

**'VERSES VERSUS VERSE':  
EXAMINING SEGMENTIVITY IN RAP  
& CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY**

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This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Research at Macquarie University. I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work and that I have given fully documented reference to the work of others. The thesis has not previously, in part or in whole, been submitted for assessment in any formal course of study.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeremy Page', with a stylized, flowing script.

Jeremy Page, October 2015.

## **Abstract**

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In the past decade a number of scholars have claimed that rap music is a modern form of poetry, yet few have discussed the reasons why we might consider it so. In order to answer the question of whether we can (or should) consider music—and particularly rap music—poetry, a number of other questions come into play. What is the nature and significance of definition in literary studies? Can one legitimately invoke a relationship between two art forms consumed in entirely different mediums? And what philosophical, literary and political implications may be involved in considering the relationship between rap and other forms of (printed) poetry?

This thesis adapts and expands on a definition of poetry offered by Rachel Blau DuPlessis—that of segmentivity—in order to construct a framework within which the claim that rap is poetry might be empirically assessed. I analyse segmentivity in the work of Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole, alongside poetry by Tina Chang, Thomas Sayers Ellis and David Tomas Martinez. I then draw on Heideggerian phenomenology to defend a conception of poetry as embodied experience. Finally, I discuss the issue of cultural appropriation, arguing that considering rap poetry is justified not only on literary and philosophical, but also political grounds.

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*'A poem is not a puzzle to be solved. A poem is an  
experience, an event, in and of language.'*

- Ann Lauterbach<sup>1</sup>

I know poetry when I see it. Perhaps that's enough. After all, ever since Aristotle's *Poetics* first attempted to construct a criterion for what is and is not poetry, a staggering number of plausible definitions have been offered by theorists, critics and poets themselves in attempts to get at the essence of this notoriously slippery term. From Wordsworth's contention that poetry is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings... emotion recollected in tranquillity',<sup>2</sup> to Frost's 'poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words',<sup>3</sup> to Rita Dove's attractively eloquent (though perhaps overly broad) 'poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful',<sup>4</sup> definitions of poetry vary as much as the poems they seek to define. This business of definition may not matter, were it not for the fact that how we define and classify texts informs how we read them, how we write about them, and ultimately influences how long they last.

The definitions quoted above are perhaps too broad to be contentious; they each seem to get at one aspect of what poetry can, or perhaps should, try to achieve. What has been contentious, however, even on a cursory glance of the literature, is the claim that *music* can be poetry. And in particular the claim that a relatively young, inherently subversive and often abrasive genre of music—rap music—is a form of poetry. The discussion presented here centres around this claim, attempting to construct a framework within which it might be empirically assessed, as well as suggesting how the disciplines of literary theory, musicology, phenomenology and cultural studies may inform and assist in such an assessment.

Of course, at different times and in various cultures poetry has been conceived in numerous ways. Yet the fact we speak of such a broad spectrum of works as being various manifestations of 'poetry' presupposes some level of cohesion.<sup>5</sup> As Harvard professor Stephen Owen writes, part of the history of poetry has involved

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1 Ann Lauterbach interview, quoted in Daniel Kane, *What is Poetry: Conversations With the American Avant Garde* (New York: Teachers & Writers Books, 2003), 2.

2 William Wordsworth and W. J. B. Owen (ed.), *Wordsworth's Preface To Lyrical Ballads* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1957), 44.

3 Robert Frost and Louis Untermeyer, *Robert Frost's Poems* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 220.

4 Kane, *What is Poetry*, 5.

5 My concern in what follows is with the modern, Western conception of lyric poetry. Drama and epic are entirely pared from the discussion.

the assumption that the word refers to something that transcends its history or has a conceptual core that runs through all the variations of its use.<sup>6</sup>

A discussion of the claim that music can be poetry necessarily invokes this assumption of poetry having a conceptual core, and the goal of the discussion presented here will be with defending one suggestion of what that core might be. The conceptual core, the yardstick for defining poetry that I wish to defend, is known as *segmentivity*, and is proposed by the poet critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her book *Blue Studios* (2006).

Briefly, segmentivity refers to the way in which poetry is fundamentally fragmented into distinct segments, and it is the interaction of these segments and the gaps between them that give rise to poetry's possible meanings. As DuPlessis phrases it, poetry 'is the creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gap.'<sup>7</sup> I wish to suggest that this way of defining poetry, which is explored in great detail in the chapters that follow, is a powerful way of understanding not only poetry, but the rhythms and lyrics that comprise perhaps today's most popular American music genre, the genre of rap.

Turn on almost any radio station or music channel today and chances are, within a few songs (and certainly by the time you approach the higher end of any music charts), you are going to hear some rap music. Hip-hop culture has exploded into a multi-billion dollar global industry, comprising music, fashion, sport, art, magazines, brand sponsorships and everything in between. At the time of writing, five of the top ten songs on Billboard's charts are either rap songs, or contain a rap verse.<sup>8</sup> Not to labour on a banal point too long, suffice to say that for an art form commonly dismissed as a passing trend in its formative years, hip-hop culture and its musical expression in rap have proved astoundingly popular.<sup>9</sup> And it may be fair to assume

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6 Stephen Owen, 'Poetry', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (4th Edition) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1065.

7 Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2006), 199.

8 Billboard, *Billboard Hot 100*, April 2015. URL = [www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100](http://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100) Web. Accessed 13 April, 2015.

9 As is common in much of the scholarship on hip-hop and rap, in discussing 'rap' I make the distinction between hip-hop as a broad culture and rap as one, musical element of that culture (which also comprises graffiti, dance and DJing). The distinction is well put by rapper KRS-One: 'Rap music is something we do, but hip-hop is something we live.' (Quoted in Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois (eds.), *The Anthology Of Rap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), xxix. Though there are other ways of defining the difference between hip-hop and rap, such as using 'hip-hop' to ascribe cultural capital to more 'pure' forms of the genre, the distinction between culture (hip-hop) and musical manifestation (rap) is the least problematic, and will hold for all uses of the terms in what follows.

that at least some of the popularity of rap may reasonably be attributed to its most distinctive feature, namely its fundamental emphasis on rhyme, rhythm and lyricism. These elements—along with how their functioning resembles and differs from contemporary American page poetry—warrant close critical examination, and have unfortunately been largely overlooked within the field of literary studies.

### **The Claim: Rap is Poetry**

In 2011, Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois (English professors from The University of Colorado and the University of Toronto, respectively), compiled *The Anthology of Rap*, a collection of almost nine hundred pages of what they consider to be rap's most seminal lyrics; 'those indispensable lyrics that define the body of rap at the present time.'<sup>10</sup> These lyrics span from hip-hop's humble beginnings in the Bronx in the 1970s, through the 'Golden Age' of 1985 to 1992, into the 'mainstream' of the later nineties, all the way to the rap of the new millennium. The pair are quick to make the claim that 'rap is a modern form of lyric poetry',<sup>11</sup> and they intend—in their own words—to 'treat rap as a body of lyrics that responds to transcription, explication and analysis as poetry.'<sup>12</sup> Even pre-theoretically, the claim for rap as lyric poetry may seem controversial, and is certainly so given the coarse nature of much of the lyrics they anthologise. Nonetheless, the pair make this claim on the grounds that the rappers they examine

embrace the clear sonic qualities of rhythm and rhyme, make ample use of figures and forms such as simile and metaphor, make storytelling a key component of their art, and emphasise the spirit of competition once central to poetry.<sup>13</sup>

This is a serious claim worthy of serious consideration, and one that has been echoed by various academics. John McWhorter, a linguistics and music history professor at Columbia

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10 Bradley and DuBois, *The Anthology Of Rap*, xi.

11 Indeed they first make the claim in the second sentence of their introduction. Ibid., xxix.

12 Ibid., xxx.

13 Ibid., xxxi. It is worth emphasising that Bradley and DuBois are far from the only scholars to make the claim for rap as poetry. The claim is also made by Alexis Pate in *'In the Heart of the Beat': The Poetry of Rap* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2010), see p. 6; Imani Perry in *'Prophets of the Hood': Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (London: Duke University Press, 2005), see p. 1; and in Bradley's *'Book Of Rhymes': The Poetics of Hip Hop*, in which he writes that 'the best MCs—like Rakim, Jay-Z, Tupac, and many others—deserve consideration alongside the giants of American poetry. We ignore them at our own expense.' See Adam Bradley, *Book Of Rhymes* (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2009), see p. xiii.

University has similarly defended the poeticity of rap, penning an article in 2014 titled 'Americans Have Never Loved Poetry More—But They Call It Rap' (2014).<sup>14</sup> Noting that for most of human history poetry has been delivered 'more through the ear than through the eye,' and that of the world's roughly 6,000 languages only around a hundred are written in 'any real way,' McWhorter asserts emphatically that poetry need not be written and that 'rap is indeed “real” poetry,' albeit a poetry more suited to the distinctly oral nature of modernity.<sup>15</sup>

Others, however, have rejected the notion that music might be considered poetry in any real sense. Responding directly to McWhorter's claims, Micah Mattix, assistant professor of literature at Houston Baptist University, has written an article with the similarly blunt title, 'Is Rap Poetry?' 'The short answer,' Mattix writes, 'is “no,” of course.' Insisting that lyrics cannot (or should not) be considered in isolation from the beat they accompany, Mattix writes that 'the only sense in which rap is poetry is as incomplete poetry, which doesn't do either rap or poetry any favors.'<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the American poet and literary critic Adam Kirsch has recently argued that 'when rap is defined as a form of written poetry, virtuosic rhyming becomes more important than other qualities—vocal timbre, dramatic performance, emotional intensity—which translate less well to the page.'<sup>17</sup> The implication of such arguments is that considering rap fundamentally separate from poetry is legitimised by rap's reliance on musicality in order to achieve its effects. As Mattix argues, 'even the best [rap lyrics] don't stand on their own as pieces of great artistry for the simple reason that they were not written to do so.'<sup>18</sup>

Of course, Mattix and Kirsch are right to point out the importance of instrumentation and the musicality of voice in our experience of rap. Nonetheless, that has failed to stop many from taking rap lyrics away from their accompanying music and onto the page to consider them poetry on their own merit. The novelist and professor Alexs Pate has spent an entire book—*In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap* (2009)—transcribing the lyrics of rap, in an attempt to, as he puts it, 'liberate the poetry of rap—the literature of hip hop—from the stereotyped

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14 John McWhorter, 'Americans Have Never Loved Poetry More—But They Call It Rap.' *The Daily Beast*, 2014. Web. URL = <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/06/29/americans-have-never-loved-poetry-more-but-they-call-it-rap.html>. Accessed 10 February, 2016.

15 Ibid.

16 Micah Mattix, 'Is Rap Poetry?' *The American Conservative*, 2014. Web. URL = <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/prufrock/is-rap-poetry>. Accessed 10 February, 2016.

17 Adam Kirsch, 'How Ya Like Me Now? Does Rap's Suspended Adolescence Keep It From Serious Consideration?' *Poetry Magazine* (2011), 48.

18 Mattix, 'Is Rap Poetry.'



expectations of their function as "songs" (author's italics).<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, rapper Jay-Z has written *Decoded* (2010), a book explaining and transcribing his own lyrics, on which he remarked in an interview: 'I hope readers take away from this book that rap is poetry.'<sup>20</sup>

Clearly there is much contention as to what constitutes poetry and, if rap constitutes a form of poetry, what aspects of rap can be stripped back before the poem becomes a new poem altogether, or ceases to be a poem at all. This issue is at the heart of the thesis that follows, and in employing segmentivity I offer one possible way of bridging the rap/poetry divide. The intention throughout is to argue that, firstly, poetry should be understood as embodied experience and that, second, rap (experienced as music *or* on the page) deserves consideration as poetry (as high art) on literary, philosophical and political grounds.

### Argument Structure

For the sake of attempting an ordered discussion of some rather disparate theoretical frameworks, the discussion that follows has been broken into five chapters, with each designated a distinct role in how it may add to an understanding of the relationship between segmentivity, poetry and rap music.

Given the relative youth of both segmentivity as a term and rap as a music genre, and the subsequently limited body of scholarship linking these fields, it is necessary that the first chapter of what follows provides a review of the most relevant and most recent literature. In this chapter I outline some of the most notable works on hip-hop culture, and how they might underpin a consideration of rap as poetry. I then consider a recent suggestion of how we might define poetry, as well as why I believe such definitions are insufficient. Finally, I examine the concept of segmentivity, discussing how it has been received and why it may be particularly helpful to a consideration of rap music and its relation to contemporary North American (page) poetry.<sup>21</sup>

After laying this groundwork in the first chapter, the substantial second chapter moves to

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19 Pate, *'In the Heart of the Beat': The Poetry of Rap*, 3.

20 Quoted in Steven Horowitz, 'Jay-Z Explains Why Rap Should Be Considered Poetry,' *HipHopDX*. URL = <http://hiphopdx.com/news/id.15546/title.jay-z-explains-why-rap-should-be-considered-poetry>. Accessed 10 February, 2016. It is worth noting further that Jay-Z makes the argument for rap as poetry extensively in *Decoded*. See Jay-Z, *Decoded* (United Kingdom: Random House, 2010), 54.

21 For the sake of neatness, I henceforth use the term 'American' as shorthand for North American (admittedly Americentric as this is). All poetry discussed here has come out of the United States.

illustrate that segmentivity lies at the core of rap and contemporary American page poetry. It examines in detail, through close analysis of the lyrics of Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole, along with poems by Tina Chang, Thomas Sayers Ellis and David Tomas Martinez, the ways in which segmentivity manifests in the flow, polysemy, repetition and rhymes of rap and page poetry. In considering a criteria for selecting rappers and page poets for analysis in this chapter, I have aimed to cover a broad range of styles and themes, while also limiting the study to a body of recent works. All texts discussed were released within the last five years, and I have chosen best-selling as well as lesser known artists.<sup>22</sup> In this way I hope to offer a reasonably diverse (but of course not comprehensive) sample of the state of American rap and page poetry today.

There is, however, a clear problem. In discussing the functioning of segmentivity in rap and page poetry, the second chapter tacitly assumes that it is legitimate to conduct a comparative study of two rather different mediums; verses consumed by the ear and verse consumed by the eye. Accordingly, the third chapter offers a justification for this comparison via the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, specifically by suggesting that the consumption of poetry is always an embodied act of cognition. Insofar as reading and listening both involve the parsing of sound through time, I argue, a poem is best understood not as a segmented *text* as much as it is the cognitive, embodied *experience* of engaging with textual segments, combining them to create meaning.<sup>23</sup>

The fourth chapter, with the knowledge that those preceding cover a large amount of ideological ground, attempts to draw the threads of discussion together and consider the implications that they may have for how we define and discuss poetry, as well as, more broadly, the relationship between poetry and music. It concludes with the suggestion that segmentivity is a powerful yardstick for defining poetry, and as such should be adopted as broadly as possible. It is here that the discussion of segmentivity, rap and poetry concludes, leaving the final chapter to discuss an important issue that the preceding discussion has knowingly avoided.

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22 The decision to focus on recent texts does entail that the rap lyrics analysed here cannot be found in Bradley and DuBois' *The Anthology of Rap*. Nonetheless, since my concern is with the state of poetry today, the recency of the texts makes them more relevant to the present discussion than those in the anthology. Moreover, it is a fair assumption that future editions of Bradley and DuBois' work would include best-selling artists such as Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole.

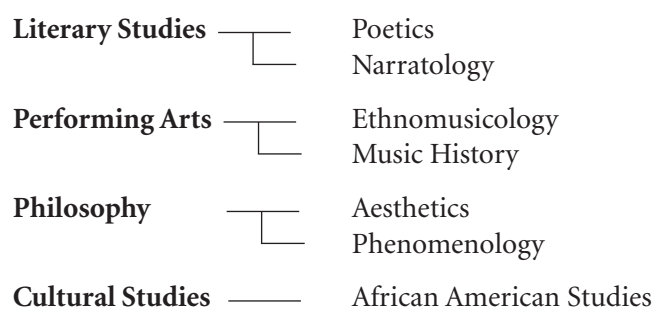
23 The reason this defence follows, rather than precedes the discussion on segmentivity, is that the evidence collected in the second chapter will help elucidate the claims regarding medium made in the third.

The fifth and final chapter addresses the legitimate concern that this thesis may be committing or prescribing a form of cultural appropriation; of either misrepresenting a profoundly and predominantly black art form as being understandable in isolation from the culture in which it originated and still thrives, or, worse still, subjecting an inherently subversive art form to precisely the kind of privileged, institutionalised gaze that it rejects. This chapter attempts to examine the discussion that precedes it through a cultural studies lens, drawing attention to potentially problematic implications while broadly defending its goal as being a richer understanding of these in many ways disparate, and in many ways similar art forms.

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## **1: 'MIC CHECK': DISCOURSES SURROUNDING RAP, POETRY & SEGMENTIVITY**

As any creative work is always necessarily culturally embedded, it is inevitably influenced by its historical and cultural position; by the discourses that have preceded, foregrounded and surrounded its creation. This is true of rap music, of all forms of poetry, and it is true of this thesis. Accordingly, in order to situate and lay the groundwork for the discussion that takes place in the next five chapters, it is necessary to first take a decent amount of time outlining the discourses that surround some of the disciplines relevant here. As a crude outline, these may be categorised under four key fields and perhaps seven key sub-disciplines as follows:



As the above makes clear, the sheer scope of the fields involved precludes anything close to a comprehensive survey of relevant literature being offered here. Instead, what can be offered is a broad outline of the scholarship and debates that sit most closely to where the current discussion situates itself.

### **Hip-hop and the Sociopolitical**

An adequate account for rap's poeticity needs to consider it on its own grounds, which is to say in light of the cultural, racial, economic and political contexts in which it was conceived. Though my focus here is literary studies rather than music history, the discussion is heavily informed and underpinned by the historical context of hip-hop best presented in Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* (1994), Marcus Reeves' *Somebody Scream!: Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftershock of Black Power* (2008) and Imani Perry's *'Prophets of the Hood': Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (2005). These works trace the emergence of rap music and the broader culture of hip-hop as a tool of expression for oppressed and economically disadvantaged, predominantly African-American communities beginning in the South Bronx in the late 1970s.

