicitly about reading, poetry or racial empowerment, a contextualized analysis of the book provides insight into Hughes's pedagogical perspective on how to use poetry to promote literacy as an agent of social change. He uses rhythm as an allegory to represent the kind of embodied active reading that he desired for his poetry, as an alternative to rote learning methods and recitation for teaching poetry / reading. The concept of rhythm, which he defines as a "measure of time or movement by regular beats coming over and over again in a harmonious relationship" (40), differs from the black cultural themes of his other *First Books*. However, the small amount of scholarship on this book identifies how Hughes "elaborates a challenge to white racial oppression" through form (Scott 201). In the only sustained analysis, Scott offers a Marxist reading, where he interprets the book through Gramsci's theories of education as "dynamic conformism" to argue that the book promotes "dialectical thinking and acting in the world" (193). Building on Scott's analysis, I extend this formal challenge beyond the confines of a Marxist frame to illustrate how the subtext of rhythm forms a model for reading.

In his afterword to the 1994 edition, Robert O'Meally argues that Hughes challenges the racist stereotype that African people understand rhythm better than other ethnic groups,

by defining rhythm as originating not in race but in the patterned shapes and movements of nature, in the pulses of the human body, and in learned cultural practices...Hughes contradicts a very old tenet of antiblack racism and, implicitly, the very idea of race as a category of meaning. (53)

In order to do this, Hughes presents a way of reading that does not rely on established “categories of meaning,” but rather invites his readers to participate in making new patterns based on their experiences of rhythm. While he provides an extensive catalogue of rhythms to prove that everything has a rhythm, he never refers directly to reading as rhythm, which reflects his phenomenological pedagogy. The form and content of the book are designed to enact a form of learning by doing rather than by explanation, so that readers experience reading as rhythm, (an experience that readers of Hughes’s poetry are familiar with), through the interactive text.

The lessons in this unique fifty-page book teach children how to recognize and decode rhythms in their environment through interactive exercises, as well as providing explanations of a diverse array of rhythms, among them sea shells, rivers, leaves, washing machines, furniture, airplanes, garden hoses, printing presses, language, music, dance, curling hair, skipping rope, electromagnetic waves, handwriting and sweeping. Robin King’s illustrations in the book begin as lines, squiggles, and shapes in the first few pages and then develop into illustrations as the book progresses to enact the creative energy of rhythm. The book is divided into short chapters that present different ways to experience and think about rhythm that include, “Some Mysteries of Rhythm,” “Broken

Rhythms,” “Athletics,” “Sources of Rhythm,” “Rhythms May Be Felt—and Smelled,” “Machines,” “Unseen Rhythms,” “Rhythms in Daily Life,” and “How Rhythms Take Shape.”

Prior to writing this book, Hughes spent a semester teaching at the Chicago Laboratory School in 1949, an experimental school for children from kindergarten through grade 12. Founded on John Dewey’s method of experiential education, the school provided Hughes with a unique learning environment to put his ideas about the pedagogical possibilities of poetic language that he had been developing throughout his career into practice. He designed and taught an interdisciplinary writing workshop called “the Special Arts Project” to eighth graders where he used rhythm as a uniting theme to explore different modes of artistic production and interpretation. He led discussions on rhythms in human body movement, speech, nature, music, visual arts, and poetry. Children were assigned homework that involved creatively documenting rhythms they had observed in their environments. He taught children to see rhythm as a relational force that connects everyone and everything together. As he puts it in *The First Book*, “All the rhythms of life in some way are related, one to another. You, your baseball, and the universe are brothers through rhythms” (42). Through rhythm, “People and races and nations get along better when they “row together” (43). Hughes’s use of rhythm as a model for harmonious social relation across cultures makes an ethical point from an aesthetic basis to build on his exploration of diasporic social voice through formal innovation in his 1940s poetics.

The First Book of Rhythms offers insight into Hughes’s compositional motivation to represent jazz, blues, and black vernacular speech rhythms in poetic form in texts such

as *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. He distills his poetics into the form of a children's reader, which reflects his desire to build an inclusive reading audience. In his forward to the 1994 edition, the jazz artist Wynton Marsalis suggests that Hughes bases his model for the interconnectivity of rhythm on a jazz ensemble where all the players are responsible for keeping rhythm, unlike other genres of music where the role lies solely on the drummer (vi). Extending this metaphor to textual production, Hughes conceptualizes the relationship between writer, reader and text as a jazz ensemble where everyone participates in the making of meaning, without enforcing a consensus of meaning. Jazz rhythm (as opposed to metrical verse rhythm) presents a model of democratic collectivity, without implying the need for hierarchy or unison.

The first chapter, "Let's Make a Rhythm" emphasizes a collaborative textual relationship between reader and writer, embodying Dewey's educational ideal of "learning by doing." By immediately inviting his readers to become involved, he privileges readers bringing their own sense of rhythm to a text. First he suggests, "Take a crayon or pencil and a sheet of paper and start a line upward. Let it go up into a curve, and you will have a rhythm. Then make a wavy like, and you will see how the line itself seems to move. Rhythm comes from movement" (2-3). By inviting his readers to pick up a pencil on the first page, he stresses reading not as a form of passive contemplation, but as a form of active creation. His instruction that "rhythm comes from movement" locates this movement as beginning in his readers' bodies. He gives readers experiential tasks to feel and simultaneously perform reading as movement. He continues to address the reader directly, "you can make a rhythm of sound by clapping your hand or tapping your foot" (4), and "you can make a body rhythm by swaying your body from side to side

or by making circles in the air with your arms” (4). He draws his readers’ attention to the book in their hands as a material object when he suggests, “try beating a slow steady rhythm with your fingers softly on the table, or on the edge of this book” (10). By drawing on a range of sensory skills from aural to aerobic as sources for rhythm making (Scott 194), Hughes provides a step-by-step approach to engage all of one’s senses in the act of embodied reading, and make it into a performance:

Now make a large circle on a paper. Inside your circle make another circle. Inside that one make another one. See how these circles almost seem to move, for you have left something of your own movement there, and your own feeling of place and roundness. Your circles are not quite like the circles of anyone else in the world, because you are not like anyone else. Your handwriting has a rhythm that is entirely your own. (4)

He instructs his readers to draw shapes to represent the rhythms of their bodies. Through the repetition of circles, he encourages children to embrace their own uniqueness. By asking his young readers to draw shapes rather than letters and words, he also encourages readers with developing literacies to feel empowered to participate in textual production. This also demystifies writing by showing how letters are just shapes. He encourages children to feel confident in their individuality and to view their own embodiment as a source of agency, a “roundness” in the world that gives them place. He offers “handwriting” as a way to express this individuality. Elsewhere in the book he discusses the rhythm of printing presses illustrating how for him different kinds of textual production are forms of rhythm. The rhythmic repetition of the prose in this passage encourages his readers to experience rhythm in the act of reading. His simple direct sentences speak personally to each reader. When they follow his instructions to draw the

shapes they respond to the rhythm in the text with the rhythms of their bodies to enact how “one rhythm affects another rhythm” (14).

The second chapter, “The Beginning of Rhythm” tells readers that rhythm starts in their bodies: “Your rhythm on this earth began first with the beat of your heart. The heart makes the blood flow. Feel your heart. Then feel your wrist where your pulse is. That is where you can best feel the rhythm of your blood moving through your body from your heart” (8). Again, his directive experiential instructions in this passage foster body awareness, while one is reading. By doing so, he shows students how their internal body movement interacts with the world around them to offer an embodied way of relating to the world. In opposition to rote memorization as a way of “learning by heart,” Hughes suggests learning to read through the rhythms of one’s heartbeat. Formally, the sentence breaks punctuate the rhythm of his prose with his reader’s activity to convey the interconnectivity of rhythms. The fragment “feel your heart” provides readers with space for this instruction to register not only cognitively but also physically. While traditional methods of “learning by heart” are based on the idea that the body is the primary place to store knowledge, Hughes privileges the body not as a repository of knowledge but as an agent of knowledge through the heart, which one can act out through performance.

