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*To Dr. Marta Werbanowska,
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Introduction

“[B]ro, they been calling that sister by the wrong name,” writes Haki R. Madhubuti in his poem “Gwendolyn Brooks”. Madhubuti was a pivotal figure of the Black Arts Movement. His work contributed to the solidification of Black literary tradition during the 1960s and onwards. His unique literary and personal relationship with Gwendolyn Brooks began with Brooks’s mentorship which led her to become Madhubuti’s “cultural mother” (Madhubuti). In a recent conversation, he describes her as a “keen direction-giver” to the political identity of Black people. (“A conversation with Dr. Haki Madhubuti, author of *Taught By Women*” 21:10-21:17). Echoing his admiration, Madhubuti’s poem situates Brooks in the center of Black literary production in stating that “everywhere the/ lady ‘negro poet’/ appeared the poets were there” (Madhubuti, *Don’t Cry, Scream*). He depicts Brooks as a leading figure of Black cultural nationalism by placing her in the focus of a poem primarily discussing the evolution of new Black consciousness. This evolution is represented by the poem’s criticism of racist terminology. In its closing line “bro, they been calling that sister by the wrong name,” Madhubuti’s poem illuminates Brooks’s enduring political stance. Her early works, while aligning with Eurocentric critical expectations, provide significant precedents for social criticism and the presence of Black consciousness before her overt affiliation with the Black Arts Movement.

I propose that Brooks’s early poetry prior to her participation in the Second Annual Fisk Writers Conference in 1967, demonstrates her engagement with African American oral and musical traditions. This anticipates the prevalence of the Black Aesthetic in her later work. My thesis relies on the aesthetic and prosodic scrutiny of poetry prior to Brooks’s participation in the Second Annual Fisk Writers Conference in 1967 as well as her later works. It proves that

Brooks continues to engage with Black oral and musical traditions to demonstrate her political awareness already in her early years. Her post-Fisk affiliation with the Black Aesthetic gives new meanings to these qualities of her work.

In the paragraphs that follow, I examine Brooks's family background as foundational influence on her poetry. Shaped by both personal experience and broader cultural movements, Brooks's work engages with themes of racial identity, urban life, and resistance while also navigating the canonical expectations imposed on Black writers. Citations from selected poems illustrate how these themes manifest in her work and demonstrate the ways in which Brooks incorporates elements of the black aesthetic in her early poetics.

Gwendolyn Brooks's family background cannot be avoided in framing the social commitment of her writing. Brooks began her life in modest circumstances and rose to become the first African American author to win the Pulitzer Prize. With nuanced sociographic accounts, her writing shows deep empathy for the lives and struggles of Black people. In an extraordinary combination, Brooks pairs portrayals of Black lives with skillful employment of Western poetic forms to engage in an implicit criticism of mainstream literary norms. Living and writing in Chicago for most of her life, Brooks witnessed and experienced the socio-economic hardships Black people have to endure in American society to this day. In her writing, Brooks always prioritized the authentic representation of Black lives. In a conversation with Gloria T. Hull and Posey Gallagher, she states, "My religion is [...] PEOPLE. LIVING" (Brooks, "Update" 38, original emphasis). With its deeply sensitive accounts of Black Chicagoan lives in twentieth-century America, her poetry paved the way for contemporary Black writers in expressing Black consciousness and social criticism.

In addition to her social commitment, Brooks showed remarkable persistence in her craft. Born to parents with "rich Artistic Abilities" (Brooks, *Report One* 39, original emphasis), Brooks

was raised in an atmosphere of devotion to literature, music, and education. According to her autobiography, already in her early childhood, she spent plenty of time writing (Brooks, *Report One* 55). Her mother marked the age of seven as the dawn of her emergence as a poet and by sixteen, Brooks was a regular contributor to the *Chicago Defender* (Melhem 55, 8). In her autobiographies, she pays loving tribute to both her mother and father who passed on a legacy of passion for words and deep care about the Black community.

Herself a writer and devotee of music, Brooks's mother, Keziah Corinne Wims Brooks, played a fundamental role in building her daughter's self-awareness about being a poet. Her early announcement about Brooks becoming the "*lady* Paul Laurence Dunbar" encouraged the young poet to approach Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson who contributed to her development and poetic evolution (Brooks, *Report One* 56, original emphasis). Her father, David Brooks was equally important in Brooks's quest for her true literary voice. He found joy in singing and performing stories and poems which fostered his children's education as well as their appreciation of art. His family legacy contributed to Brooks's later approach to social inequalities and poetic representations of Black lives. In her autobiography, she re-imagines her paternal grandfather's escape from slavery describing the "white man" as his biggest fear (Brooks, *Report One* 50). After his participation in the Civil War, Brooks's grandfather experienced racial injustice, abject poverty, and the death of several of his children due to illness. Despite all struggles and tragedies, David Brooks remembers that "openness [...] was a tradition in my parents' home" (51). When the family settled, they helped the poor in their community with meals and hospitality. This legacy of kindness and care contributed to Brooks's belief in community and the urge to carve space for the stories of Black people on a white-dominated literary scene. This cause was also motivated by Brooks's personal experience of social challenges which cast a shadow over her harmonious family life. Entering society at school,

Brooks had to learn to cope with disadvantages caused by the social stigma of her race. She recalls that “[o]ne of the first ‘world’-truths revealed to me [...] was that, to be socially successful, a little girl must be Bright (of skin)” (Brooks, *Report One* 37). As a result of racial discrimination and her families relatively higher social status in the Blacks community, young Brooks was excluded from both white and Black circles of her class mates (38). While learning to appreciate her solitude, she found solace and entertainment in writing.

Perhaps her seclusive childhood granted Brooks an open-mindedness which allowed multiple influences to shape her early writings. Her poetry demonstrates two major literary influences: Western high modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. In his poem “Madimba: Gwendolyn Brooks”, Michael S. Harper describes Brooks as a “[d]ouble-conscious sister in the veil” (Mootry and Smith, Introduction). Indeed, the bifurcated roots of Brooks’s oeuvre display what W.E.B. DuBois calls “double-consciousness” (DuBois, *Souls* 8). Influenced, among others, by the Romantic poetry of Emily Dickinson, the modernism of T.S. Eliot, and the unique blend of traditional form with colloquialism by his contemporary, Robert Frost, Brooks aligns with the formalist tradition that allows her early critics to describe her poetry as elitist (Baker “The Achievement of GB” 21-29). On the other hand, white canonical critic Harold Bloom underlines, when referring to Brooks’s post-1967 verse, that “[w]hether [Brooks] has sacrificed part of her gift in an exemplary cause seems to me a legitimate question” (Bloom, 2). This controversy in the reception of her poetry maintained Brooks’s state of non-belonging acquired during her childhood. While many contemporary critics agreed that some of her early poems seem to serve merely the demonstration of her talent in poetic language use, Brooks’s work stays far from a *l’art pour l’art* philosophy. To maintain critical awareness on her roots and cultural background, she embraces the legacy of the first golden age of Black art and employs black aesthetic features inherited from Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Sterling A. Brown,

and Paul Laurence Dunbar. In a letter to Brooks, Johnson wrote: “[y]ou have an unquestionable talent and feeling for poetry. Continue to write - at the same time, study carefully the work of the best modern poets - not to imitate them, but to help cultivate the highest possible standard of self-criticism” (Brooks, *Report One* 202).

The need for such high “standards of self-criticism” were also reaffirmed by the white dominion of the publishing industry. When Brooks entered a group of Black poets taught by Inez Cunningham Stark in the 1940s, she soon faced the lack of interest in Black literature and the difficulties of gaining acknowledgement in the white publishing world (Brooks, *Report One* 65). According to Stewart Habig, the most prestigious magazine of the time, *Poetry*, which was Brooks’s target for publishing, “represents the critical standard that Brooks simultaneously desires to achieve and dismantle. The monthly periodical embodies a critical perspective that tends to marginalize contributions from African American artists, and when they are published, they are categorized in terms designed to maintain an aesthetic hierarchy that traditionally elevates white poets above their black contemporaries” (158). This hierarchy was what Brooks circumvented by her employment of Western poetic forms veiling her social criticism.

Despite her impeccable use of poetic form, some characteristics of Brooks’s poetry contributed to rejection from white publishers who were unaccustomed to authentic representations of Black lives by Black writers. According to Maria K. Mootry, the three major themes occurring through Brooks’s oeuvre are race, gender, and regionalism (4). In addition to Anglo-modernist influences, she inherited the “‘populist’ tradition of her midwestern predecessors” who, among others, included Langston Hughes (4). Following this tradition, her poetry focuses on social issues which replace the philosophic and psychological explorations dominating late 19th and early 20th century American literature. To explore her three major thematic areas and address related social injustices towards Black people, Brooks frequently

applies colloquial speech rather than elevated language. Based on Houston A. Baker's descriptions of her early verse, it becomes evident that Brooks's portraits are realistic and often naturalistic to produce authentic representations against well-established caricatures and stereotype-driven depictions of African Americans (22-23). A representative example of Brooks's realism is her free verse epic poem "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" which depicts the marginalized perspective of a lonely man. Despite the seeming luxury of "the kiss of silk" and "the brave and beautiful/ Embrace of some [...] equivocal wool," the poem's protagonist faces internal tension caused by his psychological inheritance (Brooks, *Blacks* 44). The following passage exemplifies his past looming on him:

The pasts of his ancestors lean against
Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity.
Hundreds of hungers mingle with his own,
Hundreds of voices advise so dexterously
He quite considers his reactions his,
Judges he walks most powerfully alone,
That everything is—simply what it is.

(Brooks, *Blacks* 46)

The stanza's resigned closing line suggests that the main character makes peace with his situation as a social obligation. He accepts his generational trauma resulting from decades of racial violence and inferiority which define his identity. His loneliness results from being an outcast from society refused by all social groups including Black and white. Although Smith's character might easily seem misogynistic, his maltreatment of women can be understood as a result of his emasculation. This phenomenon is explained by bell hooks as a consequence of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy's "refusal to allow black males full access to employment while offering black females a place in the service economy" (8). Nevertheless, voices of social authority shift the discourse of emasculation from white supremacy to blaming

Black women for Black male oppression. As hooks underlines, “[s]exist mores, which encouraged women hating, influenced black men to place accountability onto black females for their woes” (12). The protagonist’s tendency for changing his lovers “[f]rom Sunday to Sunday” can thus be interpreted as a means to re-masculation through the exploitation of Black female bodies. By dedicating her poem to an otherwise marginalized Black male character, Brooks demonstrates her awareness of perennial social issues neglected by the white leading social class. The impact of Brooks’s work on social discourse is evident in bell hooks’s decision to title her groundbreaking sociological examination of Black masculinity *We Real Cool*, directly referencing Brooks’s famous poem. This intertextual choice underscores the enduring relevance of Brooks’s oeuvre in discussions of Black identity, gender dynamics, and cultural expression.