Open any scholarly text on hip-hop written in the last twenty years and it will almost certainly engage with Tricia Rose's seminal and groundbreaking text, *Black Noise* (1994). Rose's insightful commentary on hip-hop's roots, development and influence examines the ways in which race, class and gender operate inside and around hip-hop, accounting for a culture that, as Rose puts it,

attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalisation, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community.<sup>24</sup>

This conception of hip-hop as originating from, and therefore being expressive of, the experience of marginalised African-American and Caribbean cultures is vital to a proper appreciation of hip-hop, and accordingly underlies the analyses to come.<sup>25</sup> However far hip-hop has branched across cultures and classes, and however far it has blossomed—or perhaps withered?—within the corporate music industry, its roots are deep in the black oral tradition. This tradition includes African griots (storytellers and travelling poets), toasts (black epical and rhyming poetry) the 'dozens' (competitive insulting in front of a group), signifying, and the poetic cadences of the civil rights/black power movement.<sup>26</sup> Its musical roots can be found in the jazz, blues and roots heard by its progenitors, predominantly African-American youth living in areas riddled with poverty, crime and a lack of social services, many of whom had parents returning from the Vietnam War struggling with heroin addiction.<sup>27</sup> As Rose writes, 'rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritises black voices from the margins of urban America.'<sup>28</sup> As such, hip-hop is an inherently sociopolitical cultural movement, and any attempts to discuss it are necessarily, at least partially, political in nature.

To note this history is to position hip-hop as a unique cultural movement, and the raps that stem from it (even those written in decades since, and by non-black artists) as being part of a

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24 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 21.

25 As Terry Eagleton argued in 'Ideology and Literary Form' (1975), literary form is moulded by the social forms of its historical and cultural context, and so texts tend toward negotiating, in his words, 'historical contradictions into ideologically resolvable form[s].' Quoted in Susan J. Wolfson, 'Reading for Form', *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* (Vol. 61, No. 1) 2000: 3.

26 Marcus Reeves, *Somebody Scream!: Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftermath of Black Power* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008), 18.

27 Many, of course, also did not return from the war, contributing to a generation lacking in paternal care. *Ibid.*, 27

28 Rose, *Black Noise*, 2.

necessarily political discourse. It is imperative that any study of hip-hop is conducted in light of this history, and in comparing rap to page poetry it will not be my intention to obscure rap's cultural heritage in any way. Nonetheless, as Rose and others acknowledge at various points,<sup>29</sup> more scholarly attention into rap's *poetics* is necessary to a proper appreciation of this relatively young genre.<sup>30</sup> And in order to examine rap's complexities, as well as to seriously consider the claim that rap is a form of poetry, its relationship to *page* poetry needs to be explored, albeit underpinned by the history delineated by Rose and others. In this respect, the decontextualisation that textual analysis often entails must always be followed by a recontextualisation in light of this history.

In addition to the complexity of its roots, rap is also a multilevelled art form in which meaning is created on several fronts at once. Accordingly, in examining it we must look not only at rap on the page, but also take into account its backing instrumentation as well as its performative aspects.<sup>31</sup> As educator Mary Stone Hanley writes,

rap music, the first hip-hop poetry form, as it emerges in the context of African diasporic cultures, is best understood when framed by its three main sources: music, poetry, and orality, or performance.<sup>32</sup>

These three sources are large, vague categories whose edges blur and overlap, and in focusing on the first, on poetry, I am hierarchising it as the category under which music and written verse can fall. To do so is not to make poetry such a vague concept as to be worthless, as will be shown, but to show that poetry should be understood as a process, which may take different forms but works fundamentally via the fracturing (writing) and recombination (reading) of segments.

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29 As Adam Krims notes, 'such diverse scholars as Tricia Rose (1994), Paul Gilroy (1993), Tim Brennan (1994), Richard Shusterman (1991), and Robert Walser (1995) have called for elaborations on rap's musical poetics.' See Adam Krims' *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 38.

30 The genre was widely celebrated as turning forty years old on 11 August, 2013, on the anniversary of hip-hop pioneer DJ Kool Herc's first house party in The Bronx.

31 This is in parting with Alexis Pate, who examines rap lyrics in isolation from backing instrumentation, in an attempt to '*liberate* the poetry of rap from the stereotyped expectations of their functions as "songs" (author's italics). See Pate, *In the Heart of the Beat*, 3.

32 Mary Stone Hanley, 'Close to the Edge: The Poetry of Hip Hop', in D. Silberman Keller, Z. Bekerman, H. A. Giroux, N. C. Burbules (eds.) *Mirror Images: Popular Culture and Education*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 145-158.

## Poetry and the Lyric

As a first step, it may be best to start by deciding how to handle the term 'lyric', which Bradley and DuBois identify as rap's poetic mode. Following from Aristotle, as one option, we may decide to distinguish between dramatic, lyrical and epic modes as the three core forms of poetry, which seems closest to how Bradley and DuBois employ the term.<sup>33</sup> Alternatively, we could follow T.S. Eliot's suggestion that the term 'lyric' designates modern poems that are neither didactic (in second voice) or dramatic (in third voice).<sup>34</sup> Going even further, we might—as W.R. Johnson has done—break the term 'lyric' into further categories: the '*I-You*' poem; Eliot's *meditative* poem; and what he terms 'straight narratives' that remove the poetic 'I' altogether.<sup>35</sup> Or we could, with Lyn Hejinian, take a political approach in considering the lyric as 'the simpleminded model of subjectivity and authority'; just one manifestation of capitalist individualism (this may seem particularly fitting given commercial rap music's embrace of consumer culture).<sup>36</sup>

There are countless ways of delineating exactly what the lyric is, and I suggest that any of them may be compatible with a definition of poetry via segmentivity. The debate on what 'lyric' means is of less concern here than how we understand poetry more generally. For present purposes (and to avoid confusion between song lyrics and lyric poems), I will use the term 'page poetry' to refer to all manifestations of contemporary American printed poetry, in the spirit of Robert Pinsky when he defines poetry as 'what a bookstore puts in the section of that name.'<sup>37</sup> For the sake of consistency, the poems discussed are written in the lyric mode, if we understand that to mean personal, first-hand, subjective accounts of events, thoughts and emotion. Whether the remarks made here as exemplified by the lyric carry across to other modes may be a point for others to consider.<sup>38</sup>

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33 Owen, 'Poetry', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1065.

34 Eliot rejects the term 'lyric' on these grounds in favour of 'meditative verse.' Quoted in W.R. Johnson, *The Idea Of Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 5.

35 Ibid., 3.

36 Quoted in Christina Pugh, 'The Contemporary Mainstream Lyric', in Jennifer Ashton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945*. Online. *Cambridge Companions to Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Accessed April 19, 2015.

37 Robert Pinsky, *The Sound of Poetry* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 126.

38 It is worth noting that Bradley and DuBois also soon drop the term 'lyric' from their consideration in favour of speaking merely of rap as poetry. Likewise, Brian McHale, the first since DuPlessis to discuss segmentivity, considers lyric the 'default mode' for poetry. See Brian McHale, 'Beginning to Think About Narrative in Poetry', *Narrative* (Vol. 17, No. 1) 2009: 14.



As a final point on the lyric, it is worth briefly mentioning Adorno, who has stressed the political implications of lyric poetry. In his essay 'On Lyric Poetry and Society' (1974), Adorno argues that the individualism evident in lyric poetry is, paradoxically, evidence of the social conditions in which it was created. 'The lyric work', Adorno writes, 'is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism.'<sup>39</sup> A detailed consideration of this point would take the current discussion too far from its literary aims and into the realm of social philosophy. Nonetheless, this conception of poetry inherently expressing social antagonisms is worth bearing in mind, particularly when we come to the lyrics of Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole, and in light of hip-hop's history as detailed by Perry (2005), Reeves (2008) and Rose (1994).<sup>40</sup>

Having pared off some of the threads that unfortunately cannot be taken up here, the remainder of this chapter can be spent addressing those texts nearest my concerns, namely those that address the problem of definition, the concept of segmentivity and the relationship between poetry and song.

### **The Issue of Definition**

One suggestion as to how we might define poetry, written a few years before DuPlessis suggested segmentivity, was put forward by the self-described Wittgensteinian Robert B. Pierce, and is useful in highlighting several key issues that need to be considered when attempting to define poetry. As Pierce rightly notes, definitions of poetry can—like all definitions—be descriptive or normative (or indeed both). That is, if someone defines poetry as *x*, he or she can either refer to how people *do* or how people *should* use the term. Borrowing a term from Wittgenstein, Pierce makes the argument for poetry to be understood as a 'family resemblance' concept, as opposed to a definitive concept with necessary and sufficient conditions. He suggests that there is something of a list of defining characteristics of poetry, including concepts that are shared with other forms of literature like persona, characterisation, genre, intertextuality, irony

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39 Theodor Adorno, 'Lyric Poetry And Society,' *Telos* (Vol. 20) 1974), 62. This no doubt stems from Adorno's fundamental contention that social pathologies arise from the dialectic of enlightenment reason; from the fact that 'the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity' (as he has it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic Of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 1.

40 For her part, DuPlessis has addressed Adorno's views on the lyric in some detail in her essay 'Marble Paper: Toward a Feminist History of Poetry', arguing that poetry cannot be understood ahistorically and that Adorno's thoughts translate well to a feminist understanding of 'I-you relations' in much poetry. See DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 104.



and ambiguity, as well as ones 'more distinctive to poetry', such as imagery, rhythm and meter.<sup>41</sup>

Drawing on the concept of the language game proposed by Wittgenstein, Pierce suggests that approaching the 'real' meaning of poetry is an imaginary goal, since social use is precisely what constitutes meaning.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, Pierce still proposes that his definition constitutes 'a vehicle for talking and writing about poetry that should aid the critical enterprise.'<sup>43</sup> His definition is, in other words, both descriptive and normative, since it argues both that people use the term in a particular way and are right for doing so.

While I agree that poetry is widely understood in general public use as Pierce contends—via a vague list of features (none of which are essential)—I differ by suggesting that we *should* define poetry differently, and that segmentivity offers a richer way of understanding and analysing it. Even if we accept Pierce's definition of poetry, however, we could easily accommodate segmentivity within his framework. Rather than claiming, as I do, that defining poetry through segmentivity is justifiable because it's useful (and has an offshoot of placing rap under the umbrella of poetry), segmentivity may just be one of the features evident in those things we call poems. If it is, then rap may also share a claim as poetry by family resemblance definitions, but this would be in virtue of how we *do*, rather than how we *should* use the term. The key point of difference from this project and that of Pierce is that where he seems to have little problem with poetry being defined by a bundle of rather disparate techniques, I favour a definition that sees a unifying thread in how these techniques function, namely in the way they break poetry into discrete segments of line, space, and possible meaning. What we need is a definition that helps us with poetry, not just explaining what it is, but also reading how it means.<sup>44</sup> Here we arrive at the core of the discussion, the definition of poetry that I seek to justify in all of what follows.

### Segmentivity

In 2006 the poet-critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis' released *Blue Studios*, a collection of twelve essays largely focused around poetics and gender politics. In the ninth of these essays (titled 'Uncannily in the Open: in Light of Oppen') DuPlessis offers her definition of poetry, a

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41 Robert Pierce, 'Defining "Poetry"', *Philosophy and Literature* (Vol. 27, No 1) 2003: 152.

42 Ibid., 159.

43 Ibid., 152.

44 I will stress here that I take *how* poems mean to be more central to defining poetry than *what* they mean. This emphasis on function is explored in the fourth chapter. It is also worth noting here that Pierce too acknowledges the practical implications of definitions, writing that 'the category 'poetry' is a signpost to read in a certain way.' Ibid., 160.

definition that was later to be highlighted by Brian McHale and brought to the attention of various scholars. DuPlessis makes a striking claim for what constitutes the core of poetry; what makes poetry what it is and not something else. The answer to this, she proposes, is *segmentivity*. In a fairly conventional breakdown, DuPlessis makes the distinction between drama, narrative and poetry. She suggests that the core of drama is performativity, which she takes to be comprised of 'coded and decodable gestures in special space and time,' while the core of narrative is narrativity, which focuses on 'sequenced events in represented time.'<sup>45</sup> The core of poetry, as our third category, DuPlessis suggests to be segmentivity, referring to the way in which poems are fundamentally fragmented into distinct segments.<sup>46</sup> As DuPlessis phrases it, poetry is

the kind of writing that is articulated in sequenced, gapped lines  
and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded units,  
units operating in relation to chosen pause or silence.<sup>47</sup>

'Segmentivity,' she writes, 'is the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments, and is the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre.'<sup>48</sup> Largely focusing on form and structure, this definition places emphasis on line breaks, stanza breaks, choices in syntax and gaps in meaning formed by ambiguity and polysemy. The poet's use of space on the page creates a blueprint that guides the cognitive process of reading, highlighting certain words and phrases and generating semantic significance. This definition conceives of poetry as an inherently fragmented art form, where its creation involves the deliberate rupture of textual elements. Its consumption, conversely, involves an active, cognitive 'putting-back-together' of such elements in order to produce meaning(s).

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The concept of segmentivity has proven somewhat controversial, with at least half a dozen articles coming out within the last year that deal with it explicitly. In 'Beginning to Think About Narrative in Poetry' (2009), Brian McHale claims to have been the first since DuPlessis

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45 DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 199.

46 As McHale points out, in Jakobson's terms this would make segmentivity the *dominant* of poetry. See Brian McHale, 'Beginning to Think About Narrative in Poetry', *Narrative* (Vol. 17, No. 1) 2009: 14.

47 Ibid., 15.

48 Ibid.

to defend segmentivity as the defining feature of poetry, arguing that it even accommodates seemingly obvious counterexamples such as prose poetry.<sup>49</sup> McHale focuses his attention on narrative within poetry, and combines DuPlessis' views on segmentivity with those of John Shoptaw regarding measure and countermeasure. He argues that even when narrative is present in poetry, meaning is nonetheless *foregrounded* in the interplay among various segments, as well as the movement of measure and countermeasure.

Bruce Heiden, in his article 'Narrative in Poetry: A Problem of Narrative Theory' (2014) rejects this, asserting that defining poetry via segmentivity is entirely indefensible. This is so because, according to Heiden, doing so overemphasises gaps and breaks which may be meaningless or incidental and, secondly, it puts too much emphasis on poetry's appearance on the printed page.<sup>50</sup> Heiden argues, examining Milton, that line breaks and spacing are merely markers to guide reading; they are exterior to verse,<sup>51</sup> incidental aspects that should not be taken as key sites of (possible) meaning. 'The placement of each verse on a separate line', he writes, 'is merely a convention that renders the verse-measures instantly recognisable [...]'<sup>52</sup> Even more stridently, Heiden goes on to suggest that 'spaces after and between printed lines of verse have no more significance than those separating letters and words.'<sup>53</sup>

If this is true for metrical verse such as Milton's, it is certainly untrue for rap music and contemporary American free verse poetry. As we will see in the next chapter, even gaps that seem meaningless or incidental are often deliberately positioned in elaborate ways to create (possible) meaning.<sup>54</sup>

While I agree with Heiden's second claim—that segmentivity seems to overemphasise the printed page—I disagree on what this should entail. I propose that segmentivity might not be *rejected* in virtue of being (or seeming) limited to the page, but rather should be expanded to

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49 This is so, McHale believes, because prose spacing makes itself *signify* by deviating from expected lineation. See McHale, 'Beginning to Think About Narrative in Poetry', 15.

50 Bruce Heiden, 'Narrative in Poetry: A Problem of Narrative Theory', *Narrative* (Vol. 22, No 2), 2014: 270–273.

51 Heiden focuses on metrical verse as he takes it to be poetry's principal form, and so the best grounds on which to mount a rebuttal of McHale's claims. 'While poetry and verse are not identical,' he writes, 'verse has traditionally been poetry's most favoured format.' Heiden, 'Narrative in Poetry', 276.

52 Ibid., 273.

53 Ibid.

54 I will tend to always write of 'meaning' as '(possible) meaning', since I consider poetry on the page or in song always insufficient without human interpretation. This is expanded upon in the fourth chapter.

consider other mediums. As Tamryn Bennett argues in 'Comics Poetry: Beyond Sequential Boundaries' (2012), 'segmentivity does not deny any form or style of poetry and it is open to oral and written, visual and verbal, narrative and non-narrative.'<sup>55</sup> For her part, Bennett uses this flexibility to apply DuPlessis' concept to comics; their panels, visual fragments, captions, speech balloons, page layouts and typography, arguing for the legitimacy of what she terms 'comic poetry.'<sup>56</sup> Segmentivity, it seems, might be more malleable than Heiden supposes.

In a similar vein as Bennett, Alan Palmer has made steps toward applying segmentivity to new areas, in his case country-and-western music. Palmer discusses the lyrics in four rather different country songs, discussions in which he is 'trying to pay as much attention as [he] can to both segmentation and music.'<sup>57</sup> Acknowledging the influence of McHale, Palmer notes that, 'segmentivity obviously applies equally well to song lyrics, but with the addition of music.'<sup>58</sup> Importantly, here Palmer seems to expand on segmentivity at a conceptual level, using it to discuss gaps in narrative, those areas of lyrics in which the implied listener suddenly does not know (whether or not the listener or 'informed listener' does) what has happened or who is focalising.<sup>59</sup> Though my focus is rap, the spirit of the analysis with that of Alan Palmer is quite similar, and I follow from his tendency to see segmentivity in areas other than 'on the page.' Rap music in particular, to the extent it is particularly responsive to analysis as a segmented art form, is particularly responsive to understanding and analysis as poetry.<sup>60</sup>

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55 Tamryn Bennett, 'Comics Poetry: Beyond Sequential Boundaries', in *T. M. A., Media, F. o. A., Social Sciences* (2012).

