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## FOR US BY US: Explorations and Introspections on the Poetics of Black Language

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FOR US BY US:  
Explorations and Introspections on the Poetics of Black Language

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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*Carney. Dearlove. Yee-Foon. Riley.*

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## SOME SHIT YOU CAN'T TOUCH<sup>1</sup>

### An Intro

On an Autumn night of the pandemic year, a group of three college students stood just outside a dorm listening to music. It had not yet reached the point of cold weather and many students roamed about despite the dangers of a deadly virus. While enjoying the music booming out of a speaker, a large group of students unknown to the smaller group passed by. As they walked one person from the mob turned and locked eyes with one person from the group of music listeners and said, “you’re capping my vibe!” Before the mob completed walking away, the small group shared a collective look and burst into uncontrollable laughter. This story is curious: who are these people? Why did the person from the mob say that? Why did the music listeners laugh? And, why did they laugh so hard? The story begins to make more sense if we note that the larger group was entirely white and that the smaller group consisted of Black people, of which I was one. This interaction gives us much insight into African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) as an expressive art form and its inter/tracommunal usages.

If you are still lost on what exactly happened in that interaction (don’t worry, I am still a bit lost too), allow me to further explain. My friends and I were simply minding our business and having our fun. For that reason, it was bizarre of that one random person to not only lock eyes with me but to also say something while doing so. Beyond that, what the person said, “you’re

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<sup>1</sup> The chapter titles for this project are taken from the song F.U.B.U. on Solange Knowles’s 2016 album “A Seat at the Table.” The term FUBU stems from the 90s brand by the same name which is an acronym for “For Us By US.” FUBU has been a motif for my senior year of college and I think it only appropriate to title this project and its chapters accordingly.

capping my vibe,” makes absolutely no sense. You see, if you don’t already know, cap is a slang word in AAVE:

Cap

/kap/

*verb*

verb: cap, present tense: capping

to lie, to not tell the truth.

In plain English the sentence translates to something along the lines of “you are lying on how I’m doing right now.” It makes absolutely no sense and sounds ridiculous which is why my friends and I had to laugh. Furthermore, the person said it with a fervor that implied that I had wronged them in some deeply personal way when I actually have no clue who that person was. If you didn’t already understand the hilarity of the situation it is likely that you either aren’t engaged with African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or you are and just aren’t up to date on what the kids are saying nowadays.

I feel uneasy explaining to you why that interaction was weird and what exactly makes it odd because explaining AAVE feels like a betrayal of sorts. AAVE serves as an intracommunal language that is sacred to Black people. If you know, you know and if you don’t, too bad. I feel strange explaining AAVE because Black people (in the United States) who are actively in community with other Black people don’t need an explanation. So, if you don’t already know about AAVE and you don’t have the skills or tools to figure something out about it, you should stay out of Black folks’ business. Yet still, so many people are like the person who spoke at me



on that Autumn night and insert themselves into things they don't know nothin' about. Take a viral tweet from early 2021 that proposed the etymologies of certain terms in AAVE. Below are some of the terms and explanations that were listed:

periodt: comes from the peridot gemstone that was thought to bring good health and peace, but slaves were stopped from using it by their masters and had it stolen from them...

bussin: derived from a slave named busty due to how easily he would crack under pressure when threatened with a whip, and was referred to as 'bussin'...

chile: was used to mark children with African heritage<sup>2</sup>

Anyone who is Black and actually engages in Black culture (in the US) would know that those etymologies are a joke. Yet, this post resulted in perfuse apologies from non-Black people who had been using AAVE and these words in particular. These apologetic responses revealed what Black folks already knew: non-Black AAVE users do not understand nor do they care about the origins of AAVE or its importance to Black people and communities. AAVE is both a mode of communication and it is an expressive art form. It is a skill that one learns, practices, and gets better at with time. As with learning any language, getting better looks like being able to use it more easily and it coming to you more naturally. It is a skill deeply connected to Blackness. AAVE was born out of the antiBlack conditions of US chattel slavery resulting in enslavers stripping enslaved people of their native language and limiting access to the English language leaving only scraps. As such, Black Americans have taken those English scraps the we could get hold of and morphed them to fit our needs and desires. Zora Neale Hurston calls this linguistic

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<sup>2</sup> micayla, #vicsbdaybash, "Non Black People Educate Yourselves <https://t.co/MdR6x5yQDM>," Tweet, @luckyu925 (blog), March 16, 2021, <https://twitter.com/luckyu925/status/1371861764476915718/photo/1>.

metamorphosis the “will to adorn.”<sup>3</sup> Hurston pinpoints some of the linguistic elements that give way to the poetics of AAVE. What makes AAVE poetic is also that which makes it Black; it is the movement from word to word, the body movements that accompany the words, and the overall flow that distinguish AAVE from other languages. It’s really all in how you say it. While much of this process is out of survival, Black Americans have also elevated the English language into something so adorned and intriguing that those not engaged with Black (American) culture, primarily non-Black people, not only accept this revision but appropriate it as well. The result is a trajectory in which Black Americans use English to form our own language, non-Black people copy the language—almost always incorrectly—resulting in the devolvement of the English language into nonsense.

This is exactly what happened when I was supposedly “capping” the vibe. The entire interaction is an example of non-Black people regurgitating Black language, a process that both degrades AAVE and makes standard English unintelligible. This encounter is just one instance of the violence that is non-Black people taking from and inserting themselves into Blackness. As pervasive as these sorts of encounters are in everyday life, rarely do they get explored beyond the surface level. For many Black people who have had similar experiences, these moments are looked back on and laughed at. Often times reflections on these sorts of moments center the transgression. I still think back on how bizarre that night was and wonder where they learned those terms and where they got the courage to say them to me. I’m curious, though, to explore what is beneath these interactions. More specifically, I’m curious to explore the context and background behind my friend’s and I’s relationship to AAVE and how that informed our reactions. What was behind our laughter? How do Black people relate to and interact with

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<sup>3</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression (1934),” in *Within the Circle*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Duke University Press, 1994), 79–94, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822399889-009>.

AAVE? What are some of the intricacies of AAVE? What is possible for Black people when we are in safe communal spaces? What can and do we imagine while amongst ourselves and undisturbed?

This project will consider these questions by looking at how poets Ntozake Shange, June Jordan, and Sarah Jones use AAVE to engage Blackness and Black people. Understanding AAVE's relation to Black(-American)ness as both a language and a poetic art form, we will use the intersections of AAVE and Black womanhood as an entry point to understanding what how AAVE functions and to illuminate the often overlooked contributions Black women have made to poetry, AAVE, and their cultural derivatives. Shange, Jordan, and Jones' remain close to the Black experience as all three of them use their multi-marginalized statuses to address antiBlack violence including gender-based violence, school integration, and economic violence. These poets also capture the liveliness of Blackness by highlighting the poetics of AAVE, which are related to mind and spirit, physicality and space, and performance. In doing this, these poets contribute to the Black vernacular and poetic traditions. Still, Black women's contributions to poetry and AAVE remain largely overlooked. Where do Black women fit into the Black vernacular and poetic traditions? When we look at AAVE through the lens of poetry, what do we find? To explore these questions, we will work with two of Shange's poems to imagine a space in which Blackness, and as an extension AAVE, most rejects antiBlackness through the lens of girlhood and reflection. We will then look at AAVE more analytically, paying close attention to linguistic scholarly explorations of the language. This analytical rendering of AAVE will be used to understand and frame the creation and function of community in one of Jordan's poems. We will then move on to examine how AAVE functions in its most natural and common form, that is off of the page, looking closely at if and how performance alters the authenticity and poetics of

AAVE. A concluding section will discuss Black women's creations within and contributions to the current state of one manifestation of the intersection of AAVE and poetry.

Once the large group of white kids walked away and after the laughter my friends and I went on with our night, listening to music, and minding our business. Despite the weirdness of the incident that has just occurred, I think that what happened with me and my friends is where the interesting stuff lies. I'm intrigued by what was going on in our heads before, during, and after. What was our knowledge of AAVE at that point? How did we come to know AAVE? What were our relationships with AAVE at that moment? What are they now? What had gone into the language that is AAVE up until that point? How many people had helped cultivate the Black vernacular tradition up to that point? What does AAVE usage look and feel like in a space absent of non-Black people?

## OH, TO BE US

“Twisted images of Black womanhood have always been a pivotal element of the American economy...Though many Black [women] were not born into literal American ghettos...most, nevertheless, struggle for self-determination and self-definition against the world’s ghettoized version of them.”<sup>4</sup>

Black womanhood is a “pivotal element of the American economy” —from the literal building of the US economy on chattel slavery to the fetishization of Black women to build social (and sometimes, as a result, other forms of) capital. Still, Black womanhood is seldom discussed in the public sphere and when it is discussed it is often either scrutinized and met with violence or it is performative and/or misogynistic. The former often applies to discussions starting with Black women themselves while the latter refers to non-Black women discussing Black womanhood. One could argue that when anything is done publicly it becomes a sort of performance because one is aware that others may be watching them. While there are conversations about Black womanhood that unintentionally become performances due to the (possible) presence of onlookers, the type of conversations that I’m talking about are those that seek out audiences. These types of conversations often work under the guise of educating non-Black people. Instead of working with and for Black people, many of the people who have these performative conversations seek affirmation from non-Black audiences and white people in particular. This sometimes results in Black people giving accolades to non-Black people for doing the bare minimum, which in this case looks like simply acknowledging the existence of

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<sup>4</sup> Richardson, “To Protect and Serve,” 2.

Black women.<sup>5</sup> This, too, is an example of the in/hypervisibility of Black women because attention seeking disguised as appreciation for Black women does not actually center Black women but instead uses them as a prop. Because of this, the most authentic conversations about Black womanhood are often out of public view, intracommunal ones.

Black womanhood is something that exists but isn't often acknowledged—we know that it exists as a societal construct, everyone has ideas of it in their minds, and yet we don't speak of or to it except in certain spaces and under certain circumstances. Conversations about Black womanhood may take the form of a Black girl learning that she is “becoming a woman” after getting her first period. Sometimes these conversations take form during puberty; sometimes they are about fending for oneself without the help of parents; or sometimes they are about dealing with other people romantically, sexually, and emotionally. Similar to how “the (sex) talk” that is expected to occur between parents and children is often a non-conversation for Black families—“don't do it and don't talk about it until you are old enough for it to be expected that you have learned about it from someone else” —Black womanhood is a hushed conversation. The violence of the in/hypervisibility of Black womanhood is responsible for that conversation remaining hushed even when it is among Black women.