After establishing readers’ experiences of rhythm in their bodies he goes on to explore rhythms in the natural environment. He encourages children to not only view, but to experience the world around them as a composition of rhythms. He begins with the rhythms of nature in seashells, rivers, oceans, trees, birds, birds’ nests and leaves. He describes the Grand Canyon as “an immense rhythmical cleft across the land” (11), and how seashells are made from the rhythms of the ocean: “each shell is molded into a

rhythmic shape of its own by the all the rhythms and pressures put upon it from the sea” (26). These examples illustrate the pleasurable lyricism of Hughes’s unadorned prose. The apparent simplicity of the sentences condenses a poetic complexity. The book proceeds by interconnected analogy, illustrating the meaning of rhythms through its formal structure. In doing so, Hughes creates a convergence between signifying and enacting. Readers experience reading as rhythm through the style and form of the sentence fragments. Punctuation, specifically the period functions to set the tempo of his prose. He uses plain vocabulary and short direct sentences that build on one another through repetition. By using repetition as a form of elaboration, he maintains an interactive rhythm with his readers. Rather than stressing recitation as faithful imitation, Hughes enacts recitation with a difference, making his text accessible for new readers who can develop their reading skills through repetition.

Central to Hughes’s idea of rhythm is that human production and labor, both artistic and technological, can all be traced back to the generating energy of rhythm. Offering the example of sweeping, which he suggests is done most efficiently when one keeps a steady pace, he proposes that “rhythm makes it easier to use energy” (33). This idea upholds a socialist approach to the creativity of labor. By extension, reading itself becomes a form of labor that becomes easier to accomplish when a reader’s rhythm can freely interact with the rhythm of a text. By not differentiating between the manual labor of everyday acts like sweeping from the intellectual labor of reading, and even artistic production, Hughes presents a non-hierarchal socialist perspective on work.

In terms of artistic production, Hughes clearly privileges poetry as a form well suited to harness the power of rhythm. In his lecture he gave to the College Learning

Association in 1951 based on his months at the Laboratory school, he explains how poetry can be used to teach students how to interpret rhythm: “The rhythms of poetry give continuity and pattern to words, to thoughts, strengthening them, adding the qualities of permanence, and relating the written word to the vast rhythms of life” (*Essays* 319). Hughes stresses how poetry offers a dialectic model of learning: “Poetry can be used to bridge the often imagined gulf between literature and life” in the classroom (Hughes 319). In *The First Book of Rhythms* chapter “Rhythm and Words,” Hughes does not discuss language in general but focuses on poetry, suggesting that for him poetic language engages the rhythmic potential of words as a source of social connection. This chapter follows the “Rhythms and Music” chapter. He explains, “rhythm is very much a part of poetry. Maybe that is because the first poems were songs” (34). He emphasizes how poetry increases the force of words: “Just as the feet of soldiers marching in rhythm carry men forward, so the rhythms of sermons or speeches or poems carry words marching into your mind in a way that helps you to remember them” (36). Hughes uses a military metaphor of moving in unison to explain how poetic rhythm increases the power of words to “march into your mind.” This is what makes poetry a useful genre for literacy instruction because it helps one internalize language structures. Yet unlike the disciplinary use of rhythm (as regular metrical form) in memorization and recitation, Hughes invites a reader to bring their own rhythms to a text to give her more agency. While still encouraging the performance element of recitation, Hughes engages performativity through activities that move beyond merely a literal staged reading. He represents literacy not as a set of skills that one must master, but as a collaborative rhythmic process.

Hughes's chapbook, *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations* and his experimental children's reader, *The First Book of Rhythms* are emblematic of his efforts to inspire rhythmic literacy, a mode of active embodied reading as a form of social change. To exemplify Hughes's goals for his poetics, this chapter began with a story about "black poetry causing a rumble" in a high school in the town of East Orange New Jersey in the mid-nineteen sixties. While black poetry may have been perceived as threatening force then, East Orange is now home to the Langston Hughes School of Publishing and Fine Arts elementary school. This is just one of many schools named after Hughes across the United States, demonstrating his status as a national cultural icon. This parallels the naming of schools after Longfellow in the late nineteenth century. Sorby explains how when one-room schoolhouses began to be replaced by multi-room brick buildings after the Civil War it was common to name these new schools after poets as well as political heroes: "Most commonly—or rivaled in popularity only by Lincoln and Washington schools—there were Longfellow schools (Sorby 1). What are we to make of the fact that now rather than Longfellow or Lincoln schools, we have Hughes schools?"

While the naming of schools after Hughes is surely a sign of racial progress, as well as a direct result of his own efforts to promote poetry as a pedagogical form, it also marks an apex in the institutionalization of black poetry that perhaps undermines its earlier potential to cause a "rumble" outside of the classroom. Contemporary poetry curriculums in U.S. schools might well benefit from a consideration of Hughes's ideas on the pedagogy of poetry as a way to teach emancipatory literacy in order to prevent his

poetry from being used to teach children to sing the nation-state in the tradition of Longfellow. Hughes's poetics, when combined with his lessons on embodied reading, empower children to enact the performative contradictions of social community.

CHAPTER 4

RECALLING ELOCUTION LESSONS IN CREOLE POETRY READING

As with Langston Hughes's poetry in the United States, it is difficult to go through schooling in postcolonial Jamaica and not have to learn a poem by Louise Bennett at some point. There are few contemporary Jamaicans who cannot recite at least a part of a Bennett poem off by heart because they were assigned to memorize her poems in school. The Louise Bennett Garden Theatre in downtown Kingston, which was named after her in the 1970s, is often home to the national finals of the Jamaica Festival's Annual Speech contest, where one is guaranteed to hear many of Bennett's poems being recited by students in the competition.⁹³ If children growing up in the 1970s and 1980s were not exposed to Bennett in the classroom, they may have watched her children's television show *Ring Ding* on Saturday mornings, listened to her weekly radio monologues on *Miss Lou's Views*, seen her perform in the annual Christmas Pantomime, have had her Anansi stories read to them at bedtime, or watched one of her many public performances.

The annual Jamaica Festival, which features many different arts and culture events, was first held in 1962 to celebrate Independence. In the speech contest, students begin by competing in their own schools and then move onto local and regional contests. The top recitations from these competitions advance to the national finals. In his entry on

⁹³ The Gordon Town elementary school, just outside of Kingston, where Bennett lived for many years, was recently renamed the Louise Bennett-Coverley All-Age School in June 2009. Another public space recently named after Bennett is Miss Lou's Room at the Harborfront Centre, a non-profit cultural organization in Toronto. This room was opened after her death in 2006 to celebrate and educate those that visit (often students on school trips from the Toronto area) about her contributions to Jamaican culture, illustrating that Bennett's reach as an educational icon extends to the diaspora.

“Poetic Contests” in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Earl Miner notes that speech contests “remain vital in third-world and popular culture” (926), which he attributes to the role of verbal competition in African oral traditions. Yet he neglects to point out that these contests also reflect a colonial history of elocution. This is reflected in the categories of the speech contest, which reflect Jamaica’s colonial past, as well as its postcolonial present. Entries are accepted in the following eight fields: Standard English poems/prose; Jamaican dialect poems/prose; dub poetry; speaking ensemble; public speaking; storytelling; Jamaican dialect poems; as well as sonnets, psalms and Shakespeare. Bennett’s poems are competition favorites in the dialect category, a reflection of her own promotion of poetry recitation throughout her lifetime.

The contemporary dub poet Jean Binta Breeze describes the formative influence that reciting Bennett’s poetry at the Jamaica Festival had on her postcolonial feminist poetics:

I had grown up as a young child performing the works of Louise Bennett on stages all over Jamaica in the annual festival. I had read and performed works from other women writers in Jamaica, but Miss Lou had not only drawn on the characters, experiences and languages of the people, she had also managed to give the people’s poetry back to them in a way that made the nation celebrate itself. No other woman poet had taken on the popular stage, no other had broken so totally out of the literary and academic circles of recognition, indeed, had forced them to accept her and so opened the way for all of us who now work in our own language with ease. (498)

By aligning Bennett’s groundbreaking performances with those of her readers, Breeze underscores the role that both readers and writers play in the collective reclaiming of public discourse.⁹⁴ Her comments suggest that every time a reader performs a Bennett

⁹⁴ Similar to Breeze, the poet Opal Palmer Adisa describes the formative influence hearing Louise Bennett’s poems performed at the Jamaica Festival had on her

poem, the ongoing work of decolonizing potentially continues. And yet the act of recitation also evokes indelible marks from a colonial past.