56 It is my opinion that here Bennett may here be stretching segmentivity too far, insofar as 'poetry' on this understanding is beginning to stray some way from *language*, which I take to be fundamentally the medium of poetry. I thus reject Bennett's application only because I agree with Peter Verdonk, who has recently suggested that 'the medium of any literary work of art is language.' See Peter Verdonk, *The Stylistics Of Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 13. Addressing this problem adequately, however, would require elaboration far beyond the scope of this thesis.

57 Alan Palmer, 'Listen to the Stories': Narrative, Cognition, and Country-and-Western Music in Lisa Zunshine (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 137.

58 Ibid., 151.

59 It is worth noting that, while Palmer says he will pay attention to 'segmentation' and later moves to discuss such gaps in narrative, he never explicitly states that he considers such gaps instances of segmentivity, in DuPlessis' sense of the term or in an expanded sense. 'Listen to the Stories': Narrative, Cognition, and Country-and-Western Music, 140.

60 The reasons I focus on rap specifically are three-fold. Firstly, it is the only genre I know of in which both scholars and artists themselves repeatedly make the claim of the genre as poetry; secondly, it is quite probably the most popular genre in the United States today; and thirdly, given its de-emphasis on melody and harmony and its emphasis on flow and lyricism, it seems to me the most appropriate for an analysis in reference to poetry. Other genres should of course be examined in reference to similar techniques, but space precludes their consideration here.

## Reading vs. Listening

An excellent recent work on issues surrounding music, sound and poetry has been put together by Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, titled *The Sound of Poetry, The Poetry of Sound* (2009). Several of the essays contained within this anthology are particularly relevant to the concerns here. Jacques Roubaud's prelude, for one, has some strident comments to make about the relationship between music and poetry:

A song is not a poem and a poem is not a song. The words of  
a song deprived of their sounds may constitute a poem; or not.  
The words of a poem put to music may constitute a song; or not.  
It's an insult to poetry to call it song. It's an insult to song to call  
it poetry.<sup>61</sup>

There are a few things that could be said about these comments. Firstly, it is not clear to me that depriving a song of its sounds is possible in the way Roubaud imagines. As will be explored in the third chapter, the sounds of poetry are inextricably linked to their reading, so that even a 'silent' reading of a poem is only silent in the strict sense of inaudible, even when producing 'sound' in a meaningful way. Secondly, while it is important to keep in mind the distinction between mediums, it seems to me overly reductive to suggest that the dichotomy is necessarily mutually exclusive. Insofar as the terms we use both define and are defined by how we treat their referents, it may be logical to say that a text can be two (or indeed more) kinds of text, to the extent it is helpful to look at it from more than one angle. As Bennett notes in an article on visual poetry, poetry isn't easily pigeon-holed into one form. 'Possibilities for poetry,' she writes, 'aren't constrained by pages or set forms. Its malleability is precisely what enables poetry to transcend time, space, imagination and fixed definition.'<sup>62</sup> I imagine Roubaud may retort, 'but, the poem is still a poem and not a song', but I suggest that this merely calls attention to particular features, rather than bringing us to some core truth about the text.

Moreover, Roubaud's comments seemingly overlook the fact that for much of its history poetry has been an oral art form intimately connected to and reliant on musical cadences,

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61 Roubaud, 'Prelude: Poetry and Orality', in Marjorie Perloff and Craig Douglas Dworkin (ed.) *The Sound Of Poetry, The Poetry Of Sound* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 18.

62 Tamryn Bennett, 'The Kaleidoscope of Visual Poetry: New Approaches to Visual Literacy', *English in Australia* (Vol. 46, No. 3) 2011: 55.

harmonies, repetitions and memorisation.<sup>63</sup> To suggest that 'a poem is not a song' supposes that these aspects of a poem are exterior to it; that the poem is the text stripped of its musical qualities (if indeed it can exist without them). The argument presented here entirely rejects this, and instead suggests that many songs are well understood as poems in virtue of their functioning via segmentivity, and that their musical qualities are fundamental to such effects.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Roubaud's essay for present purposes is when he states the following: 'A poem cannot be reduced to its external aspect alone. If it has not entered a single mind, a poem does not yet exist.'<sup>64</sup> This suggestion, that a text can only exist in virtue of its consumption, is a powerful one, and one that will underscore the discussion of medium in chapter three.

### **The Place of Rhyme**

Another essay in *The Sound of Poetry*, Susan Stewart's 'Rhyme and Freedom', concentrates on the function of rhyme as it (occasionally) appears in modern poetry. Stewart suggests that rhyme is a powerful driver of meaning in poetry, but that it simultaneously creates meaning and draws attention to the text as artifice. Somewhat counter-intuitively, Stewart writes that in poetry 'rhyme punctuates and concentrates, it does not flow.'<sup>65</sup> While this may be the case, I suspect that rhyme only fails to 'flow' in poetry (or rap) when it is unexpected. In an otherwise rhyming poem or a rap, an *absence* of rhyme in a given line draws more attention to itself, and thus punctuates or concentrates more than rhyme. The function of rhyme will be of some concern in the analyses of the next chapter, but they will not take centre stage. For a detailed account of rhyme's history and function in rap music, David Caplan's recent work, *Rhyme's Challenge: Hip-Hop, Poetry and Contemporary Rhyming Culture* (2014) is the most comprehensive.

Caplan's work looks in great detail at the function of rhyme in rap music, analysing lyrics by many contemporary rap artists (though, deliberately, neither of those I examine), as well as some manifestations of rhyme in contemporary American page poetry. However, while his analyses persuasively underscore the intricacies and centrality of rhyme in rap, Caplan does

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63 An insightful elaboration on this fact can be found in Johnson, *The Idea Of Lyric*, 4.

64 Roubaud, 'Prelude: Poetry and Orality', 19.

65 Susan Stewart, 'Rhyme and Freedom', in Perloff and Dworkin (ed.) *The Sound Of Poetry, The Poetry Of Sound*, 42.

not address the larger question of how the relationship between rap and poetry should be understood. Rather, Caplan's text argues that rap is poetry on the basis of its complexity, seemingly employing a family resemblance definition similar to that of Pierce. Moreover, the text neglects the musical aspects of rap entirely, arguing that lyrics can and should be transcribed and analysed as poetry, a technique similarly employed by Alexis Pate in *'In the Heart of the Beat': The Poetry of Rap* (2010).

Together these texts make large contributions to one way of understanding and analysing rap music; namely by looking at the lyrics in isolation from the music and voice they lay between. However, in doing so they tacitly reproduce Roubaud's assumption that a poem is a text stripped of its musical qualities, whereas I intend to argue that the musicality of rap is as central to its poeticity as the semantic content of its lyrics. For an analysis of this musicality, I borrow a technique of annotating syllable placement from Adam Krims. This technique is explained more thoroughly in the chapter that follows.

### Poetry in the Classroom

As a final remark on pedagogy, two years ago Debbie Pullinger and David Whitley published a paper in the journal *Changing English*, titled 'Sounding Sense: The Place, Problems and Potential of Performance in Poetry' (2013). In it they argue that within contemporary English teaching 'the experience of performance is now largely separated with knowledge of poems developed through detailed analysis',<sup>66</sup> and that this dichotomy may be limiting to a full appreciation of the sounds of poetry. The pair cite John Gordon who, writing on how poetry communicates through sound, argues that

an understanding of its modality would be of profound interest for debates about the future of the English curriculum, not least because of the increasing role of audiovisual technology and new media.<sup>67</sup>

It is my hope that the analysis of page poetry and rap offered here will add one small piece to an understanding of poetry and the function of its modality. The implications for how

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66 Debbie Pullinger and David Whitley, 'Sounding Sense: The Place, Problems And Potential Of Performance In Poetry', *Changing English* (Vol. 20, No. 2) 2013): 160.

67 Ibid., 172.

these ideas may influence the didactic potentials of poetry and rap, however, unfortunately lie outside the scope of this project.

The masterful poet Mark Strand has been quoted as stating in a lecture, 'there's no connection between rap and poetry. I can't listen to it. It's like being blasted up against a wall.'<sup>68</sup> Perhaps. But if one considers poetry through the lens of segmentivity, rap begins to sound more and more like poetry. Moreover, this lens offers a rich way of understanding, analysing and appreciating both poetry and rap lyrics, which may make them 'blast us against the wall' with even more force. Perhaps that's exactly what good poetry feels like.

Let's find out.

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68 Quoted in David Caplan, *Rhyme's Challenge: Hip Hop, Poetry, and Contemporary Rhyming Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.



## **2: 'BAR FOR BAR': RHYTHM, FLOW AND THE SEGMENTIVITY OF SOUND**

*'Stories have ups and downs and moments of development followed by moments of climax; the storyteller has to keep it all together, which is an incredible skill. But poetry is all climax, every word and line pops with the same energy as the whole; even the spaces between the words can feel charged with potential energy.'*

- Jay-Z<sup>69</sup>

As it is my aim in this thesis to defend segmentivity as the defining feature of poetry, suggesting that it functions in analogous ways in contemporary American page poetry and rap music, the present chapter is dedicated to unpacking at length some of the key ways in which segmentivity manifests within each medium. This chapter limits itself to three key aspects of segmentivity, and an analysis of how each is employed by two rappers and three page poets. The key ways in which I take segmentivity to be evident in rap music and page poetry are as follows:

1. Flow - comprised of pauses, breaks, ellipses, white space.
2. Polysemy - wordplay, ambiguity, fractured/segmented meanings.
3. Repetition and rhyme - distinct sound segments that group meanings.

Though the boundaries between these often blur and interact (homonyms, common in rap, often straddle all three), it is worth examining each of these techniques as distinct elements of segmentivity in reference to a rapper and a page poet whose work well exemplifies each technique. The rappers to be considered here are Kendrick Lamar, specifically his song 'Kush & Corinthians' (featuring BJ the Chicago Kid) (2011) and J. Cole, through his 2013 song 'Born Sinner' (featuring James Fauntleroy)<sup>70</sup> The page poets to be examined here are Tina Chang, through her poem 'Love' (2011); David Tomas Martinez, through his poem 'The Mechanics of Men' (2014); and Thomas Sayers Ellis, through his poems 'Or,' 'Skin Inc.' and 'The Pronoun-Vowel Reparations Song' (2010).<sup>71</sup>

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69 Jay-Z, *Decoded*, 191.

70 Due to space limitations, the other artists featured on each track are not examined. For a comprehensive consideration of each song as a full poem, their contributions to each song would need to be addressed. These poems (if they are to be considered such) should be understood as collaborative poems with more than one author.

71 Transcriptions of all lyrics and reproductions of page poems can be found in the attached appendix.

## Selection Criteria

There are several reasons I have chosen these poets/rappers. Each has received a degree of well-deserved critical praise, with Tina Chang being named Brooklyn's Poet Laureate, and Kendrick Lamar being called 'hip-hop's most exciting rapper' by Rolling Stone,<sup>72</sup> as well as breaking Spotify streaming records with his album *To Pimp A Butterfly* (2015).<sup>73</sup> In this respect I have deliberately opted to select artists who are emblematic of and well-regarded within their respective fields, as well as being artists whose work I personally admire. Furthermore, as will be seen, there is a large degree of thematic overlap among these works, with each at various points broaching race, morality and parental estrangement. Examining works that engage with similar themes through different mediums is a particularly helpful way of illuminating the ways in which their respective poetic techniques both overlap and diverge to contribute to textual meaning(s). The poetic techniques I have chosen to observe here are ubiquitous in rap and page poetry, and if my claims regarding segmentivity hold weight for these works then such claims should be tentatively generalisable for the functioning of poetry in general.<sup>74</sup>

## The Centrality of Flow

In rap, 'flow' refers to the ways in which a rapper vocally navigates an instrumental; where they decide to place syllables and group rhymes, pause, elongate or abbreviate syllables and so forth. As Bradley and DuBois suggest, 'flow' is a particularly fitting term for this aspect of vocal delivery given its emphasis on *rhythm*; which comes from the Greek word *rheo*, meaning flow.<sup>75</sup> As the crux of the term concerns temporality, we might define flow more generally as *the writer's deliberate control of the rate at which a reader can consume text*.<sup>76</sup> This concept is absolutely central to the function of rap music. As Tricia Rose notes,

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72 Josh Eells, 'The Trials of Kendrick Lamar', *Rolling Stone*, Issue 1231: March 26, 2015. Accessed online. URL = <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/the-trials-of-kendrick-lamar-cover-story-20150622>.

73 Guardian Music, 'Kendrick Lamar's To Pimp A Butterfly breaks Spotify streaming records', *The Guardian*, 18 March 2015. Accessed online. URL = <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/mar/18/kendrick-lamars-to-pimp-a-butterfly-breaks-spotify-streaming-records>

74 Further analysis of other artists would be necessary in order to assess this claim, but unfortunately lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

75 Bradley and DuBois, xxix.

76 The use of 'reader' here is deliberate, as I consider listening to music analogous to reading in all important respects. This viewpoint is defended in the next chapter.

The music and vocal rapping in rap music privileges flow, layering and ruptures in line.' [...] Rappers stutter and alternatively race through passages, always moving within the beat or in response to it, often using the music as a partner in rhyme.<sup>77</sup>

Accordingly, and though it may seem paradoxical, to speak of flow is necessarily to speak of segments of time, and how one linguistically navigates that time in reference to backing instrumentation. Metrical page poetry is, in this respect, perhaps more akin to rap than free verse, to the extent that rhythmic consistency strongly influences the pace at which a poem is read (though, unlike fixed, recorded rap music, there is some room for interpretation/variation on the part of the reader).<sup>78</sup> By definition, free verse avoids metrical regularity, and yet is clearly poetry nonetheless. Insofar as my concern here is in defending a definition of poetry *per se*, free verse has been selected as the more interesting avenue for exploration. As opposed to metrical poetry, free verse controls the reader's experience of text via line breaks, punctuation, white space and choices in syntax. To the extent these guide the temporal aspects of reading—rhythm, pauses, the re-reading of lines and so forth—these can and should be understood as elements of flow: they entail the deliberate control of the consumption of the poem through time. Before examining these techniques, however, it is worth looking more closely at how flow functions within rap.

### The Structure of Rap

As with most popular Western music, rap is nearly always constructed in a 4/4 time signature. Each measure consists of four beats, and a lyric line (one bar) consists of the number of words that can be rapped in that time. Given that a standard rap verse is sixteen bars in length, this means that rap is inherently segmented into sixteen lines per verse, a strict structure that drives and informs the creative process. In an interview with Ice-T (one of the first rappers from the United States' west coast to gain nationwide fame) hip-hop pioneer Rakim explains:

Ice-T: I read before that you said that you break the music down into musical segments. Could you elaborate on that?

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77 Rose, *Black Noise*, 39.

78 It would be easier and less interesting to examine the crossovers between page poetry with a regular metre and rap music, and would risk over-emphasising rhythm as a defining characteristic of poetry.

Rakim: I try to start off with sixteen dots on paper. If it's a sixteen bar rhyme at least I know what I'm dealing with. [...] If four bars were so long... I see a graph in between the four bars, and within that I could place so many words, so many syllables. And at times if the beat was perfect, I could take it to a point where there was no other words you could put in those four bars.<sup>79</sup>

The visual reference to a graph here is illustrative of the way rap is inherently segmented. Such temporal constraints are similar to a sheet of lined paper for a page poet: one can alter the amount of words per line by shortening spaces between words or writing smaller—i.e. rapping faster—but the 'page' runs out at the sixteenth bar. The concept is the same, but the 'gaps' between lines are here temporal rather than spatial/visual. In terms of transcription, this structure means that rap lyrics are often transcribed in verses of sixteen lines, with a line break positioned at the end of each bar. This technique of transcription is useful as it highlights enjambment, end rhymes and internal rhymes, as well as—as Rakim demonstrates—likely reproducing the form in which the lyrics were originally written. Accordingly, this is the method of transcription I adopt here.

### Segmentivity Analysis: Kendrick Lamar

The degree to which a rapper emphasises or downplays the sixteen bar structure and the links between song segments, such as the transition from a chorus (more commonly known in rap as a hook) to a verse, can be used to great effect. We can consider, for example, the hook and beginning of the first verse in rap artist Kendrick Lamar's song 'Kush & Corinthians', from his 2011 album *Section.80*.<sup>80</sup>

As the title suggests (kush being a strand of marijuana, and Corinthians being a book of the bible's New Testament largely concerned with morality and sin), the song is fundamentally a first-person rumination on morality; on the struggle of an 'out of control artist' trying to maintain sanity surrounded by a culture of drugs and violence. At the close of the third hook, we hear:

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79 Ice-T in conversation with Rakim, from *Something From Nothing: The Art of Rap* (USA: Ice-T, Andy Baybutt, 2012). DVD.

80 For a full appreciation of segmentivity and the lyric emphasis that will be analysed here, the song should be heard alongside the printed lyrics, and can be streamed on YouTube. See <https://youtu.be/695Dxe6LXMA>. A transcription of the lyrics can also be found in the appendix.

But can we win? Wait, let's get straight to the point, [end hook]  
To the meaning of life, what's my purpose?  
Maybe this Earth is, ain't a good place to be.

In maintaining a consistency of flow—keeping a consistent rhythm in vocal delivery as the hook bridges into a verse—Lamar here emphasises his focaliser's distressed mental state, as if the narrator cannot pause to mark the hook's closure. The first verse flows directly from the hook's last line, with the sudden and overly ambitious 'meaning of life' foregrounding a tone of urgency; the narrator's anxieties and sense of being overwhelmed.<sup>81</sup> This is furthered by the syntactic irregularity of 'maybe this earth is, ain't a good place to be', which is symptomatic of the narrator's implicitly clouded head space, and either inability or lack of desire to be grammatically correct. The song's title and the first line of the second verse ('As I open this book and then burn up some of this reefer') indicate that the narrator is high on marijuana, and Lamar fashions verses that are almost stream-of-consciousness, consistent with someone writing in this state.<sup>82</sup> Accordingly, Lamar groups words into lexical sets—to borrow a term from Peter Verdonk—selecting words within each bar 'on the principle of loose synonymy,'<sup>83</sup> in this case on the bases of either sound or meaning. Each new thought the narrator has gives rise to the next through either sound (as in the second verse: 'I'm *dyin*' inside, I wonder if *Zion* inside...) or semantic association (as in 'they tell me to make it *right*, but I'm *right* on the edge'). In this way almost every bar is both a self-sufficient unit of meaning while also causally linked or sonically echoed in a preceding or following line. The bars, in other words, are segmented into semantically discrete parts that individually express the narrator's anxieties, while sonically they are linked in a way that enacts his intoxicated, tangential headspace.