These quiet dialogues are often had between Black women or at least start with Black women. Black mothers sit on their porches and discuss motherhood; Black siblings lay sprawled across a bed discussing new manifestations of their emerging hormones; aunties converse about their love lives while eating and watching the kids play at the cookout. Alice Walker writes *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison writes *Sula*, Maya Angelou writes “Woman Work,” and Audre Lorde compiles *Sister Outsider*; Chaka Khan and Whitney Houston sing “I'm Every

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<sup>5</sup> Tee Noir, “*The Black Girl Fetish*”: *Let's Talk.*, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHCFs\\_jWuNQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHCFs_jWuNQ).

Woman.” Conversations on Black womanhood do take place, texts are written, and songs are sung. There are entry points into Black womanhood and frameworks through which we can look at it, but we are often deterred from approaching those entry points. This may take the form of children being told to “stay out of grown folks’ business” or it can look like someone not asking for needed assistance in an attempt to be “every woman.” This can also show up as Black women feeling hesitant to express their true emotions out of fear of being labeled whatever it is the world sees them as and wants them to be—ghetto, angry, sorry, ugly, or just someone in need of humbling.

The invisibility of Black womanhood is complicated by the simultaneous hypervisibility of Black women, be it in media or on the street or in the club. Despite sounding opposed to one another, hypervisibility and invisibility are complements. Still, we have seen in the past and are currently seeing moments of intervention in academia in which there are pushes for the visibility of Black life. While there are several, two particular scholars that come to mind are Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe who authored *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* and *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* respectively.<sup>6,7</sup> These texts are pioneering discourse around Black womanhood and Black queerness by either offering new frameworks in which we can think about Blackness and language, such as “the wake,” or (re)visiting narratives that were overlooked. While Hartman and Sharpe’s works are new and exciting in that they bring the conversation out from behind closed doors and into the light, there remains the question of who is able to see in that light. The language and formatting of these texts make them inaccessible to

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<sup>6</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*.

<sup>7</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.

many Black people, even those whose native language is English. The academic language used throughout these texts make it clear that readers must be educated in a way that is familiar with the academy and its language (and thus, able to afford such an education) in order to engage in these discussions on Blackness. Thinking specifically about Black girlhood, the texts are inaccessible to Black youth just because of the sophisticated language used. This only illuminates the sense of urgency I feel around the need for there to be scholarship that uses language more familiar to Black folk who aren't in the academy.

It is important for Black people to not only be seen but also heard in their voices and their styles, and all of the cadences and intricate nuances that come along with it. For children, this looks like occupying the space that I call *the playground*. In daily life the playground is a space where children can be children and interact with each other accordingly. I postulate *the playground* to be a metaphorical space where Black childhood exists in its most free state. This playground is one of abundance and imagination. I envision each person as having their own metaphorical playground and there they can connect with others who are in their own playgrounds, creating a larger interconnected playground. It is here that we see the junction of AAVE and poetry as it relates to Black childhood. This junction offers up a framework through which we can look at Black expression as a space for creation and resistance. Furthermore, these playgrounds are intracommunal and, as such, can be read as genuine because they operate without the intent of performing for the non-Black gaze.

The story of the Black girl—and the Black child in general—is one that is rarely told. This is in part due to American chattel slavery and its legacies of ungendering, objectification, sexual assault, and its accelerated aging of Black children, particularly those who are read as



girl/woman.<sup>8</sup> The accelerated aging of Black children was primarily used to justify sexual assault and extreme labor conditions. Today, while that is still prominent, this accelerated aging shows up in other ways with perhaps one of the most familiar examples being how policed young Black bodies are in schools.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the topic being ill acknowledged, there have been attempts to tell the story of Black girlhood, the most (in)famous one being the character Topsy from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Topsy's character, or caricature rather, is infamous because it aligns not with girlhood but with *nonchild-hood*. As scholar Robin Bernstein notes, "the [B]lack child was redefined as a nonchild—a 'pickaninny.'"<sup>10</sup> Now, we not only have ungendering as a method of dehumanizing Black people, but there is also the imagined accelerated maturation of Black children in part through the removal of the labels of "child" and "innocent" from Black children. Since then there have been more authentic stories—and by authentic, I mean that they were written by people who have experienced it themselves—about Black girlhood, such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, but few have made it into the mainstream.

Ntozake Shange also successfully tells the story of Black girlhood, or rather parts of a couple out of many Black girlhoods, in her poems "for any other child first/second in a devil's school especially, chirren in brooklyn/queens '72" and "is not so good to be born a girl." Both these poems address what it is like to navigate the world as a young, Black, feminine, and thus vulnerable. Furthermore, these poems deal with the dissonance between the perceptions that little Black girls have of themselves and the perceptions that people project onto little Black girls, while also reckoning with the impact that dissonance has on those girls. Not only do these works

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<sup>8</sup> Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

<sup>9</sup> "School Dress Codes Often Unfairly Punish Black Girls in School - Vox."

<sup>10</sup> Bernstein, "Introduction Playing Innocent: Childhood, Race, Performance."

shed light on the mindset of Black girls—whose thoughts and feelings, alluded to in the poems, are often not sought after and their stories never told—but they also illuminate the dynamic perspective of the grown adult who is reflecting on girlhood.

As an (at least semi-)autobiographical work, “for any other child first/second in a devil's school especially, chirren in brooklyn/queens '72” depicts a narrator reflecting on her school girl years. Although it isn't explicitly stated, this poem is at least semi-autobiographical because Shange herself was “bussed” miles away from her home in St. Louis to attend an integrated school where she would endure much racial trauma.<sup>11</sup> In this poem, Shange first sets the scene of an integrated school sometime in the past: “i went to a integrated school”<sup>12</sup> In labeling the school “integrated,” Shange immediately establishes an air of intensity and anxiety. Since most schools in the States are supposedly integrated, explicitly naming a school as “integrated” implies a sense of newness, otherness, and discomfort. When I think of “a integrated school”, I think of middle school, being able to count the number of Black girls there on one hand, and assimilating for my safety; I think of the television show, “Everybody Hates Chris,” and Caruso's persistent antiBlack harassment; I think of anything but learning. Already with this one phrase, Shange opens us up to what it is like to navigate the world as a Black child.

Shange's choice to express that she went to *a* integrated school rather than *an* integrated school is one that I initially overlooked. I didn't even catch it at first. The ease with which I read the first line showcases the comfortability that AAVE affords. I didn't have to think about the words that Shange used, I simply understood them. The distinction between “a” and “an” is also a sonic one; it takes more effort to say “an integrated school” than it does to say “*a* integrated

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<sup>11</sup> Shange, “For Any Other Child First/Second in a Devil's School Especially, Chirren in Brooklyn/Queens '72.”

<sup>12</sup> Shange, l. 1.

school.” Furthermore, because “an” is a sharp word with emphasis on the “nnnn” sound, that effort that it takes to speak it carries over to the words that follow: integrated school. This extra effort is there even while reading. The simple omission of the letter “n” gives us readers one less thing to take in. Shange has cut out the unnecessary parts of the sentence allowing us to understand what she is saying quickly and easily. While “a integrated school” and *an* integrated school” literally mean the same thing, their connotations differ in that the latter is how the phrase *should* be said. Who gets to decide how things should be said? Why does the letter “n” take the phrase from “improper” to “proper.” Who decides what proper and improper are?

Part of the significance of Shange using “a integrated school” when the more “proper” “*an* integrated school” is just one letter away lies in the naturalness of speech and AAVE. Using “a” instead of “an” immediately makes the first line feel somewhat relaxed. The clause “*an* integrated school” feels like having good posture. More specifically, it feels like being made aware of your poor posture, fixing it, and actively thinking about it. The phrase that Shange uses, on the other hand, feels like standing in whatever way feels most comfortable. While this comfortable posture guides us towards focusing on the poem’s content, there is also value in considering the poem’s delivery, or the posture, in itself. Based on the first line alone, our narrator’s voice feels heavy and dragging. I imagine the narrator to be a middle-aged Black woman who is just worn out and tired. Part of this low feeling can be attributed to the lack of capitalization as it implies a lack of will, or energy rather, to do the extra work of capitalization. The sound of this voice, though, has much to do with the convenience of AAVE. The dropping of unnecessary letters (across becomes “cross;” and becomes “n;” because becomes “cuz,” and so on), altering spellings of words to align more with how they sound (of becomes “uv”), and the drawn-out repetition of letters (“rrrrrrr” and “nooooooooooooo noooooooooooooomore”) contribute to

this sunken, frustrated, and reflective voice. Understanding our narrator's voice as such allows us to better see how AAVE is working here. The use of AAVE provides and implies comfort in the face of and in response to harms that our narrator is recalling. In this way, this language works as a coping mechanism that allows the narrator to express what she means clearly with as little effort as possible.<sup>13</sup> We can then see that the initial relaxed tone one may have thought emanates from this poem is actually not relaxed at all. Instead, it holds the balance of one recalling harm while trying not to slip into tension. Our narrator is trying to remain calm in the midst of discomfort.

This tension between discomfort and comfort, remembering pain and AAVE, also brings forth the distance between our narrator at the time of this poem and our narrator at the time she is remembering in the poem. Shange incorporates a few layers into this narration. While we see both the present narrator and the narrator as a child within the poem, the pain evoked and referenced is not just that of the child. Actually, we see the violence of a child attending a integrated school and the dynamics that surround that situation, and we see the grip that those experiences still have on the narrator and the pain that lies in remembering those violences. Here we can see that the narrator is both distanced from and yet still impacted by these memories. She seems to be moving in between and around these distanced narrative layers, maneuvering from voice to voice throughout the poem.