A further issue that Brooks attends to is the quality of social life among Black and white children. The grim shadow of slavery stretched beyond its abolition and brought a legacy of forced neglect and death for African American children. Stemming from the brutal treatment of Black individuals as commodities, the widespread perception of Black children as illegitimate heirs to bondage perpetuated a cycle of dehumanization. This heritage persisted into the twentieth century, contributing to the systemic inferiorization and deliberate limitation of Black children. Studies prove that established white patriarchal standards of beauty still maintain the marginalization of Black children, especially that of young girls, depriving them of opportunities for fulfillment (Andrews et al. 2533). Brooks dedicated several of her works to describing the experience of Black girls, adolescents, and mothers. Among her most prominent childhood-poems are “Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood” in *Annie Allen*, “In the Mecca,” “the mother,” her coming-of-age autobiographical novel *Maud Martha*, and “the ballad of chocolate

Mabbie". This last poem ideally exemplifies Brooks's combination of the traditional Anglo-Western lyrical ballad form with her critical thematic choice of Black girls experiencing discrimination. In the poem, Mabbie experiences racial discrimination at an early stage of her life:

It was Mabbie without the grammar school gates
Waiting for Willie Boone.
Half hour after closing bell!
He would surely be coming soon.

[...]

Out came the saucily bold Willie Boone.
It was woe for our Mabbie now.
He wore like a jewel a lemon-hued lynx
With sand-waves loving her brow.

(Brooks, *Blacks* 30)

Brooks writes about a seven-year-old Black girl who falls in love with her Black class mate, Willie Boone. Despite her apparent affection, Willie Boone chooses a white girl as his companion, leaving Mabbie alone at the school gate. The poem creates a dark ironic effect by applying simple four-line rhymes and iambic feet which create a jolly tone. Although these features suit a nursery rhyme, they create a formal and thematic discrepancy with the events told contributing to tension and thus highlighting the poem's central message: the norms of white American patriarchal society impose insurmountable difficulties for Black girls in attaining qualities that would fit in a framework that inherently marginalizes them. With her employment of traditional form, Brooks implicitly criticizes these norms.

Alongside the thematic intersection of race and gender, Brooks often engages with discussions about social class. A poem representing her naturalistic depiction of poverty is "The Bean Eaters". The first two stanzas describe an old couple's evening:

They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.
 Dinner is a casual affair.
 Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
 Tin flatware.

Two who are Mostly Good.
 Two who have lived their day,
 But keep on putting on their clothes
 And putting things away.

(Brooks, *Blacks* 330)

In this poem, Brooks depicts the modest living conditions of an old couple. She applies a metonymic description of the scene for the intricate representation of ordinary life. The figure subtly connects everyday objects and actions to the larger theme of experiencing poverty. In addition to metonymic phrases, Brooks skillfully uses repetition to portray the couple's daily routines, thus emphasizing the repetitive nature of human experience and illuminating the profound meaning in the most mundane aspects of life. Brooks's autobiography, *Report from Part One*, suggests that the poem has references to her life. She recalls her family's survival of the Great Depression on his father's irregular salary which could often only provide beans for the dinner table (*Report One* 40). Although the poem triggered negative reactions from mainstream critics for "getting too social" and "forsaking lyricism for polemics," Brooks suggests that authenticity has priority over opinion (165-166).

The poet's authenticity lies in her realistic representations of Chicago's Black neighborhoods from Bronzeville to the Mecca flats, and her individualization of their inhabitants. She undermines the stereotypical imagination of spaces rendered as 'ghettos' and elevates her everyday characters to individuals with distinct identities, aspirations, and struggles. With keen observation and attention to detail, her works capture the nuances of Black existence, portraying the complexities of human experience within the context of race, class, and gender. By individualizing her characters, Brooks extends their narratives beyond the

confines of the page, inviting readers to empathize with them. In doing so, she re-humanizes Black people and challenges prevailing perceptions and stereotypes. Consequently, she contributes to her readers' understanding of the Black experience. Brooks's narrative poem, "In the Mecca" exemplifies this most suitably. The poem's following passage introduces its protagonist Mrs. Sallie whose ascension to her flat on the staircase allows a glimpse of each inhabitant of the building.

S. Smith is Mrs. Sallie Mrs. Sallie
hies home to Mecca, hies to marvelous rest;
ascends the sick and influential stair.
The eye unrinsed, the mouth absurd
with the last sourings of the master's Feast.
[...]
Sees old St. Julia Jones, who has had prayer,
and who is rising from amenable knees
inside the wide-flung door of 215.
"Isn't He wonderfulwonderful!" cries St. Julia.
"Isn't our Lord the greatest to the brim?"
(Brooks, *Blacks* 407-408)

The excerpt demonstrates how Brooks allows her readers an intimate insight into Black lives. "[W]ide-flung door[s]" invite both neighbors and readers to observe privacies and develop an understanding of the community's daily experience.

Another fundamental characteristic that permeates Brooks's poetics is her use of the black aesthetic, a framework for Black artistic creation and literary criticism rooted in Black cultural traditions and values. Hoyt W. Fuller defines the black aesthetic as "a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperative of black experience" (9). By engaging with the black aesthetic, Brooks follows in the footsteps of her Harlem Renaissance predecessors and imbues her poetry with a sense of cultural authenticity and resilience, offering a counter-narrative to dominant white cultural norms. The black aesthetic serves as a tool for implicit social criticism, allowing Brooks to

question and subvert false prevailing narratives about Blackness. Whether through the celebration of Black culture, the exploration of racial identity, or the condemnation of systemic racism, Brooks's poetry navigates the complexities of race and power with subtlety and nuance.

This is best represented by her collection *Blacks* that serves as a monumental literary work structured to evoke both a spiritual and political awakening within the Black community. *Blacks* is a volume containing Brooks's works spanning around forty years, from 1945 to 1986. Its first printing was published in 1987 by Third World Press a publishing company founded by Haki R. Madhubuti whose early criticism of Brooks turned into an almost religious devotion providing a safe haven for her self-expression. The book features a dark-blue hardcover embellished with the golden-letter title: *BLACKS*. The design encourages an association with the Bible that signals the collection's significance in the Black literary canon. It is a collection of Black 'origin stories' from child- to adulthood about gaining spiritual and political independence. This reading is further enforced by the collection's macro-structure displaying the evolution and, as it were, the resurrection of Black consciousness. Brooks's 1940s poetics, her poetry's symbolism, thematic, and formal aspects, evolve into a firm voice aligning with the politics of the Black Arts Movement. To demonstrate this aesthetic evolution, my thesis examines five works that span Brooks's literary achievement from her early years to the later stages of her oeuvre. In my analyses of the poems "The Wall" and "The Second Sermon on the Warpland," I explore Brooks's engagement with the Black Aesthetic during her involvement in the Black Arts Movement. I then turn to her early phase and analyze two poems, "Queen of the Blues" and "I Love Those Little Booths at Benvenuti's," and her novel *Maud Martha*. Here, I demonstrate how oral and musical features of her aesthetic sustain the poet's authenticity and foreshadow the explicitly political tone prominent in her later works.

To thoroughly understand these works, I explore and apply key theories of Black literary criticism. In addition to fundamental concepts such as DuBois's double consciousness, I approach Brooks's work through Black Aesthetic theory and the semantic theory of Signifying, both rooted in African American musical and literary traditions. I analyze the poet's prosody and stylistic strategies through these frameworks to provide textual and sonic evidence that oral and musical features are permanent in Brooks's aesthetic and serve the evolution of her ideological engagement with the Black Arts Movement. My scrutiny is limited to close readings and close listenings of textual materials, but it may inspire further, more comprehensive semantic investigations of Black literary meaning-making as well as interdisciplinary approaches to the work of Brooks and contemporary authors.

Chapter 1

“Survival is not a theory”

- Audrey Lorde

Early scholarship often associates Brooks with assimilationism and observes her oeuvre through the lens of an aesthetic turn. Most recent studies, however, acknowledge continuities in her poetics which establish the poet's aesthetic of resistance. Following a review of key contributions and a discussion of major themes of criticism, this chapter introduces the theoretical concept of the Black Aesthetic and the semantic theory of Signifying. I attend to the works of prominent scholars to find plausible definitions and explanations for the role of musical and oral features in Brooks's poetics and their contribution to the politicization of her work.

Critics often find that Brooks's early poetry reflects the integrationist-assimilationist philosophy prevalent in African American literature before the nineteen-sixties. The poet's own description supports this argument when she shares that her work was “conditioned to the times and the peoples” (Brooks in Lee, “The Achievement of GB” 32). According to Philip A. Greasley, “[w]ith this literary and philosophical basis, it is easy to understand why Gwendolyn Brooks' writings prior to 1967 adopt white European-based poetic norms, structures, and symbols. [I]n her early writings the color white, consciously or unconsciously, becomes associated with things which are good and to be striven for, while black is only the absence of these qualities” (18). Madhubuti's early approach to Brooks's pre-1960s poetry supports this argument. He argues that “[Brooks] is being defined not only by her surroundings [...], but the definitions and poetic direction from the Euro-American world is also much a part of her make-up” (“The Achievement of GB” 32-33). In another essay Madhubuti articulates strong criticism when stating that “[Brooks] attracted those 'negro' blacks who didn't believe that one is

legitimate unless one is sanctioned by whites first" ("Beyond the Wordmaker" 84). His views on Brooks's poetics later change when he understands her oeuvre as an evolution of new Black consciousness.