In ways quite comparable to Hughes, Bennett reappropriates the disciplinary practices of memorization and recitation from the transatlantic schoolroom poetry tradition to promote an active form of embodied reading aimed at social dissent. Her recycling of colonial elocution pedagogies in her 1940s poetics, which leads to later Caribbean feminist performance projects like that of Jean Binta Breeze, provides a model to understand how colonial power gets subverted from within.⁹⁵ Bennett's gendered version of rhythmic literacy – a creolized clash of rhythms, gestures and voices that her readers are invited to activate – illustrates how the physical and social contours of reading play a central role in the decolonization of knowledge. Even in her recourse to oral performance to build an audience later in her career, she never ceased to promote reading through the recitation of poetry, especially amongst children. Bennett's use of print, as well as television and radio illustrate how she educated her audience through a range of

as a child in the late 1960s: “Then when I turned eleven years old and began attending the Festival competitions, I witnessed hosts of children, all ages and both genders, reciting your poems, trying you on, imitating and celebrating you celebrating us—how we spoke and acted at a time when my high school gave detention if we were caught speaking patois (nation language)—the so-called language of the uneducated. But you always saw and valued who we were, you knew that all languages are formed from the ordinary people with their extraordinary creativity and dexterity (2).

⁹⁵ Many critics have discussed Bennett's influence on a diverse array of contemporary Caribbean women artists ranging from dub poets such as Jean Binta Breeze, Opal Palmer Adisa, Jean Hutchinson, and Lillian Allen (See Thelma Thompson); dramatists such as the Sistren Theatre Collective (See Smith); to dancehall artists such as Lady Saw (See Cooper's *Sound Clash*).

media outlets in part because her Creole politics were initially resisted by institutionalized education.

When Bennett was first published, many of her middle class readers feared that her Creole poetry would encourage a lack of knowledge of Standard English, which in turn would perpetuate illiteracy. What often gets overlooked in analysis of these early debates about Bennett's legitimacy as a literary figure is that she intended her poetry to do the exact opposite - to promote literacy. To challenge her critics, Bennett wrote one of her most famous poems in 1943, "Bans O' Killing," which defends the legitimacy of Creole as a language "dah-equal up wid English" (*Jamaica* 218).⁹⁶ She singles out and makes fun of "Mass Charlie," a *Gleaner* reader who wrote a letter to the editor complaining about Bennett's poetry column and claiming that he wanted to "kill dialect" (218). Her mocking instruction to "mine how yuh dah-read dem English / Book deh pon yuh shelf / for ef you drop a "h" you mighta / Haffe kill yuhself" (219), emphasizes precisely the kind of interaction between textuality and Creole pronunciation that Bennett encourages her readers to participate in.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ "Bans O' Killing" was written in 1943; however, it was not published until April 10th, 1948, when it appeared in her column in the more liberal paper *Public Opinion* (Hewitt 137). It is not clear whether the editors of the *Gleaner* censored this poem because it directly addressed a reader, because of the argument the poem makes about dialect, or if Bennett chose not to publish it at the time.

⁹⁷ This chapter explores the significance of Bennett's Creole poetry for native speakers of Jamaican Creole. However, my experience of learning how to read Bennett as a non-native speaker of Creole, and in turn teaching students in the U.S. how to read Bennett's poems suggest to me that her literacy pedagogy does translate cross-culturally to a certain extent. Regardless of a reader's native language, her transcriptions of Creole words demand a more phonetic relationship to text, and raise an awareness of the multiplicity of English.

Many critics, such as Rex Nettleford, Mervyn Morris, Lloyd Brown, J. Edward Chamberlain, Gordon Rohlehr, Carolyn Cooper, Kamau Brathwaite and Mary Jane Hewitt, have discussed the importance of Bennett putting Jamaican Creole into written form, but these studies focus only on a unilateral movement from oral to written. For instance, in his chapter on Bennett and the oral tradition in his foundational book, *West Indian Poetry*, Lloyd Brown claims that for Bennett, “publication has really been an after-thought, of sorts, in terms of her function and achievement as an artist in an oral medium” (108). In contrast, I examine how her strategies to write down Creole are not just an “after-thought,” or a method of conservation and documentation as Hewitt has argued, or a “a legitimizing process” as Cooper has argued (40), but more importantly a method to activate new modes of bilingual literacy that invite readers to draw on their embodied Creole knowledge.⁹⁸

Brathwaite insists that “reading is an individualistic expression. The oral tradition on the other hand demands not only the griot but the audience to complete the community” (*History* 18). As a theorist of creolization, it is strange that he addresses oral and literate modes in such discrete terms.⁹⁹ By using oral performance dynamics,

⁹⁸ Mignolo distinguishes between “language [as] an object controlled by grammar vs. languaging imbedded in the body” (252). The latter, the idea of language as an action, illuminates what I mean by embodied Creole knowledge. Bennett engages the conflict between these two language modes in her poetics, which her readers must then negotiate.

⁹⁹ Similar to the poetry broadsides that Hughes sold on his reading tour to the American South in 1931, one of the first popular mento groups, Slim Beckford and Sam Blackwood, sold printed “tracts” at their performances in the Kingston streets in the 1930s, showing how print and oral cultures merge through performance: “There was no recording industry in Jamaica and very little recording equipment either. But the more enterprising performers knew there was an audience for their work regardless and printed

Bennett engenders reading as a form of social expression. Through her poetry and her media projects, she underscores that it is not individuals but communities who produce meaning, and by extension knowledge. By doing so, she challenges the ideology of liberal individualism, and calls for a more communal form of agency. This chapter begins with a brief history of memorization and recitation in West Indian education and then moves on to an analysis of the transformative literacy pedagogy dramatized in Bennett's rarely discussed 1942 poem, "Sammy Intres" [Sammy's Interests]. I then conclude with a discussion of how she puts her educational aspirations for Creole poetry reading into practice in her media projects for the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation.

"Sammy Intres," stands out in Bennett's work as one of her only poems to directly engage with memorization and recitation practices in West Indian education. Consisting of nine stanzas, it features a woman who stands in her doorway conversing with her friend about her son's progress in school. Like the majority of Bennett's feminine dramatic personae, the woman speaks in Creole; however, this speaker, rather than making references to Jamaican folk culture, translates lines from English into Creole from the American 19th century poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Latinated poem "Excelsior" (1841). Since worldwide working class women have the highest illiteracy rates of any social group (Seager 76), Bennett's presentation of a peasant woman reading indicates her commitment to an inclusive feminist literacy politics. Through the lines of

up copies of their newest lyric to sell for a penny or two" (Thompson 181). In contrast to Brathwaite in this instance, print (one might even characterize this as a fledgling print capitalism) mediates the relationship between the griot and his audience. It is very likely that Bennett, a mento singer herself, may have seen Slim and Slam perform. Their use of print to encourage their audiences to participate in their performances, as well as to encourage their audiences to stage their own mento acts may have influenced Bennett's ideas on how to develop reading as a social act through poetry performance.

the Longfellow poem, the woman speaker reinvents his text to talk about her son who has been assigned to memorize this poem in school. Rather than reciting Longfellow faithfully, the woman speaker inserts her own interests, effaced by the colonial society that she inhabits, into the text of the poem. Through this dramatization of reading, Bennett makes a critique of poetry memorization and recitation in schools as a way to transmit patriarchal colonial literacy and knowledge, while also refashioning its embodied and performative potential.

Recalling Colonial Elocution

When Bennett's woman speaker in "Sammy Intres" embarks on memorizing and reciting Longfellow's "Excelsior," she recalls a long history of these practices under colonial rule that extend far back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. I use the word recall here with emphasis on the multiple and contradictory meanings of the word, as in to remember that which seems familiar, as well as in to order that something be sent back where it came from, similar to how it is used in manufacturing when a faulty product is taken out of circulation to be fixed.¹⁰⁰ An underlying claim of this chapter is that if we are not attentive to Bennett's complex recall on the elocutionary tradition in the

¹⁰⁰ While the colonial elocution tradition is clearly not exactly comparable to a recalled product thinking about it as a commodity that is dangerous and can cause harm to its consumers helps to illuminate the traces of this tradition that are still alive and well in global capitalism. Instances of voice standardization, such as call centers in India where operators who work for multinational corporations must mimic American accents for customers, attest to how a North American voice is an undeniable commodity in the global marketplace.