Shange explicitly familiarizes us with distance: the distance between our narrator's school and her home, the distance between her and the people she encounters near this school, and then even the distance between her and her mother. Distance is the space between her and

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<sup>13</sup> This lack of effort is indicative of the ease with which AAVE comes to her, not of AAVE being a language that lacks effort or takes little effort to engage in.

others, it is the space between her and the person other people see when they look at her. She treks

13 miles cross town/ on the side uv the city  
 the out/skirts uv st. louis/ richmond heights  
 three blocks to walk/ a trolley to ride  
 a change at Delmar/ another four blocks  
 to the germans askin me if i was greek  
 or italian cuz i was dark n did i have a  
 accident round my head cuz it was so knotty<sup>14</sup>

13 miles. She treks thirteen miles cross town. Walk, trolley, walk. She treks all to attend an integrated school. These first four lines that detail what exactly went into Shange's commute elicit images of bussing and all that Black children had to endure logistically just to get to an integrated school. It showcases not only the (literal) lengths a Black child must go to integrate schools, but also highlights the idea that Black people must meet non-Black and in this case white people where they are in order for progress to ensue. Shange's choice to break up the word "out/skirts" contributes to the concept of otherness that flows throughout the poem. Not only is her school on the outskirts, but the word is literally "out/" with a barrier between it and "skirts," or the world in which school exists and the world in which her home exists. Us readers must cross the barrier of the backslash in order to travel with her to school. Furthermore, this word break directly introduces readers to the barrier, or distance, between "proper" and "improper" (language). This formatting posits that, similar to our narrator's school and her hood, proper and

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<sup>14</sup> Shange, "For Any Other Child First/Second in a Devil's School Especially, Chirren in Brooklyn/Queens '72," ll. 1-6.

improper are worlds away, and to get from one to the other we must hurdle a backlash. What that backlash is and what it takes to cross it we will never fully know. Perhaps one of the more interesting and troubling things about this notion of distance is that in many ways these different worlds aren't that far apart. Two adjacent places are still next to each other and a backlash is a seemingly thin barrier. As pointed out earlier, "an" and "a" are only one letter apart, and when spoken have the same meaning. Still, the difference between here and there, this side of the slash and that side feels starkly different.

After we cross the backlash we make our way into richmond heights, the neighborhood where the integrated school is located. The poem transitions perspectives from that of someone recalling memories to that of the girl who experiences those memories. The journey Shange takes us on is not only from st. louis to richmond heights, but it is also a journey back in time. By the time we reach the poem's sixth line we are immersed in richmond heights and in the mind and body of a young narrator. We experience the final three lines of the stanza as a girl out of place in an unfamiliar world. The AAVE used solidifies this time travel. Shange's use of "askin" as opposed to "asking" reifies the aforementioned distances by implying a distance between "proper" and "improper" language. The further we venture into the questioning, the more adolescent the narrator becomes: "cuz i was dark n did i have a / accident round my head cuz it was so knotty."<sup>15</sup> In this instance, the use of AAVE makes for a sharp sense of direction, resulting in a pace that mimics the questioning that the narrator endures. It feels as if the little girl has just returned home from a long day at school and is telling us about all the things that she experienced.

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<sup>15</sup> Ntozake Shange, "For Any Other Child First/Second in a Devil's School Especially, Chirren in Brooklyn/Queens '72," *The American Poetry Review* 4, no. 3 (1975): ll. 5–6.

In these moments in which the narrator slips into the voice of her younger self, the poem's language works to illuminate the nuances of navigating the world as a Black girl. Understanding the narrator's partial position as child makes this notion of distance even more powerful because when one is younger, and thus smaller, distances are farther. In regard to language, the distance between proper and improper looks like a tension between language that affords one space and rigid language that one is indoctrinated with. AAVE has a particular connection to youth because it makes room for new contributions and it isn't concerned with decorum. While the former element does not really apply to this poem, we see the latter element showing up in the narrator's lack of concern with how they present ideas. Part of this is due to that worn out demeanor that the narrator emanates; in this moment she is simply too tired to consider performing some sort of etiquette. Another very important aspect of this is the fact that Blackness—and by extension AAVE and Black girlhood—have never and will never meet the standards of decorum because it is rooted in antiBlackness. Scholars such as Hunter Shackleford, Tea Troutman, Hortense Spillers, and Frank Wilderson III discuss how current societal standards and expectations of living were created in opposition to the Black/slave/captive. This leaves us with antiBlack modes of conduct that Blackness was never intended to fit into. Furthermore, because these concepts lean *against* Blackness, the Black can never actually achieve them. This means that every time a Black person approaches or embodies decorum, decorum shifts to once again position itself against Blackness. This results in a cycle of Blackness trying to achieve something that it can never actually be.

The chase after fitting into antiBlack structures—which in this case is decorum, particularly in regard to language—relates back to the exhaustion that our narrator feels. It is tiring chasing something, and maybe even almost having it in your grasp at times, but never





playground. It looks like a space where intense expressions of feelings can thrive. It looks like a space where kids can be kids.

Shange ends this poem with this moment of revolutionary imagining that allows us to ponder what revolutionary desire can look like in a world where desirability is antiBlack. Before we get there, though, we should recognize that in the latter half of the poem our narrator moves between the playground and the adult space that we start the poem in. We see our narrator express what feels like more adult leaning thoughts and then jolt back to what seems childish:

all colored girls are women/ all colored  
 women are girls/ nooooooooooooo noooooooooooooomore<sup>17</sup>

But just as these lines say, we can't really draw the line between Black women and Black girl. We don't know where one ends and the other begins because we are socialized to see them as both and neither. I wouldn't be surprised if a Black girl said that all Black girls are women and vice versa, nor would I be surprised if a Black woman whined "no more" in the way it is done here. This blurring of lines between girlhood and womanhood are underscored by adultification that our narrator recalls earlier on in the poem and the exhausted posture that she has. So, we see this girl being pushed out of childhood by antiBlackness in the name of integration and we see this woman reverting to a childlike state as a result. And since antiBlackness is the culprit in this, only Blackness can accurately hold these tensions. AAVE captures the movement between girlhood and womanhood occurring in this poem. It also captures how Blackness fails social constructs, particularly gender as it pertains to age, because we don't see clear cut performances.

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<sup>17</sup> Shange, "For Any Other Child First/Second in a Devil's School Especially, Chirren in Brooklyn/Queens '72," ll. 18–19.

It is difficult to tell whose voice these lines are in, but at the very least we know it is a Black voice.

This poem depicts the narrator reflecting on how as a child they were able to easily access the playground because they existed in a Black community but was stripped of this access when put into an integrated school. We see how this experience necessitates the narrator's desire for a new playground that will hold space for the now adults who were harmed by that severance from their communities and also hold space for current and future Black children to enter in and cultivate their own playgrounds. Only AAVE can adequately capture the nuance of this severance, reflection, and desire. Returning to the final lines of the poem and the revolutionary imagining that I mentioned earlier, we end off with a voice that feels both adult and ageless. This is in part due to the use of AAVE. The adult voice is established by the narrator speaking as a parent while the AAVE adds a sense of youth: "daddy n mama gonna build / you a school, watch you in yr world."<sup>18</sup> I think adulthood is often either marked by assimilation into or experience with antiBlack structures. There's this idea that you have to endure a certain amount of struggle to gain the knowledge that allows one to be seen as an adult. In this poem we see how that can't and doesn't apply to Black people because Black children are adultified. AAVE is often associated with youth because of the idea that young people have not yet been broken down by the structure of "proper" language and so they haven't fully assimilated to it (yet). AAVE, as an extension of Blackness, is not limited to age or gender. With this we can expand the framework of the playground to include Black people of all ages. In this way, at the end of this poem our narrator is able to access a type of desire that is based on the simultaneous weathering and hope that is harbored within Blackness. As our narrator accesses the desire of creating a site for the

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<sup>18</sup> Shange, ll. 21–22.

playground she holds the tensions of youth and adulthood, classroom English and AAVE, trauma and hope.

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In “for any other child first/second in a devil's school especially, chirren in brooklyn/queens '72,” Shange illuminates the tensions that Blackness holds and what that means for Black womanhood and girlhood when seen through the lens of remembrance. The undefinable distinction between girlhood and womanhood is in many ways particular to Blackness, and it is also something that Ntozake Shange wrestles with in other works of hers. Shange is most famous for her choreopoem and theatre piece *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* in which choreographed movement poems tell the stories of Black women, all connected by the notion of sisterhood. While I am not going to spend much time on this play, I think it postulates a crucial take on what a poem can look like. The concept of the choreopoem drives home the idea that a poem is an attempt at those feelings that exist deep inside. In bringing our attention to how blurred the lines are between dance and poetry for Black people, Shange highlights how that which is Black is often difficult if not impossible for non-Black people to grasp. This play is for Black girls and Shange made it to reflect how the experiences of Black girlhood and womanhood cannot be taken away nor inhabited by anyone else. *for colored girls* also highlights the interconnectedness of Black girlhood and Black womanhood as the play is about Black womanhood but, as stated in the title, is quite literally “for colored *girls*.” It is important to understand how seamless adulthood and childhood are and how that manifests itself for both

adults and children. When looking at childhood it is important to imagine oneself as a child while also keeping in mind how others (may) perceive that child.

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The distinction between adulthood and childhood is quite a murky one, if one can even say there is a distinction at all. For some time now, I have believed that the primary distinction between childhood and adulthood are people's expectations. That is, the one thing that is sure to change as we age are people's expectations of us. It is through those expectations that we are afforded more, less, and/or different modes of (supposed) autonomy and support. Using the previously analyzed poem, "For Any Other Child First/Second in a Devil's School Especially, Chirren in Brooklyn/Queens '72," we've looked at the ways in which Shange and the narrator as a representation of a Black womanhood navigate this murky territory. Shange continues this navigation in "is not so good to be born a girl" from a different perspective. In this poem, we encounter Blackness outside of the U.S. context as well as girlhood in regard to gender-based violence. The poem itself acts as a playground in that it is a space in which one (Shange, the narrator, and us readers) experiences the narrator's account of girlhood and responds to and reflects on it.

What does it mean to be a girl? That is the question that Shange implies with the opening of "is not so good to be born a girl":

is not so gd to be born a girl/ sometimes.

that's why societies usedta throw us away/

or sell us/ or play with our vaginas/ cuz  
 that's all girls were gd for/ at least women  
 cd carry things & cook/...<sup>19</sup>

Here a distinction is made between women and girls: women can “at least” carry things and cook, girls cannot. There is an interesting discussion of utility occurring beneath the surface of these lines. It is implied that womanhood holds the utility of providing material goods. Women function to do things that are useful for others, such as cooking and carrying. Girls, however, are to be thrown away, sold, or toyed with. Instead of providing useful materials, girls are the useful materials. There is a sense that women are those girls who were (un)fortunate enough to not have been thrown away. Through the evasion and survival of discardure, these women have managed to acquire skills that continually prove their utility. In this way, they are perpetually evading disposal. This makes the trajectory from girlhood to womanhood one that is marked by the desire/need to be valued as someone undeserving of violation. This desire follows one everywhere, it haunts. Throughout this poem Shange expresses just how pervasive this haunting is and, as a result, the experience of reading this poem is eerie.