With her reflections on Black lives in *Blacks*, Brooks accompanies and contributes to Black self-realization advocated by cultural nationalism. The relatable portraits of individuals offered by the collection expand Black experience to the community level. As Courtney Thorsson observes, especially in her early writings, "[Brooks] depicts individual, private experience as a sphere of black agency with broad communal implications" (149). Such depictions embedded in traditional poetic forms serve the purpose of critiquing white supremacy enforced by the American literary canon and establishment. Nevertheless, Brooks's early poetics was viewed as a *l'art pour l'art* approach with a lack of transparency in political affiliation. In the preface of her autobiography, Madhubuti, although praising Brooks's later works, asserts that by focusing on poetic forms and style rather than on African American historical legacy she indirectly addresses a white audience in her pre-1967 poetics (*Report One* 17). Acknowledging such criticism of Brooks's early works, today's scholars maintain that Brooks engaged in her contemporary political discourses intentionally in a manner that pleased but also deluded white literary critics. Stewart Habig observes that Brooks's most famous early works such as *A Street in Bronzeville*, *Annie Allen* and her novel *Maud Martha* "are designed to subvert dominant aesthetic norms reflective of a white critical elitism" (144). Habig's statement is echoed by Seoyoung Park who writes that "Brooks' engagement with the mainstream literary tradition is not so much an opportunistic denial of her cultural identity as a subversive attempt to disclose and dislocate the tradition's ideological underpinnings" (745). In the 1960s, Brooks ended the clever masking of her political awareness and made her stance on supporting the Black Power and Black Arts Movements explicit.

Critical discourse on Brooks's poetics is largely shaped by the aesthetic shift following her attendance of the Second Annual Fisk Writers' Conference in 1967. In an interview with Ida Lewis, Brooks admits her early integrationist mindset. She says "I thought that integration was the solution. All we had to do was keep on appealing to the whites to help us, and they would" (*Report One* 175). Her attitude changed without hesitation upon hearing the powerful young voices appearing at the conference. The 1960s saw the culmination of unresolved social tensions accumulating through past decades of racial injustices. The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X following the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 contributed to the eruption of these tensions. Black communities' response to social injustice took shape in the concept of Black Power, which fueled the Black Power Movement. Supporters of this movement were united by "a belief in the need for personal and social transformation of African Americans to determine their own political and cultural destiny" (Bracey Jr., Sanchez, Smethurst 1). This belief contributed simultaneously to the emergence of the Black Arts Movement; the artistic expression of political affiliation with the Black Power Movement. To Larry Neal, its philosophy foregrounded the importance of community as a source of inspiration and thus "envision[ed] an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America" (55). Black writers turned away from the white establishment and addressed the Black community. In this politically tense atmosphere, in 1967, novelist John Oliver Killens organized the Second Annual Fisk Writers' Conference in Nashville. The conference's theme of "The Black Writer and Human Rights" foreshadowed the tone and the participants' approach to Black literature. As explained by Angela Jackson, Brooks experienced a revelation when listening to Amiri Baraka and other young participants who "would impress [her] as black and beautiful. [...] They were the children of Malcolm X — independent of the need for white approval or acceptance, bold and clamoring to knock down American customs that denied them fullness

as human beings” (54). The pride and passion of these young writers inspired Brooks to ‘convert’ to a more radical use of her poetic voice. She shifted her focus from European and Anglo-modernist poetic forms to new ways of expression to address an exclusively Black audience. Although she had extensively used traditional poetic forms to validate and “incorporate a neglected black experience” into the American cultural consciousness (Mickle vii), she realized that her concern with white opinion had been outdated (Brooks *Report One* 176). She was hopeful about the evolution of her voice when entering what she dubbed “the kindergarten of new consciousness” in the 1960s (86). A year after her attendance of the Fisk conference, her long poem, often described as a marker of her aesthetic shift, *In the Mecca* was published.

The most apparent differences between Brooks’s pre- and post-Fisk poetics are the departure from traditional Euro-American poetic forms, an explicit address to Black audience, and the political as well as geographic embrace of Black nationalism. Following her perfection of the sonnet, the ballad, and her own innovation of the sonnet-ballad (Brooks *Report One* 186), free verse becomes dominant in her technique. Her “newish voice” explicitly embraces and celebrates Blackness by returning to African roots and spirituality, thematizing contemporary political events, and raising awareness of social injustices in white supremacist U.S. society (183). She turns to a Black audience, liberating her characters from exposure to the white gaze and herself from the role of validating Black experience to white audiences. Her poems start serving the purpose of strengthening a sense of community among Black readers. According to Jeni Rinner, this shift is also marked by Brooks’s transition from the geographical space of the Bronzeville neighborhood to the conceptual space of the Black Nation (151). Her post-Fisk poetry expands its horizon to Africa, honoring her roots while rejecting white literary constraints, as well as social and geographic boundaries.

The poet's focus turns towards Black communities regardless of their location and socio-economic backgrounds. This aspect becomes most apparent in her post-Fisk poetics. Nevertheless, contemporary critics detect a similar characteristic with political significance in her early practice of "challeng[ing] the binary of private and public" spaces (Wheeler 89). By thematizing everyday Black lives and attending to their miniature details, Brooks invites Black readership to feel a sense of community already in her pre-Fisk work. The identifiably shared experiences, such as racial discrimination, poverty, and womanhood, described in her poems make an indirect statement about the collective nature of individual experience. This fundamentally political feature of her work evolves from latent to explicit during the evolution of her aesthetics. As Arthur P. Davis underlines, preceding Brooks's 1960's transformation, "the poetic aspects of [her] work so outweigh the polemical elements that what emerges is a very nuanced kind of protest poetry; [...] Brooks presents portraits of disillusionment that are so quietly but unequivocally empathetic that the characters' experiences resist being understood as illustrative" (Davis in Kich 40). This latent protest in Brooks's pre-Fisk poetics becomes explicit in her later work; however, her fundamental message remains consistent. Her unwavering focus on Black lives and experiences solidifies her humanistic approach and status as a "people poet" (Brooks "Lincoln Academy 1997 Interview" 00:08:00-00:08:25).

Building on this foundation, recent scholarship identifies four overarching themes in Brooks's poetry which bridge her pre- and post-Fisk phases: her observations on space and spatiality in the Black neighborhoods of Chicago, her early revisionary approach to poetic forms, her responses to sociological discourses of gender and race through character development, and the role of music in her poetics.

The "spatial turn" in literary and cultural studies of the past few decades has sparked interest in revisiting Brooks's work from a new perspective. The fragmentation and mutability

of space brought about by migration in African American history exerted their effects on Black literature. In an ever-changing environment, space has the power to fracture a poet's aesthetic and sense of self. Nevertheless, Sonya Posmentier defines transience as a positive factor contributing to continuity in Brooks's poetics. She attends to the concept of "Black migratory poetics," which marks an aesthetic quality transforming simultaneously with physical movement, and in its conversions dismantles and subverts limitations to create space beyond physical borders (112-113). Listing Brooks among the inheritors of such migratory poetics, Posmentier defines her "as a transitional figure between the New Negro movements and the Chicago Renaissance and the Black Arts Movements with which she later became associated" (111). Her analysis of Brooks's poem "Riot" and her Sermon trilogy encourages a comparison between the geographical migration of Black people and Brooks's poetic migration from high modernist aesthetics to a politically explicit Black voice. By highlighting intergenerational motives in Brooks's poems, Posmentier bridges the Fisk divide in Brooks's poetics and demonstrates continuity in her aesthetic evolution. Similarly, in *Late Modernism and the Poetics of Place*, Alexander Neal focuses on spatiality and its effects on Brooks's poetics. Like Posmentier, Neal describes Brooks as a "pivotal mediating figure" between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement (172). Following this interpretation of Brooks's role in African American literary history, it becomes clear that Brooks's poetics is as metamorphic as the places it describes. The centrality of Bronzeville and its inhabitants in her work reveals that migration exerted as much effect on the city's landscape as on Brooks's poetics. According to Neal, Brooks's poetic representations emerge from a "new geography of race and attempts to document its effect, even when migration and racial segregation are not taken up as explicit themes" (174). In contrast with early scholarship, Posmentier and Neal avoid dividing Brooks's

poetry based on her pre- and post-Fisk poetics and detect a continuous transiency prevalent in her representations of space.

In addition to spatiality, a frequently discussed aspect of Brooks's work is her treatment of poetic form. Most contemporary scholars maintain a revisionary view on Brooks's formalism and establish new perspectives on her aesthetics. An apparent example of formalism in Brooks's early poetics is her use of the ballad form, as examined in Laura Vrana's discussion of the poet's anti-lynching ballads. Vrana puts Brooks's ballads in conversation with poets Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Margaret Walker. Through examining their work, she demonstrates the evolution of woman-authored anti-lynching ballads countering the literary tradition of turn-of-the-century ballads authored by white men which normalize white-supremacist discourses and legitimize racial violence. In spite of the fact that the prominence of white lynching ballads contributed to Black poets' ambivalence towards the form, some used it to undermine hegemonic white discourses. Together with Harper and Walker's work, Brooks's pseudo-ballads serve this purpose. Vrana observes that in her anti-lynching poems, Brooks "implicitly endorses a counter-tradition of Black ballads" (18). Her poems "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Woman Burns Bacon" and "The Last Quatrain of The Ballad of Emmett Till" demonstrate how she engages in rewriting the white narrative surrounding the murder of Emmett Till. She uses the ballad as a reference to the legacy of white literature produced to validate the lynching of Black people, but refuses to align with conventions of formal requirements. Consequently, she "poses a counterhistory that rewrites [...] the form's purpose, revealing the intertwined complicity of both literary and oral white ballads in perpetuating racist violence" (Vrana 21). This legacy is echoed by contemporary Black poets responding to police brutality against African American communities, as illustrated by Claudia Rankine and John Lucas's video essay "Situation 6" or Danez Smith's poem "the bullet was a girl.". Brooks's work

contributes to these contemporary writers' vocabulary addressing today's injustices against Black people.

Brooks's practice in undermining white literary conventions is further presented in Seoyoung Park's article examining the poet's response to the hegemony of Euro-American literary norms in her epic poem "The Anniad." Aligning with contemporary scholarship, Park focuses on continuity rather than aesthetic fracture in Brooks's poetics. She argues that her "engagement with the mainstream literary tradition is not so much an opportunistic denial of her cultural identity as a subversive attempt to disclose and dislocate the tradition's ideological underpinnings" (745). Park asserts that the critical narrative about Brooks's aesthetic break brought about by her attendance of the Fisk conference often conceals her critical spirit characteristic not only of her later but of her early works. Following the epic tradition, largely defined by masculinist norms, with "The Anniad," Brooks introduces the much-neglected theme of Black female experience and subverts thematic conventions of the epic. This understanding demonstrates Brooks's pre-Fisk political awareness and conscious use of the black aesthetic while appealing to mainstream formal requirements. In addition to establishing her authority as a poet, the traditional verse form "provide[s] Brooks with the necessary distance [...] to universalize the experiences peculiar to African American communities" (Park 750). This shows how Brooks engages with traditional poetic forms to subvert white narratives and carve space for Black experience in literary discourses.