1940s, we run the risk of continuing to perpetuate the damaging effects of this colonial practice in the present.

At the end of the slavery period leading up to Emancipation in 1834, the British government began to implement literacy education through rote learning as a form of social control. The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the increasing insurrection of enslaved groups in the different colonies signaled that the eventual abolition of all slavery practices in the British Empire were not far off. With the Haitian revolution of 1791 as the only Caribbean model for a shift from slavery to freedom (Blouet 626), the British government desperately wanted to avoid such a violent revolt in their colonies and somehow preserve or salvage a post-emancipation labor force. In her essay “Slavery and Freedom in the British West Indies,” historian Olwyn Blouet argues that this desire caused a dramatic shift in the perspective on education in colonial policy. Rather than being seen as a threat, education became an integral part of the civilizing mission. In contrast to a U.S. context where teaching enslaved people to read was illegal, and was often punished severely, in the West Indies colonial officials began to implement it as a way of “maintaining social and moral order” (Blouet 634). In 1823 the British Government passed a “policy of amelioration” to improve the quality of life for enslaved peoples, which legislated the promotion of education in the West Indies. As Blouet explains, “missionaries, abolitionists, British government officials, and some planters hoped that education would replace the whip” (643). The methods of instruction for reading followed those current in Britain, which “relied heavily on rote learning” (633). During slavery, missionary groups taught literacy almost explicitly for the purpose of Bible study. Students were taught to memorize and recite Bible passages, as a form of

internalizing moral instruction. This underscores how memorization and recitation emerge in West Indian education as a “safe” way to teach reading that would not lead to radical consciousness or revolt.

In one of the first comprehensive studies of West Indian education written post-independence, Deborah Gordon quotes a circular dispatched by the British Colonial office to the West Indies, dated Jan. 26, 1847, which outlines the guidelines for the curricula in primary schools. The second point of the circular specified the role of English language instruction as the second most important subject after Christian instruction: “To diffuse a grammatical knowledge of the English language as the most important agent of civilization for the colored population of the colonies” (quot’d in Gordon 58). This mandate makes transparent the role of Standard English grammar as a means of colonial control and cultural assimilation. While these civilizing arguments are not unfamiliar, I draw attention to how intertwined literacy and literature education were in the Anglophone Caribbean. To diffuse “grammatical knowledge” as a civilizing agent, schools began to rely not only on the Bible, but also on literary texts, especially on poetry. Similar to British schools, reading was often taught and tested through the memorization and recitation of poetry. Catherine Robson explains how standardized testing increased the popularity of teaching the memorization and recitation of poetry in UK schools because it was a convenient way for examiners to evaluate reading, by making it into a performance that could be easily judged. Students were expected to memorize and recite a certain amount of lines of poetry depending on their grade level. Thus, the character Sammy in Bennett’s poem may have had to recite “Excelsior” to pass his exams, making his mother’s pun on Longfellow’s “Alpine pass” as a way to describe

Sammy's academic achievement all the more salient. To put it in the terms of V.S. Naipaul, this form of reading quite literally makes the colonized subject into a mimic man.

In the *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, Kamau Brathwaite cites the opening lines of Felicia Hemans's "Casabianca" to identify the elocutionary tradition as a form of colonial control in Caribbean education:

But the point is that for the needs of the kind of emerging society that I am defending—for the people who have to recite 'The boy / stood on / the burn / ing deck' for so long, who are unable to express the power of the hurricane in the way that they write their words (42).

Brathwaite emphasizes how the process of internalization and performance involved in learning a poem by heart supplants a subject's ability to express one's own cultural identity in writing. The ungrammatical syntax of his quotation, which seems to start and stop the emergence of his point, embodies his critique. Robson claims that "Casabianca" is one of the most memorized and recited poems across the British Empire (148), which explains why he may have selected this particular poem. Brathwaite appropriates the metaphor of "the boy" on the "burning deck" to evoke the colonial situation of the Caribbean islands as sinking ships. While he does not explicitly address memorization and recitation elsewhere in his essay, he makes clear through the inclusion of the Hemans's quotation that poetry memorization and recitation of selected poems from the British-American tradition has played a central role in the colonization of the voice both in and outside of that tradition.

In contrast, the dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, while critiquing the practice, also claims he enjoyed it, which suggests that it introduced him to the pleasures of poetry. In an interview with Mervyn Morris, he describes his experiences with poetry recitation in Jamaican schools in the 1950s, prior to his migration to England at age 11:

When I began to write, in fact, I had no poetic models to draw from because I wasn't very much into poetry at school. I remember I quite enjoyed it when I was out here in Jamaica, but in those days they taught you parrot fashion and you just learnt everything and the whole class said it. 'O wind-a blowing all day long,/ O wind that sings so loud a song...' (253)

Johnson explains that the primary poetic model offered in schools was to recite poetry in "parrot fashion," and he provides a quotation from Robert Louis Stevenson, a popular poet in schoolroom readers, as an example. Despite the fact that both Brathwaite and Johnson emphasize that postcolonial poets must reject this model, their comments reveal that these internalizing practices have had far reaching effects on the development of postcolonial poetics. Dub poetry, like Johnson's, which uses performance as a means to build diasporic communities should be seen as a response to the use of poetry recitation in colonial schoolrooms as a method of collective indoctrination.

From Parrot Fashion to Parody

In "Sammy Intres" Bennett explores the impact of forced memorization of Anglophone literatures, to disrupt its power over her voice, so that rather than parroting back what she was forced to learn, her parody creates space for new voices to emerge, including her own and those of her readers. Written when she was in her early twenties, it can be read as response to Longfellow, as well as to her education in colonial Jamaica

and her schoolroom experiences of poetry.¹⁰¹ In fact, she attended Excelsior high school in Kingston from 1936-1938, so it is plausible that Longfellow's "Excelsior" would have been a familiar poem in the school curriculum to convey the ethos of its name and to foster school spirit.¹⁰² Bennett likely had to memorize and recite this poem at some point during her education there. Originally published in her first book in 1942, "Sammy Intres" was collected in her *Selected Poems* (1982), put out by Sangster's Books.¹⁰³ Mervyn Morris designed and edited the collection for use in education settings. He includes a section on Notes and Teaching Questions in the back of the book. Now children are just as likely to memorize and recite Bennett's poetry in schools as they are writers like Longfellow or Wordsworth. The poem, which questions what it means "to read a poem as an educational experience" in the context of colonial rule (Sorby xiii), provides postcolonial children the opportunity to be self-reflexive about what it means to read a poem such as Bennett's in their own historical context.

¹⁰¹ Although Bennett was predominantly schooled in the British and American tradition of metrical verse, in *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite describes Bennett's revelation when her teacher gave her a copy Claude McKay's of *Constab Ballads* (1912), written in Jamaican Creole, because she excelled in poetry (28).

¹⁰² In an email query to the Excelsior alumni association that was distributed by the president to its members, I attempted to confirm that Longfellow's poem "Excelsior" was a frequently taught poem at this school in the 1930s. While no one was able to confirm this (mostly likely because members were too young to have attended the school during the 1930s), many people responded by sharing their memories of poetry memorization and recitation in the curriculum.

¹⁰³ "Sammy Intres" was also included in *Jamaica Dialect Poems* (1949), but it was not included in *Jamaican Labrish* (1966) that republished many of Bennett's 1940s poems. Beginning with *Jamaica Labrish*, the majority of Bennett's books have been published by Sangsters's Bookshop, which is primarily a supplier and seller of educational books in Jamaica. The fact that she has published predominantly with Sangster's, rather than a literary publisher, underscores her commitment to education.