The violation in question is that of gender-based violence. That is, violence predicated on one's biological sex, gender identity, and/or gender expression.<sup>20</sup> Before we address gender-based violence and how this poem handles it in the literary sense, though, I want to name that the language of this poem implies the bio-essentialist notion that gender is directly related to one's genitalia. That is, everyone who has a vagina has a girlhood and is understood to eventually grow

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<sup>19</sup> Ntozake Shange, “Is Not so Good to Be Born a Girl,” *Off Our Backs* 9, no. 3 (1979): ll. 1–5.

<sup>20</sup> Here the term “gender-based violence” is used as an umbrella term as opposed to simply meaning violence based on gender.

into womanhood. I want to extend grace to Shange here because that is a common, and perhaps even the most widely accepted framework. Furthermore, the materials and thinkers that have helped me cultivate my current understanding of gender (i.e. the gender binary as we now know it and have known it for some time now) as an antiBlack tool for oppression came long after this poem was published in 1978. I want to assert that gender is actually just a categorization of performances that we attach meaning and expectations to. Using this we can understand that not everyone who has had a girlhood is a woman and not everyone who is a woman has had a girlhood. Yet still, it seems to be that Shange is understanding both girls and women to be people with vaginas, regardless of gender identity or expression. When struggling with this poem I will try my best to hold the tension of how Shange may have thought about gender and how I am presenting gender in this project.

The first named violence in this poem takes the form of societies playing with “our vaginas.” The narrator presents us with examples of utility, juxtaposing being useful with providing useful things. Here we can understand the girls’ vaginas—not even the girls themselves—as their utility, that is what they are “gd” for. The girls are not useful as they have yet to learn to contribute anything to others, but rather, their bodies are useful. In diminishing girls to their vaginas, societies render them expendable. If we take a step back we can see that these notions of utility and disposability also apply to Blackness, providing yet another example of how the gender binary fails to corral Blackness. All Black people are marked by the sense that they should be of use. We are expected to produce, to work, to contribute, to perform, to provide something, anything to the lives of others. If we are not useful we are thought to be devoid of value. Black people are engaged as reservoirs that can be taken from, indulged in, and abandoned without consent or concern for their wholeness as people. In this sense, the violence that Shange

is naming is very close to a common Black experience. I say this not to mull over the specificity and pointedness of gender-based violence but instead to name one way this violence relates to Blackness more broadly.

Earlier I wrote that I would “struggle with” this poem and I really do mean that. Working with this poem is not only a struggle because of its discussion of intimate and sinister gender-based violence, but also because of its delivery. While working on this project I found myself wondering why I hadn’t began working with this poem earlier and I realized that it was because of how difficult it is. Simply reading this poem is painful; it feels like running your hand along a barbed wire fence. When reading it I get this indescribable sensation in my chest that feels almost like someone pulling me apart from the inside out. It is as if they are trying to open me up to free themselves using their prickly hands. I think part of what makes me so (beyond) uneasy is the framing of gender-based violence through the narrator. Based on the language of the poem, I imagine the narrator to be a girl, perhaps a young teenager, who is very intelligent and relates closely to the topic of gender-based violence. The cadence of the poem indicates an honesty and directness that comes with youth. The narrator is just telling it like it is. Yet the honesty here does not feel like that one has when they are alone, but rather, it feels like the narrator is speaking to someone, and regardless of what positions this audience holds she speaks honestly. The use of words such as “usedta” and “cuz” help assert the narrator’s youth and show that she’s talking to her audience straight. There isn’t any intentional beautification of language for the audience’s benefit here. The shortening of words to “gd,” “cd,” and “wd” aid this sentiment by only using what is most necessary for communication. These shortened words and the written colloquial language give the poem what Joseph McLaren calls an “authenticating feature.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph McLaren, “African Diaspora Vernacular Traditions and the Dilemma of Identity,” *Research in African Literatures* 40, no. 1 (2009): 97–111.

Moving away from the term authentic, as it implies that one must prove themselves and their Blackness to others, these words that reaffirm our narrator as young and Black juxtapose the cold, scientific word “infibulation.”<sup>22</sup> When I first encountered this word I thought “ooooh, SAT word” because it sounds big and fancy and I had no idea what it meant. It initially felt out of place. What does a young teenager know about infibulation? I appreciated the definition that follows and the talks of its impacts that come later in the poem; it answers the questions the word’s initial mentioning raised for me. A girl whose life has been impacted by infibulation knows everything about it, just as she also knows about rape and molestation and incest. Even if we don’t expect our narrator to know—or rather, we hope that our narrator wouldn’t know about these things, she does because she has or knows someone who has experienced these issues.

Shange’s inclusion of words such as “infibulation” and “clitrectomized” along with the AAVE in the form of cadence, pauses, and some words do an excellent job of capturing that this is a girl talking about things that she shouldn’t (have to) know about but knows really well. One moment that illuminates how this poem uses the rhythmic elements of AAVE is when our narrator mentions that girls are “sewn-up, cut-up, pared-down & sore if not dead.”<sup>23</sup> There’s almost a metronomic aspect to these lines with nearly every word or word-phrase piercing with intensity. “sewn-up, cut-up, pared-down” establishes a pattern causing us to anticipate that another word-phrase will come next. That pattern and anticipation is quickly disrupted by “& sore if not dead.” This quickness in which we are disrupted stems from that metronomic element. Us readers feel as if the disruption is abrupt because the rhythm of the poem keeps playing in the background. Due to this, along with its sharpness, the “not” in these lines hits really hard. All of

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<sup>22</sup> Shange, “Is Not so Good to Be Born a Girl,” ll. 9–10.

<sup>23</sup> Shange, ll. 29–30.



this—the steady beat and the establishing of a pattern and then changing right when we adjust to the pattern—result in a gravity that’s really powerful. Truthfully, I can’t accurately describe this experience other than saying that it is moving.

The AAVE counteracts the scientific feeling language. This balancing act makes the poem feel more down to earth than it would if it were made up entirely of scientific words. Consequently, the poem feels both more and less comforting. It is more comforting in that it is easy enough to understand; the narrator goes out of her way to make us understand. In that same vein, it is discomfoting because we are made to understand. I am overall struck by the rhythm of this poem. Whilst reading it, I can feel that this is such a young person handling what feels like it should be collegiate science work. That is what is truly discomfoting about this: a young person handling a topic that they shouldn’t be and doing it so well.

The narrator speaks with a frankness that is reminiscent of being upset and fed up. It feels as if at one point the matter would have led her to get angry to the point of sobbing, but she is past that point now. She seems so upset that she is past being upset:

if not terrified that so much of our body waz  
 wrong & did not belong on earth/ such thoughts  
 lead to a silence/ that hangs behind veils &  
 straight jackets/ it really is not so good to  
 be born a girl when we have to be infibulated,  
 excised, clitorctomized & still be afraid to  
 walk the streets or stay home at night<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Shange, ll. 31–37.

The narrator is speaking from a genuine place, a place of intimate understanding of violence disguised as protection and science only without any of the coded scientific jargon. She conveys her deep understanding of infibulation using regular degular language that suggests that she is not the only girl with this knowledge. This genuine place opens us up to think about the possibility that some girls share this knowledge in great emotional and physical detail and the probability that most girls share this knowledge or something similar to it. It forces us to consider who has access to this knowledge and why. Why do young girls know gender-based violence so intimately? Why are some people ignorant to that violence? Why do others enact that violence? Where do us readers fit in? While this excerpt, and the poem as a whole, contains no explicit examples of AAVE, it is this genuineness paired with the discussion of gender-based violence that make this poem a site that alludes to the playground. It is an example of the nuance of the playground as an encapsulated yet boundless space. The playground is a personal, intracommunal, and spiritual space in which one is afforded the grace to be as true to themselves as possible. Yet still, this space is not completely free from external influence and gaze.

Similar to “Shange, “For Any Other Child First/Second in a Devil’s School Especially, Chirren in Brooklyn/Queens ’72” we see Shange wrestling with the adultification of Black children. In that poem the struggle came from the act of remembrance: the narrator moved between youth and adulthood throughout the poem. It shows up differently in “is not so good to be born a girl” in that it is a tension between the narrator and what she is talking about: the narrator is young, and the topic is adult; the two are tugging away from one another at opposite ends of a rope. That knot in the middle of the rope that hold all that tension, that is squirming in both directions yet not moving is where us readers are located. In this way, the narrator and the poem itself operate from the playground. The narrator speaks with an autonomy reminiscent only

of the playground but expands it as she acknowledges and responds to the conditions she experiences outside of the playground. The poem operates from the playground by offering up a space for one to read an expressive response on gender-based violence and then respond to it. The playground is that knot in the middle of a taut rope being pulled at from either side. Within that knot beads of energy bounce around and all over the place on their own accord. At the same time, the outside world tugs the rope in opposite directions. While the beads are bouncing in their own little knot, the external forces undoubtedly impact them. The same applies to the playground. As it stands, one cannot exist only in the playground as the playground exists as a haven from and a response to the external world. Moreover, one must acknowledge and be aware of others who are also in the playground. Both the beads and those in the playground must reckon with their surroundings and their impact.

## ALL MY NIGGAS IN THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD

June Jordan's 1977 poem "On the Loss of Energy (And Other Things)" reflects on and responds to the oil crises of the 1970s and the consequent gas rationing along with the stagflation in the US at the time. Simplified, this poem is about navigating life when impacted by forces beyond one's control. More specifically, this poem is about how Black people are impacted by and must reckon with the grave consequences of decisions that aren't made by them or considering them. In this case, those decisions are that of the state and in regard to the economy. Jordan is known for her commitment to AAVE as a legitimate expression of Black life. This is clear in "On the Loss of Energy (And Other Things)" as she uses AAVE throughout the poem. Jordan not only believes that AAVE is a valid form of expression, but she is also critical of the quickness and ease with which people dismiss AAVE in comparison to and in favor of "standard" or "proper" English.

Conversations among linguists regarding Black language provide us with several definitions of AAVE. Some argue that AAVE is a dialect of English, others argue that it is a language, and some choose not to engage in the discourse at all. In her book *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, Geneva Smitherman argues that "Black dialect is an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America. Black Language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone and gesture."<sup>25</sup> This definition is spot on in its assertion that AAVE is unique and particular to Black people. Smitherman falls short, however, by characterizing "Black dialect" as "Africanized" Euro-American speech. Not only

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<sup>25</sup> Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Wayne State University Press, 1977), 2.

does this miss the fact that AAVE was born out of English *scraps*, not English, but this also gives non-Black people too much credit. Smitherman's definition implies that AAVE is white at its core with Black aspects added onto it. While AAVE does use English as a foundation, it is much more than Blackified English. Instead, it is Black at its core with its English foundation serving merely as a vessel through which communication manifests.