In addition to discussions of form and spatiality, contemporary scholars often apply an intersectional approach to Brooks's work. Jess Schollenberger takes a fresh approach to the concept of queerness by scrutinizing Brooks's two non-queer female characters, Annie Allen and Maud Martha. He underlines that a "richer and more nuanced account of Brooks's ordinary heroines [...] demands not only that we further stretch the boundaries of inclusion for the

queer, but also that we question our investments in a queerness rendered legible by sexual alterity as much as by a recognizable refusal of the normative” (375). Brooks’s characters are marginalized by the hegemonic white heterosexual norm and minoritized by race, gender, and class. Schollenberger’s chain of arguments enfolds in identifying this intersectional reality with queerness. Along these lines, Priyanka Dey applies a rhetorical analysis of Brooks’s poem, “The Mother” to take an intersectional perspective on a Black mother’s situation who is forced to abort her child. In Black women’s lives maternal trauma is often a result of societal oppression. Dey argues that while abortion is discursively framed as a choice, the socio-economic constraints of patriarchal structures often enforce the decision, particularly on women of color. As she puts it, “The Mother” reveals the “mental conflict and agony that a mother is forcefully subjected to by the circumstantial situations in a hegemonic society” (Dey 4758). She underlines that these circumstances are defined by the attitudes of patriarchal society to race, class, and gender. As demonstrated by Brooks’s oeuvre from her early works including collections such as *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and *Annie Allen* (1949) to her post-Fisk poetics, she continues to engage with societal issues including the marginalization of Black women and supports a discourse that shapes the fight for Black rights until today.

A further aspect, and the main focus of this thesis, that indicates aesthetic continuity in Brooks’s pre- and post-Fisk poetry is her engagement with African American oral and musical traditions. Her work exemplifies how jazz and blues idioms take on major significance in Black literature, thus saluting the long lineage of African oral and musical traditions shaping African American poetry to this day. Brooks’s use of orality and musical aesthetics provides her with subtle ways of expressing Black integrity and social criticism already early on in her work. In his discussion of Brooks’s influence on poets Carolyn Rodgers and Sonia Sanchez, Jean-Philippe Marcoux underlines that Brooks’s poetry helped “reconstitute the links, the connection to Africa

and its vast historical and cultural heritage, using vernacular culture, and especially song, as conduit” (64). Due to its emotive effect, music serves the preservation of cultural memory and history. When attending to African American literature, it becomes almost evident that musical references foster intergenerational dialogue and communication within the vernacular tradition. Fahamisha Patricia Brown states that “[s]ong functions in African American vernacular culture as primary recorder, the means of documentation of life and experience. Making music, then [...] records and passes on the story, documents the events” (82). As a result, overt and covert musical references in Brooks’s poetry become crucial in her authentic representation of Black lives. Her vernacularisms and use of the blues, among other musical references, allows for Marcoux’s comparison of Brooks to singer Billie Holiday, both sharing the same historical significance in Black art (92). Furthermore, as Betsy Erkkila observes, younger-generation poets respect Brooks as a community mother, the “African griot, or the storyteller, who unifies her race across time in an ongoing, communal, and socially empowering dynamics of black cultural exchange” (230). Brooks’s griotic voice is prevalent in her writing as well as in her oral performances. Aesthetic and prosodic analyses of oral and musical features in both her pre- and post-1967 poems amply demonstrate this alongside her maintained political awareness and engagement with Black cultural heritage.

My approach to musicality in Brooks’s poems is informed by Stewart Habig, who examines the prevalence of musical aesthetics in Brooks’s pre-Fisk works. In his 2020 article, Habig attends to the rare find of Brooks’s unpublished short story, “The Conversion of Mary Green,” written sometime between 1950 and 1951 (3). He states that the story “reveals Brooks’s interest in the transformative power of Africa and African cultures nearly two decades before her Fisk-shift” (“Some Notes” 1). Based on Habig’s analysis it becomes evident that musical modes of expression provide firm ground for disputing earlier perceptions of Brooks’s work

which asserted the poet's primary concern with form and language with relative disregard for political questions.

Not only Brooks's lesser-known short-story, but also her early poems and novel show traits of musical affiliation that unmask the black aesthetic in her work. The third chapter of Habig's dissertation, "Politicizing Poetics, Narrative Syncopations, and Jazz Aesthetics in Twentieth-Century American Literary Discourse," is dedicated to the scrutiny of jazz aesthetics in Brooks's early poetics. Habig argues against the Fisk-shift in Brooks's work and underlines aesthetic continuity manifesting in her use of the blues and jazz idiom. Attending to poems from *A Street in Bronzeville* and *Annie Allen*, he states that Brooks's "use of blues and jazz aesthetics, evidenced by her work from the late 1930s [...] illustrates [her] creation of a unique and individual poetic perspective that riffs and subverts accepted literary convention" (210). As a result of the critical authority of the white publishing industry, Brooks incorporates jazz and blues aesthetics in her poetics to transcend limitations faced by Black writers. Although she veils her political awareness under a seeming conformity to Western literary norms, she persistently challenges the underprivileged social, racial, and economic position of African Americans and demonstrates a conscious effort to address these subjects. Habig affirms that "the main strength in Brooks's early poetry lies in her confident destabilization of a discursive critical binary that views African American poetry as either an acquiesce of conventional form or a deviance from universal poetics" (210). Indeed, Brooks undermines stereotypes in numerous ways through her career that are yet to be solidified in critical discourses about her poetry.

Following in Habig's footsteps, I eschew the significance of Brooks's 1967-aesthetic shift and argue that her poetics maintains an underlying continuity of her political stance. Brooks's engagement with African American oral and musical traditions prior to her time at the Fisk conference foreshadows the prominence of the Black Aesthetic in her later works. I support this

statement with close readings of both her pre- and post-1967 poetry, revealing Brooks's employment of oral and musical traditions to express political awareness even in her early years. Her later association with the Black Aesthetic further enriches and recontextualizes these elements within her body of work.

As opposed to Habig's, my research does not concern jazz history in detail to draw parallels between the state of Brooks's poetry and the evolution of jazz. Nevertheless, in my detailed discussion of the history and concept of the black aesthetic, I underline the major impact of jazz and blues on Black poetry and the inseparable nature of literature and music in an African American literary context. In addition to his poetry analyses, Habig dedicates a subchapter to describing Brooks's experience with and reception by different publishers. While this is crucial to understanding Brooks's context, in contrast to Habig's more thematic approach, I focus on formal, prosodic, and aesthetic features of the poet's works using black aesthetic theory and the semantic theory of Signifying. With this, I aim to practice using theories of Black literary criticism and to bridge Brooks's two poetic phases demonstrating how the use of musical and oral features provides a spectrum of aesthetic continuity in Brooks's oeuvre.

As mentioned above, Brooks's early poetry displays a state of doubleness due to her simultaneous engagement with Anglo-Western forms and black aesthetic features. This allows an association with W. E. B. DuBois's concept of double consciousness, a state of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (*Souls* 8). This condition is a by-product of white supremacy, a system reinforcing institutionalized racism and relying on constraining Black culture and the Black self. It is enforced by stereotypes and racial discrimination which hinder Black people in achieving fullness in public as well as in private spheres of their lives. Doubleness is an almost inevitable aspect of the Black experience in white supremacist societies. In American society, Blackness entails two conflicting identities: one is the authentic

Self, the other is the forced self. DuBois describes Black people as “gifted with a second-sight in [the] American world [...] – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (8). Black aesthetics, however, remedies this pathological state maintained in Black people to legitimize their exploitation. The primary source of the black aesthetic is the oral tradition which helped enslaved people in preserving their cultural heritage. In *Blues People*, Amiri Baraka notes that in the early years of American slavery, “[o]nly religion [...] and the arts were not completely submerged by Euro-American concepts. Music, dance, religion do not have *artifacts* as their end products, so they were saved. [...] [N]onmaterial aspects of the African’s culture were almost impossible to eradicate” and thus could retain the aesthetic roots from which modern blues, jazz, and Black literary expression could develop (19, original emphasis). As a result of its preservatory nature, the later use of black aesthetic features in African American art fostered authenticity and self-determination. It raised awareness on the nature of double consciousness and helped writers challenge and overcome it.

The black aesthetic became a vital mode of expression within African American literature and the arts, serving as a means of cultural preservation and self-definition. When the emergence of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s brought the theorization of the term, it became important to distinguish between the general definition of the *black aesthetic* and its capitalized mode the *Black Aesthetic*. The distinction lies in the concepts’ scope, historical context, and ideological underpinnings. The black aesthetic encompasses a broad conceptual framework that includes collective features and characteristics of African American literature and art evolving since the beginning of the Black experience in America. Unlike the Black Aesthetic, this broader concept is not inherently tied to any specific political or cultural movement, allowing for a more diverse representation of African American literary expression.

In contrast, the Black Aesthetic stands for a specific mode of general black aesthetic features, intimately linked to the socio-political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the Black Arts Movement. It is prescriptive in nature, advocating for a determined vision of Black literature that is explicitly aligned with the goals and ideologies of the Black Power concept, emphasizing themes of racial pride, self-determination, political activism, and cultural empowerment. This distinction highlights the nuanced evolution of African American literary discourse and the complex interplay between the artistic expression and socio-political activism of the African American community. As quoted above, Hoyt W. Fuller defines the black aesthetic broadly as a conceptual and thematic framework which captures the essence of the Black experience in art (9). The black aesthetic as an organized framework started to take shape during the Harlem Renaissance. In his book, *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. underlines a specific feature of literary works produced in this period. He detects “a profoundly lyrical, densely metaphorical, quasi-musical, privileged black oral tradition on the one hand, and a received but not yet fully appropriated standard English literary tradition on the other. The quandary for the writer was to find a third term, a bold and novel signifier, informed by these two related yet distinct literary languages” (188). This state of perplexity was overcome during the Black Arts Movement when the use of the black aesthetic became programmatic. In his prescriptive essay for the Black Aesthetic Larry Neal writes:

When we speak of a "Black aesthetic" several things are meant. First, we assume that there is already in existence the basis for such an aesthetic. Essentially, it consists of an African-American cultural tradition. But this aesthetic is finally, by implication, broader than that tradition. It encompasses most of the useable elements of Third World culture. The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world [...] What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express? (Neal 56)

Although Neal echoes DuBois's 1926 predilection for the propagandistic nature of art entitled "Criteria of Negro Art," he maintains that Renaissance writers failed to press the necessity of finding answers to these questions. In my analyses of Brooks's early work, I attend to the concept of the black aesthetic as a retroactive imposition of the Black Aesthetic framework onto her pre-1967 writings would not feel appropriate. Nevertheless, examining her early deliberate engaged with the black aesthetic allows for a deeper understanding of her later style.