“Sammy Intres” is included in Bennett’s *Selected Poems* with two other 1940s poems, “Bed-time Story” and “New Scholar” in a section on education, entitled “Teck Time wid him, yaw, teacher.” Much like her tramcar settings, these poems, which depict classroom settings and other social spaces of learning, illustrate how Bennett challenges the social hierarchies of public space. The title of the section is a line from “New Scholar,” which is about a mother taking her child to his first day at a new school and advising the teacher on how to deal with him. Like “Sammy Intres,” this poem explores the contrastive relationship in a colonial setting between mothers and teachers as figures of female authority in childhood development, with mothers symbolizing local knowledge, and teachers symbolizing public colonial knowledge. The other poem in the section, “Bedtime Story,” also deals with the blurring of public and private knowledge for comic effect. It depicts a mother trying to put a crying baby to sleep by reciting English nursery rhymes that are interspersed with local gossip about a sexual scandal. The title humorously refers doubly to a mother telling her child a bedtime story and to a story about a sexual encounter. All three of the poems in the education section dramatize the fraught relationship in colonial Jamaica between intimate familiar knowledge, and public knowledge taught in schools, what Ann Laura Stoler describes as the “tense and tender ties [of colonialism] played out in beds, kitchens, nurseries, and schoolrooms” (*Haunted* 3). Similar to her Aunty Roachy persona, in these education poems, Bennett asserts the feminine discourse of gossip as a source of authority to challenge colonial power. By doing so Bennett demonstrates not only how “matters of the intimate are critical sites for the consolidation of colonial power” (Stoler *Haunted* 4), but also how they can become potential sites for its subversion.

Bennett's 1940s education poems are important precursors to later Anglophone Caribbean literature that critiques the oppressive effects of British colonial education and argues for new curriculums to focus on Caribbean language and culture, such as Kamau Brathwaite's essay, *History of the Voice*, Jamaica Kincaid's novel, *Annie John*, and Olive Senior's poem "Colonial School Girls." However, Bennett's work differs significantly from these later literary texts because rather than presenting a tragic or defiant oppositional critique, she constructs her critique through rearticulation and comedy. Humor relieves tension between the contradictions of local knowledge and colonial knowledge, while also leaving them at play for a reader to negotiate at both the thematic and linguistic levels, so that she can make her own meanings from her colonial education.

The central humorous conflict of "Sammy Intres" is figured by the confusion over the meaning of the word interests. Sammy's mother decides to try to memorize Longfellow's poem "Excelsior" because her son's teacher tells her that she should be more concerned with her son's interests. The mother assumes that Sammy is interested in the Longfellow poem because he "learn it off by heart," not realizing that he would have been assigned to memorize the poem in school. By using the vernacular version of the word "intres," Bennett stresses that what one gets taught in a Jamaican school does not reflect one's own interests, but the interests of the British ruling power, and she explores the alienating effects of this on the mother child relationship. Despite the foreign form, content and style of the poem, the mother revises it to suit her own interests in her conversation with her friend Miss Della. The lack of a possessive in the title questions whether Sammy as a young student in a colonial school setting can have agency over his

own interests.¹⁰⁴ The word “intres” is invoked doubly to signify what one likes or prefers, as well as what is in one’s best interest. Bennett questions who has the agency to decide what is in a child’s best interest through the conflict between the mother and the teacher. This encapsulates a broader critique of colonial rule as meddling in the interests of others when it is not one’s concern, and the fact that trying to control private life, interactions, ideology and consciousness is in the best interests of the colonial ruling power. Bennett also makes fun of the teacher’s reprimand to the mother that she should be more concerned with her son’s interests. Even though the mother misunderstands what the teacher means by interests, her conversation with her friend illustrates her concern for her son. Through the deliberate misinterpretation of interests, Bennett subtly resists the colonial myth that it is neglectful working class mothers who are responsible for the social problems in Jamaica, rather than colonialism itself.

The mother relays her decision to memorize the poem to her friend Miss Della, who has just dropped by her house and is “jus in time fi hear” her recite the poem. The speaker explains her process of learning the poem involves “So me write it out fi study it -- / Me jus benna go start” (7), illustrating how even though recitation is an oral practice, it begins first and foremost as a textual one. The woman speaker tells Miss Della, “Me was talkin to Sam teacher / Todder day right at dis door” (7). The doorway setting symbolizes being on the boundary between public and private space. Sammy’s mother

¹⁰⁴ According to Jamaican Creole grammar, it is debatable whether the title lacks a possessive. The preposition “fi” (meaning for) is typically used to convey a possessive when attached to a noun, rather than apostrophe ‘s’ in English grammar; however, sometimes a possessive can also be implied (Adams 14). However, this ambiguity over the signification of a possessive still illuminates my point because in the conflict between the two grammar systems (English and Creole), we are not able to determine whether Sammy possesses his interests or not.

stands on guard at her door trying to prevent colonial knowledge and authority, figured by Longfellow's poem and her son's education more generally, from entering her domestic space under any terms but her own.

The woman speaker's appropriation of the Longfellow poem dramatizes the intertextual conversation taking place between Bennett and Longfellow. Since Bennett rarely makes references to Western literature in her poetry, her mention of Longfellow should be taken as highly significant. By invoking him, Bennett playfully draws a distinction between her experimental poetry pedagogy, and the overt moral didacticism of 19th century schoolroom poetry, like Longfellow's.

"Excelsior" is exemplary of the type of poetry used for traditional elocution lessons, which Bennett critiques. Longfellow's poetry promotes the civilizing mission of the English language through the ideology of liberal individualism and the belief in great men who must aspire for achievement through cultural pursuits. As Angela Sorby argues, "Excelsior" epitomizes the message of Longfellow's poetics, which encourage readers "to perform (and perhaps to negotiate) their roles as middle-class strivers" (xxix). The poem embodies how liberalism constructs "reading as an individualistic expression" (Brathwaite 18). "Excelsior" is about a boy striving for cultural elevation, symbolized by his literal attempt to climb a snowy alpine mountain. Bennett's recontextualization of this metaphor in the context of colonial rule in the tropical climate of Jamaica draws attention to how difficult it is for a young child to mimic successfully this model of cultural ascent. The title points to Latin language learning as a way to achieve excelsior, thus upholding a European hierarchy of languages, which completely effaces Creole.

It is significant that Bennett makes reference to an American poet and not a British poet such as Wordsworth, Hemans, or Tennyson, whose poems were also frequently assigned for memorization in schools. By doing so Bennett raises the issue of who is allowed to claim ownership of European culture in the Americas. While Longfellow sought to cultivate a unique American poetics rooted in the American environment, he was obsessed with the imitation of European poetic forms. In an uncanny doubling, Bennett's own (often conflictive) merging of Creole rhythms with the English ballad form parallels this central conflict in Longfellow's poetics. Yet Bennett intentionally stages the collision of cultures to draw attention to the disjunction between them, and to the effects of colonial rule on everyday life. Unlike many of his famous poems, "Excelsior" is one of Longfellow's more resoundingly Eurocentric texts in both form and content.¹⁰⁵ The confusion over being in control of one's "interests" can also be read as Bennett's postcolonial critique of Longfellow who does not depict his own culture and environment in this particular poem. By making a mockery of Longfellow's Eurocentric representation of cultural ascent, Bennett undermines his privilege, as an Anglo-American man, to claim a direct link to European modernity in the Americas. A privilege Bennett, as an Afro-Jamaican woman, is not afforded.

Playing on the theme of "interests," the woman speaker continues her dialogue with Miss Della by recombining and revising lines from Longfellow's poem to suit her own interests in terms of talking about her child's progress in school. Below, I quote at-length quatrains four through seven from the poem by Bennett on the left, and put them

¹⁰⁵ The Eurocentric theme of "Excelsior" likely explains why it was more popular in British colonial curriculums than Longfellow's more American poems such as *Song of Hiawatha*.

side by side with the first four quatrains from Longfellow's poem on the right hand side, in order to more closely examine their intertextuality:

<p>De shades of night was fallin fast As o'er – yuh hear me cross? Sam teck exam an not even – An Alpine village pass</p> <p>A youth who bore mid snow an ice -- Not even one wud bout – A banner wide de strange device – When results gwine come out.</p> <p>Excelsior! His brow was sad -- Ef him pass – his eye beneath – Teacher seh nex year him wi teck – A falcon form its sheat!</p> <p>Den ow is fi-you lickle gal? Me hear har – clarion rung – Me ehar har singing wid – de accent Of dat unknown tongue. (7)</p>	<p>The shades of night were falling fast, As through an Alpine village passed A youth, who bore, 'mid snow and ice, A banner with the strange device, Excelsior!</p> <p>His brow was sad; his eye beneath, Flashed like a falchion from its sheath, And like a silver clarion run The accents of that unknown tongue, Excelsior!</p> <p>In happy homes he saw the light Of household fires gleam warm and bright; Above, the spectral glaciers shone, And from his lips escaped a groan, Excelsior!</p> <p>“Try not the Pass!” the old man said; Dark lowers the tempest overhead, The roaring torrent is deep and wide!” And lo! that clarion voice replied, Excelsior! (19)</p>
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Bennett does not mimic “Excelsior” in a line-by-line fashion but rather recombines and plays with the ordering of his lines. In the reconfiguration of lines, the mother's concerns for her son are reflected in her recitation, and even though she still includes much of the language and themes from the original poem, her interests, which are primarily expressed through her speech rhythms, are not displaced by it. She playfully draws attention to the semantic doubleness of language by making puns on the meaning of words in the original poem, such as the mother's use of the word “pass” to discuss her son's ability to pass exams in school, rather than the Alpine mountain pass in “Excelsior.” She disrupts the driving rhythm of the original poem by choosing to not mimic the declamatory

“excelsior” at the end of each quatrain, by using an alternating rhyme scheme, and by translating it into Creole.