### Segmentivity in Sound & Sense (Expanding Our Definition)

At this point DuPlessis should reenter the discussion, as the centrality of her notion of segmentivity is beginning to make itself apparent. Recalling that DuPlessis defines poetry by

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81 I am reminded here of the musical psychologist Carol Pratt's remark that 'music sounds the way emotions feel.' Quoted in Peter Kivy, *Sound Sentiment: An Essay on the Musical Emotions, Including the Complete Text of The Corded Shell* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

82 Lamar elsewhere writes and raps as if his narrators were intoxicated on other substances, as in 'U' from his album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015), in which the poetic voice is drunk, slurring words and using incorrect syntax, broken and incomplete sentences. See Kendrick Lamar, 'U' in *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Los Angeles: Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015). CD.

83 Verdonk, *The Stylistics Of Poetry*, 16.

its fundamental reliance on segmentivity, and that segmentivity entails 'the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments,'<sup>84</sup> an attempt to examine segmentivity at work in rap entails a search for a reliance on the interaction of discrete segments in creating (possible) meaning. As DuPlessis puts it at one point, in a helpfully succinct manner: 'the line segment creates meanings.'<sup>85</sup> Thus far it has been seen that, not unlike a poetic set form, rap verses are invariably broken into sixteen discrete lines (bars), and that the gaps between these bars (and between hooks and verses) can be emphasised or downplayed via a rapper's flow to achieve particular effects. In continuing to consider segmentivity in rap, it will be helpful to bear in mind that segments may function at this level of sound or, I will argue, at the level of sense. Returning to the work of Lamar, consider again the beginning of the third verse:

To the meaning of life, what's my purpose?  
Maybe this Earth is, ain't a good place to be.

Here we can see segmentivity occurring at the level of sense in the second line, centering around the word 'Earth.' Here the phrase 'maybe this Earth is' straddles the metaphoric and the literal in using 'Earth' to connote both life and death. 'Earth' is both metonymically representative of human existence, signifying life (as in, 'my purpose is to be *on* this Earth'), while also denoting death as the site of burial ('my purpose is to be *in* this earth'), while the rhyme on 'purpose' and 'earth is' sonically links human existence with inevitable death, reinforcing the speaker's anxieties regarding mortality. On this reading, the seemingly ambiguous 'place' in the next line—'ain't a good *place* to be'—actually has three possible referents. It may be 1) 'Earth' as *life*; 2) 'earth' as inevitable *death* or, perhaps more likely; 3) this state of confusion, of not knowing 'the meaning of life' that 'ain't a good place to be.'

This ambiguity in sense is underpinned at the level of sound by Lamar's consistent flow; it is because Lamar does not pause that 'earth' and 'place' can plausibly be interpreted in several ways, since a more substantial pause after 'is' (for instance) might lean us in favour of the first interpretation (as it were, 'inserting' punctuation into what we hear). In this way a *lack* of formal segmentivity (in this instance a lack of pause) works to trifurcate possible meanings. A flow that threads together syntactically disjointed phrases works to create multiple layers of meaning, and

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84 DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 199.

85 Ibid., 199.

should accordingly be considered an instance of segmentivity. This is, however, a novel way of viewing segmentivity, and not directly in line with how DuPlessis formulates the term.

What I am suggesting here is a revision—more specifically, an expansion—of DuPlessis' notion of segmentivity. I wish to suggest that, for reasons that will become more clear as the discussion continues, segmentivity should be used to refer *not only* to 'literal' segments—spacing, gaps and pauses—as DuPlessis seems to limit the term,<sup>86</sup> but, somewhat more abstractly, to refer to those instances at which a space opens up between possible meanings, and a reader is confronted with a choice between interpretations. Such instances of the furcation of meaning very often coincide with segmentivity in form, as with enjambed lines we will see in Tina Chang's work, but not always. Ambiguity and polysemy, for instance, are manifestations of segmentivity in (possible) meaning, and quite often are not accompanied by segmentivity in form. In Lamar's case, however, flow and polysemy work hand in hand.

It would be equally arbitrary and counterproductive to an understanding of poetry to suppose that segmentivity need be limited to formal aspects of the text. Moreover, it may even be impossible to define segmentivity as limited to form, since sound in poetry is so intricately caught up with sense. This is a point to be returned to in the next chapter, but for now it will do to note that I am understanding and using segmentivity in this broader sense, and we can return to Lamar's lyrics.

At the level of sound, fragmentation in 'Kush & Corinthians' is further emphasised by a combination of flow and beat that often groups the thought trail in syllabic pairs. In beats per minute (BPM), it is interesting to note the tempo of the backing instrumentation of 'Kush & Corinthians' is 89, roughly analogous to a healthy adult's heartbeat when slightly increased, as under the effects of marijuana. There is a brief pause between paired syllables, so that the opening lines of the first verse fall in a paired rhythm of [...'mea/ning] [of/life] [what's/my] [pur/pose] [may/be] [this] [earth/is] [ain't/a] [good/place] [to/be']. The anxieties of the narrator are in this way sonically reinforced by a flow that drums like a human heartbeat. It is a perception of these discrete beats and the gaps between them—a perception, that is, of

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86 I write 'seems' only because DuPlessis formulates her thoughts on segmentivity in scarcely more than 700 words, and within them does not strictly limit the edges of the term. Accordingly, it is not impossible that she may agree to a more expansive definition of segmentivity, though she does not say specifically. As already noted, expanding on the definition is not new, with Palmer, Bennett, Heiden and McHale all having acknowledged the malleability of the term at various points.

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- 87 While the analysis of 'Kush & Corinthians' in Table 1.0 is my own, the technique of a flow map analysis (though he doesn't use the term) has been borrowed from Krims' *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, see p. 59. The subsequent technique of reproducing lyrics (rather than Xs) within beat measures in Table 1.1 is, to the best of my knowledge, my own. Kendrick Lamar, 'Kush & Corinthians', *Section.80* (Los Angeles: Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011). CD.
- 88 One could label the above 1-4 instead of 0-3 (to capture that there are four beats in each bar), but it makes more sense temporally to begin at 0, with the final beat running from 3 until the bar's loop.



placement, with each *X* representing one syllable of the lyrics adjacent, and its placement indicating where it sits in the verse's progression through sixteen bars (accordingly, a 2 denotes that two syllables occur during that sixteenth-note).<sup>89</sup> What is immediately evident on listening to this song, and is made apparent in Table 1.0, is the consistency of Lamar's flow; there is scarcely any time in each bar that isn't filled with the attack of a syllable, which is, once again, consistent with a narrator who is high and anxious. There is, however, a noticeable bar end, as the backing instrumentation loops after every fourth stress.<sup>90</sup> To the extent that the bar ends are noticeable at the level of sound—which is to say we mentally *register* the beat's loop every 3 seconds—bar ends that run-on can be considered instances of enjambment. Consider, for instance, the following striking example:

It's probably you, am I right? If I'm wrong, you a fucking lie. When I  
lie on my back n' look at the ceiling, it's so appealing to [...]

Insofar as 'Kush & Corinthians' is largely concerned with expressing a desire for reprieve from inherently corrupting, violent surroundings, its power relies partially on its ability to construct internal tension in the narrator, a psychological struggle between doing right and doing wrong. With this in mind, it's interesting to note the tacking repetition of pronouns in the first line of the above, which are ordered '*you / I / I'm / you / I*.' This seeming tension between narrator and addressee is problematised by the enjambment in '*you a fucking lie. When I / lie...*', in which '*you*' and '*I*' are linked by the homophonic '*lie*.' Since this line bridges two bars—which elsewhere necessitates semantic closure—the homophone works to problematise *I/you* and *saint/sinner* binaries, furthering internal tensions of an 'out of control artist' narrator. The tacking of pronouns and sudden enjambment, linked by a homophone, makes it unclear whether the addressee is an actual other, internal or external to the song, or whether the narrator is merely addressing himself, as both accuser and accused. Since the deliberate bridging of bars, i.e. the deliberate linking of discrete segments, here works to create internal conflict in the speaker and establish new possibilities of meaning, here we have a clear instance of segmentivity in rap, functioning via

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89 It is worth noting that this method of analysis is admittedly flawed to the extent it cannot capture the fluidity of the sounds it represents. Nonetheless, it is illustrative of flow, and is accordingly relevant to the discussion here. Pitch, loudness, tone-colour and duration are aspects of sound neglected by a flow map of this kind, and need be considered separately and by other means.

90 It is likely the case that these bar ends are more noticeable to listeners more attuned to rap, and familiar with its sixteen bar structuring of verse. Nonetheless, I suggest the bar ends are noticable to any lay listener who is paying attention.

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As is clear even on a cursory glance, the most evocative nouns, pronouns and verbs all fall on

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91      Once again, these tables can and should be scanned simultaneously with the music for a full appreciation of segmentivity's effects in sound. See 2:09 of <https://youtu.be/695Dxe6LXMA>

stressed beats, marked by the shaded columns. And of a total of forty conjunctions, articles and prepositions, all but two fall on off beats. Far from being arbitrary, Lamar's flow deliberately navigates the instrumental in a way that segments imagery and creates (possible) meaning. Points of emphasis (beat stresses), combined with repeated brief pauses in the fourteenth and sixteenth notes (at the end of each bar), serve to sonically segment key phrases, reinforcing the semantically-constructed dichotomies between self and society, sin and salvation (as in book/burn; demons/heaven; dying/life; saint/sinner etc.). Meaning is thus intricately linked to segmentivity; Lamar's choices in lineation and flow deliberately emphasise dichotomies, and supplementary semantic information falls on the gaps between stressed beats.<sup>92</sup>

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The medical journal *The Lancet Psychiatry* published an article online in April 2015 in which they claim that

listening to Kendrick Lamar might help mental-health practitioners and other professionals to understand the day-to-day internal and external struggles of their patients.<sup>93</sup>

If this claim has truth to it, it is in no small part due to the power of segmentivity throughout Lamar's work; through polysemy, ambiguity, levelled meanings and fractured syntax, reinforced by Lamar's complex flow. Further, if DuPlessis is correct that poetry is 'the creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gap',<sup>94</sup> then Kendrick Lamar's 'Kush & Corinthians' is by all rights a poem as much as it is a song.

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- 92 These 'gaps' are not silences *per se*, but insofar as they mark noticeable intervals between sonic highlights they should be considered musical manifestations of white (or perhaps grey) space.
  - 93 Akeem Sule and Becky Inkster, 'Kendrick Lamar, Street Poet of Mental Health', in *The Lancet Psychiatry*. Published online April 29, 2015.
  - 94 DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 199.

## Segmentivity Analysis: J. Cole

As with Kendrick Lamar, dichotomies of life and death and sin and salvation abound in the work of New York artist J. Cole, particularly in his 2013 album *Born Sinner*. A fundamental difference between Cole's album and Lamar's, however, is that Lamar largely flows in a consistent, rhythmic cavalcade of rhymes that homogenises the sixteen bar structure, making transitions between bars seamless. Cole, on the other hand, often exhibits a more relaxed flow, in which pauses and rhyme placement make bar segments obvious. Consider, for instance, the opening lines of the album's title track:<sup>95</sup>

Spinning in circles, live my life without rehearsals,  
If I die today my nigga was it business? Was it personal?  
Should this be my last breath I'm blessed cause it was purposeful,  
Never got to church to worship lord but please be merciful.<sup>96</sup>

As with Lamar, here there is ambiguity in the second line between life and death. The 'it' in the questions 'was *it* business?' and 'was *it* personal?' can denote the death of the same line, which would entail questioning the motive behind the narrator's death (i.e. was 'I' killed for business or personal reasons?) However, the syntax leaves open the possibility of 'it' denoting the *life* of the previous line, which would entail questioning in retrospect how the narrator's life was lived (with a focus on business or on 'personal' matters). Ambiguity of attribution works here to underpin the dialectic between life and death, in which neither appears certain. Such instances of ambiguity, reinforced by enjambment, are manifestations of segmentivity that DuPlessis considers (in their page poetry instances) in some detail in *Blue Studios*. DuPlessis writes of poet George Oppen's 'distinctive practice of hovering and enjambment, a practice achieving ethical and emotional effects from poetic segmentivity.' She writes:

These bidirectional, even multidirectional, line segments in later Oppen compel a practice of reading that makes fluid and ambiguous what part of the line segment to read with what other part. Or how to read and reckon enjambment and *api koinou* (syntactic hinge or pivot words). Through the various

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95 Again, for a full appreciation of Cole's flow the song can be streamed on YouTube. See <https://youtu.be/fr3ITE967mM>. A transcription of the lyrics can also be found in the appendix.  
96 J. Cole, 'Born Sinner', *Born Sinner* (New York: Dreamville Records, 2013). CD.

answers to the open-ended questions of what line segments go with what, hovering, hinges, and bridges are created that make double or triple readings plausible.<sup>97</sup>

Here DuPlessis could easily have been writing of the lyrics of Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole, whose bars are often structured in such a way as to open connections between them, making multiple readings legitimate. I wish to suggest that such instances of polysemy and ambiguity in these texts are inherently manifestations of segmentivity; they are points at which meaning is fractured and a listener must negotiate interpretation via gaps and segments in relation to the flow of sound.

Returning to the song at hand, 'Born Sinner' is largely an expression of the transience and fragility of life, in both a literal sense (as in the lines 'rest in peace to Tiffany'<sup>98</sup> and the hook's 'I'm a born sinner, but I'll die better than that'), as well as the struggle to retain identity in a music industry that threatens to compromise one's character. At the second verse we hear:

This music shit is a gift  
But God help us make it cause this music business is a cliff  
I got a life in my grip, she holding tight to my wrist  
She screaming: "Don't let me slip"  
She see the tears in my eyes, I see the fear on her lips.<sup>99</sup>

The strength of the extended metaphor here relies on the listener's ability to follow a course of imagery, and to this end Cole segments key images with rhyme: *is a gift / is a cliff / in my grip / to my wrist / "...let me slip" / on her lips*. By the second repetition of the rhyme cluster we come to anticipate the return of the rhyme, and our anticipation curtails the amount of attention given to words between rhyme clusters. Accordingly, rhyme is here a form of sonic parallelism that serves to structure the listener's parsing of metaphor. On the basis of the song's rhyme pattern we come to anticipate the end of each bar, and accordingly this is where Cole groups rhymes with important semantic information. Our attention peaks at *gift, cliff, wrist, slip* and *lips*; the tangible images at

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97 DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 203.

98 In an interview with NPR, J. Cole has stated that Tiffany was a girl in his primary school, and the first person he personally knew to have passed away. See J. Cole, Ali Shaheed Muhammad and Frannie Kelley, NPR Conversations: 'J. Cole On Competition And Writing Honest Songs', June 23, 2013. Audio. URL = <http://www.npr.org/sections/microphonecheck/2013/06/23/194594097/j-cole-on-competition-and-writing-honest-songs>.

99 J. Cole, 'Born Sinner', 2013.

the heart of the metaphor's sense are aligned front and center of its construction in sound.

To return to DuPlessis contention that segmentivity is 'the creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gap', insofar as 'Born Sinner' is arranged into key rhyme clusters separated by gaps of supplementary semantic information, it can be seen as employing segmentivity. This is so because, as already mentioned, 'gaps' need not be literal spaces on a page, but can be gaps that open between meanings (as with Lamar) or gaps in *time*, as we have here with Cole. This is a point that Brian McHale has been keenly aware of, suggesting that

oral poetry too has its periodicities and gaps, its segmentivity, even if here "spacing" is only metaphorical, and the equivalent of "white space" is pause, silence, or the beginning or end of a recurrent pattern.<sup>100</sup>

Since Cole's flow guides the listener's ability to parse the metaphor at the song's conceptual core, segmentivity becomes fundamental to the song's creation of (possible) meaning. The claim I am making here is not that all rhymes in rap are instances of segmentivity; they are instances of rhyme. But when rhymes are deliberately clustered around a set of key concepts or images that foreground (possible) meaning, supplemented by gaps of supplementary information, segmentivity is at work.

Having seen in some detail how segmentivity manifests in the structure, flow, rhymes and polysemy of rap, the discussion can now progress to consider how segmentivity functions on the page, specifically in the work of Brooklyn's Poet Laureate Tina Chang, Houston-based poet David Tomas Martinez, and New York poet and academic, Thomas Sayers Ellis. Having already considered enjambment in rap, Tina Chang's 'Love' from her anthology *Of Gods & Strangers* (2011) may make an illustrative starting point.

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### **Segmentivity Analysis: Tina Chang**

'Love' is one of the earlier poems in Chang's *Of Gods & Strangers*, a collection that combines

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100      McHale, 'Beginning to Think About Narrative in Poetry', 15.

contemporary, anecdotal pieces with stories of the Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi, the last empress of China (1835–1908). The line between modernity and 19th Century China often blurs throughout, via anachronisms and the use of ambiguous pronouns (a technique we'll return to). 'Love' is one such poem, in which the narrator seemingly blurs between Chang and Hsi. Here again, we find enjambment used to segment (possible) meaning. We can consider, for instance, the following lines:

My mother does not know I am lying  
with a man who is darker than me. That we do not  
have names for how we truly treat our bodies.<sup>101</sup>  
(*OG&S*, 16)

The gap created by breaking after 'lying' brackets meaning on either side of the line end, generating polysemy in what 'lying' entails. Initially it seems to suggest deceit (lying *to* mother), while the next line switches the meaning to denote sex (lying *with* a man). The subsequent break and resulting temporal pause after 'that we do not' threatens to backpedal, moving from action (lying) to inaction (do not), but ultimately gives way to further confession in the suggestively polysemous 'treating' of bodies. As with J. Cole's lyrics, here polysemy reinforces tone: the poetic voice of 'Love' is confessional without being apologetic; candid without being tactless. The poem is like a letter between friends, with layered meanings that distance the poetic voice from her mother and draw the reader in as confidant. It is worth stressing that these fractures in meaning are entirely formed by segmentivity as applied to line break, and a definition of poetry that is insensitive to such gaps may overlook such key points of meaning.