Black aesthetic features originate from the African American vernacular tradition whose history reaches back to the beginnings of American slavery on the one hand, and to African origins on the other. As music was one of the primary means of self-expression for Black people, its legacy is tightly connected to the evolution of the black aesthetic. In his compelling book, *Blues People*, Baraka outlines the American history of Black people through the lens of music. In the book's 1965 edition, he describes music as a mirror of Black history and insists, that the "definite stages in the Negro's transmutation from African to American [...] can be seen in his music" (x). During slavery the only chance for African culture to survive was to transform. Nevertheless, ephemeral cultural means such as music and spoken word could not be completely exterminated by slaveholders. These art forms remained primary sources of self-expression allowing Black people to emerge as icons of music in American culture. In his revised 1999-introduction to *Blues People*, Baraka recalls a talk by Sterling A. Brown on Black people's history. In it, Brown passionately states, that "The Music, The Music, this is our history" (Brown qtd. In Baraka 10). In this light, it is not in the least surprising that music became fundamental to Black literary expression. Maintaining Baraka's argument, Ron Wellburn asserts that "[B]lack music has been the vanguard reflection of black feeling and the continuous repository of black consciousness" (132). As a result, he underlines the symbiotic relationship of Black music with all other art forms, including poetry, drama, and fiction. Black literature often involves the

mimesis of music and vernacular language which fosters a sense of shared cultural identity and preserves the cultural heritage of the first enslaved Africans arriving to the 'New World.' Mimetic approach is characteristic of Black expression. As Zora Neal Hurston states, the Black artist imitates "as the mocking bird does it, for the love of it, and not because he wishes to be like the one imitated" (87). One of the founding fathers of the black aesthetic in music, Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington recorded *The Queen's Suite*, including a piece entitled "Sunset and the Mocking Bird" in 1959. In the piece, his orchestra stretches the canvas of the setting sun, bidding farewell to the mocking bird animated by Ellington's piano play. Recalling Western Romantic conventions of classical music, the piece imitates nature and Western musical patterns for the sake of mockery. Ellington's humor in his "Mocking Bird" demonstrates an important feature of the black aesthetic which also permeated literature.

Like music, humor has a long history in Black culture and art. It served as a means of survival during slavery that helped preserve the humanity and agency of enslaved people. In later decades, it developed into a form of cultural resistance connecting Black writers to their legacies. Blyden Jackson's description of Harlem Renaissance writers' relation to humor illuminates an effort to pay tribute to the Black folk past and acknowledge their ancestors' instinctive use of humor. He states that emerging from this cultural background, "[all] Negro literature is suffused with an uneasy laughter, the wry reaction of the ironist" (Jackson 299). The enactment of humor with a devil-may-care attitude is involved in African American meaning-making termed as Signifying, which I attend in the following paragraphs. It allows the simultaneous communication of denotative and connotative meanings, hinting at the writer's attitude toward their subject. The complexity of saying one thing and meaning another fosters the articulation of criticism towards the socio-politico-economic inferiority of Black people in American society and asserts the agency of Black writers. In his article, John Gery attends to

Brooks's subversive use of parody in her early poetry. Her parody lies in the subversion of traditional ballad and sonnet forms by merging them with contemporary Black urban content thereby reshaping the forms' convention. According to Gery, "parody as an agent for reconfiguring social identity [...] best describes the voice of Brooks's early poems" (47). Brooks uses irony, satire, and performative language to expose the contradictions in societal expectations of Black identity, particularly for women, thus creating space for reimagining Black subjectivity. Humor, Signifying, and music, as central components of the black aesthetic, emerge as focal points in my analyses of Brooks's works.

The conscious and explicit use of humor was preceded by a period of what has often been critically referred to as literary assimilation in the African American tradition. In his essay, Addison Gayle Jr. discusses the impact of "white aesthetics" and asserts that before Black writers established political awareness about the restrictive nature of white literary conventions to Black expression, they had to experience "the cultural strangulation of Black literature by white critics [who] have been allowed to define the terms in which the Black artist will deal with his own experience" (212). The pressure from the white literary establishment for Black writers to adhere to Anglo-Western aesthetic norms led to their perfection of mainstream literary conventions which ultimately fostered the development of a Black aesthetic framework. This framework enabled the exploration of Black experience and the criticism of the very establishment that constrained Black writers. In their introduction to *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry*, Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton refer to the "adopt" and "adapt" phases of African American poetry (xxix). They touch upon the adoption of Anglo-Western rhetorical and formal traditions, mostly from British poetry by African American poets during the period stretching from the 18th century through the post-Civil War era. Such adoptions can be detected in works of Phillis Wheatley, George Moses Horton, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Later

on, with the Harlem Renaissance, adoption transformed into the adaptation of conventions to Black themes. Adaptation in Black poetry, exemplified by the work of key figures such as Sterling A. Brown, remains an important feature of the black aesthetic in later eras of African American literary history (Harper and Walton xxix). Harper and Walton underline Brown's dedication to the "folk," especially to the representation of Black lives in the American South, and his creation of a new prosody in his quest for an authentic voice beyond stereotypes (xxix). Brooks transforms Brown's folk representations into truthful images of the South Side of Chicago which zoom in on the rural Black folk and their everyday experience. As Brooks's poetics demonstrates, the transformation of rhetorical, formal, and semantic conventions form essential features of the black aesthetic.

In 1947, jazz musician Cab Calloway recorded the song "The Jungle King" telling the story of a monkey who tricks a lion. His recording belongs to the African American tradition of tales about the Signifying Monkey recontextualized across many genres from poetry to prose, from blues to hip hop. The concept of Signifying and its definition by Henry Louis Gates Jr. indicates a crucial stepping stone in the establishment of African American literary criticism that unearthed critical features of the black aesthetic. In his 1988 book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Gates defines the Black concept of Signifying as a "carefully structured system of rhetoric" based on "traditional Afro-American figures of signification" (49). In his theory, Gates explains his derivation of the prevalent African American Signifying Monkey, a trope from Yoruba mythology. The divine trickster figure, messenger of the gods, and embodiment of the figurative Esu-Elegbara, the most frequent topos in South American Black oral narratives, went through a cultural transformation and came to be referred to as the Signifying Monkey. Gates asserts that "[i]f we examine some of the primal myths of origins in which Esu defines his metaphoric uses for black literary criticism, we shall be able to

speculate on Esu's relation to his functional equivalent in Afro-American mythic discourse: that oxymoron, the Signifying Monkey" (13). The trope of the monkey originates from a myth which tells about Esu's journey to regain man's goodwill and belief in the gods. He was given palm-tree nuts by a monkey who ordered him to learn their meaning in sixteen different languages of the world (16). Based on the myth, both Esu and the monkey play an important role in meaning-making i.e., the process of Signifying. Upon discussing meanings of the myth, Gates explains the significance of the two tricksters, Esu and the monkey, to Black literary theory. Both characters and their mythological story represent the double-voiced discourse reflecting the tension between the oral and the written in African American literatures. They illuminate the fundamental role of figurative language where literal and figurative meanings are closely interwoven in a Signifying relation, and the inherent indeterminacy of interpretation contributing to multiple levels of meaning (26). Although based on the myth, the trope of Esu and the monkey are inseparable, it is only the monkey who survived the cultural passage from South America to the United States. As Gates observes, "[p]erhaps the racist designation of the Afro-American as a monkey informed the North American features of this figure" (47). Nevertheless, the appropriated term of the Signifying Monkey came to be the trope of the African American writer whose governance of figurative and literal meanings undermine Western conventions of literary criticism.

In his theory, Gates contrasts the Western linguistic concept of signification with the African American concept of Signification. He refers to French semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure's explanation of the nature of linguistic signs as dependent on the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified; i.e., between a sound pattern and an abstract concept. Gates underlines that "[t]he relationship that black 'Signification' bears to the [Western concept of] 'signification' is, paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of

[cultural] identity” (50). While Western semiotic convention relies on arbitrariness, Signifying is a culturally contingent engagement with Black rhetorical games. Signification in Black language involves an alteration of meaning which allows repressed meanings of a word to surface (64). This plays an essential role in the expression of Black cultural identity and social criticism in literary texts. From Gates’s discussion of Monkey poems, it becomes evident that Signifying relies heavily on intertextuality, repetition, and rhymes. He underlines that the frequent foregrounding of sound “defines what is meant by the materiality of the signifier” (64). This valorization of the signifier demonstrates how meaning is created without introducing new words or sound patterns to express Blackness. Signifying is essentially Black language. A mode of formal revision that shakes Western semiotic conventions at their core and adds new meanings to an already established set of signs. It is revision, rephrasing, and thriving, and thus a building block of the black aesthetic. In the act of Signifying, Black writers engage with the vernacular tradition that relies heavily on orality and music. They challenge not only white supremacist master narratives but the very system of language that provides for their meaning. Signifying is a source of cultural and political resilience and a catalyst for empowerment in the African American experience. It is “the black trope for all other tropes, the trope of tropes, the figure of figures” (Gates 88). In her answer to what Black language is, Sarah Webster Fabio elaborates on a list of characteristics suitable for a description of Signifying. She states that

Black language is direct, creative, intelligent communication between black people based on a shared reality, awareness, understanding which generates interaction; it is a rhetoric which places premium on imagistic renderings and concretizations of abstractions, poetic usages of language, [and] idiosyncrasies [...]; it is an idiom of integrated insight, a knowledge emanating from a juxtaposition of feeling and fact which form a perspective of ‘now’ causing perpetual changes of meaning. (Fabio 286)

Fabio's statement reinforces the idea that Signifying, or Black language, is a product of being socially differentiated and discriminated based on one's race. It is both a means of resistance and preservation. This economy of contrast at the core of Black meaning-making creates an omnipresent duality also referred to by Roger D. Abrahams. Abrahams defines Signifying as "the language of trickery, [a] set of words and gestures which arrives at direction through indirection" (125). Signifying, in its Western context, originates from the master's language deprived of its meanings, its signifiers vacated, to create a coded language comprised of a set of rhetorical tactics unique to the Black vernacular tradition. As Gates puts it, it is "black double-voicedness; because it always entails formal revision and an intertextual relation" (56). Signifying as a process of meaning-making was a conscious linguistic choice of enslaved Africans who created a language consisting of secret codes that allowed the preservation of their identities and their survival. According to Gates, it is what Saussure calls "the chaos of [...] associative relations" and what Jacques Lacan terms "the Other of discourse" (Gates 55). As "the slave's trope", Signifying is a language which encompasses several Western and Black rhetorical tropes (57). In her work, Brooks actively engages in the practice of Signifying which allows her to contribute to the black aesthetic and foster the evolution of a new racial consciousness that provides ground for her use of the Black Aesthetic after 1967. My thesis analyses features of Signifying in Brooks's work that rely on the use of musicality and orality referencing Black cultural heritage and history preserved in written and spoken word.