As well as engaging directly with specific lines of Longfellow’s “Excelsior,” “Sammy Intres” mirrors Longfellow’s memory gem in form. Both poems are nine quatrains long. Bennett’s and Longfellow’s frequent use of the quatrain is explained by Robson’s argument that the rhymed quatrain ballad stanza was one of the most popular forms for poems intended for recitation because the succinct structure makes poems easier to memorize:

Usually organized as one divided sentence, or two sentences with a natural pivot or place for breath, the quatrain is long enough to paint a scene, to express a thought, to feature dialogue in the form of question and response, or to describe a narrative movement but not long enough to permit complicated elaboration. And while rhymed couplets close in on themselves and offer no convenient bridge to the next lines, an alternate rhyming scheme helps lead us forward. (158)

While Longfellow’s poem uses rhyming couplets punctuated at the end of every quatrain by the declarative “Excelsior!”, Bennett departs from Longfellow’s rhyme scheme to have only the second and fourth line of each quatrain rhyme. Her alternating rhyme scheme propels the dynamic interactions in the poem, and their traversal through Longfellow’s original poem, in order to recontextualize and rewrite it. The gaps between the lines that rhyme create space for the rhythms of Creole to take over in the poem.

Sammy’s mother makes clear in her discussion of his weak progress in school that he is not interested in striving for “excelsior” like the young boy in Longfellow’s poem, although she still hopes that her son will pass his exams. The poem concludes with the mother giving up on learning the poem after she misses a line, “Excelsior! Tap, em lef out / One whole line, yuh know!” Again, Bennett makes fun of the original poem, when

the speaker is frustrated about forgetting a line, she invokes “excelsior” as an expletive, rather than as goal to strive for. After giving up on the poem, she tears it up and throws it out the door, “Me dah go tear i up, Missis, / An fling i outa door!,” then she asks her friend to share with her all the gossip from her “yard:” Pop tory gimme, Della – all / De labrish from yuh yard. Me cyaan study pickney inters / Ef a so it a go hard (8).¹⁰⁶

Throwing the poem out of her door symbolizes colonial knowledge and authority being prevented from penetrating her private domestic space. The mother’s claim that “one go at [children’s] interests too hard” makes fun of the ridiculous perseverance portrayed in Longfellow’s poem and indicates that she, like her son, is not interested in striving for the “excelsior” of individualism that Longfellow depicts. By ending with the mother pressing her friend to share gossip, Bennett implies that the dialogue continues beyond the space of the poem. While both poems represent subjects who fail to accomplish their goals, the boy dies trying to climb the mountain and Sammy’s mother does not successfully memorize “Excelsior,” the fact that she perseveres in her labrish suggests communal exchange as means to an alternative form of achievement, as compared to an individual work ethic.

In his journey up the mountain the young boy in “Excelsior” resists the following temptations, “the light / of household fires” that “gleam warm and bright,” the advice of an old man and a peasant, and the invitation of a “maiden” for him to “rest / Thy weary

¹⁰⁶ Usage of pickney or pickny, meaning a small child, is widespread in Jamaican Creole, and unlike its related American pickaninny it does not have such a negative racist connotation. It derives from the Portuguese “Pequenino,” which means ‘little boy, little one.’ This word is found in Creoles in Sierra Leone, and Cameroon etc, likely due to Portuguese control of the slave coast and the word was likely brought to the Caribbean and North America by enslaved peoples (Allsopp 438).

head upon the breast” and take refuge in love or companionship (19). When Bennett’s woman speaker tears up “Excelsior” and throws it out the door, she reverses what the boy in Longfellow’s poem refuses – the domestic space, local or popular knowledge and feminine comfort. Instead, Bennett privileges the local feminine knowledge of gossip over the foreign masculine knowledge conveyed in “Excelsior” of individual perseverance to attain success. It is important to point out that her attack on liberal individualism is doubly aimed at both the British ruling power, as well as the Jamaican middle class who often upheld and applied such values to the struggle for independence. The mother resists the internationalization of the poem by performing it on her own terms, by making it into a form for her to use for her own labrish, and then throwing the poem out the door. Bennett demonstrates in “Sammy Intres” how performative reading can increase a reader’s agency, which is instructive in terms of how to deal with the operations of colonial power. While one cannot completely resist internalizing colonial power structures, Bennett’s speaker demonstrates that within the framework of reading, performance provides a mode to deflect or transform its force.

As a form of subjugation, memorization and recitation illuminate Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry as a strategy of colonial power and knowledge. While Bhabha focuses on the failure of the colonized subject to successfully mimic colonial discourse, Bennett makes an open mockery of imitation, which reflects back on the text imitated rather than on the failed mimic. Through Sammy’s mother, Bennett exaggerates what Bhabha describes as “the *menace* of mimicry...which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (126). “Sammy Intres,” provides readers with a loose script to explore and indeed act out such a disruptive ambivalence.

The conflict of “interests” created by the power dynamics of colonial rule, also questions how much a reader, under any circumstances, brings her own interests to a text in the process of interpretation. Through “Sammy Intres,” which stages deliberate misreading through puns and embellishment, Bennett gives her readers permission to bring their own interests to her poems in their interpretations. The poem depicts a series of interactions between the woman speaker and her son, the speaker and her son’s teacher, the speaker and her friend Miss Della, and the speaker and Longfellow’s “Excelsior.” The poem’s *mise en abîme* structure, which stages an animated scene where the speaker engages in reading and interpreting Longfellow’s poem through performance, becomes a mirror for a reader’s own engagement with Bennett’s poem, especially if a reader chooses to recite the poem aloud. All of these various exchanges both textual and interpersonal foreground the process of reading as an interaction between text and reader. Bennett represents reading a poetic text as a creative act, rather than just one of memorization, that is embodied, performative, and that takes place through a series of interactions that engender a liberating form of literacy. A traditional understanding of poetry reading as memorization and recitation suggests that reading is fundamentally imitative, and not a form of meaning production. However, by having the woman speaker reinvent Longfellow’s lines for her own purposes, Bennett proposes that a reader does not merely ventriloquize or mimic the author, but rather has agency to bring her own concerns or interests to her interpretation. In doing so, she provides readers with an opportunity to disrupt the learning of literacy “with the transmission and mastery of a unitary Western tradition” (Giroux 3).

Through Sammy's mother, Bennett shows how the practice of memorization and recitation will remain complicit with its colonial history if children are not encouraged to read dialectically and bring their own "interests" to their performances and textual interpretations. By in large, Creole literature is still the only form of Creole accepted in academic classrooms in Jamaica. When poetry such as Bennett's is taught it is often used to symbolically recognize the cultural significance of Creole; however, the literacy pedagogy of "Sammy Intres" offers a new perspective on how Creole can be put into practice in the classroom.

In her manual, *From Jamaican Creole to Standard English: A Handbook for Teachers* (2003), linguist Velma Pollard proposes that elementary school teachers develop students' Standard English fluency by adapting their intuitive knowledge of Creole grammar to English structures. This progressive approach to literacy reflects the education activist Paulo Friere's idea that students need to be able to learn how to read in or through their native languages, even when those are oral languages. Bennett clearly promotes such an approach; however, I draw attention to how she pushes these bilingual pedagogies even further by representing a woman who, rather than translate Creole into Standard English, engages in the opposite practice and transforms a Standard English text into a Creole grammar.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ The Jamaican Language Unit/Unit for Caribbean Language Research was established at the University of the West Indies in 2003 to promote the acceptance of Creole, headed by the linguist Hubert Devonish. It was the outcome of a proposal that freedom from discrimination on the grounds of language be added to the Charter of Rights in the Jamaican Constitution. While this goal has not yet been achieved, the research unit was designed to pave the way for such legislation. To celebrate the opening of the center, on her visit to Jamaica that year Louise Bennett sponsored a primary school literary contest for works written in the Jamaican language. Her participation in the

Memorizing and reciting a poem combines oral memory with literacy skills.