'Love' is largely concerned with identity, specifically the difficulty of forming female identity in relation to a lover and in spite of oppressive cultural expectations of who that lover should be. The poem continues:

with a man who is darker than me, that we do not  
have names for how we truly treat our bodies.  
What we do with them. The other possesses me.  
Without him the perception of me fails to exist.  
(*OG&S*, 16)

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101 Tina Chang, *Of Gods & Strangers* (New York: Four Way Books, 2011), 16. For subsequent references, all taken from this edition, footnotes are omitted and page numbers are inserted parenthetically in the text.

These lines suggest a narrator that feels her identity is inextricably linked to how she is perceived, so that identity *as* self is always identity *for* other. On this reading, the above lines reconstruct de Beauvoir's critique of the patriarchal cultural conditions that perpetuate conceptions of female as defined always in reference to male. As de Beauvoir has claimed in *The Second Sex*, 'Man can think of himself without women. She cannot think of herself without man.'<sup>102</sup> In using the terminology of 'the other', the poetic voice is acutely aware of this dynamic; struggling to legitimise identity while self-reflexively analysing that very struggle. The repetition of 'lying with a man who is darker than me', among repeated reference to the mother, suggests that the narrator's mother serves as a reminder of the cultural unacceptability of her choice in partner. Lexical choices and repetition here underpin the narrator's difficulty in negotiating self-identity in the face of love.

The speaker's attempts at self definition are, in the latter half of the poem, conducted in reference to her mother:

I am  
her daughter. This is certain. I am lying down with a man  
who is darker than me and maybe this poem is my  
real republic, my face is my face, or is it stolen from  
my mother and hung over mine? [...]  
(OG&S, 16)

The lines 'my face is my face, or is it stolen from / my mother and hung over mine?' are particularly telling. 'Her face' here being 'hung over mine' serves both as a symbol of inherited identity and a constant reminder of cultural/parental surveillance. The enjambed 'I am / her daughter' encapsulates the identity dialectic, with the visually independent 'I am' promising self-identity, while 'her daughter' after the line break re-establishes identity as always partially inherited. The repetition in 'I am' and '*my republic; my face; my face*' are thus bitterly ironic in light of the narrator's seeming *inability* to establish the personal identity to which this lexicon alludes. Just as segmentivity through flow in Lamar's verses and rhyme in Cole's serve to

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102 It should be noted that there are two at times conflicting translations of de Beauvoir's classic work: the 1953 translation offered by H.M. Parshley and a more recent translation by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (2009). While there has been debate and some controversy around their discrepancies, the quote taken here is translated the same in each edition, so may be taken as reliably close to its original/intended meaning. See de Beauvoir, Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.), xiii.



foreground (possible) meaning, here segmented sense (through polysemy), segmented lineation (through line breaks) and segmented sound (through repetition) work to establish the speaker's struggle to negotiate identity and love in the face of maternal intervention and cultural norms. Once again, segmentivity is at the centre of how (possible) meaning is constructed.

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What has become apparent through much of the analysis thus far, and I wish to suggest explicitly, is that segmentivity entails not just the *division* of poetry into discrete segments, but *hierarchisation*; the ascription of salience to certain segments in virtue of their position within the machine (to borrow William Carlos Williams' apt metaphor).

Poetry is not a democratic, evenly voiced medium. Its lineation, page layout, rhythm and syntax serve to create an ebb and flow of poetic meaning, ensuring that certain words and lines get more of a say than others. Just as in rap, where (as seen in Cole's work), the end of a bar often brings rhyme, semantic closure and key imagery, so too in page poetry are line ends and beginnings often attractors for key points of poetic meaning. And I would like to suggest that this is so because of their functions as break. Line endings are given priority as points of (possible) meaning by virtue of being points of reader *pause*, as the reader stops briefly to hold the final word in their mind as they advance to the next line.<sup>103</sup> Once again, here we are dealing with temporality, which is to say with *flow*; with the deliberate control of a reader's experience of text through time.

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### Segmentivity Analysis: David Tomas Martinez

In David Tomas Martinez' first poetry collection, *Hustle* (2014), such hierarchisation

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103 The importance of line break has perhaps been taken furthest by Giorgio Agamben in *The End of the Poem* (1999), in which he argues that 'the possibility of enjambment constitutes the only criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose.' Interestingly, Agamben argues on this basis for an impossibility of poetry as such, since each poem must negotiate the impossibility of enjambment in its last line. While noting the huge role of line ends, however, I contend they are just one instance of segmentivity. See Giorgio Agamben and Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The End of the Poem* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 109.

through syntax and line breaks works to highlight particular words and phrases. A particularly illustrative example is 'The Mechanics of Men.' As the closing poem in Martinez's first collection, 'The Mechanics of Men' should be understood in light of the narrative loosely woven through the poems that precede it. This narrative tells of a tumultuous youth, marred by drug abuse, violence and familial instability. Here choices in line break often enact distance *within* the poem. Consider the layout, for instance, of the following:

I never understood how he could work around so much grass. For him, life was work. For him, everything was hard. For me, it was not hard. He stalked my mother a long time after their divorce.<sup>104</sup>

This stanza marks a point of temporal shift in the poem, in which the poetic voice is reflecting on the transition from childhood into adulthood, in which emotional distance from his father begins to form. By ordering the syntax so the parallelistic phrases ‘for him’ and ‘for me’ are either side of ‘everything was hard,’ Martinez graphologically enacts the speaker’s tentative closeness with his father, joined, bridged or linked by hardship. Such hardship is alluded to elsewhere in the collection, as in ‘Innominatus’, where we read ‘Just because you and your dad share the same name / and you live under his protective hand, / doesn’t mean it protects’ (42). As this fraught closeness, this ‘enjoying watching my father dig’ (as the previous stanza has it) gives way to a life of the speaker’s own, so too at the level of the line break—at the level of graphology<sup>105</sup>—does the poem give way to the realisation that ‘for me / It was not hard.’ In narratological terminology, here narration and narrative time are *intercalated*; the brief pause caused by line break corresponds to the passing of time and the creation of distance in the poem’s content, and triggers the progression of further memories.<sup>106</sup>

Once again, this is a technique DuPlessis mentions in *Blue Studios* with regard to the poetry of Oppen. And, once again, her discussion could be equally applicable to the breaks being considered here. DuPlessis writes of Oppen's lines that

104 David Tomas Martinez, *Hustle* (Kentucky, Saraband Books, 2014), 90. For subsequent references, all taken from this edition, footnotes are omitted and page numbers are inserted parenthetically in the text.

105 Here I follow the lead of Peter Verdonk, who has recently suggested that we might distinguish five levels of organisation in language: semantics, lexis, syntax, phonology and graphology. See Verdonk, *The Stylistics Of Poetry*, 12.

106 Here I borrow terminology from Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan in *Narrative Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1983), 91.

the intellectual, emotional, and structural mobility of the lines in the reading process, their modular quality, creates a sense of temporality (even historical time, large time, time in motion) inside the poem as object.<sup>107</sup>

In other words, breaks in form correspond to breaks in content, and line ends/beginnings are hierarchised as key points of (possible) meaning, in virtue of their function as gap. A syntax that leans toward enacting closeness ('For him everything was hard. For me [...]') is undermined by a line break that enacts the passing of temporal, financial and emotional distance ('For me / it was not hard').

The centrality of this distancing is perhaps made most stark in the poem's final lines:

How ridiculous I was that summer for us all;  
for not attempting to rebuild any of his love that summer, at all.  
(*Hustle*, 92)

In another instance of form enacting content, here page distance—experienced as (reading) time—is used to reinforce narrator tension, desire and distance. If it is true, as I think it is, that 'The Mechanics of Men' fundamentally grapples with desire and distance—the desire for paternal love with the distance caused by time, ill-treatment and differences in personality ('I was, in fact, already, a bigger and better man...')—then earlier instances in the poem of distance and desire forming, such as those achieved by segmentivity outlined above, are crucial to the poem's creation of (possible) meaning. Segmentivity, and specifically hierarchisation, once again underpin poetic affect.

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As well as concerning itself with human relationships, 'The Mechanics of Men' engages with concepts of masculinity and what it means to be a 'working' man, in both the functional and vocational senses of the word. The poem's lexicon problematises subject and object binaries at various points, reifying and de-reifying the human/the organic, the inhuman/the mechanic.

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107 DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 204.

Even a brief survey of the polysemous terms in the poem reveals a treasure trove of terms that straddle the organic and the mechanical in their associations: *inclined*; *made nice*; *hooked*; *loaded*; *grew*; *laid*; *seven inches*; *broke*; *fixed*; *play at paste*; *smoking* and *rebuild*, among others.

In the very first stanza this human/mechanical binary arises:

I have never been the most mechanically inclined of men.  
Wrenches, screwdrivers, or shovels  
have never made nice with me. In the shipyard,  
(*Hustle*, 90)

The polysemous phrase 'made nice' reifies the subject/object relationship, imparting agency to the tools, suggesting that it is through their use that one 'makes' a man. Such instances of subject/object and human/mechanic crossover occur repeatedly, such as when 'the brass rod / hissed like an ostrich'; 'the loops fell like bright oranges'; 'I ripened the rusty metal'; 'gulls in the bay were tables'; 'She was not sod to be laid'; '[We] reheat our want' and 'to feel fixed is to feel a mechanical spirit.' The result is a mechanisation of man, a conceptual inversion of organic, natural processes and mechanical, artificial ones. Insofar as the poetic voice becomes romantically isolated over time, distanced from family and particularly from his father, such inversions in which human interaction becomes sterile and mechanical (while work and the mechanical become fruitful and organic) underpin the emotional progression (or regression) of poetic voice. Here polysemous lexical choices don't merely destabilise binaries, but entirely invert them. The parallels with Cole and Lamar should not be overstated, but it is worth noting that polysemy and the destabilisation of binaries are being used by all three artists to segment possible meaning(s). Segmentivity is thus crucial to unpacking the richness present in their respective poetics.

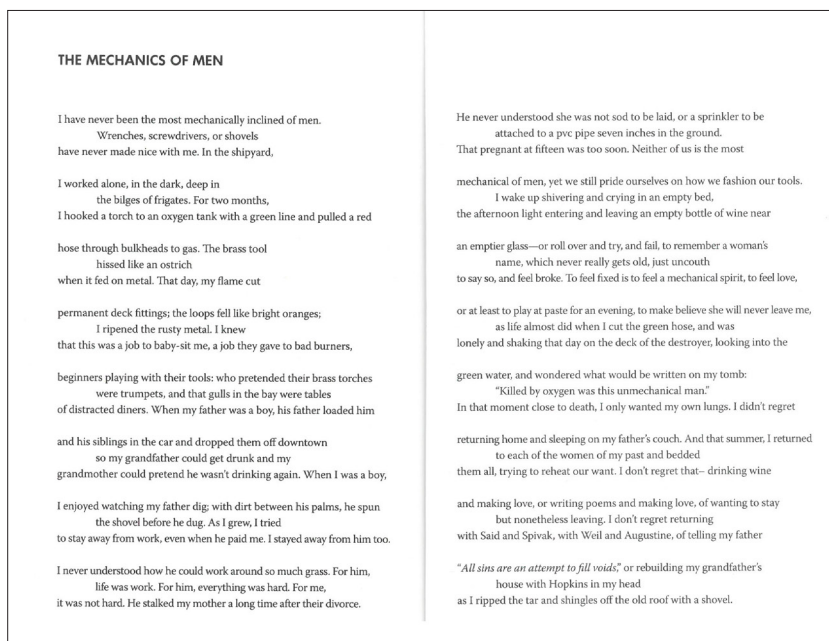
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### **A Brief Note on Form**

Page poetry is, I think, usually apprehended first as whole, static artwork, as one might look at a painting or a sculpture. Then, I believe, it is seen as incrementally processed text, just as we process film (through the gradual scanning of various textual elements over time). As a whole,

static object, 'The Mechanics of Men' bears and indeed draws attention to its own artificiality. To illustrate, it may be helpful to reproduce a scan of the poem as it appears in the collection:

Image 1.0



The symmetry of the spread and consistency of the three-line stanzas has a geometric aesthetic, the lines tacking back and forth in a consistent series of indentation on the second line, making the pages look like two immaculately chiselled pillars, side by side. Every page poem, unlike a rap song, has such a spatial aesthetic aspect that is apprehended before the poem is read. And at some level it colours our reading expectations: a poem that is clearly sculptured artifice, and is registered as so before it is read, makes references to structure, machination and artificiality within it metatextual, salient and laden with meaning. In this way, since 'The Mechanics of Men' is more 'rigid' in form, and noticeably so, than other page poems in Martinez' collection, it is fitting that it is also a poem that deals with artificiality/rigidity in its content. Form here is, once again, being used to reinforce (possible) meaning.

This is exacerbated even further on the poem's literal reading process, as the eyes scan across, down, in, across, down, in a constant tacking back and forth in equal distances. Where other poems in the collection require a drifting of the eyes down inconsistent levels of indentation, here the poem's form forces a mechanical reading, and so a poem that examines mechanisation is experienced by the reader via mechanical eye movements. There will be more to say on this topic when we come to the relationship between reading and listening to music. For now,

having examined some further, important ways in which segmentivity operates through the work of Martinez, as well as having flagged the significance of page poetry's spatial aesthetics, the discussion can now progress to the last page poet for consideration in this thesis, namely the New York poet, academic and photographer, Thomas Sayers Ellis.

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### Segmentivity Analysis: Thomas Sayers Ellis

Thomas Sayers Ellis' 2010 collection *Skin Inc: Identity Repair Poems* is a confronting, eclectic compilation, including concrete and prose poetry, eulogy and photography. Largely concerned with identity politics and race relations in America today, the poems often employ repetition, capitalisation and fractured page spacing to generate possible meaning(s). 'Or,' for example, is a masterful example of using sound to group and convey meaning. The poem is grouped into seven brief stanzas, each divided by 'or' followed by a capitalised noun that forms a loose theme for the stanza that follows. It begins:

Or,  
  
Or Oreo, or  
worse. Or ordinary.  
Or your choice  
of category<sup>108</sup>

Here the use of anaphora in the repetition of 'or' is paratactic; it places each possibility on an even footing. Each new instance of 'Or' initially suggests a dichotomy [ $x$  or  $y$ ], yet the pairings offered are dialectical; destabilised by a midpoint which simultaneously binds and separates them. *Oreo*—Greek for what is good or beautiful—leads on to 'or/worse' as its antithesis, but is followed by 'Or ordinary', which synthesises the two and so reduces extremes to a gradation. This is likewise true for 'Oreo' in its polysemic, colloquial sense, in which it condescendingly denotes a black American that wishes to be part of the white establishment, and thus acts as a middle ground; a bridging point between what had seemed to be binaries.

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108 Thomas Sayers Ellis, *Skin, Inc.* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2010), 4. For subsequent references, all taken from this edition, footnotes are omitted and page numbers are inserted parenthetically in the text.

This simultaneous erecting and undermining of dichotomies runs throughout, and insofar as the poem is concerned with interrogating and destabilising notions of race and class difference, segmentivity is here used for political affect. The poem continues:

or  
Color

or any color  
other than Colored  
or Colored Only.  
Or "Of Color"

or  
Other

(SI, 4)

There is an implied progression in the move from the blatantly discriminatory (though knowingly ironic) 'any color/other than Colored/or Colored Only' to the seeming political correctness in the phrase "Of Color." However, the capitalisation in "Of Color" and the conspicuous scare quotes constitute grammatical and tonal manifestations of difference, so that these labels are merely more manifestations of the ideology that sees 'Colored' as 'Other/ed.' The 'alternatives' presented here are thus not *x* 'Or' *y* 'Or' *z* but rather *x* or *x* or *x*. This stasis is sonically reinforced throughout by the anaphoric repetition of 'or' not only *between* but *within* words, so that 'or' semantically promises progress while sonically revoking that very offer. Here we see segmentivity constructed through parataxis and anaphora and employed for political affect.

In the closing six lines the link between the poem's sounds and one of its (possible) meanings comes to the fore:

or  
Neighbor

or fear of..  
of terror or border.  
Or all organized  
minorities.

(SI, 5)

The ellipsis, the first point at which the expected 'or' fails to materialise, brackets the extended parataxis and foregrounds the poetic voice, as if he/she is suddenly unsure of what the possible sources of fear are. 'Of terror or border' reads as a critique of American imperialism outside its borders, while 'organised minorities' highlights oppression and marginalisation within. As with the other dialectics it examines, these lines both highlight and lambast xenophobic us/them dichotomies still insidiously present in American (and Western) culture. As the lexical symbol of otherness, in retrospect the sonic repetition/mobilisation of 'or' sounds between and among words becomes symbolic of the organisation of minorities alluded to in the final lines. In this way the extended trail of 'alternatives' (or, or, or) suggests disconnection, while paradoxically its repetition alludes to *cohesion* through sound. As J. Weare writes, 'anaphora highlights poetic lines as discrete units while simultaneously binding those lines together.'<sup>109</sup> In segmenting his work into lines that are semantically incongruent (*x* or *y*) but sonically cohesive, Sayers Ellis enacts *within* the poem the tension between mobilisation and division to which it refers in the world around it.