The establishment of Black literary criticism and the theorization of the black aesthetic during the 1960s brought an evolving awareness and acknowledgement of what makes African American literature aesthetically different from Euro-American works. Nevertheless, the work of Black scholars, writers, and artists advocating for the Black Arts Movement, were not produced over a mere decade but should be interpreted in the social context of a centuries-long civil rights

struggle. Their approach to Black art, language, and culture is essentially political. As an inevitable step in the development of a distinct cultural and literary consciousness, Addison Gayle proposes the “de-Americanization” of Black people. He defines this cultural undoing as the core of the Black Aesthetic (xxii) that establishes the political function of art. Arising from this purpose, the Black Aesthetic rejects Anglo-Western norms and advocates a revival of African American and African cultural heritage. This cultural evolution of Black consciousness is reflected in Brooks’s poetics. Her oeuvre clearly demonstrates how the black aesthetic in her works evolved into an overtly political voice with her conscious use of the Black Aesthetic.

More than a decade after Gayle’s proposal, Toni Morrison urges the establishment of a literary theory that “truly accommodates Afro-American literature: one that is based on its culture, its history, and the artistic strategies the works employ to negotiate the world it inhabits” (“Unspeakable Things” 377). Such approaches have contributed to canonical revisions of what is determined socially, culturally, and aesthetically valuable for the preservation of Black culture. Morrison also ruminates on what makes a literary work Black, a key question towards a new set of critical theories. In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” she offers a set of major characteristics unique to Black literature. She underlines that due to the rich musical and oral heritage of African American culture, Black literature is open to both written and oral form. In my view, this is what makes Black literature inherently intermedial and inseparable from musical aesthetics. Orality, as the first form of art in African American culture, has always been crucial for passing on legacies from ancestors. The wisdom of these “timeless people” in life and in literary pieces is key to character development (Morrison 401). Furthermore, Black literature always requires active readerly participation in listening to the narrator, who “make[s] the story appear oral”, and encourages to engage in emotions (399).

The readers' participation contributes to the political function of Black literature in serving the Black community and makes "the best art [...] political" (403).

To thoroughly understand the characteristic features of Black literature, in addition to Morrison's key concepts, I attend to D. Quentin Miller's recent approach where he offers a summary of these features. Black literature can often be described by its inseparable discussions of the political and the personal; by an intersectional approach to race, gender, and class; its thematization of religion; the centrality of family and lineage, its discussion of the spectrum of assimilationism and separatism; and the celebration of the vernacular tradition including musicality (Miller 8-20). This latter aspect provides ample source for my scrutiny of the meaning-making processes of orality and musicality in Brooks's work that illustrates the diverse and intricate manifestations of these features.

My approach is greatly supported by Meta DuEwa Jones's study in *The Muse Is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word*. Jones offers a model for the intermedial analysis of poems in conversation with the Black musical tradition. My take on Brooks's works under analysis differs in its attendance to the role of Signifying in the development of intermedial relations. Drawing on the African American oral tradition, Jones conducts comprehensive research of jazz and poetry examining the interconnection of audible and visible registers across the two media. She joins the quest for aesthetic features which contribute to the "blackness" of poetry and concludes that it is Black poetry's multivocality and multivalence; its constant dialogue with music and responses to Black experience which allow for its unique voicings (Jones 5). Brooks is famous for sounding her unique voicings and phrases when reciting poetry. Describing her performances, Jones underlines the importance of "close listening to poetry" (14). She chooses to examine Brooks's sonic and semantic Signifying when reciting Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues" and finds that it demonstrates the poet's

awareness of the political significance of poetry's ultra-discursivity. Brooks riffs on Hughes's alliterating opening words "Droning a drowsy syncopated tune" and sets off a "melodious blues-tinged lilt" (Jones 17-18). As Jones puts it, she jazzes the poem by "transform[ing] the presence of repetition [...] into an opportunity for interpretive variation, a vocalized changing same that is inherent in the blues and jazz tradition of expressive variation" (18). Brooks's reading with awareness of this tradition encourages an interdisciplinary approach to her poems.

Upon close readings and close listenings, Brooks's work reveals an abundance of oral and musical features. Their prevalence throughout her oeuvre demonstrates Brooks's political awareness reinforced by her post-1967 aesthetics. This thesis examines Brooks's preservation of Black oral and musical heritage in her griotic role anticipating the prevalence of the Black Aesthetic in her later works. My study relies on the semantic theory of Signifying that offers a ground-breaking framework for understanding the process of meaning-making in Black literatures. A collection of aesthetic components detected in literary works prior and during the Black Arts Movement aid my process of finding evidence of vernacular and musical features in Brooks's work to demonstrate the evolution of her aesthetics. With her prominence on the white literary scene and fundamental contribution to the black aesthetic, Brooks paved the way for future generations of Black women writers. Her employment of oral features and the blues and jazz idiom set an example for poets such as Sonia Sanchez, Carolyn Rodgers, Alice Walker, and Patricia Smith whose generations still face enduring social injustices. In the face of today's world-wide political turmoil threatening values of equity, diversity, and basic human rights, the representation of historical awareness in the arts becomes ever so important. Aesthetic qualities, whether implicitly or explicitly expressed, help preserve legacies that may face attempts at eradication. Engaging with Brooks's work highlights the vital role of literature in

safeguarding values and identities through honoring cultural heritage. My thesis is a celebration of Gwendolyn Brooks's contribution to a legacy that survived and profoundly shaped Western culture.

Chapter 2

The Voice Evolving: Brooks's Poetics during the Black Arts Movement

During the turbulent decades of 1960s and 1970s, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) forged a new way of cultural and political expression in the African American community. It fused the language of art with political activism witnessing an explosion of creativity across multiple media. Literary expression gained central role, taking the lead in creating new narratives of the racialized Black self and restoring pride in early cultural heritage. The aesthetic changes in Black poetry brought by new ways of expression had major impact on Brooks's work. She saw them as opportunity to evolve her critical voice that served the political cause of the Movement.

The beginning of the Black Arts Movement dates to 1965 when the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem opened its doors to a new era of civil rights activism. The theater's founder, Amiri Baraka attributes the Movement to the revolutionary spirit of the 1950s and 1960s including the Cuban Revolution and the African Liberation Movements ("The Black Arts Movement" Baraka 11). In addition to international political tensions, Malcolm X's emergent nationalistic approach to Black self-determination also contributed to the new artistic philosophy of the Black Arts Movement. Advocates of BAM saw art as a means of addressing and instigating civilians who were not directly involved in ongoing political events. In Baraka's words, they "demanded an art of struggle, an art that related to the reality [...] of the Afro American people", repelling the contemporary "standard bourgeois aesthetic of separation of arts and politics" (13). In the spirit of cultural nationalism, which Larry Neal describes in Garveyite terms as "the idea that Black people, however, dispersed, constitute a *nation* within the belly of white America", the Black Arts Movement made creative expression a weapon of political advocacy against white supremacy (Neal 66, original emphasis).

To align with this new aesthetic, founders of BAM established a new value system for Black art. The Movement's three principles as listed by Baraka were the creation of art that is "[i]dentifiably Afro American" and free from white cultural constraints, that is accessible to and addresses all Black people while refusing elitism, and that pushes towards revolution, in Baraka's words "a Ballot or Bullet verse" (16, 17). The Black Arts Repertory Theater became the center of artistic and educational activities which drew the outlines of the Black Aesthetic and with it a new school of Black literary criticism. In a nutshell, the Black Aesthetic relied on explicit political criticism, orality and performance culture, and the spiritual role of the poet thus preserving fundamental values of Black art and underscoring a profound connection to ancestral roots.

The period saw the necessity for Black artists to forge new criteria for Black literary criticism. James T. Stewart underlines that "the black artist must construct models which correspond to his own reality" (3). As mainstream white art and criticism could not offer meaningful guidelines for Black self-expression, the Black Arts Movement initiated a new school of criticism. In their estrangement from the white cultural monopoly, Black artists started creating their own conventions, stylization, and methodology validated by the morality and spirit of African and African American cultural heritage (Stewart 6). According to Stewart, one principle of Black art is its lack of fixity value. He underlines that "[p]erpetuation, as the white culture understands it, simply does not exist in black culture" (4). Based on the lack of fixity value in Black art, Stewart defines art as change (4). This metaphor hints at the frequent identification of the evolution of Black music with the socio-anthropological aspects of Black American life determined by the constancy of change. In his final chapter of *Black Music*, "The Changing Same", Amiri Baraka reflects on the tradition of change in Black culture. Upon underlining the "gradual erosion" of African forms of expression in Black art, he defines Black

music as “African in origin, African-American in its totality, [whose] various forms (especially the vocal) show just how the African impulses were redistributed in its expression, and the expression itself became Christianized and post-Christianized” (Baraka 182). Indeed, the African roots of Black music have been preserved and appropriated to fit new historic contexts. Black music, especially the blues is “descriptive of an evolution” of Black identity and how this identity is shaped and treated in American society (184). In the 1965 edition of his pivotal book *Blues People*, Baraka asserts that “if the Negro represents, or is symbolic of, something in and about the nature of American culture, this certainly should be revealed by his characteristic music” (ix). His statement reinforces that early traditions of music and orality are archetypes of Black art produced in the twentieth century. A fundamental feature of these two sources is ephemerality which aligns with the unfixability of art. The meaning of art is in constant flux, emerging from context and conception. This definition drove writers of the Black Arts Movement to address the socio-political realities of their communities and create art that is in conversation with its context.