As the speaker in “Sammy Intres” demonstrates, despite its final delivery in oral form, one typically “write it out fi study it” as a method of memorization. In order to memorize a poem, one also must become intimate with every word, as one reads and writes the poem over and over again. As Sorby explains,

Readers in schools were taught to read poems in specific ways...but they were also invited to interpret poems through acts of repetition. This resulted in an experience of poetry that was highly institutional, grounded in specific incorporated social bodies, but also deeply internalized, grounded in individual bodies and in readers’ earliest memories of language-learning” (xxix).

Sorby explains how the embodied nature of this form of poetry learning heightens the tension between indoctrination and creativity in the act of reading. Memorization and recitation simultaneously encourage a highly analytic relationship to the text because they prompt one to dissect every word, while the process of internalization also encourages an embodied and intimate relationship to the text. Traditionally in elocution pedagogies, this learning process aims to unify one’s written language with the way that one speaks, to make “dat unknown tongue” conform to Standard English. However, Bennett’s dramatization of memorization and recitation in “Sammy Intres” enacts the opposite. In the translation of “Excelsior,” she draws attention to the disjunction between Creole and Standard English and makes English into the “foreign tongue,” rather than Latin in the original “Excelsior.” As in her poem “Bans O’ Killing,” Bennett promotes a dynamic

launch of this center demonstrates that towards the end of her life, Bennett witnessed her educational politics begin to be realized. In 2004, the JLU launched a four-year bilingual education project for primary school students, where students were given reading and writing instruction in both Creole and Standard English in grades one through four. The research findings were conclusive in proving that students taught in both languages had a higher competence in both, (than if they had just studied English exclusively) as well as other subjects such as mathematics and science. (Devonish)

interaction between Creole pronunciation and the written text. The speaker's creolization of the Longfellow poem makes the written text conform to her accent. This functions as a demonstration of how readers can bring their own "tongues" to animate the written page. Bennett invites readers to bring their embodied relationship to language into their textual relationship, and to inflect their reading with the rhythms of their own accents. Since vernaculars do not possess a standardized written form, Bennett suggests a mode of reading where every reader needs to rewrite the poem according to her local patois, and sense of transcribing it. Rather than using recitation to standardize speech and promote the civilizing mission of the English language; Bennett reappropriates poetry memorization and recitation from elocution pedagogies to encourage rhythmic literacy.

Emerging Media and Othermothering

Critics, such as Cooper and deCaires Narain, have drawn attention to the prominence of women speakers in Bennett's poems. However, they do not address how many of Bennett's female personae talk about children, either their own or those of their friends or relatives, as "Sammy Intres" demonstrates. Her women characters' "labrish" about children promotes an ethic of maternal care that is not only the responsibility of a biological mother but is shared by the community. As she describes in one of her radio monologues: "An pickney welfare is a great future heritage to we all, for if we doan look after pickney now, den naw gwine got nobody fi look after we an look after Jamaica an look after we worl affairs later on, a oh!" (23) Bennett not only wrote about the shared responsibility for the welfare and education of children, but she also upheld and practiced

this value in her personal life. She fostered many children with her husband Eric Coverley and children were always welcomed into her home in Gordon Town.

Bennett promotes a form of activism similar to what Patricia Hill Collins defines in an African American context as community “othermothering:” “By seeing the larger *community* as responsible for children and by giving othermothers and other nonparents “rights” in child rearing, those African-Americans who endorse these values challenge prevailing capitalist property relations” (182). Collins suggests that “value placed on co-operative mothering in Caribbean and other Black diasporic societies shows the influence of African ideals of mothering on new world practices” (182). Sammy’s mother and her friend Miss Della talking about their children at her door, even with their conversation being relayed through Longfellow’s script, hint at such a co-operative approach. More directly, Bennett used the medium of television and radio to enact her ethic of “othermothering.”¹⁰⁸

Her media projects for the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation in the 1970s - her children’s television show *Ring Ding*, and her radio program *Miss Lou’s Views* – further illuminate the centrality of education in her postcolonial feminism, and the pedagogical role she envisioned for her labrish poetics to teach new forms of reading and interpretation. Her emphasis on reaching children reflects her investment in using her art to educate new readers, who themselves could help to foster a more inclusive public

¹⁰⁸ In Jamaican, ring-ding can mean “noisy excitement, a rousing dance or an open-air row” (Allsopp 473). This doubleness in the affective meaning of the phrase draws attention to how Bennett, while making her show entertaining, also encouraged children to question their Eurocentric education, thus inspiring both celebratory and argumentative “noisy excitement.”

sphere as they grow up. The appeal of her work to children can be added to the list of reasons, along with her use of Creole and her representation of working class women that has caused her poetry to not be taken “seriously” by critics.

The impact of her television show on children growing up in Jamaica in the last half of the twentieth century can be seen in the huge response from her fans from across the Jamaican diaspora after her death in 2006. In the following *Jamaica Gleaner* editorial, reader Audrey McLaren responds to Bennett’s death by writing about the influence of *Ring Ding* on her as child:

Miss Lou has been my mentor from the days of *Ring Ding*. I was not fortunate enough to be among the many children who joined her each Saturday morning for what I call a session of cultural awareness. Apart from the fact that my parents were Seventh-day Adventists, my mother's beliefs were Eurocentric, hence she had very little tolerance for patois and anything of African ethnicity. This is where my ingenuity came in. In order to be an active participant of this renaissance that was taking place in Jamaica, I faked illness numerous Saturday mornings in order to be excused from church. The television would then become my 'chapel' until *Ring Ding* ended. After that, I would spend some time praying that when my mother returned from church, she did not touch the top of the television set - it was hot! It was from these Saturday morning sessions with the television set that I learnt about my cultural heritage and started to develop an appreciation for my Afro-Caribbean heritage. It was from Miss Lou that I learnt not only to read and write patois, but that respect is due to a language that evolved out of our blood, sweat, tears, longings, struggles, and most important, out of our need to be a recognized people with dreams, aspirations and roots... Without her, I would not be the positive, self-confident person I am.

McLaren is now a teacher, poet and education activist who lives in Toronto.¹⁰⁹ Her

poetry publications, *I am Djembe* and *Barefare Pickney*, pay tribute to Bennett’s legacy

¹⁰⁹ McLaren taught high school in Jamaica for fourteen years, before immigrating to Canada in 2000 where she now also teaches. She is one of the founding members of a non-profit group in Toronto, The Jeffrey Town Education Association, which worked to re-build the elementary school in Jeffrey Town, Jamaica. Her editorial comments illustrate how Bennett played a formative influence on her commitment to education activism.

of using Creole to explore and foster children's consciousness. In her editorial, McLaren describes the importance of learning to "read and write patois" from watching *Ring Ding*. Her comments indicate that even within the visual oral medium of television, Bennett promoted children's reading habits. Her description of how she had to actively pursue her Creole literacy behind her mother's back also attests to the self-determination of readers. *Ring Ding* started as a spin-off of *Sesame Street*, which revolutionized the possibilities for children's education on television, especially by making basic literacy skills widely available to any child who had access to a TV. Bennett was invited to do short segments to introduce *Sesame Street* to Jamaican children, and her introductions were so popular that the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation asked her to do her own television show, which aired from 1970-1982. While there is no media archive of the show because the JBC had few resources, and therefore recorded over the tapes with other shows, *Ring Ding* should be recognized for its contribution to the development of children's educational television in the 1970s, particularly for its promotion of a decolonized literacy.¹¹⁰ As the creative director and host of the show, Bennett not only encouraged children to value their African-descended oral culture, but she also facilitated those learning to read to bring their embodied knowledge of Creole into their textual relationship to language. McLaren insists that this has made her a more self-confident

¹¹⁰ Bennett confirms that tapes of *Ring Ding* were not preserved in a 2001 interview with Marcia Davidson: "To my understanding when I asked about it, the tapes were scrubbed and recorded over with other programs. None to my knowledge were preserved, so there are none available for sale." While one expects challenges as a researcher when trying to uncover archives that record the experiences of Jamaicans from the colonial period, it is discouraging to find that records of nascent postcolonial cultural histories from the 1970s have already been quite literally erased and dubbed over.

person, which supports Paulo Friere's position that, in order to develop an emancipatory literacy people need to be able to learn in their native language (3).