As the title suggests, Ellis' *Skin Inc.: Identity Repair Poems* is a collection that interrogates sociopolitical conditions that have worked against the publication of black literature and the subsequent marginalisation of black voices. As with 'Or,' many of the poems in the collection are overtly political, often employing enjambment and polysemy to add to their force. The title poem, for instance, offers:

If punctuation  
were a punch  
I'd publish line breaks of fists.  
(*SI*, 65)

Here enjambment segments alliteration, and the momentary pause experienced at each line break creates a staggered rhythm, so that the line breaks force a 'punch' of each line, making them enact their own meaning. In this poem the corporeal and the literary are inextricably intertwined. Literature can be a means of revolt, as in the lines above, but also the means of oppression, as in the polysemous '*ruled*'; 'their *tense*, twisted spin'; '*paged* air'; 'they *conjugate*

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109 J. Weare, 'Anaphora', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (4th Edition) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 50.



you'; and '*in the margins*.'<sup>110</sup> 'Insofar as *Skin Inc.* examines such stifling of identity through the silencing of voice, it is interesting to note a lack of spatial deixis—where is the poem occurring?— as well as missing attribution of agency. Consider, for instance, the opening lines:

A black arm, unarmed, bent upward  
at the elbow  
so the blow slides off.

(*SI*, 65)

*Whose arm? And again:*

Wanted so bad,  
back then, to hit back  
but didn't dare, ever, strike their tense, twisted spin.

(*SI*, 65)

*Who* wanted? In omitting the black agential subject (and its 'place') the poem initially enacts the silencing it critiques. As with Lamar's pronoun tacking in '*Kush & Corinthians*', if we examine only the pronouns from the ninth to the thirteenth line of '*Skin Inc.*', we read *they / you / you / them / their / you / they*. The repetitive racial binary forces the reader into negotiating their relationship to the unstable 'you' (as well as 'I' and 'they') of the poem, which shifts from addressing black (as in '*First they conjugate you*') to white (as in '*Sorry I know / "Cracker" and "Honky" hurt*'). Ellis has been quoted as referring to this ambiguity as 'the door of the pronoun,'<sup>111</sup> an apt phrase since approaching from one side entails being included and 'inside' the poem; the other to being excluded or 'outside.' Insofar as repetition of inherently ambiguous pronouns necessitates a reader negotiation with race (is one to read their own race, or does one read 'as' black or 'as' white?) the poem calls attention to its own consumption as necessarily an *embodied* act. It is only in acknowledging that this embodiment is necessarily inextricable from the experience of text that one can 'free skin,' hence 'I am not merely *in* / this thing I am *in*. I am *it*' (that is, skin '*incorporated*' into identity, as per the collection's title).

110 It is perhaps worth mentioning that Kendrick Lamar uses the same wordplay in his poignantly titled '*Poetic Justice*' (2012), rapping 'living my life in the margins, and that metaphor was proof...'

111 Quoted in Kascha Semonovitch, '*Skin, Inc. Identity Repair Poems* by Thomas Sayers Ellis: This Book Is Not Like Anything You've Ever Read' (Review), in *The Kenyon Review*, Spring 2011. Online. URL = <http://www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2011-sprin/selections/skin-inc-identity-repair-poems-by-thomas-sayers-ellis-this-book-is-not-like-anything-you've-ever-read/>

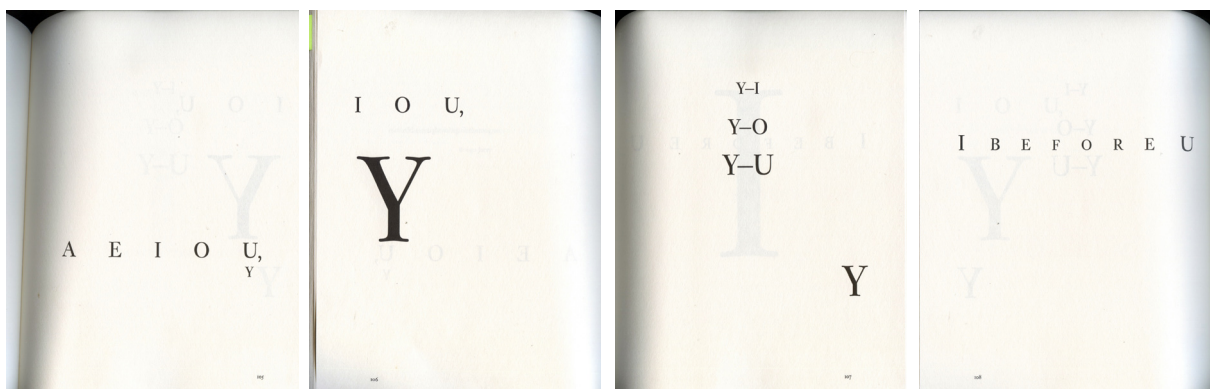
Since segmentivity denotes textual gaps that are bridged by a reader in order to create meaning, these ambiguous pronouns are well understood as manifestations of poetic segmentivity; they are discrete vantage points from which each line can be understood, and must be 'filled' by a reader in order to create meaning.

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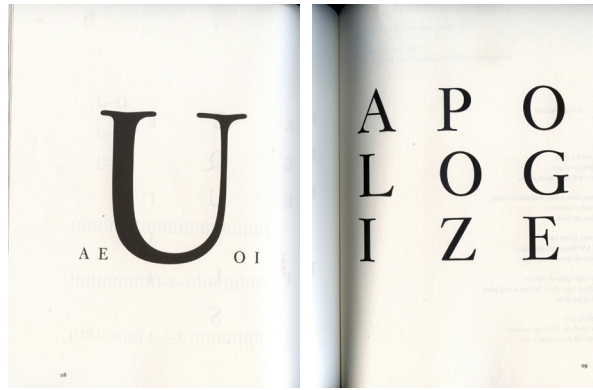
### The Use of the Page

The chapter to follow explores in more detail the relationship between reading and listening as temporally-bound processes of cognition. As a way of heading in that direction, it will be a fitting close to the current chapter to finally consider a page poem that relies for its meaning on the apprehension, or perhaps more accurately, the conversion, of graphological units—single letters—to their constituent, phonetic sounds. The strength of 'The Pronoun-Vowel Reparation Song' is achieved so much through page layout and typography that it is worth reproducing some portions of it here. What follows are reproduced scans of the first, second and last spreads of the poem, comprised of a total of sixteen pages:<sup>112</sup>

Image 2.0



112 The poem can be read in its entirety (albeit with reduced formatting) in *Callaloo* (Vol. 27, No. 3) 2004: 654-656, available at <https://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/callaloo/v027/27.3ellis01.html>. A reproduction of the entire poem as it appears in *Skin Inc.* is also included in the attached appendix.



To borrow a term from Espen J. Aarseth, this might be considered an *ergodic* poem, one in which 'nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text.'<sup>113</sup> It relies so much on its graphology, its layout and its use of bold space on the printed page for its impacts that it almost feels more like a like visual art piece than literature.<sup>114</sup> The fundamental driver of meaning here, however, is in the *sounds* of the vowels and letters on the page, which are mentally 'heard' and converted into their corresponding, homophonic equivalents, just as I.O.U is read and understood as 'I owe you.'

As seen in the scans above, 'The Pronoun-Vowel Reparation Song' opens by listing the English vowels, in order, immediately followed by 'Y.' By virtue of the fact English speakers are most used to reading 'AEIOU' as a set of individual sounds, rather than as a single semantic word, the 'Y' that follows is likewise read as 'why?', and the pages that follow receive the same mental conversion of symbol into sound, then sound into word. Accordingly, the following is what is 'seen' in the spreads reproduced above (with a line break marking a page break):

AEIOU — Y  
 IOU — Y  
 Y—I Y—O Y—U Y  
 I B E F O R E Y O U  
 [...]  
 AEUOI  
 A P O L O G I Z E  
 (SI, 105–119)

113 Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 1.

114 I am reminded here of Tamryn Bennett's argument for the existence of 'Comics Poetry', in which she considers visual elements manifestations of poetry. See Bennett: 'Comics Poetry: Beyond Sequential Boundaries.'

What is read, however, is the following:

AEIOU. Why  
I owe you? Why?  
Why I? Why owe? Why you? Why  
'I' before 'you'?  
[...]  
A. E. *You owe I.*  
Apologize.

The poem thus takes the English language and turns it in on itself, using one of its most basic grammatical constructs as a symbol of class ('I owe you') and race ('apologise') division.<sup>115</sup> It demands not only to be read, but engaged with on sonic, then semantic, then political grounds. As Gregory Pardlo puts it in one review,

the poem reminds us the act of reading is not passive, but it is indeed physically demanding and requires a will to scrutinise the text, no matter what uncomfortable truths it may hold or guilt it may disclose.<sup>116</sup>

The result is an admonition of slavery, of course (as evidenced in the last line), but also of an academy that has systematically ignored what another poem in the collection calls 'A Galaxy of Black Writing.'<sup>117</sup> In this respect the reparations called for in the poem's title require not only an apology, but for black art to be recognised ('You owe I') since, as symbolised in the library discussed in 'Spike Lee At Harvard', 'there was only / one black poet / on the wall of photographs, / Ai, interrupting / the white typeface / of American detachment' (10–11).

More punctuation could of course be added to my above transcription to correspond with the relative force of certain letters and words in virtue of their typographical size and layout, such as an exclamation mark after the bold last line. Since it has become clear that we are 'hearing' these sounds in order to comprehend meaning in this work, it follows that spaces

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115 My reading of this poem is influenced by and indebted to Ailish Hopper's analysis of Ellis' work in 'The Gentle Art of Making Enemies', in Laura McCullough (ed.), *A Sense of Regard: Essays on Poetry and Race* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 193.

116 Gregory Pardlo, 'Skin Inc: Identity Repair Poems, and: Amnesiac, and: The Black Automaton, and: Quantum Spit' (review), *Callaloo* (Vol. 34, No. 3), 2011: 960.

117 Ellis, *Skin, Inc.*, 126.

between each sound function as pause—that is, silence. Moreover, larger, bolder words are mentally 'heard' louder than relatively smaller units.<sup>118</sup> Since here we are dealing once again with segmentivity in relation to sound, it will be useful once again to draw on DuPlessis, who writes the following when discussing the function of sound in poetry:

The sound on the page, apprehended before any semantic meaning, sets up a sound tunnel wherein things when understood (the semantic meaning) give the illusion of being what you already "knew"—since these things echo the nonsemantic sounds that you have just heard, a brief second before. [...] Semantic meaning, in this analysis, is the echo chamber of an already apprehended sound.<sup>119</sup>

Here DuPlessis is suggesting that the apprehension of sound always precedes that of sense, so that when we do understand a word *in the context* of a poem, it is akin to the experience of mild *déjà vu*, as we 'hear' the word for a second time in its (semantic) context. This may explain why 'The Pronoun-Vowel Reparation Song' has such a profound affect, since it relies on this doubling and then a further *redoubling* of sound and sense, as we convert graphological units into their respective sounds, then into their homonyms, and further into their respective senses.<sup>120</sup> That Ellis should choose to title this work a *song* and not a poem is rather fitting, given this emphasis on sound for the creation of (possible) meaning. The process of reading here is, once again, operating via the bridging of gaps, which is to say via the core functioning of segmentivity, in the expanded and revised sense I am using it.

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118 Cognitive theory work done by Howard Margolis on 'pattern matching' would likely be a relevant avenue of consideration here. Margolis suggests that image schemas (patterns abstracted from bodily experience) interact with musical schemas (patterns abstracted from musical convention), so that in a sense we hear by virtue of how we see, and vice versa. A detailed consideration of this claim, however, would take the present discussion too far from its emphasis on segmentivity. Quoted in Candace Brower, 'A Cognitive Theory of Musical Meaning', *Journal of Music Theory* (Vol. 44, No. 2) 2000: 324.

119 DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 233.

120 The progression here seems strikingly analogous to Robert Frost's contention that 'there are three things, after all, that a poem must reach: the eye, the ear, and what we may call the heart or the mind.' Robert Frost and Mark Richardson (ed.), *The Collected Prose Of Robert Frost* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 301.

## A Possible Interjection

To this point, it has only been demonstrated, albeit in some detail, that segmentivity functions in both rap music and contemporary American page poetry. But why consider this *the* defining characteristic of poetry? Why not just be content to conclude that segmentivity functions in both, as metaphor often does, but it is not the necessary and sufficient condition for defining poetry? Why lump rap and page poetry together at all?

There are two reasons. The first is that we need, I believe, a definition of poetry in order to read it effectively. So much of the richness in the poems discussed here is likely to be overlooked or obfuscated by a way of reading poetry that is insensitive to gaps in spacing, in sound and in meaning. Accordingly, and returning to a distinction mentioned at the outset, this way of defining poetry is normative (prescriptive), insofar as I am claiming that poetry *should* be defined as that kind of writing, which can be consumed by the eyes or the ears, which functions via segmentivity; via a reliance on flow, layering (in sound and sense) and gaps (physical and temporal) to create (possible) meaning. In saying we should define poetry in this way I am suggesting that, armed with this definition, anyone unfamiliar with poetry could read any given contemporary poem and would likely find multiple layers of possible meaning, in a way at best diluted, at worst entirely obscured by family resemblance definitions such as those of Robert Pierce.

The second reason for defining poetry via segmentivity is that it helps us begin to resolve the largest problem this thesis seeks to address, namely whether and how music might be considered poetry. As we have seen throughout this chapter, segmentivity functions in several key ways in rap music and contemporary American page poetry. The work of Kendrick Lamar has demonstrated how flow functions as a fundamental manifestation of segmentivity at the level of sound. J. Cole has served to illustrate the place of rhyme, while Tina Chang and David Tomas Martinez have been useful in highlighting enjambment and polysemy as they function in poetry on the page. Lastly, Thomas Sayers Ellis has highlighted how anaphora, ambiguity and page layout can segment possible meanings and guide reader response. To recognise the simple fact that segmentivity lies at the core of how rap and page poetry function opens each genre to various rich avenues of analysis, of which this chapter has only made a small dent. Moreover, in defining poetry through segmentivity we begin to get at the heart of why music,

especially rap music, so often feels like poetry: simply because it is, if we define poetry sensibly. Having seen the similarities in how segmentivity functions in both page poems and rap songs, it is now time to address the larger issue: how we might consider the relationship between reading and listening.

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### **3: 'BETWEEN THE LINES': PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE POEM AS EXPERIENCE**

While the previous chapter has succeeded in offering tentative solutions to some small problems, it has also raised rather large problems in other areas. In offering a plausible account of how segmentivity functions in rap music and contemporary American (page) poetry, thus far the discussion has tacitly circumvented the issue of medium, the very real problem of whether (and how) we may even begin to compare the act of listening to music with the act of reading. In a sense then, the thesis now shifts its attention from the rapper and the page poet to the listener and the reader, from examining page poetry and music to the interplay between reading and listening.

In order to approach this rather large problem head on, I'd like to return to quoting Jacques Roubaud who has put the division between poetry and music rather stridently when he writes the following in 'Poetry and Orality', which serves as the prelude to Perloff and Dworkin's *The Sound of Poetry, The Poetry of Sound* (2009):

A song is not a poem and a poem is not a song. The words of a song deprived of their sounds may constitute a poem; or not. The words of a poem put to music may constitute a song; or not. It's an insult to poetry to call it song. It's an insult to song to call it poetry.<sup>121</sup>

Since the remainder of this chapter is an attempt to dismantle this claim, I'd like to further quote Roubaud to show that, while we disagree on this first point, I strongly agree on another, and it is precisely because I agree with the second claim that I disagree with the first. The claim I agree with, which parallels the argument I intend to make here, Roubaud puts as follows: 'A poem cannot be reduced to its external aspect alone. If it has not entered a single mind, a poem does not yet exist.'<sup>122</sup> This way of conceiving poetry is to see poetry as a process; an experience of text rather than the text itself. If, as Simon Jarvis has suggested, to ask what poetry is is a philosophical rather than a poetical question,<sup>123</sup> an answer of this kind will be a phenomenological rather than an ontological account. Moreover, it will be an account that

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121     Roubaud, 'Prelude: Poetry and Orality', in Perloff and Dworkin (ed.) *The Sound Of Poetry, The Poetry Of Sound*, 18.

122     Ibid., 19.

123     Simon Jarvis, 'For a Poetics of Verse', *PMLA* (Vol. 125, No. 4), 2010: 931.



very much muddies the dichotomy Roubaud wishes to draw between music and poetry.

In the last decade a growing body of empirical research in cognitive science has fuelled and informed discussions about creative processes, including textual creation and reception. Two papers have come out in as many years with the same title, a title which succinctly captures an increasingly empirically defensible way of understanding the creative process: 'Writing as Thinking.'<sup>124</sup> These articles, and others like them (such as Simon Jarvis' 'Music as Thinking: Hegel and the Phenomenology of Prosody'<sup>125</sup>) collapse the Cartesian dualism still evident in a conception of thinking as *nonsensuous* and *primary*, and writing as *sensuous* and *secondary* to thought. Instead, they emphasise the bodily experience of text, the physical and neural processes that simultaneously comprise the creative process, making up what cognitive linguists call embodied understanding.<sup>126</sup> In a term used by Richard Menary, this way of understanding writing sees it as involving *cognitive integration* between neural, bodily and manipulative processes. As Menary writes, 'this view is opposed to that of internalist cognitive science, where it is supposed that cognition can be defined in terms of manipulating internal neural symbols.'<sup>127</sup>

What I wish to suggest is that reading and listening to music likewise function via cognitive integration; as *experiences*, over time, via the bridging of gaps.<sup>128</sup> Elucidating and defending these claims will require drawing on the phenomenology and poetics of Martin Heidegger, to whose work we now turn.

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Following from his mentor Edmund Husserl, Heidegger's phenomenology sought to examine and account for the distinctly human mode of experience, and how it is that we interact with the world around us. How is it, for instance, that the seemingly 'internal' mind

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124 See Richard Menary, 'Writing as Thinking', *Language Sciences* (Vol. 29) 2007 and Keith Oatley, 'Writing as Thinking', *Review of General Psychology* (Vol. 12, No. 1) 2008.