Music became the first medium that served as a vehicle for social change and source of aesthetic value in Black art. In his defining essay, poet and music critic, Alfred Bennett Spellman calls the New Music, evolving during the Civil Rights Movement, “the artistic signal of the imminent maturation and self-assertion of the black man in an oppressive American society” (160). With its ephemeral nature, sound served as the only medium for preserving identity even under the most inhumane circumstances. Enslaved Black people turned to music religiously to create a secret vocabulary which fostered their spiritual and physical survival. In order to establish the aesthetic significance of this heritage, BAM artists and scholars developed new models of art which relied on the coded language of musical heritage and resisted European criticism which deemed Black art “incomprehensible”. Spellman underlines that it is indeed

impossible to understand the value of Black music within the realm of European critical theory (161). Black music as well as other art forms require a school of Black criticism introduced during the Black Arts Movement. Evolving from a secret medium of communication, Black music remained a mode of Signifying, “the sublimation of the true meaning of being Afro-American” in Spellman’s words (163). Black aesthetic theory reinforces the idea that music is a defining feature, a cohesive force in African American existence. In his essay, James T. Stewart emphasizes that “[j]azz music [...] is a social activity, participated by artists collectively. [...] [It] possesses properties of being that come closest to the condition of life” (9-10). For this very reason, music was the first model Black artists used to reflect on their reality in their own aesthetic terms. It became the “purest expression of the black man in America” (3) and thus contributed to a large extent to setting aesthetic criteria for other Black art forms such as literature.

The language of BAM poetry served as a reflection of identity and an expression of political criticism. Poets took the roles of teachers, visionaries, and activists with the purpose of drawing their Black audience’s attention to racial, social, and economic injustices. They created new social values in their re-interpretation of life through language. As one of the most influential Black writers, James Baldwin writes, language is the birthplace of identity. He insisted that language is also “a political instrument, means, and proof of power. [...] It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity” (Baldwin 132). By using Black English and imitating vernacular speech to address the diaspora, BAM poets revoked and recreated cultural memory that offered a sense of belonging and developed self-awareness in their communities while contributing to a canon distinct from the white cultural mainstream. In her essay about the poetry of the Black Arts Movement, Sonia Sanchez pays special attention to understanding the meaning-making

process of poetry. She states that “[p]oetry is the symbol or essence of language designed to sensitize meaning, motivate, create or re-create experience and bestow a state of perception” (245). Poetic language has the power to change and replace meanings in existing semantic conventions. Poets have the power to manipulate established meanings and influence social experience. Sanchez argues that poetry is a “subconscious conversation” (245), maintained by multiple layers of meaning hidden in poetic symbols. This closely relates to the African American rhetoric practice of Signifying which relies on a double-voiced system of meaning-making.

Due to the importance of poetic language in redefining black identity, poets of the Black Arts Movement identified with a role established in early civilizations where poetry maintained religious significance. The role involved prophecy and the interpretation of life for the rest of society. Sanchez explains that poet-priests of ancient societies “develop[ed] symbols of collective experience into teaching tools that inculcated [...] social values” (246). This explains how BAM poets shared the same purpose tailored to the socio-political context of their time. They introduced pride in Blackness as a social value, promoted self-determination and self-sufficiency, and celebrated the re-creation of memory in Black history.

In conclusion, the Black Aesthetic is characterized by revolutionary spirit, explicit political criticism, emphasis on orality and performance culture, the spiritual role of the poet, and connection to ancestral roots. It formed the foundation of the Black Arts Movement, aligning art with activism. Gwendolyn Brooks' engagement with these principles demonstrates her strong affiliation with the Movement. This connection is vividly reflected in two of her poems from *In the Mecca*, “The Wall” and “Second Sermon on the Warpland”.

In her introduction at the Library of Congress in 1986, Gwendolyn Brooks points out that due to their political affiliations with the Black Arts Movement, Madhubuti and Sanchez were

perceived as racists by white critics. She emphasizes that they are anything but racist. “They are lovers of humanity [...] interpreters and protectors of Blackness [...] subscribers to what is beautiful in the world” (94). A decade after the Movement’s dwindling, Brooks echoes her full engagement with its cause, which she sees as a fight against oppression (94). Despite her national reputation among white critics, by 1968, Brooks championed Black communities’ need for their own authentic outlet. As her close friend and biographer, D.H. Melhem notes instead of submitting to the white publishing industry, Brooks turned to publisher Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press, started her own magazine, *The Black Position*, and “embarked on a journey of commitment” that continued until the end of her life (Melhem 146). She remained adaptive to the shifting perceptions of Black identity within the community and consistently attuned to the evolving expressions during a period of significant transformation. Along her responsiveness to change, her social concerns stayed permanent through her oeuvre. As Melhem notes, themes of war and peace, the Civil Rights movement, the Black rebellion, a sense of African heritage, the welfare of women and children, and the need for courage and resistance demonstrate Brooks’s vocation to charity and love for humanity “nourished by a sense of African identity and a vivid sense of the Black Nation as an extension of the Black family” (Melhem 150).

Brooks’s poetic themes and her overarching focus on Black people are consolidated by her engagement with the Black Aesthetic. In her late poetics, she uses features of orality and musicality characteristic to the Black Aesthetic. Melhem recalls an occasion of listening to Brooks reading her poetry:

What I heard [...] in her musical cadences was a spiritual and prosodic power, a poetry of humane vision and leadership. With meticulous aptness it combined the energy of African drums, the rhythm of Black music, its blues and jazz, the Black sermon, the Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetic, the ballad, and the sonnet, and forged something new. (Melhem 155)

The legacy of Black music along with Black language served Brooks's contribution to the Black Aesthetic and helped demonstrate her affiliation with the Black Arts Movement. One of her most representative poems of the Black Aesthetic is "The Wall" published as the second part of the diptych "Two Dedications" from her 1968-collection *In the Mecca* addressing a piece of visual art. The poem exemplifies Brooks's alignment with the Black Aesthetic by integrating Black musical and oral features, alongside portraying a pivotal moment in Black history.

It is a tribute to the site of the Wall of Respect; a mural situated on a slum building at 43rd Street and Langley Avenue on the South Side of Chicago that stood as a vivid testament to the rich cultural history of the African American community. Conceived and created by members of the Organization for Black American Culture (OBAC), the Wall portrays significant historical events and influential figures reflecting the struggles, achievements, and resilience of the Black community ("Wall of Respect"). This artistic landmark served not only as a source of Black pride but also as a powerful narrative tool revealing Chicago's African American experience. The Wall of Respect functioned as a public canvas that celebrated heritage, fostered communal bonds, and galvanized collective memory and action towards social justice and empowerment. Brooks dedicates her poem to Edward Christmas who portrayed her on the Wall among influential Black artists, writers, and politicians such as Nina Simone, James Baldwin, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Martin Luther King Jr. and many more. Her poem celebrates the mural's memory by recording the OBAC's tribute to Black culture in the spirit of Black Power. According to Angela Jackson, however, the poem commemorates not only the Wall's inauguration, but also Brooks's "own re-initiation into the black community as a black woman of African-identified consciousness and rallied social consciousness" (Jackson n.p.). It affirms cultural diversity and portrays the Black community in a state of collective pride, honoring its literary and musical heritage. James Edward Smethurst notes that the production of Chicago's Wall of

Respect, as well as other murals and forms of public art “took on a performative aspect” with the participation of musicians and poets whose performances invited people to engage with the Black Arts Movement (90). In “The Wall”, Brooks reconstructs this performative aspect, employing the Black Aesthetic. The poem’s central message is true to the BAM as it conveys its political vision. In its militant tone, it contributes to the visibility of the Black community, united in pride and the celebration of Black culture. This celebration is best represented by the poem’s musical references and sound aesthetic. My analysis follows the poem’s track of references to Black music and vernacular language that can be traced in Brooks’s use of Signifying. It is represented by poetic devices such as references to music, forms of repetition, the imitation of speech sounds, and revision all contributing to the Black Aesthetic in the poem.

In addition to my look out for aesthetic features, my scrutiny is guided by Brooks’s own reading of her poem on the album “Gwendolyn Brooks-Reading Her Poetry” released in 1968. The recording encourages further investigations of vocal Signifying and improvisation both characteristic to Black art and language.

The poem opens with two short indented statements. “A drumdrumdrum./ Humbly we come.” The first line is an onomatopoeia creating a vivid imagery with its sound. In its mimetic approach, it explicitly thematizes music, representing the evocative nature of Black poetic language rooted in Black musical and linguistic tradition. According to Zora Neal Hurston, Black expression has a “will to adorn” for which it relies on visuality and evocative expression (Huston 80-81). Howard Ramsby and Briana Whiteside explain Hurston’s thought by stating that “[m]etaphorical speech and phrasings permeate African American linguistic practices, allowing Black people to draw culturally distinct parallels, evoke emotional responses, and display racial and ethnic awareness of multiple experiences” (714). Brooks’s onomatopoetic phrase evokes the militancy of the Black Arts Movement infused by the rhythm of drums, and commemorates

a distinct African past. In his account of prehistoric jazz, critic and music historian Ted Gioia paints a picture of Black musicians playing on different percussive instruments to provide rhythm for social gatherings involving dance. What could be a scene in Africa is an event on Congo Square in nineteenth-century New Orleans (Gioia, n.p.). Ring shout, as the dance is called, was a “transplanted African ritual” heavily relying on the polyrhythm of drums. In addition to social entertainment, drums also served as means of communication which kept customs alive “as part of the collective memory and oral history of the [...] black community” (Gioia, n.p.). Brooks contributes to the Black Aesthetic by evoking these practices in her opening line. The sound of drums prepares the scene for the poem dedicated to the celebration of Black self-determination, art, and African cultural heritage.