A useful resource that can help us work with and understand AAVE is Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Life," in which she breaks down different aspects of Black culture and life into different categories, among them AAVE, that refer to the unique ways in which Black people in the US communicate and express themselves. Hurston discusses the technical aspects of Black language including grammar and literary devices as well as more fluid aspects of communicating, such as body language, storytelling, and emoting. Through this text, Hurston helps us understand *how* Black people are so cool by detailing the specialties of Black expression. Instead of calling it AAVE or Black language, Hurston establishes the "will to adorn" as the "second most notable characteristic in Negro expression."<sup>26</sup> What makes the will to adorn so special, according to Hurston, is that Black people do not wish to make things more attractive for the "conventional" white world in which they live, but rather they adorn for their own satisfaction. Hurston discusses this beautification specifically in terms of language, noting three aspects of the will to adorn: metaphor and simile, the double descriptive, and verbal nouns (including nouns from verbs). Hurston considers these the Black American's "greatest contribution to the language." I think that June Jordan would feel similarly as she often emphasized using AAVE as a form of divesting from white standards.<sup>27</sup> She also asserted

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<sup>26</sup> Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression (1934)," 50.

<sup>27</sup> June Jordan, "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan," August 8, 1985, 367,

something similar: “There are three qualities of Black English— the presence of life, voice, and clarity—that intensify to a distinctive Black value system that we became excited about and self-consciously tried to maintain.”<sup>28</sup> These characteristics are imperative to the will to adorn and are what distinguish AAVE from standard English.

Some linguists have taken Hurston’s and Jordan’s characterization of AAVE a step farther by denoting what exactly goes into the language on a more systematic level. As linguist Lisa J. Green points out in *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*, knowing the words and phrases within the AAVE lexicon is not the same as knowing the language. In addition to having the vocabulary, one must also understand the syntax, semantics, and phonological aspects of AAVE. In her book Green goes on to list four linguistic aspects of AAVE that set it apart from standard English: pronunciation, grammatical class, part of speech, and linguistic context. She then provides examples of words and phrases in the AAVE lexicon along with proper and improper usages of the terms.<sup>29</sup> This parallels Hurston’s work in “Characteristics of Negro Life” in which she provides example sentences that use double descriptives, nouns from verbs, and other patterns found in AAVE. Green continues this examination by breaking the vocabulary aspect of AAVE into two groups: vocabulary used across age ranges and vocabulary used by particular age groups. She also discusses three types of AAVE lexicons that have been presented in previous scholarship: (1) vocabulary that occur in the variety, (2) vocabulary that fit into thematic subdivisions, and (3) a repository of words that are part of the African American community and are distinct from slang. The third lexicon pairs

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20181214071419/http://www.portville.wnyric.org/cms/lib/NY19000376/Centricity/Domain/83/jordan%20nobody.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Jordan, “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan.”

<sup>29</sup> Lisa J. Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511800306>.

with Green's distinction between the types of vocabulary to elicit the question of what sets AAVE apart from (regional) slang or from "what the kids say nowadays." Green goes on to break down the AAVE lexicon into three categories: (1) general vocabulary that transcends generational and likely economic boundaries, (2) verbal markers, and (3) slang used by youth. Using this model, we can see slang falls under the umbrella of AAVE. Slang, regional or not, is associated with youth and is quickly changing. Slang is marked by current popularity meaning that what was once a popular saying may be considered out of touch these days. The general vocabulary is that which transcends the social environment; these words and phrases are pretty much universal. Therefore, all slang is AAVE (or can at least be traced back to it) but not all AAVE is slang.

These categorizations and analyses are useful because they give language to how AAVE functions. It is affirming and perhaps even legitimizing (**to whom?**) to know the methodology behind AAVE even if the language comes naturally to a lot of people. Still, one must question who exactly books like *Talkin and Testifyin* and *African American English* are for. If Black people understand that language without being able to name any of the linguistic traits behind it using academic language, then this sort of analysis is not really necessary. It seems then that these types of books are for non-Black people, non-AAVE speakers and work to legitimize AAVE in non-Black spaces. In this way, these sorts of projects diverge from Blackness by playing into notions of respectability and thus appeal to non-Black audiences. Jordan's work feels slightly off kilter from that of Hurston and Green as the latter two scholars have scientific approaches with backgrounds in anthropology and linguistics respectively. These more scientific approaches focus on finding patterns and systematizing the language. Jordan shares a similar approach which is made evident by the fact that she taught a course on AAVE. In "Nobody

Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan” Jordan details conclusions that came out of the class including guidelines and example sentences. Jordan pairs the class’ findings with critical reflections on the social aspects of using AAVE, recalling students’ repulsed reactions to a written version of the language. Jordan goes on to question why her students are so turned off by AAVE which then grows into questions about why AAVE isn’t taught like other languages and why no one ever learns to read or write it. If the linguistic elements of AAVE make it a legitimate form of communication (legitimate meaning worthy of non-Black people’s attention), then the social aspects of AAVE are what make it Black. Since the time Hurston wrote “Characteristics of Negro Life,” AAVE has grown beyond Black Americans (that is, descendants of US chattel slavery) due to migration and the intermingling of different Black communities, particularly those in cities. These connections have complexified who exactly contributes to and participates in AAVE. This looks like AAVE adopting language from Afro-Caribbean creole(se), African pidgin, and Spanish to name a few examples. At its core, AAVE is about communication and transcends calculable patterns. I agree with Green who asserts that AAVE, whether one acknowledges it as a language or not, is a system whose definition cannot be confined to linguistic elements.<sup>30</sup> AAVE occupies a special place because it cannot be divorced from Blackness.

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“Black English is not exactly a linguistic buffalo, but we should understand its status as an endangered species, as a perishing, irreplaceable system of community intelligence, or we should

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<sup>30</sup> Green.



expect its extinction, and, along with that, the extinguishing of much that constitutes our own proud, and singular identity.”<sup>31</sup>

Although AAVE is not necessarily in danger of becoming extinct, antiBlackness perpetually threatens it by way of schooling and respectability, as Jordan addresses in her aforementioned essay. Jordan highlights one important aspect of AAVE that also explains why it is targeted and endangered: community. AAVE is an “irreplaceable system of community intelligence” because it connects Black people together, serving as one of the most comfortable ways for us to communicate with one another. When one uses AAVE that good linguistic posture loosens and makes room for the person to flow as they please. In this way, using AAVE indicates that one feels somewhat comfortable with whomever they are speaking to. The language acts as a safe haven one enters when they know or think that the pressures of respectability are less of a threat. Since AAVE defies notions of etiquette, it is dangerous to use. Black people understand this. Black people also understand that the eyes of respectability are ever present. Therefore, using AAVE is an act of defiance. It indicates one’s refusal to conform to white standards, as Jordan would phrase it, and reinforces one’s relationship with Blackness and other Black people. Jordan highlights the communal elements of AAVE in “On the Loss of Energy (And Other Things).” This poem feels like a town hall in a community center or a church in which community members, even some who don’t usually attend these sorts of things, have come out to air their grievances. The scene is set up so that there is a crowd of people in chairs all facing a table or podium at the front of the room where community leaders are facilitating the meeting. During this town hall different people stand up to say their piece with some shouting ad-libs from their

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<sup>31</sup> Jordan, “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan,” 1.

seats when feeling moved to do so. There is an air of unrest in the meeting room that is felt by all and explains the anxiety of the speakers in the poem.

Jordan creates this air of unrest by using movement throughout the poem. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is how the poem is blocked. Jordan uses several disjointed stanzas, some left aligned and some indented made up of varying capitalizations, parenthetical lines, italics, and forward slashes to indicate movement between speakers and topics. These visual elements replicate an actual discussion. Just as one would move their head to look at each person speaking, one's eyes must shift from speaker to speaker while reading this poem. Just as different people have different intonations and personalities, the speakers in this poem come across as distinct from one another. Jordan's depiction of multiple voices showcases that AAVE is not just about language but also about assuming a posture that is natural and unique to oneself. Throughout the poem there are parenthetical moments that indicate a quick and brief departure from whoever is speaking:

no more the chicken and the egg come

one of them

before the other

both

be fadin (steady)

from the supersafeway/a&p/giant

circus

uh-huh

the pilgrim cornucopia  
 it ain' a pot to pee in  
 much  
 (these days)<sup>32</sup>

Continuing with the image of this poem being a community meeting, we can understand the first two stanzas as coming from one speaker and the third stanza as a shift to another speaker in a different part of the crowd. The first speaker orients us into this world, letting us know that it is becoming increasingly difficult to access food, specifically poultry. This stanza riffs on the age-old question: which came first, the chicken or the egg? This question explains why the opening line reads “no more the chicken and the egg come.” In this line, “the” triggers the reader’s memory of that age-old question providing a sense of familiarity and adding a particular cadence to the line. This allusion continues in the next stanza where we learn that both are becoming scarce and one of them becomes harder to find before the other, we aren’t told which one. Here Jordan flips the chicken or the egg question on its head. The concern is no longer about arrival but departure. The speaker doesn’t care about which came first and they seem to know which one became less accessible first. What the speaker is concerned with is that the grocery stores are running out of food. Jordan’s decision to reimagine a commonly known question is common in the Black vernacular tradition (AAVE). Using a well-known phrase works to create common ground between the speaker and listener (and us readers), allowing everyone to gain some sort of footing in the conversation. Its use here makes the speaker’s issue clear and makes the speaker

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<sup>32</sup> June Jordan, “On the Loss of Energy (and Other Things),” text/html, Poetry Foundation (Poetry Foundation, September 30, 2020), ll. 1–12, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48761/on-the-loss-of-energy-and-other-things>.

feel approachable. The speaker expresses their concerns clearly while also communicating them poetically through the allusion. Jordan does something similar with the second speaker who says that “the pilgrim cornucopia / it ain’ a pot to pee in.” On the surface level, these lines communicate that there is a severe lack of resources. They also serve as critique of the state as they imply that the pilgrim cornucopia, a symbol of abundant harvest in relation to US Thanksgiving, doesn’t exist for this community. Once again, Jordan inverts a well-known image to emphasize how backwards life is for Black people in the US, particularly in comparison to the supposed greatness that it is by way of American exceptionalism and symbols such as the pilgrim cornucopia.