Bennett's radio program, *Miss Lou's Views* broadcast by Radio Jamaica (run by the JBC), is another example of how she used emerging media for educational activism. On the air between one and three times a week, from 1966 to 1982, Bennett would express her views on Jamaican culture and society by invoking her invented persona of the othermother figure Aunty Roachy. Delivered in Creole, Bennett's voice would echo across the airwaves to challenge Standard English as the dominant language for media communication on radio and television in Jamaica.¹¹¹ Despite the cultural movement to accept Creole as a symbol of national collectivity post-independence, there were still many people who challenged the use of the language in public life, and who rejected Bennett's use of Creole on the radio. As one writer in the *Star* wrote in December 1971, "Admittedly the greater part of our population uses the dialect but that should not be good grounds for our radio stations to stuff so much raw 'Patois English' into our ears daily. Take for example *Miss Lou's Views* – such a programme should be scrapped as it tends to perpetuate ignorance in Jamaicans" (quot'd in Morris xiii). The reviewer's description of Patois as "raw" indicates how certain critics continued to assume that Bennett's art lacks craft because of her use of the oral language, and refused to recognize her educational aims.

¹¹¹ While Bennett spoke in Creole on her radio broadcasts, the JBC did not allow her to converse in Creole on her television show, unless she was singing folk songs or reciting poems (Campbell).

Her monologues both critiqued and instructed Jamaican society, yet the didactic tone of her moral lessons did not wield authority through discipline, force, or a Longfellow type of driving exclamation, but through humor and playfulness, much like her poems. She delivered the wisdom of her invented persona “Aunty Roachy,” who she would call on in her broadcast as a source of authority. Through this radio persona, Bennett expands on her use of feminine personae as a pedagogical tactic in her poetics. Similar to Hughes’s invented persona of Jesse B. Semple, who expressed his views on African American society once a week in his *Chicago Defender* newspaper column, Aunty Roachy functioned as a black vernacular intellectual.¹¹² However, Bennett’s Aunty Roachy makes an intervention in these male-dominated discourses to claim power for women’s authority in Caribbean culture. Carol B. Duncan proposes that Bennett “makes subversive use of the mammy stereotype” in her portrayal of Aunty Roachy as a community mother figure who “represents an older time and the wisdom of elders in Miss Lou’s pronouncements” (107).¹¹³ By characterizing her as aunt, rather than a mother, she promotes maternal care extending beyond the role of biological mothers.

¹¹² I borrow the term black vernacular intellectual from Grant Farred, who presents a raced interpretation of Gramsci’s concept of a vernacular intellectual in his book *What’s My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals*. Farred’s exclusive focus on black men in his study (Muhammad Ali, C. L. R. James, Stuart Hall and Bob Marley) replicates the stereotype that intellect is a masculine trait, and neglects to examine women’s contributions to “vernacular thinking.”

¹¹³ Duncan’s essay discusses the reappropriation of Aunt Jemima, the racist pancake mix symbol by Spiritual Baptist women who work as domestic laborers in Toronto. Aunt Jemima’s costume with headscarf and long skirts resembles both those of the Spiritual Baptist women who wear a head tie as part of their spiritual dress, as well as Bennett’s costume for her public performances. Duncan argues that while Aunt Jemima symbolizes black women’s servility in North American popular culture, the Spiritual

The Aunty Roachy persona frees Bennett to express more radical views than if she were to present them as her own. However, titled *Miss Lou's Views*, the sentiments, ideas and perspectives are simultaneously identified as Bennett's own, even when she attributes them to Aunty Roachy. In this way, Bennett pluralizes her voice in her radio show, speaking for at least two rather than one, so that Aunty Roachy functions like an alter-ego, or a split subjectivity. Similar to Hughes's exploration of a fractured plural radio voice to mediate social connection discussed in chapter two, Bennett performs her subjectivity as a relational construct through the form of the radio broadcast.

In Bennett's radio monologue, "The School's Challenge," broadcast in October 1976, she relays Aunty Roachy's disapproval of the presentation of Jamaican culture in exclusively oral terms in schools. She challenges schools to improve their Caribbean curricula by including more Jamaican literature. She relates Aunty Roachy's response to watching an episode of the popular quiz show for children, "The School's Challenge." She acknowledges that Aunty Roachy was pleased that a child could answer questions about both Jamaican and English proverbs. However, "Aunty Roachy shivel up wid shame" when a student could not answer the examiner's question about who wrote the book *New Day*.¹¹⁴ Vic Reid's novel, *New Day* is a contemporary classic not only for its story of Jamaican resistance to colonial rule, but also because it is one of the first Caribbean novels to be written partially in the vernacular. Bennett questions through the

Baptist Caribbean immigrant women from the Toronto congregation who put Aunt Jemima's statue on their alter reclaim her as mythic symbol of spiritual strength (98).

¹¹⁴ Written by V. S. Reid in 1949, the Jamaican historical novel, *New Day*, relates the story of the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865 against English Rule and concludes with the signing of the New Constitution in 1944, which gave Jamaicans partial self-government.

voice of Aunty Roachy why children do not read more Jamaican literature in school:

An Aunty Roachy holler, “Dem haffi know, we haffi learn dem! Jamaica pickney of all rank and pedigree haffi start learn bout Vic Reid an Claude McKay an Clare McFarlane an Roger Mais, an dinky an ring ding an kumina an all we Jamaica proverbs an riddle-dem, an all dem Jamaica heritage, same like how dem know bout de works of Shakespeare and Hitler and all dem foreign smaddy-deh, a oh!”
(11)

Bennett groups oral and literate forms of Jamaican culture together to challenge a hierarchal separation between them. She emphasizes authors like McKay, and Reid, who like her write in the vernacular to insist on a literary culture made in the Jamaican language. While children’s knowledge of Jamaican oral culture has been promoted in postcolonial Jamaica, she draws attention to how they lack knowledge about twentieth century Jamaican literature. For her, this maintains the assumption that Jamaican culture is predominantly oral in nature, and distinct from a Western literary tradition. She humorously groups Hitler and Shakespeare as “foreign somebodies” to imply a similarity between British colonialism and European fascism. By suggesting that Hitler and Shakespeare are in the same category, she aligns political and cultural domination to insist on the violence of cultural control. Shakespeare is emblematic of precisely the kind of colonial literary education, which Bennett rejects in her poetry.

The majority of Bennett’s radio monologues begin with “My Aunty Roachy seh dat...” before she presents the subject of her satirical commentary. This citational structure is similar to her poems, which feature one woman reporting on the “labrish” of another woman. By having one woman’s voice call on the authority of another, she presents a shared economy of feminine knowledge. Her use of one voice speaking

through an other, both in her poems and in her radio show, demonstrates the influence of poetry recitation on Bennett's poetics, which through performance makes reading into a citational act. To recite is also to cite the interests, thoughts and / or feelings of another, and while in the context of schoolroom poetry learning one often feels subjected to "the interests" of another when forced to learn a poem, (which mimics the dynamics of colonial power), Bennett's personae intentionally align their voices with the voices of other women to produce communal knowledge.

Through memorization and recitation, Bennett experiences reading as an active ventriloquy of the other. She reinvents this colonial mode of reading to stage a contiguous overlap of women's voices, jostling for space and for recognition in wider social body. Her poems represent the involuntary intimacies of colonialism between strange cultures, ideas, objects, bodies and texts. Borrowing from Foucault's concept of biopower, Ann Laura Stoler characterizes these interactions as "the microphysics of colonial rule" (*Carnal* 7). Bennett enacts bodies pressed together on a moving tramcar, and voices forced to learn the colonizer's scripts by heart. However, within these crevices of uncomfortable contact, the intimate becomes a language of disjuncture from colonial control.

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