125 See Simon Jarvis, 'Musical Thinking: Hegel and the Phenomenology of Prosody', *Paragraph* (Vol. 28, No. 2) 2005.

126 Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 209.

127 Menary, 'Writing as Thinking', 622.

128 It is worth noting that DuPlessis herself at one point calls poems and poetics 'events in consciousness, in collective understanding.' This suggests—at the very least—a receptivity to this cognitive, experiential conception of poetry. See DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 4.

interacts with the 'external' world? Heidegger proposed, contrary to a Platonic ideal of forms, that the world only reveals itself to us through the way in which we interact with it. To put it crudely, this amounts to claiming that in a sense things *are* what they *do*.<sup>129</sup> Accordingly, if one were to learn what poetry *is*, one should look at how it functions. David Nowell Smith, who has recently written an excellent book on Heidegger's poetics, suggests that Heidegger effects something of 'an ontologisation of poetry; that is, he moves away from its 'ontic' or generic features, in order to conceive of the poem as a privileged site for the 'event' of being.'<sup>130</sup> This event of being is what Heidegger notoriously calls *Dasein* (being-there), the distinctly human mode of 'being-in-the-world' from which (unlike all other entities), humans lead their lives.<sup>131</sup> This concept and its relation to poetry requires a little unpacking, and some specific terminology, which will help toward the end of this chapter.

In *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971), Heidegger distinguishes between artworks and what he calls 'equipment', writing that

the piece of equipment is half thing, because characterised by thingliness, and yet it is something more; at the same time it is half art work and yet something less, because lacking the self-sufficiency of the artwork.<sup>132</sup>

This conception of equipment as reliant on experience—a 'half thing'—makes *Dasein* integral to being: it is only through our interactions with the world that the world shows itself, that objects reveal their essence. 'The equipmental quality of equipment, Heidegger writes, consists in its usefulness.'<sup>133</sup> As a simple example to illustrate this point, Heidegger writes of a peasant woman's shoes:

The peasant woman wears her shoes in the field. Only here are they what they are. They are all the more genuinely so, the less the peasant woman thinks about the shoes while she is at work,

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129 While I'm certain that this is an oversimplification, it is nonetheless a helpful way of getting a broad sense of Heidegger's thought.

130 David Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence: Martin Heidegger at the Limits of Poetics*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 4.

131 Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Online. URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/heidegger/>

132 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 29.

133 Ibid., 33.

or looks at them at all, or is even aware of them. She stands and walks in them. That is how shoes actually serve. It is in this process of the use of equipment that we must actually encounter the character of equipment.<sup>134</sup>

Importantly, this anthropocentrism extends in Heidegger's thought to sensory phenomena, such as when he writes of colour that 'colour shines and wants to shine. When we analyse it in rational terms by measuring its wavelengths, it is gone.'<sup>135</sup> Like the peasant woman's shoes, colour is thus insufficient; a 'half thing'; a tree falling silently in the woods (or failing to fall, or failing to exist at all).

For his part, Heidegger considers artworks such as poems, on the other hand, to be self-sufficient, to the extent that they transcend their 'thingness' by revealing truth. A Greek temple, for instance, reveals the Greek world.<sup>136</sup> I, however, wish to argue that poems are comparable to the peasant woman's shoes: they are best understood by their *function*, and, like colour, they disappear when they're not read.<sup>137</sup> Here, then, we can begin to think of the poem as an experience, and in doing so two things become absolutely central: time and body.<sup>138</sup>

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Recalling that we have defined flow as the deliberate control of a reader's consumption of text through time, if we are to think of the poem as experience then flow is to the poem as walking is to the peasant woman's shoes; it is the movement, the tool in action, not exterior to but interior to the work, part of the essence of the poem itself. This seems to have been what Carl Jünger has gestured toward when he wrote that, in poetry, 'time and rhythm are one.'<sup>139</sup>

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134 Ibid., 33.

135 Ibid., 47.

136 The reasons for this are rather complex and largely rely on Heidegger's specific way of defining truth. An adequate account of this would take the discussion too far off track, and here I am concerned less with reproducing Heidegger's ideas than with how they may be of use to understanding the relationship between reading and listening.

137 This may seem tautological, akin to saying 'the poems aren't there when the poems aren't there.' It is not. What I am suggesting is that the poem itself cannot be separated from its consumption *as* poetry.

138 As noted in *Science News* in July 2015, time is so central to human experience that 'even in a dish, neurons can detect and respond to time information, scientists reported in March 2015 in the *Journal of Neuroscience*.' See Laura Sanders, 'How the Brain Perceives Time', *Science News* (Vol. 188 No. 2) 2015: 20.

139 Quoted in Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence: Martin Heidegger at the Limits of Poetics*, 52.

The flow created by a poet or rapper in this sense isn't a guiding tool—a coda in reference to which the poem is read—but is *the very reading itself*. And this understanding is entirely congruent with Heidegger's thought. As Nowell Smith summarises,

we can grasp a poem's measure not by recourse to an external framework of time [...] but rather by tracing a temporality imminent within language; and at the same time, this temporality, or rhythmicity, rather than being a paralinguistic effect cut off from a poem's meaning, becomes the very process by which the poem means.<sup>140</sup>

A natural consequence of this is that analyses such as those conducted in the previous chapter are paradoxically both a way of illuminating and a way of obscuring the poem. Just as colour vanishes when we speak of it in terms of wavelength, so too does the poem cease to be a poem the moment we treat it as entity rather than experience. This seems to be why Heidegger refused to conceptually separate artworks into meaningful content and formal features, as the two are inextricably bound together in the phenomenal experience of the work through time.

It is perhaps worth noting that Hegel too has been sensitive to the importance of this temporal dimension of music. He writes,

now since time, and not space as such, provides the essential element in which sound gains existence in respect of its musical value, and since the time of the sound is that of the subject too, sound on this principle penetrates the self, grips it in its simplest being, and by means of the temporal movement and its rhythm sets the self in motion. This is what can be advanced as the essential reason for the elemental might of music.<sup>141</sup>

Indeed, I would agree, but would suggest that this is no less true of the reading of poetry. If it makes sense to conceive of poetry as a temporal event, as I believe it does, we can begin to see the space in which poetry as music (or music as poetry) opens up. The experience of language as actual sound or as imagined sound (our inner voice when reading) may have

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140 Ibid., 51.

141 Quoted in Jarvis, 'Musical Thinking: Hegel and the Phenomenology of Prosody', 66.

different effects, but the differences needn't interfere with the work's status *as poem*. Nowell Smith begins to touch on this relationship between sound and the tangible, written word when he writes, paraphrasing Heidegger,

The sounding and script of language are no longer considered as sensuous tokens, extraneous to actual meaning, but rather are returned to the bodying forth of language that constitutes the opening of linguistic meaning; [...] the body is no longer a physiological organism receiving sense data, but is always already oriented in an intelligible world, open to the very horizon in which something like "sense data" can first appear.<sup>142</sup>

It is worth highlighting that both *sounding* and *script* are here conceptually pulled into the fabric of the work, becoming the linguistic means of textual transmission over time. In this respect language is irreducible to sound or sense, and to this end Heidegger employs two terms which will be helpful to make use of here in elucidating his thought. Firstly, he speaks of a work's *Gestalt* (shape), as a way of referring to the poem's medium but also the tension with its own limits of medium; the way in which it is both contained within but also transcends the bounds of its linguistic framework. Here he speaks of the necessarily embodied encounter with the work's *Gestalt* as *erdhaft*; a rising-up of language and meaning from within the body. Once again, it is worth quoting Nowell Smith on this point at some length:

I suggest that we approach this in terms of what Heidegger had termed the work's *Gestalt*, tracing and fixing in place the *erdhaft* rising-up of language through the "movedness" (*Bewegtheit*) it fixes in place and holds in tension. The sounding, then, would describe the work's entry into appearance in its broadest sense [...] a hearing that goes beyond the bounds of auditory reception to embody our encounter with language more broadly.<sup>143</sup>

This broadening of the experience of language makes particular sense when thinking about the consumption of poetry by the ear and by the eye, since neither involve an *audible* rising-up of language and yet both necessarily entail the mediated (flow) apprehension of sound through

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142 Ibid., 121.  
143 Ibid., 133.

time. They are both, I suggest, necessarily embodied modes of cognition, an integration between sensation (hearing or seeing) and meaning that is simultaneous. As Nowell Smith puts it,

this leads to a radically nonmimetic account of art meaning. No longer a content that supervenes over the thingly dimension of the work, "meaning" would describe the way in which the thing's entry into appearance is set into motion in and by the work.<sup>144</sup>

To return then to our consideration of segmentivity as the defining characteristic of poetry, this conception of poetry as always embodied, always a temporal process of cognition necessitates that our experience of segmentivity is the process of broken thought. The points of textual rupture that were outlined in the last chapter are salient interruptions in the *erdhaft* of the work, in its rising-up in language as thought. Accordingly, when we reflect on what a poem 'means' after reading it (which I take to mean this process of textual transmission, and so possible by both the ear and the eye), what we may be doing is retrospectively reflecting on meaning that has already occurred; piling thoughts on a thinking that already passed.<sup>145</sup> This process, then, involves the bridging of textual gaps in order to generate further meaning, and this process, exemplified in the preceding chapter, necessarily involves abstracting poetry from what it necessarily *is*—examining the peasant woman's shoes away from the field; discussing colour in terms of wavelength, eviscerating it in the process.

This line of thinking has rather far reaching consequences, the most important of which are addressed in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to offer a tentative solution to the problem of medium, and so a way of bridging segmentivity across rap music and (page) poetry. Heidegger's phenomenology offers us what I take to be a far richer way of understanding poetry than conceiving of it as a static object on the page, waiting for us to pick it up and examine it from without. Rather, poetry is best understood as half text, half mental processing of text; a dialectic in which neither is self-sufficient. As Roubaud reminds us, if a poem has not yet entered a single mind, it does not exist, precisely because it is this coming into existence, this

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144 Ibid., 26.

145 Simon Jarvis seems to have gestured toward this way of thinking when he wrote in 'Prosody as Cognition' that 'it may be that some of the most promising resources for a renewed prosody would lie in that philosophy of music which understands music as itself a kind of cognition.' Simon Jarvis, 'Prosody As Cognition', *Critical Quarterly* (Vol. 40, No. 4) 1998: 11.

*erdhaft* that constitutes poetry's essence. In this respect, meaning is to text as flavour is to food; it is the bodily reception of complexity and configuration, it is experience rather than artefact; as useless, as inert as the padlock without the key.

Returning, then, to Roubaud's claim that a poem is not a song and a song is not a poem, if we are to understand poetry as an experience (that cannot occur without a subject of that experience), then it may make far more sense than Roubaud supposes to consider poetry alongside music. As necessarily language-based, temporally bound experiences of *erdhaft*, guided by a flow and structured around ruptures in sound and sense (as we have seen in the previous chapter), reading poetry and listening to rap music are best understood as not only similar, but in many ways the same experience. Of course, this chapter has only been able to erect the conceptual scaffolding on which a more solid defence of the congruence between writing and reading might be based, and the effects of memory, of anticipation and of bodily interaction would all be relevant avenues of discussion. Moreover, far more work needs to be done to unpack on musical terms the ways in which these poems are achieving their effects, including both the effects of vocal expression as well as backing instrumentation, tempo, pitch and so forth. Nonetheless, Heidegger's phenomenology provides the conceptual framework in which we can understand how poetry functions, and so get a little closer to illuminating what it is. Having seen how this can aid our understanding of the relationship between reading and listening to music, we can now begin a survey of the claims so far, tracing their implications and drawing some conclusions from the poets and theorists that have led us to this point.

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#### 4: 'OUTRO': CONCLUDING REMARKS ON SEGMENTIVITY

Recalling that one of the key texts that gave impetus to the discussion carried out here was Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois' *The Anthology of Rap*, it is fitting now to return and make a few comments on how this thesis may relate to their claims. Like Alex Pate and David Caplan, Bradley and DuBois argue that rap is poetry, in their terms 'a modern form of lyric poetry' by virtue of its employing certain techniques and displaying certain characteristics. As they write, rappers

embrace the clear sonic qualities of rhythm and rhyme, make ample use of figures and forms such as simile and metaphor, make storytelling a key component of their art, and emphasise the spirit of competition once central to poetry.<sup>146</sup>

Similarly, Alex Pate has written in *In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap* that 'the essential point of this book is that what most people consider "music" is, in fact, "poetry,"<sup>147</sup> while David Caplan has recently spent several hundred pages examining the intricacies of rhyme alongside techniques by contemporary (page) poets, suggesting that rappers and poets are up to the same tricks.

In considering the poeticity of rap music, these texts all necessitate an engagement with the question of what poetry is, and yet each of them neglects to deal with the question explicitly. Though none of them say so directly, it seems to me that Bradley, DuBois, Pate and Caplan all, at least tacitly, reproduce the somewhat vague, family resemblance definition of poetry as espoused by Robert Pierce, outlined in the first chapter.<sup>148</sup> However, as I have argued, one of the problems with defining poetry in such a way is that it fails to get to the core of how poetry functions, nor does it aid an understanding of how poetry should be read. Accordingly, I have rejected this in favour of defining poetry via Rachel Blau DuPlessis' notion of segmentivity; of poetry being that kind of text that functions through the negotiation of gaps.

In the second chapter I have slightly revised and expanded on the notion of segmentivity,

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146 Bradley and DuBois, *The Anthology Of Rap*, xi.

147 Pate, *In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap*, xviii.

148 Recall that Pierce contends there is something of a list of defining characteristics of poetry, such as metaphor, rhythm and so forth, and poems are only poems by virtue of making use of such techniques.



such that it can account for three manifestations of 'gappiness' in rap music and page poetry: through flow, polysemy and repetition/rhyme, each of which has been explored in some detail. Importantly, in defining poetry via segmentivity, I have implied that the core of poetry lies in function rather than form, and in this way we can begin to consider the relationship between music and (page) poetry; between listening to music and reading. Here Heidegger's phenomenology of poetics has been helpful in providing a framework in which to consider the poem as experience, as temporal event, necessarily embodied and experienced through the work's *erdhaft*, its rising-up of language and meaning which are inextricably intertwined. I do, however, wish to be clear on this aspect so as to avoid overstatement or obscurity.

Poems, like novels, songs, plays, films and rubix cubes, all have an experiential aspect tied into the fabric of their being, and I do not wish to claim the uniqueness of poetry on these grounds. The point is not that the poem should be privileged as the only site of experience. Rather, the point is that if we are to seek a definition of any phenomena—in this case poetry—I believe (with Heidegger) that we should look at how it functions in our experience. In looking at the experience of (page) poetry and rap music, we have seen quite clearly that the way meaning is made revolves around the negotiation of gap, and so we can justify defining poetry via segmentivity despite differences in medium. This is a rather crucial point. If my analyses of segmentivity in the second chapter are to hold any weight, music and (page) poetry need to be comparable. They are so, I argue, by virtue of their mutual dependence on the unravelling of text through time and via the negotiation of gaps (in both sound and sense, as we have seen).

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### **Influences and Points of Difference**

It should be clear that the ideas I have been espousing here are strongly influenced by those of Roland Barthes and the movement of New Criticism, particularly regarding the rejection of authorial intent and the notion of textual fragmentation. Long before DuPlessis, Barthes had drawn attention to the 'gappiness' of texts, their fractured meanings and influences, what he called 'a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.'<sup>149</sup> The question

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149 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1990), 146.

arises then, that in using Heidegger's phenomenology (or at least aspects of it) and combining it with the concept of segmentivity, have I taken a different path to arrive at the same place as Barthes? Does this all amount to merely destabilising the text, de-emphasising the author and making meaning a fluid process, all points Barthes and others have already made (though on slightly different grounds)?

I don't think so. Or at least, I don't think so exactly. There are important points of difference. In *Image, Music, Text* (1977), for instance, Barthes distinguishes (following from Julia Kristeva) between the *pheno-song* and the *geno-song* of music. The former is supposed to encompass all aspects of song which are in service of communication, representation and expression, 'all those aspects it is customary to talk about'; the structure of the language, the cultural aspects surrounding the text and so forth. The *geno-song*, conversely, is supposed to contain all the essentially contingent aspects: the volume of the singer's voice, those aspects where the melody 'works at the language'; what Barthes calls the work's *diction*, the stylistic rather than the semantic aspects of expression.<sup>150</sup> The way I am suggesting we conceive of poetry, and music as poetry, will tend to conflate these supposedly distinguishable aspects of a poem.

To the extent that poems are experiences, temporally mediated via flow, where meaning is constructed in and around textual ruptures, there is no room for considering anything as 'internal' or 'external' to text. Volume, sound quality, font, layout, stock, ink—every element we reflexively consider 'outside' a text—is as much the poem itself as the title, the metaphors and ruptures that make it up. Hence, when Thomas Sayers Ellis has 'The Pronoun-Vowel Reparation Song' published in *Callaloo* with comparatively reduced formatting to that of the version in *Skin Inc.*—as he did in 2004,<sup>151</sup>—we are dealing with two fundamentally different, albeit similar, poems.

### Further Implications

But the implications go still further. If the poem is to be understood as the experience of the verse itself, then when I read Chang's 'Love' in the night quiet of my apartment I am necessarily reading *a different poem* to Chang's 'Love' that I read the next day on a crowded train. And

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150 Ibid. 182.

151 See Thomas Sayers Ellis, 'The Pronoun-Vowel Reparations Song' in *Callaloo* (Vol. 27, No. 3), 2004: 654-656.

if someone were in the same carriage, fortunate enough to also have a copy of *Of Gods & Strangers*, and also be reading 'Love', they too would be reading a different, though perhaps similar, poem (by virtue of their experience being necessarily different to my own).<sup>152</sup>

Perhaps, then, one of the most significant and possibly troubling implications entailed by how I wish to define poetry is that it quite seriously destabilises the poem as a fixed entity that can be spoken about with any real meaning. If we are to understand the poem as the process, the experience of negotiating meaning in and around poetic gaps, then insofar as my experience of any poem is inevitably different from those around me, it follows that what I am experiencing is a different poem.