In addition to speakers being clear and poetic, there are also grammatical aspects of AAVE at play here. One of Jordan’s listed three qualities of AAVE is “the presence of life” which also means “*there is no passive voice construction possible in Black English.*”<sup>33</sup> We see this when it is the chicken and the egg that don’t come, and it is food that “be fadin” from stores. The priority is clear in each sentence because it generally appears earlier on in the thought. For example, it is less effective to say that the supermarket is running out of food than to say that the food is running out. The food is the important factor, not the supermarket. This sort of sentence construction is common in AAVE. Not only does it emphasize one’s priority, but in the process, it may also personify an object. For example, when the food “be fadin” there is an implied third party that causes the food to fade but because the food is the main concern the sentence is structured in a way that makes it seem as if the food is fading on its own accord. In this way, AAVE animates otherwise lifeless objects which both aids clarity and adds style to speech.

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<sup>33</sup> Jordan, “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan,” 367.

Jordan leans further into the Black vernacular tradition by having speakers interact with one another. This manifests as different voices speaking within the same thought which is indicated by parentheses and italics. In these first stanzas parentheses are used. Following the town hall imagery, we can imagine that someone other than the main speaker of the stanza echoes or expands upon whatever topic is at hand. So, when the food “be fadin (steady) and “it ain’ a pot to pee in / much / (these days)” there are two different people talking, with one adding their two cents onto the other’s thoughts. Within the town hall these echoes serve as affirmations, letting the speaker know that they are being listened to and that they are not alone in their experiences. This gets at the communal aspects of AAVE as it showcases how important engagement is as a way to display support. These speaker-echo instances are almost similar to the call and response technique found throughout Black culture. Much of AAVE is about person to person interaction which explains its ties to community.

This poem depicts a conversation among many people. The voices of the poem talk to, respond to, and affirm one another. While a life-threatening lack of resources is the reason for this meeting, the meeting itself is filled with care. The meeting itself is an act of care. Much of this care manifests as intent listening and giving people space to get things off of their chests:

gas is gone

and alka seltza runnin gas

a close race

outasight/you

name it

toilet paper

halfway honest politicians

there's a shortage

folks/*please*

*step right up)*

a crisis

*(come in closer)*

A International Disaster

Definitely Takin Place

(give the little lady down in front some room)

and (*how about the brother in the back row/can*

*you hear me brother?*)<sup>34</sup>

In these lines the parentheses continue to work as echoes and polite interjections only now there is the added element of italics. Based on the words that are italicized and where they fall within the dialogue, I imagine the italics to represent a leader at the front of the room standing by the podium or tables who organized this meeting. This speaker is distinct from someone whom I imagine to be another leader because of the italics and because there is a difference in voice. When one person tells the crowd to “give the little lady down in front some room” and that is immediately followed by another request, it reads as though there are two people coordinating what is going on. I imagine two leaders conducting the meeting, being on the same wavelength but not being completely in sync, thus explaining why it may read as them interrupting each other. These moments that may seem like interruptions remind me of the spontaneity of it all. This town hall feels loosely structured; it is based less on written documents and rules and

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<sup>34</sup> Jordan, “On the Loss of Energy (and Other Things),” ll. 13–29.

focuses more on people's experiences and feelings. These distinct voices and emphasis on people rather than structure gets at Jordan's second quality of AAVE, voice, whose delivery is "a primary consequence of the person-centered values of Black English."<sup>35</sup> Jordan's use of AAVE does an excellent job of distinguishing individuals within a larger community while also having those individuals work to help the community. On the level of content this looks like each speaker contributing to the meeting, be they a leader or another community member. On the structural level of the poem, this looks like all of the voices coming together to create the scene of a community meeting while we can still pinpoint when different people are speaking. Jordan uses AAVE to depict the individual as working within community. She is able to do this without there being a feeling that the individual and the community are in conflict with one another because AAVE is a binding force that relies on person to person interaction. The italicized words are those of facilitation. The speaker welcome community members to "*step right up*" and "*come in closer,*" in an inviting way. The act of seeing and acknowledging people in this meeting is crucial to making community members feel safe and heard. The speaker in the italics even extends themselves across the room asking about "*the brother in the back row/can / you hear me brother?*" This line creates an image of someone lengthening their entire body through the spine and reach their head forward and to the sky as they point towards the back of the room. You can feel the speaker going out of their way to include the brother, meeting the brother where he is. For those who know the language, speaking AAVE is a way to meet someone on their own terms. It is like entering the playground mentioned in Chapter One. This instance of one of the meeting leaders reaching out to include someone works similarly to how the "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" allusion and the pilgrim cornucopia metaphor work. Something similar

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<sup>35</sup> Jordan, "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan," 367.

happens when one person notes that “alka seltza runnin gas / a close race.” Of course, there isn’t actually a race, but the metaphor of household medicine and gasoline prices getting so high that they seem to be in competition with one another drives home just how absurd the economy is in this world. These metaphors and allusions showcase how AAVE uses literary elements to both adorn life, even its violences, and communicate in a clear and easy to understand way.

The poetics of AAVE lie in its adornments and its clarity. Jordan would not have been able to create a sense of community and familiarity among distinct voices had she not written using AAVE. The comfort that AAVE affords one allows for such connections to be formed. Furthermore, it gives one the space to address the trauma and harm they face, something that already makes people uneasy, more easily. Now that we know some exact ways in which AAVE works linguistically we can recognize that much, if not all, of AAVE comes back to Jordan’s three elements: life, voice, and clarity. These three qualities are all necessary to cultivating and navigating communal spaces, as shown in “On the Loss of Energy (And Other Things).” Now that we have seen how and why Black vernacular is key to community on the page, we can use this knowledge to explore what navigating community using AAVE looks like in real time. Where and how do we see AAVE used to connect people together in the real, un(/less)imagined world? Do real life uses of AAVE as a safe space differ from that of Jordan’s poem? If so, how? These are the questions that we can begin to ask now that we understand exactly how AAVE shows up as poetry and as a necessary communal element for Black people.



## MADE THIS SONG TO MAKE IT ALL Y'ALL'S TURN

It's sometime between late 1997 and mid-1998, a poet-politician plays the role of teacher and speaks with a living room of children. The conversation jumps with eager interruptions, warm giggles, and sincere affirmations. The discussion focuses on the concept of love and features strong anecdotes and profound reflections from the children about what it means to love, the difference between loving and being in love, and what love looks like. This adorable story holds the saturated textured brown hues of a worn-in school desk and moves from cute to cosmic when we hear snippets of this conversation as interludes in *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, the debut solo album of Lauryn Hill, an artist who weaves poetry, hip-hop, AAVE, and Black womanhood together seamlessly to present an exhibition of Black life. In fact, this album showcases what exactly can come out of operating from within *the playground*. The playground operates as a space where this sort of creation can take place and thrive. When one enters into this mental, emotional, and spiritual space it is there they can tap into their creativity. It is there that the generative, ever evolving work and discourse that is *Miseducation* can be forged. For Hill, the playground was Tuff Gong Studios in Kingston, Jamaica; for the children, the playground was Hill's New Jersey living room. The playground transcends physical space, this we know. We know that the playground what the playground is, what it does, and what can happen there. What we aren't clear on is *how* things operate in the playground. How do people maneuver in the playground? How does one navigate the playground's interior and exterior? What are the ways in which one creates a work such as *Miseducation*?

Only Hill and her team will know what exactly went into that album. Moreover, I prefer to be held in the hand of mystery and not know the details of that particular project just because I

love it so much. Still, it is useful to think about what takes place in the playground and how people move within it. One way to do this is to look at performance, specifically live performance, and how it alters the concept of the playground. Previously, we have seen the playground as a metaphorical space, as a sort of mental state or realm that one enters in which they embody and navigate Blackness as freely as possible. Live performance gives us the opportunity to witness someone navigating that mental playground in real time (or being played back in what was real time) as well as showing us an actual, physical manifestation of the metaphorical safe space that is the playground. Instead of only seeing the product, as we do with an album, we experience both the product and the process through which we got that product. In this chapter we will explore what this product making process entails for the audience by analyzing a spoken word poem, paying close attention to its content, how it is performed, the relationship between performer and audience, the dynamic between performer and narrator, and how the external world impacts both the narrator and the performer. Through this we will also consider how understanding the playground differs when experiencing live performance as opposed to engaging with poetry on a page.

We've previously established that the playground, while a space where Blackness most rejects the antiBlackness of the rest of the world, it is not devoid of external influence. This external pressure is what prevents the playground from being a liberated state. One aspect of the mental playground is the interior in which one may roam around and play with their imaginings. These imaginings may show up as concepts, desires, refusals, people, communities—the playground holds space for infinite imagination. It also consists of an exterior making it sort of an abundant and closed off space. Within the exterior exists that which is not Black. While separated by a boundary, the exterior and interior do not exist in vacuums. Just as with a literal

playground, what happens on the outside impacts the inside and vice versa. The dynamic between the interior and the exterior operates differently depending on who occupies the space. Understanding the interior to be Blackness and the exterior to be non-Blackness, the general relationship between the interior and exterior is that of the exploited and the exploiter. That is, those outside of the playground peer in looking for ways to impose their energy onto the interior while also siphoning energy from it. (Live) performance offers up a unique lens for the playground because one performs knowing that what they are doing will be consumed and oftentimes the performance is intended to be consumed in that very moment. And so, the playground is transformed from a headspace in which one is surrounded by Blackness into a physical space that is shared with other Black people. When performance is always for others and thus the performer is (hyper)aware of the external, what does it mean to perform from within the playground? The concept of performing automatically brings the (previously imagined, mental) playground into the tangible world as it physically includes people other than the self. There is a tension between the playground and performance that stems from the idea that the playground is an introspective space in which one engages with (their) Blackness. It seems contradictory, then, for one to be able to perform in a space meant for oneself. However, performance can and does occur from within the playground when one wants it to. This type of performance is elicited by the self, similar to how children play dress up or put on talent shows in their parents' living rooms and is based less on societal expectations. Looking closely at how performance relates to the playground may present new ways of handling forms of expression as it relates to Blackness. Furthermore, it will help us web (seemingly) different forms of expression together.