Should this particularly trouble us?

I don't think it should. In generating a multiplicity of poems, this way of conceiving poetry also democratises possible readings, legitimising each poem as an equally real and so equally defensible interaction with text. In this way we should, I believe, part with Alexs Pate when he claims the following:

Each rap/poem, whether textured or not, has a singular meaning at its core. In a way, the multiple meanings (that are generated from texture) that might be apparent in a poem are actually performing in service to one central meaning.<sup>153</sup>

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It might be argued that the way I am suggesting we think about poetry fits snugly within Western, consumerist ideals of individuation, the quasi-solipsistic belief that everyone experiences and expresses life differently (and should be free to do so). Perhaps so. But here we have a pleasant paradox: there is no one reading of a poem, and yet there is only ever one reading. Poetry is always a new reading, a dynamic, finite experience—like Heraclitus' river,

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152 As a side note, this seems to work against the common distinction, initially proposed by Nelson Goodman, between 'autographic' and 'allographic' forms of art, supposedly being (respectively) those—like paintings—that have an original (and copies/forgeries), and those—like music—in which every instance of the work is independent of an 'original.' See Peter Kivy, *The Performance of Reading* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 2.

153 Pate, *In the Heart of the Beat*, 94.

poems cannot be stepped into twice. In the words of Barthes, poetry is 'eternally written here and now,'<sup>154</sup> it rises as *erdhaft* through our embodied experience and, like colour, is eviscerated as soon as we turn to face it.

At the outset I distinguished between normative and descriptive ways of defining poetry, with the former denoting accounts for how we *do* and the latter for how we *should* define poetry. The account given here is of the latter kind. In defining poetry via segmentivity we give ourselves a huge head-start, a way of understanding how to approach the most meaning-laden aspects of poems. An offshoot of defining poetry in this way, incidentally, is that it allows us to explain how rap music is properly understood as poetry, so providing definitive grounding for the huge amounts of textual evidence amassed by Bradley and DuBois, Pate and Caplan. Moreover, this definition opens poetic analysis to a consideration of the rich complexities of how we receive and interact with poetry; it allows us to talk about the human body, the physicality of the poem itself, the texture of sound and the physical environment that surrounds, enables and inevitably influences the process of poetic meaning making. Defining poetry through segmentivity thus simplifies our poetry theory, multiplies and democratises our poems, while expanding, complicating, and ultimately enriching our poetics.

There is, however, one final (and rather large) problem.

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154 Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 145.

## 5: 'HIDDEN TRACK': ADDRESSING CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

*'A great deal of value has been placed on black arts, but this value has been largely negotiable only in terms of white dollars.'*

- Russell Potter<sup>155</sup>

The most serious and possibly the most plausible charge that could be laid against my claims, at least so far, is that they neglect to adequately address the hugely different histories, cultures and politics of their respective genres, and in so doing—it could be claimed—I attempt to conflate two art forms that cannot (and should not) be understood in isolation from the social conditions and histories that gave rise to them. Accordingly, I've titled this chapter 'Hidden Track' with the hope of addressing what may be misconstrued as a hidden thread of cultural appropriation in my thought.

Broadly speaking, we can understand cultural appropriation as the taking of anything (art, knowledge, behaviour) from one culture by the members of another.<sup>156</sup> Within and around hip-hop specifically, cultural appropriation can and does occur in a number of ways. I suggest there are perhaps three main ways in which this occurs:

1. Appropriation *within* hip-hop (by artists). This entails the mimicry of style, cadence and aesthetic of urban, predominantly black artists by other artists 'outside' the culture.<sup>157</sup>
2. Appropriation *around* hip-hop (by the public). This entails all manifestations of hip-hop style, slang, dress and so forth by those 'outside' hip-hop culture.
3. Appropriation *of hip-hop itself* (by institutions). This entails the intellectual interrogation, rationalisation and potential (mis)representation of hip-hop by institutions such as academia.

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155 Russell Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars, Hip-Hop And The Politics Of Postmoderism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 4.

156 James Young, 'Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Vol. 63, No. 2) 2005: 136.

157 Australian-born artist Iggy Azalea has recently been heavily criticised on these grounds. As Timothy Wellbeck, an African American studies professor at Temple University charges, in her use of accent, sound and aesthetic, Azalea's music 'attempts to divorce hip-hop (and black identity) of its context.' Quoted in Aaron Morrison, 'Rachel Dolezal, Iggy Azalea And Cultural Appropriation: When Admiration Of Black Culture Becomes Offensive', *International Business Times*, June 2015. Web.

While the first two of these are no doubt interesting and concerning in their own right, I am limiting myself here to the third, since it concerns the implications of this thesis.

It is important to a fair examination of hip-hop that we recall that it has been, and in many ways continues to be, a subversive art form, and so any 'outsider' attempts (such as my own) to label it or elucidate it should be viewed with some caution, if not downright suspicion. Despite its explosion into a multi-billion dollar industry, hip-hop began with exceptionally humble roots, as a tool of expression and identity formation for members of economically, socially and politically repressed communities. As Tricia Rose reminds us in *Black Noise*,

hip-hop culture emerged as a source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished along with large sectors of its built environment.<sup>158</sup>

This is a critical fact of hip-hop culture and the rap music that it gave rise to, and one that sets it apart from other music genres. That the culture and music spring from voices that had been all but ignored means that any attempt to retell, reconceive or reaffirm what their art form is about or how it functions is necessarily a political act. This is so because the music was not only a creative outlet, but a biographical, non-fictional means of drawing attention to the poverty, crime, drug abuse and institutional neglect that a generation experienced and the effects it was having on communities within the New York of the 1970s and 80s. As Jay-Z writes, 'I was part of a generation of kids who saw something special about what it means to be human—something bloody, dramatic and scandalous that happened right here in America.' The music these conditions gave rise to thus became a means of negotiating cultural identity in the face of violence, just as 'Kush & Corinthians' encapsulates on a micro level. 'Hip-hop,' Jay-Z continues, 'was our way of reporting that story, telling it to ourselves and to the world.'<sup>159</sup>

It is perhaps no surprise then—and indeed fitting—that hip-hop should be so thoroughly saturated in the discourse of authenticity, of what constitutes the 'real' and sets it apart from the fake, the *wack*; the inauthentic. As a culture so intimately tied up with the experience, the spatial and temporal positioning of its progenitors, it makes sense that hip-hop casts a

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158 Rose, *Black Noise*, 34.

159 Jay-Z, *Decoded*, 18

skeptical and often derogatory glare (and bar) at those who attempt to cast judgement on it from without. 'Identity in hip-hop', as Rose writes, 'is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and one's attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family.'<sup>160</sup>

There are two things I would like to say on this point. The first is to highlight that this cultural cohesion is in its nature exclusionary; the culture of hip-hop has defined itself not only by embracing the self (the urban, marginalised African American youth) but by conversely rejecting the other (the suburban, the privileged, the white, and older generations). Not unlike the jazz musicians many of them had grown up listening to (and would often later sample),<sup>161</sup> hip-hop artists of the 80s and 90s defined themselves by musically (and often coarsely, lyrically) distancing themselves from other genres, and particularly from forms of authority (such as in Dead Prez's song 'They Schools'<sup>162</sup> and NWA's hit 'Fuck tha Police').<sup>163</sup> As Perry A. Hall puts it,

it was as if Black musicians were deliberately making cultural space between themselves and perceived mainstream sensibilities, as if their wish was to make sure they were not mistaken for someone trying to appeal to "white" or otherwise highfalutin' tastes.<sup>164</sup>

The second point I wish to make is that rap music in all its forms is fundamentally black American music. Here I follow the lead of Amani Perry who argues that 'even with its hybridity' and 'consistent contributions from nonblack artists,' rap remains a black art form by virtue of four facts. Firstly, the primary language of rap is African American Vernacular English; secondly, it has a political location distinctly ascribed to black culture; thirdly, its lyrical roots are in the black American oral culture; and lastly its musical roots are in black American music (jazz, blues, spoken word).<sup>165</sup>

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160 Rose, *Black Noise*, 34.

161 For a more detailed history of this fact see Chapter 3 of Rose's *Black Noise*, in which she outlines the importance of sampling, arguing specifically that 'rap production resonates with black cultural priorities in the age of digital production.' See Rose, *Black Noise*, p75.

162 Dead Prez, 'They Schools', *Let's Get Free* (New York: Loud Records, 2000)

163 Niggaz With Attitude, 'Fuck tha Police', *Straight Outta Compton* (Los Angeles: Priority Records, 1988)

164 Perry A. Hall, 'African American Music: Dynames of Appropriation and Innovation', in Bruce H Ziff and Pratima V Rao (ed.) *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 43.

165 Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop*, 10.

Taken together, these two points add up to the core argument that could be made against attempts, such as my own, by those 'outside' hip-hop to attempt to define it. In analysing rap alongside written poetry within an academic context, it could be asked, am I not subjecting hip-hop culture to precisely the kind of privileged, institutionalised gaze that it rejects? Is Russell Potter right in arguing, as he does in *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (1995) that

for such an established 'cultural movement' as hip-hop, it would be an act of *violence* to appropriate its indigenous knowledges and practices merely in order to annex them to academic modes of knowledge (author's italics).<sup>166</sup>

Is calling rap *poetry* and analysing it as I have an act of violence in this way? I believe not, and in fact I believe precisely the opposite: that to *deny* rap its status as poetry is the act of violence.

Clearly the title of 'poetry' comes with some degree of cultural capital, by virtue of its place in academia, its history, its place in popular culture and so forth. Presumably this is why rappers tend to claim the status of poet almost *ad nauseum* in their lyrics.<sup>167</sup> A consequence of this is that labelling poetry is necessarily an act of value ascription, and where one labels texts 'poetry' they are simultaneously elevating that artwork and presuming they have the right to do so.

Accordingly, if the claim that rap is poetry is contentious on literary grounds, it is almost certainly just as contentious on political and ideological grounds. Here, however, the claim is contentious not by virtue of what the claim itself entails, but rather by virtue of who is making the claim and in what context. This is so because, as Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao persuasively argue, appropriation can potentially occur merely by presuming the right to speak or write about another culture. 'In a world permeated by social constructions of reality,' they write, there is 'something to be said about controlling the process of creating that world, of imposing some control over who can or should hold the pen.'<sup>168</sup>

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166 Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars*, 22.

167 For two brief examples from those artists studied here, see Kendrick Lamar's verse in 'Poetic Justice' (with Drake), in which he raps 'I write poems in these songs dedicated to you, when you're in the mood for empathy there's blood in my pen' and J. Cole's 'Tears for ODB', in which he raps 'tears for ODB, drug induced poetry, what's the use? Strung out from that drug abuse — woe is me.'

168 Ziff and Rao (ed.), *Borrowed Power*, 17.



It would, of course, be limiting and divisive to suggest that only black writers can write on black art forms (or women on women's literature, or any other claim of the sort).<sup>169</sup> Nonetheless, I believe 'outsider' commentaries should be conducted with a degree of respect for the culture examined, which necessarily entails an acknowledgement of the writer's intentions and relationship to the culture. For my part, I write as a lifelong fan of rap music, but still essentially as an 'outsider' in most of the senses discussed. Accordingly, my opinions are put forward for what they are worth, and I do not suppose any right to speak for the culture, but rather to examine it from a vantage point it should consider while retaining the right to reject.<sup>170</sup>

Returning to rap as poetry, I have suggested that we do hip-hop an injustice in refusing to acknowledge its music as being poetry. To acknowledge its poeticity is not to minimise its innovation, nor to pretend that it is identical with contemporary American page poetry. Rather, it is to bring to light its core functioning, and in so doing begin to redress an unjustified cultural imbalance between 'high' and 'low' art. Just as Thomas Sayers Ellis has called for throughout *Skin Inc.*—and particularly in 'The Pronoun Vowel Reparation Song', as we have seen ('You owe I')—black art has often been systematically neglected by publishers and in academia.<sup>171</sup> If segmentivity constitutes a suitable yardstick for defining poetry, as I believe it does, it likewise constitutes a vehicle for beginning to accord a form of black American art the acknowledgement it deserves. As Kwame Dawes asserts,

if we grant that white artists have essentially dominated the highest echelons of art for too long, and if we further accept that this is a product, not of artistic ability, but of political and cultural will, then there is a place for the redressing of what is essentially an injustice.<sup>172</sup>

In acknowledging that rap music is poetry (to the extent that it functions via the core of segmentivity) we make a significant move of redressing an imbalance that continues almost two decades after Ziff and Rao's anthology was collected, and toward according rap music the

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169 This is a point Edward Said has made even when identifying the impacts of Orientalism, calling the idea that races, cultures or sexes might be the only ones able to write of their own perspectives a 'limited proposition.' Quoted in Ziff and Rao, *Borrowed Power*, 17.

170 This may be a banal point, but is nonetheless one that needs to be made, given the seriousness and respect with which I believe hip-hop culture should be approached.

171 Recall here 'only one black face' on the wall at Harvard's library.

172 Kwame Dawes, 'Re-appropriating Cultural Appropriation', in Ziff and Rao (ed.) *Borrowed Power*, 113.

serious critical attention that it clearly deserves.

As mentioned at the outset, by examining hip-hop in isolation from its cultural and historical roots, as I have (at least in part) done here, one neglects crucial points of difference between hip-hop and other cultures, including the equally rich cultures surrounding and informing those page poets discussed in the second chapter. Accordingly, such decontextualisation should always be followed by a historical recontextualisation aimed at drawing out the complexities of how history and culture informs and differentiates art, while keeping intact the important and telling points of overlap. Such a recontextualisation would not negate the claims made here, but rather illuminate the spaces in which these claims should be understood. On this important historical and cultural work, I defer to the work of Tricia Rose, Imani Perry, Adam Krims and George Pate.

Clearly the business of definition and comparison involves traversing some messy and rather slippery ideological terrain, particularly with such broad and disparate terms and cultures as have been at issue here. One might even be forgiven for taking Ellis' advice in the opening poem of *Skin Inc.* that we 'Shut up about Sameness. Shut up about Difference.'<sup>173</sup> Nonetheless, I think the business of considering the relationship between rap music and contemporary American page poetry a worthwhile pursuit, even if we get lost, confused or tempted to shut up along the way.

Such comparisons are incredibly interesting avenues for illuminating aspects of rap and poetry we might otherwise miss, and are justified in three key (and possibly surprising) respects. They are justified on literary grounds, as we have seen based on the evidence of the second chapter, on the way each genre functions via the negotiation of gap. Moreover, they are justified philosophically, given the ways we can understand reading and listening to music as temporally mediated experiences, as discussed in the third chapter. And lastly, such comparisons are justified politically, since they work against a history of ignoring black American art, as argued in this chapter. The aim here is not conflation, nor is it appropriation. It is, rather, a nuanced understanding of a relationship between rap music and written poetry that is undeniably complex, but is a relationship nonetheless.

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173 Ellis, 'As Segregation, As Us', in *Skin Inc.*, 1.

When William Carlos Williams described a poem as a machine made out of words, he was, I think, coming very close to what DuPlessis would later mean when she wrote of segmentivity; of 'bounded units' of language 'operating in relation to chosen pause or silence.'<sup>174</sup> Just as machines have discrete parts, each with its own purpose, so too are poems bound into discrete parts, each contributing to the function of the whole. And while novels, short stories, plays, essays and a myriad of other genres do (often) contain discrete segments, the fundamental driver of meaning is not the ruptures between and interaction among these segments. Picking a novel at random from the shelf, one would be fighting an uphill battle to argue for the significance of the word endings on each line, or the ambiguity in a word affecting the novel's tone, or for the significance of one chapter's length in relation to another. But in poetry these are crucial tools of meaning-making. Skilled poets use flow, breaks, pause, ruptures, polysemy, ambiguity, repetition and rhyme to carefully construct mosaics of (possible) meaning. It is the negotiation of these various manifestations of gap that creates meaning when we read poetry, and that makes the experience of poetry the often difficult, occasionally frustrating, often rewarding and always unique experience that it is.

I preceded this entire discussion with a quote by the poet Ann Lauterbach, which I think bears repeating. Lauterbach has remarked in an interview that 'a poem is not a puzzle to be solved. A poem is an experience, an event, in and of language.'<sup>175</sup> This brilliantly succinct claim distills much of what I have elaborated here. Poems are individual experiences they are events of meaning making that occur through time, in reference to perceived gaps (in sound and sense). To the extent that poetry functions in this way, it makes sense on literary grounds to define it via segmentivity. And, moreover, to the extent that rap music functions via segmentivity, it makes sense on both philosophical and political grounds to call it poetry.

As Robert Pierce suggests, 'since terms are the tools of literary study, it is important to keep these tools in good condition, above all by having clear and functional meanings for them.'<sup>176</sup> We currently do not have a clear meaning for poetry, but a good working definition is available in DuPlessis' notion of segmentivity, which should be increasingly refined and further applied

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174 DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 199,

175 Quoted in Kane, *What is Poetry*, 2.

176 Pierce, 'Defining "Poetry"', 151.

to other avenues of literary studies.<sup>177</sup> If, as I have suggested, how we define and classify texts informs how we read them, how we write about them, and ultimately influences how long they last, then segmentivity will help us read more nuanced meanings, write more nuanced articles and reviews, and more properly revere an art form that has been largely overlooked.

This thesis, for its small part in the debate, was born in equal measures from the certainty that I love poetry and the uncertainty of what, precisely, that love is directed toward. I certainly know poetry when I see it. Is it possible, if we listen in just the right way, that we can know poetry when we hear it too?

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177 Just as McHale has applied it to narrative in poetry, in no small part inspiring much of the discussion here. See McHale, 'Beginning to Think About Narrative in Poetry.'

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