There are close connections between poetry, hip-hop, and AAVE that I think are generally understood. Still, understandings of those connections fall short of telling a complete story in their failure to address womanhood and its role in those forms of expression. Due to this, the acknowledgement of and attention put on women in regard to hip-hop, AAVE, and poetry (but chiefly the first two) are disproportionate to their actual contributions to those art forms. Looking specifically at hip-hop for a moment, conversations about womanhood are often rooted in comparison and consumption. This may take the form of the “best female rapper” debates or discussions of autonomy as it relates to women and their sexuality.<sup>36, 37, 38</sup> In this chapter, we will use Sarah Jones’ spoken word poem “Your Revolution” as an entry point into looking at the relationship between womanhood and hip-hop, with an understanding of hip-hop as a derivative and union of AAVE and poetry. There are projects that attempt to explain hip-hop and its connections to other Black art forms such as *The Anthology of Rap* by Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois and Adam Bradley’s *Book of Rhymes*. One may consider texts like these entry points into hip-hop but ultimately, they come off as corny as hip-hop is something to be experienced not necessarily read about. Anyone who is engaged in the culture should be able to make connections between AAVE, poetry, and hip-hop on their own.<sup>39</sup> Similar to AAVE, if you know, you know.

*Def Poetry Jam* is a television show featuring spoken word poetry and airing from 2002 to 2007. The series brought spoken word to the mainstage, showcasing how closely connected

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<sup>36</sup> “From Megan to Trina: The Raunchiest Women in Hip-Hop Represent,” TIDAL Magazine, accessed March 29, 2021, <https://tidal.com/magazine/article/megan-thee-stallion-sex-rap/1-56159>.

<sup>37</sup> “2020 Was The Year Female Rappers Dominated : NPR,” accessed March 29, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/10/944625003/2020-was-the-year-female-rappers-dominated>.

<sup>38</sup> “Ladies First: 31 Female Rappers Who Changed Hip-Hop,” Billboard, accessed March 29, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/5923011/ladies-first-31-female-rappers-who-changed-hip-hop/>.

<sup>39</sup> For more on these sorts of projects about hip-hop check out “Review: Capital Rules Everything around Me” by Hua Hsu and “Def Poetry” by Baz Dreisinger (*New York Times*)

hip-hop and poetry are with works from notable poets such as Nikki Giovanni, popular artists such as Lauryn Hill, and not-as-easily-recognized artists such as Sarah Jones. Through performances such as Kanye West's "Self Conscious" which also appears as a verse on his 2004 album *The College Dropout* and Erykah Badu's "Friends, Fans, and Artists Must Meet," *Def Poetry Jam* does the work of making the connection between hip-hop (and Black music generally), poetry, and AAVE and presenting it out in front of us. All there seemingly is for us to do is to recognize and experience the connection. Now, we are also tasked with figuring out how the act of performing fits into this. Furthermore, we must pinpoint the performance of womanhood and consider the particularities of it in regard to the connections *Def* has already made.

One instance of the performance of womanhood that appears on *Def* is Sarah Jones' "Your Revolution" which occupies distinct space as it is a spoken word poem performed by a Black woman with heavy use of AAVE and allusions to hip-hop. Jones immediately plants roots in poetry by dedicating her poem to Gil Scott Heron, the poet who wrote "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (1971), which serves as a foundation for her poem.<sup>40</sup> Her poetic roots strengthen when we see her begin to perform poetry. Even in her dedication, moments before she has actually started the poem, she engages in a poetics of the body. The way that she grabs the mic, the steadiness with which she moves her hand in an attempt to emphasize her words, and the moment where we see her look up, smile, and take it all in are all conveyed feelings (poetry) that both Jones and the audience carry into her poem. Her emoting acts as a sort of pre-performance, a performance before the performance, as she is not yet in character and manages to express a pride and a nervousness that gives the audience insight on how she is feeling in the

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<sup>40</sup> Gil Scott-Heron, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/track/7myQdTOXavZSxeF1dhp50x>.

moment and how she feels about the poem she is about to perform. In this way, her introduction works as a contextualizing poem.

If we take a step back and look at performance more generally, we can see connections between performance, poetry, and movement. These connections are so clear that they often transcend from connection to a point of overlap. We can take the briefly aforementioned set of choreopoems *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* by Ntozake Shange as an example of performance and movement as poetry. Shange's play is a live experience of feelings have been felt but could not be communicated in any other way. This aligns with Audre Lorde's assertion that poetry is the naming of ideas that had already been felt but went undocumented:

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. *It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.* That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding. (emphasis mine)<sup>41</sup>

If AAVE is used to communicate what cannot be fully explained and only deeply felt, then poetry is the way that we can name feelings already felt but not put into words. Lorde emphasizes the importance of feelings and lived experiences. She asserts that feelings, not

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<sup>41</sup> Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider*, n.d., 36–39.

thoughts or logic, are “hidden sources of power.” In these sources of power lies what Lorde describes as true knowledge and long-term action. Our essence is housed in our feelings. Feelings are what we know but might not be able to explain. Poetry is the drawing out and focusing in on experience. Lorde makes it a point to note that poetry is *not* “sterile word play.” A work must be connected to feeling for it to be poetry. Lorde argues that this connection to feeling is what makes poetry a necessity for all women. To take that a step further, I would argue that poetry is necessary for all Black people. It is how we realize our feelings. Poetry exists beyond the conventions of literary work. Performance works similarly as it is a realization of imagination and feelings. So, when I think of poetry I think of stanzas on a page, as we’ve encountered earlier in this project, but I also think of storytelling more generally. I think of the movement of my friends’ body language when they are recalling a memory; I think of laughter; I think of the different types of walks that people have; I think of dancing. Poetry is not just literary, it is the movement of life. Poetry, performance, and AAVE work together to make feeling and imagination communicable.

In this way, Jones’ movements and her vocal inflections on top of her warm, almost smooth tone that occur during her introduction are both poem and performance. It is important to note that this pre-performance or pre-poem is told to us in AAVE, which in itself is poetry. Her tone, her inflections, and her movements are performance, because she is in front of people, and they are AAVE because of the way she performs. There’s a certain wave to the way that she carries herself that, verbiage aside, lets us know that she is using AAVE, that she is operating from the playground. It is her nonverbal acts of communication that elevate her words, performance, and allusions into poetry as they add force behind what she’s saying. Her movements are how we and the audience understand exactly what feelings are behind her words.

Physicality externalizes the inner workings of the words into something more tangible, more comprehensible and relatable thus embodying poetry as a way to communicate that which is deeply felt.

Something special about performance that brings it closer to AAVE than a written poem is the fact that it happens in real time. Just as Shange's play is an example of theatre embodying the playground, Jones is also a theatre maker, being a Tony Award winning writer and actress, and it shows. When performing there are energetic exchanges between the performer and the audience as well as the physical space that they're in. We see an example of this when Jones makes her audience laugh right before she takes a second to get into character and begin her poem. Within that second of recuperation, Jones takes that energy and channels it into her poem. This exchange is also present in uses of AAVE. AAVE can be understood as sharing and trading energy, and that is what makes it a successful form of communication. So much of communicating using AAVE lies in what isn't said: it's in movement, tone, facial expression, and so on. It lies in energy. Performance allows us to see AAVE, to see stories, to see feelings, to see energy come alive. We get to experience that energy. The playground is a space where one experiences and exchanges energy, and we see this with the written poems that we looked at earlier. Of course, Jones' poem occupies a space sort of in between and also outside of live and written poetry as it is a recording of a live performance. Still, this puts us in a special place because we can see how Jones interacts with her surroundings and we can reflect on our experience witnessing that interaction as a third party.

Jones takes a deep breath in that moment of recentering that occurs right before the poem begins. We hear, see and feel that breath: her shoulders perk up, one hand goes to her hip, and the other rises in the air to serve as a sort of baton to be waived. She inhales the energy from the



audience's laughter and cheers that takes place a moment prior and, in her exhalation, begins the poem:

Your revolution will not happen between these thighs  
 The real revolution ain't about booty size  
 The Versaces you buys, or the Lexus you don't drive  
 And though we've lost Biggie Smalls  
 Baby your notorious revolution  
 Will never allow you to lace no lyrical douche, in my bush<sup>42, 43</sup>

The narrator, a character played by Jones, never tells us what the revolution is or how it will happen, only that it “will not happen between these thighs.” There's something particular about someone telling you what something is not and what you will not do. This motif of negation makes it feel like the narrator is really coming for somebody's neck, presumably those of men. Furthermore, this negation almost works as a form of reprimanding. Hearing about “the Lexus you don't drive” makes one think that she just aired some people out and hurt a few egos. To be told what you will never be able to do is dream crushing and makes one question their own ability. It also makes one question who has the power to do certain things or to allow others to do things. In this way, negation indicates criticism. Moreover, it showcases the narrator's power. This is a valuable development from Shange's “is not so good to be born a girl” that we looked at earlier. Here we see a version of Black womanhood that relates to gender-based violence in a different way. She claims power and asserts it on men, telling them about themselves. One could

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<sup>42</sup> “Sarah Jones – Your Revolution,” Genius, ll. 1–6, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://genius.com/Sarah-jones-your-revolution-annotated>.

<sup>43</sup> *Def Poetry: Sarah Jones- “Your Revolution” (Official Video)*, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRgIGMwZd2o>.

think that the narrator of “is not so good to be born a girl” would dream of this. For Jones’s narrator, negation is empowering because it reinforces her autonomy over her body by way of boundary setting.

Jones reinforces the narrator’s bodily autonomy through performance. She is in control of everything she is doing and, in some ways, is in control of her audience. As previously showcased with her making the audience laugh and in turn using that energy to propel her performance forward, she knows her audience and her material. She anticipates their reactions to each line, reads their energy, and adjusts accordingly. We see the confidence with which she moves her body, making pointed movements towards her thighs, the air, and the audience when appropriate. Her gestures, subtle movements, and postures all seem intentional but not premeditated. It feels almost as if the narrator is having a conversation with the audience; it’s as if she is responding to her environment and hadn’t prepared this poem and rehearsed it over and over. It feels organic, and that is good performance.

What the written version of “Your Revolution” misses is, well, damn near everything. We get the content, we get the message: women do not exist as a means through which you can achieve liberation, be that actual freedom or ejaculation. What the video and the audio show us is who Jones’ character is. Through moments such as the “ohkayy” that comes right after “bush,” we understand this narrator to be annoyed, playful, and a little condescending. The annoyance and condescension one could possibly get a sense of from reading. There are moments, however, such as “Baby” and “The Versaces you buys” that I think would trip people up. That “Baby” is like a fluffy dagger. It makes you feel nice at first but cuts deep once you realize she is taunting you. “The Versaces you buys” works similarly, serving as a mocking of men’s priorities, of

which grammar is presumably not one. The narrator's playfulness, I think, comes almost entirely from the performance. There are elements that you just need to experience:

Your revolution will not happen between these thighs  
 Will not happen between these thighs  
 Will not be you shaking and me \*yawn\* eventually faking between these thighs  
 Because, why? Because the revolution, when it finally comes  
 It's gonna be real<sup>44, 45</sup>

Reading the final line doesn't capture hearing Jones say it. For one, it reads "gonna" when what she actually says is "gon" which have very different feels. I cannot name what the difference is but it relates what else the written version of this poem misses which is her delivery of this line. Before saying it, she takes a pause and then speaks it with a gumption that showcases that she knows she is driving the poem home for the audience. When she finishes, right before she walks of stage she gives a smirk that says "yeah, I just did that. I killedt that!" The performed version of the poem captures both the narrator's and the performer's process. It also adds the spatiotemporal aspect of the room and the audience as another layer to the poem. Reading "\*yawn\*" is a much different experience from seeing the narrator's disgusted-faced, tiredly unimpressed yawn. Reading does give one the opportunity to imagine, though, which can be useful. However, it also detracts from the imagining that Jones brings to life and shares with us. One might get the impression that the narrator is sleepy or even exhausted when really, she is bored and disenchanted. This line is funny. Jones' ability to make space for jokes, for playfulness in a poem about asserting autonomy showcases how the playground is a space for possibility.

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<sup>44</sup> "Sarah Jones – Your Revolution," ll. 40–43.

<sup>45</sup> *Def Poetry*.

Through poetry, AAVE, and performance, Jones is able to navigate her topic with care while also having fun. This humor is something that only the playground, and more specifically the playground as a performance site (that is, Jones being aware of who else is in the playground with her and who is on the exterior of the playground watching her) could capture.

Another thing that is lost is the weight of Jones' allusions. More than half of the lines in this poem are allusions to hip-hop songs and artists. We see the importance of delivery when Jones references LL Cool J's "Back Seat" and "Doin' It"<sup>46, 47</sup>:

Because that revolution will not happen between these thighs  
 And your revolution will not find me in the backseat of a jeep  
 With LL, hard as hell, doin' it and doin' it and doin' it well<sup>48, 49</sup>

Both songs have sexual overtones with "Back Seat" being about having sex in the backseat of his Jeep and "Doin' It" being about a romantic and sexual rendezvous between two lovers. It is likely that one would be able to pick up on the sexual implications of these lines considering that it is a theme throughout the poem. What would probably remain unclear is why the narrator won't be caught in a Jeep of all cars, who LL is, and why "doin' it" is repeated three times. Whether reading it or watching it, one would only be able to understand these allusions unaided if they are engaged in hip-hop culture and history. If one doesn't have "Doin' It" sitting in the catalog of their brain and they're reading this poem, they will completely miss the allusion. Jones sort of remedies this in the performance by saying the line similar to how it sounds in the song. This intonation and musicality transforms "doin' it and doin' it and doin' it well" to something

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<sup>46</sup> LL Cool J, *Back Seat*, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6Jp3TN4L6FESIBJrRFgZLt>.

<sup>47</sup> LL Cool J, *Doin' It*, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0y8Q52P8sQxvplwbsgbyu6>.

<sup>48</sup> *Def Poetry*.

<sup>49</sup> "Sarah Jones – Your Revolution," ll. 10–12.

that sounds more like “zoooin’ it and zoooin’ it and zoooin’ it waeell.” Even my re-writing of the line doesn’t fully capture what it feels like to hear those lyrics. Jones takes the lyrics a step further by saying it with distaste in her mouth and ridicule in her body. She almost makes a mockery of the song, telling us that the idea of having sex with whomever she is talking to is not only beneath her, but it’s so beneath her that it’s funny.

I initially only picked up on the “Doin’ It” allusion because I hadn’t heard of “Back Seat” before. I was able to get away with because it is clear that the nod to “Back Seat” (and “Doin’ it) is about sex. Still, in not getting the reference, I miss out on the imagery of Cool J going on a date to a drive-in movie theater with the intention of knockin’ boots with someone.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, I miss out of the nostalgia of thinking back to the fashion, the groove, and the overall experience of living in the 90s. In this way, Jones creates a world that is particularly special for those who grew up part of the “hip-hop generation.”<sup>51</sup> I can understand the references, but I will never be able to understand them the way that someone who lived through them does. Both songs released before I was even a thought, 1995 and 1993 respectively, but I was still able to understand one of the references because I grew up listening to it. My familiarity with hip-hop and the songs of its past allows me to understand what the narrator is talking about and the world that Jones is building.

Jones expands the world of this poem when she includes the Mr. Lova Lova, Jamaican(-American) reggae artist Shaggy, and references his 1995 song “Boombastic.”<sup>52</sup> Jones broadens the poem’s scope from US based Blackness to a more global Blackness:

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<sup>50</sup> LL Cool J - *Back Seat*, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYt5ouu4088>.

<sup>51</sup> *Def Poetry*.

<sup>52</sup> Shaggy, *Boombastic* (Virgin Records Ltd), accessed April 2, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4LxCU4wJqtapXU02H8qRTG>.

Because that revolution will not happen between these thighs

Oh, my Jamaican brother, your revolution will not make you feel bombastic

And really fantastic<sup>53, 54</sup>

“Boombastic” is essentially Shaggy bigging himself up for a little over four minutes, detailing the reasons why he is Mr. Romantic from his sexual physique to his ability to take rejection. To be boombastic is to be explosive and consequently at the center of attention.<sup>55</sup> Jones says the lines containing lyrics to “Boombastic” in a Jamaican accent and gumption to drive home the reference. The way that she says these lines transforms them from an obscure reference to a callback to a feel-good song. Her reading of the lines makes her into (the narrator pretending to be) Shaggy or a more general, boombastic and egotistical man. In expanding this world to include reggae, Jones shows that this poem is not just about hip-hop but about Blackness more generally. Similarly, AAVE has expanded to encompass global Blackness, beginning with African-Americans and now applying to more of the African diaspora by way of migration and the intermingling of different Black communities in the US, particularly in cities. Understanding that this poem transcends one particular type of Blackness, we can think of it as one of many narratives of Black womanhood in the face of unwanted gender-based attention and sexual advances. Jones uses forms of Black expression, music and AAVE, to describe the narrator’s experiences and feelings, which are meant to represent those of an average Black woman. These allusions work to weed out those who weren’t actually part of the “hip-hop generation” of the 90s. In this way, we can understand the narrator as operating from within the playground and

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<sup>53</sup> “Sarah Jones – Your Revolution,” ll. 20–22.

<sup>54</sup> *Def Poetry*.

<sup>55</sup> Much love and a big shout out to Sahar Carter for providing this reading! I couldn’t put it to words and they were able to name it and hit the nail on the head.

talking to people inside of the playground. Jones' use of allusions work to keep those who are outside the playground gazing in from understanding what she is talking about. We can also think of this poem as being performed in a particular part of the playground. Jones/the narrator is by the jungle gym chatting with her friends while we are by the swings watching the interaction.

## PLAY THIS SONG AND SING IT ON YOUR TERMS

### An Outro

You know whose business people can't seem to stay out of? Women in hip hop. Once again in the pandemic year, this time on a brisk Winter night, some college kids were hanging out in a common area, eating food, you know, doing what college kids do. Somehow, somehow they ended up on the topic of music, specifically the current state hip-hop and rap. People threw out names such as Megan thee Stallion, Kanye West, and Nicki Minaj. Amongst the discussion someone proposed the (outlandish) claim that Megan thee Stallion is Nicki Minaj's successor. Now I'm gonna tell you why this claim is outlandish. Discussions of women in hip-hop and rap often devolve into the "best female rapper" debate which is predicated on the idea that there can only be one woman to stand alongside all of the men rappers and she and she alone must reign supreme. This is part of how we get artist comparisons when the artists in question can and do coexist while often occupying different pockets of hip hop making the comparison senseless.

Now that we understand the playground and have seen examples of how people operate within it both on and off the page we can use these findings to look at how Black women engage with hip hop. Using the framework of the playground, we can engage discussions about women in hip hop by centering the women in question and thus illuminating and challenging the competitiveness that is placed onto them. We can use the framework of the playground to address the unsustainability of the "best female rapper" debate by showcasing how men at the playground exterior impose competition on women who operate from within the playground.

It would be interesting to further explore interiority and exteriority as it relates to the playground and Black expression both on the page in a more theoretical sense and in spatiotemporal sense with how Black people interact with one another. Through this one could



attempt to address how the playground resists antiBlackness and what that means when the goal is to destroy antiBlackness. In a free world, there is no need for a safe haven. If the goal is to ultimately no longer need the playground, why then, do we keep the playground intact? Here it might prove fruitful to engage with Frank Wilderson III's work on Afropessimism and Joy James' concept of the captive maternal, frameworks that address (anti)Blackness as ontological violence. These works could even be put in the context of women in hip hop to explore what it means for women rappers to assert autonomy when they are constantly put in competition with each other against their will.

Furthermore, the framework of the playground as an abundant space can perhaps help us engage discussions on gender and be in conversation with writers such as Hortense J. Spillers, Da'Shaun Harrison, and Hunter Shackelford whose works examine gender as a construct that renders mis/unreadable on Black people and thus is a tool for antiBlack violence. As such, one could put the playground in perspective alongside the works of these writers to get a different gaze on the ways in which Blackness situates itself in response to antiBlack violence. One could use this to recognize and examine the ways that gendered distinctions show up as a form of policing, particularly in regard to Black people. In discussions about Black women rappers this may show up as women being reduced to being competitive entities despite their innovative contributions to the genre, leaving room for mediocre and subpar men rappers to populate the mainstream. This could also be used to critique the discussion itself as gendered categorizations require, seek out, and herald certain types of performances over others which almost always leave out transgender and non-binary artists. Further exploring exteriority and interiority as it relates to the playground and hip hop may offer up insight into the ways that gender fails Black people and vice versa which in turn may get us closer to releasing our ties to gender.

We have to consider the ways in which we engage with our Blackness and how that impacts and is impacted by that which is external to our Blackness. We have to reckon with how entangled Blackness and non-Blackness are. The playground is a complex space and exploring those complexities are valuable in that they can help us get a clearer gaze on how functions of Blackness. AAVE is just one manifestation of Blackness. It is just one way that Black people have positioned themselves to survive in the face of antiBlackness. Finding frameworks through which we can better understand how we do and can resist antiBlackness are valuable for imagining a world without (anti)Blackness, and we have to tap into that imagination.

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