She maintains the aesthetic with Signifying in her second line, “Humbly we come.” While the sentence further contributes to the beat with its four-syllabic structure and end rhyme (“drum-come”), its most outstanding feature is its Signifying revealed in Brooks’s reading of the poem. She puts an emphasis on the statement by opening it with a high vocal pitch and a strong, prolonged enunciation of the first syllable of the adverb /Humb-ly/ (“Side B”, 00:18:27). Her voice suggests that the crowd’s arrival is anything but humble challenging the word’s conventional meaning. This double-voicedness of Signifying includes a semantic revision with an implicit reference to white society’s expectation of the subjugation of the Black crowd. Brooks’s word choice and reading imposes a new meaning on the signifier “humble” which conveys the community’s regained self-awareness and the militancy of the Black Arts Movement. This semantic play notably exemplifies a fundamental characteristic of the African American vernacular. As Geneva Smitherman notes, “Black Language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture” (2). In light of Gates’s semantic explanation of Signifying, Smitherman’s definition refers to the complex structure of a sign in

Black language which relies on the relationship of a signifier (here: “Humbly”) and a rhetorical figure (here: irony) (Gates 53). The figure relies on the context of the word “Humbly”. The conventional Euro-American meaning of “humble” is contrasted by Brooks’s punctuation of the poem’s two opening statements reinforcing collective confidence and militancy. The adjective “humble” suggests a passive, submissive behavior which lacks assertiveness. On the contrary, Brooks’s use of short, clear statements implies strong awareness about abilities. The plural pronoun “we” addresses a Black audience and suggests a communal impulse maintained by references to the ancestral homeland, Africa. Carrying the gist of the poem, the two opening indebted lines define rhythm and play the role of the master drummer of an ancient ritual. They foreshadow the first stanza’s dedication to African roots.

The opening musical reference is followed by a metonymic enumeration of pieces of cloth, accessories, and colors.

South of success and east of gloss and glass are
sandals;
flowercloth;
grave hoops of wood or gold, pendant
from black ears, brown ears, reddish-brown
and ivory ears;

(Brooks, lines 3-8)

The third line is dominated by nouns acoustically grouped by Brooks’s extensive use of alliterations and consonance. They feature the sound /s/ and /g/ creating a strong acoustic effect which contribute to a powerful cadence. With its noun-heavy construction and acoustic flow, the line becomes a representation of the approaching crowd fueled by the spirit of liberation. It relies heavily on metaphoric and metonymic relations. South and east are metonymies of the city of Chicago, while they also serve as metaphors of the populations of city quarters. The prepositional phrase “South of success” offers a reference to the economic

contrast between the Southern and Northern parts of Chicago, pertaining the global disparity between the U.S. and Africa as Global South. In addition, it is also an ekphrastic phrase, describing the southern part of the painting on the Wall behind the reciting poet. Brooks's simultaneous reference to the Wall of Respect and geography serves as an instance of Signifying where the painting becomes the map of Black history. The phrase "South of success" highlights the cultural richness of Africa and Chicago's South Side and expresses social criticism about the economic status and distorted global image of these places. The alliteration of the fricative /s/ and plosive /g/ sound, and the consonance of "gloss and glass" create a powerful vocal effect and highlight underlying meanings.

Following the third line's abstract imagery, Brooks suddenly drags her readers back to the event of the poem. She abruptly leaves the flow of her metaphors with an enumeration consisting of the metonymic representation of the crowd. The detailed list of clothing and accessories serve as subject complements of the prepositional phrases: "South of success and east of gloss and glass are / sandals; flowercloth; grave hoops of wood or gold [...]" (lines 3-6). The grave contrast between the metaphors and the everyday items develops irony. The poem's statement, success, gloss, and glass are sandals, underlines Brooks's juxtaposition of economic differences between Chicago's class groups. This contrast appears in the poet's reading too. Although the word "sandals" fits the vocal scheme of the previous line, Brooks slows her voice and drops her pitch thus putting emphasis on the word "sandals" and represents the redirection of the speaker's gaze ("Side B" 00:18:33). She now looks at the feet of the celebrating crowd diminishing the significance of luxury provided by privileges and implying that Black Power rises above the values of white society, establishing its own moral and aesthetic criteria.

In her metonymic enumeration, Brooks continues listing different skin colors to signify the diversity and inclusivity of the event: “hoops [...] pendant / from black ears, brown ears, reddish-brown / and ivory ears” (lines 7-8). The noun “ears” stands for individuals in the celebrating crowd. By means of repetition, it becomes a riff that gives a syncopated rhythm to the lines imitating jazz music and spoken-word improvisation. According to Ted Gioia, a “riff [is] a repeated motif over changing harmonies, sometimes given a syncopated ‘kick’ through a displacement caused by a contrast between the length of the phrase and the underlying meter” that evolved at the musical signature of the Swing Era (Gioia n.p.). It serves the function of maintaining structure and thus supporting a soloist in their improvisation. Riffing has remained an essential element of Black music that seeped into language enriching Black poetic expression. To help understand the term from a linguistic point of view, Henry Louis Gates Jr. offers the following definition: “[t]he riff is a central component of jazz improvisation and Signifyin(g) and serves as an especially appropriate synonym for troping and for revision” (114). A riff is a repetition that relies on the revision of meaning. Gates underscores that repetition is an important figure of Signifying. As he puts it, Signifying itself is the “principle of repetition and difference” (70). As a result of its semantic revisions, the repetition in phrasal riffs generates the evolution of meaning. The key features of riffing in both music and language involve improvisation, cultural rootedness, and multi-modal expression. Riffing in the seventh line contributes to a multimodal aesthetic that involves acoustic effect, rhythm, and social commentary, and lends an improvisatory nature to Brooks’s reading. She repeats the noun “ears” with changing descriptive adjectives thus imitating the function of riffing in music and indicating cultural rootedness. With the help of the trope, she underlines the diversity and inclusiveness of the crowd at the Wall’s dedication.

Reading on, repetitions, pauses, and direct speech quotations provide further evidence of oral and musical features that contribute to the Black Aesthetic in the poem.

black boy-men.
 Black
 boy-men on roofs fist out “Black Power!” Val,
 a little black stampede
 in African
 images of brass and flowerswirl,
 fists out “Black Power!”

(Brooks, lines 9-15)

Repetition is present on levels of sounds, words, and phrases. The section opens with the alliterating sounds of /b/ in “black boy-men” highlighting the opening phrase. The term “boy-men” refers to the white legacy of diminishing Black men by calling them “boys” regardless of their age. In her book *We Real Cool, Black Men and Masculinity*, bell hooks explains the historical infantilization and dehumanization of Black men within oppressive white-supremacist racial dynamics to maintain white power. Brooks’s reference to this practice is introduced by the decapitalization of the opening adjective “black” formally representing this diminishment. The next line, however, follows anaphorically with its capitalized word “Black”. The repetition signifies and holds a semantic change in the word’s meaning. It represents the evolution of Black self-awareness, governance, and the artistic development of an aesthetic that serves the political revolution of its time. The sudden line break also indicates this semantic shift and prepares the next repetition in the eleventh line’s opening noun phrase “boy-men”. Here, Brooks reappropriates the pejorative meaning of “boy” in its racist context and refers to young advocates of the Black Power Movement. She riffs on the noun “boy” and the adjective “black” to demonstrate the evolution of meaning in Black language. The alliterating plosive /b/ sound lends a solemn tone to Brooks’s reading shaped by the repeated phrase “boy-men”. To distinguish the connotative meanings of the two occurrences, she maintains her elevated pitch

on “boy” in the second phrase’s closing noun “men” (“Side B” 00:18:45-00:18:48). The connotations are further signified by the stanza’s formal play with line break. The break creates a pause which can be interpreted as a reference to rhythmic alterations in music that help rephrasing a melodic pattern in improvisation. This practice contributes to restructuring the meaning of chords and patterns in their context and aids the development of the conversational nature of improvisation. Such a conversation between the different connotations of the same words is developed in Brooks’s lines.

In addition to this implicit musical reference, the reiteration of oral features contributes to the gradual intensification of palpable energy. The two fist-out shouts “Black Power!” in the subsequent lines provide the axis of the stanza which is supported by Brooks’s reading using an elevated pitch for both instances to imitate shouts (00:18:50). The context invites to imagine these collective cries accompanied by the underlying beat of the drums introduced in the opening lines. The shouts of the crowd immerse in the surrounding music and serve as the accentuation of phrases in the same manner as those played by brass instruments in jazz. This reading demonstrates the inseparability of speech and music in Black poetic expression.

Musicality shapes not only the poem’s acoustic and formal features, but also its content, where themes and imagery reinforce the significance of music in the Black Aesthetic. In the third stanza, Brooks salutes the legacy of trumpeter and composer Kelan Philip Cohran whose figure is central to the poem as well as to the Black Arts Movement. Known for his contributions to Chicago’s cultural and musical scene, Cohran blended his activism with jazz to uplift the Black community. Upon his death in 2017, the New York Times commemorated him for his key role in co-founding the influential *Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians* whose aim was to create original Black music and raise people’s awareness through public performances

on the South Side of Chicago. A former member of Sun Ra's famous *Arkestra*, Cohran's work extended beyond music, advocating for African American heritage, education, and empowerment (Russonello). Brooks centralizes his persona in her continued description of the Wall's celebration.

Phil Cohran gives us messages and music
made of developed bone and polished and honed cult.
It is the Hour of tribe and of vibration,
the day-long Hour. It is the Hour
of ringing rouse, of ferment-festival.

(Brooks, lines 19-23)

The stanza underlines the role of music in connecting contemporary Black culture to its African roots. The direct reference to Cohran suggests communality within the celebrating crowd as well as with the poem's readership. During the BAM poets have made proper nouns and nicknames in African American language central to Black poetry. Especially frequently referenced are historical figures and musicians in poems. According to Rambsy and Whiteside, "[t]he regular and widespread appearances of names [...] throughout the body of Black poetry constitute one of the genre's most indelible direct ties to [African American language]. Generally, Black speakers and poets apparently display cultural knowledge and pay tribute to revered figures by frequently uttering their names" (709). Black poets, musicians, and historical figures are architects of interpretation and criticism. Their role stems from the ancient African myth of Esu-Elegbara examined meticulously by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*. While a specific passage directly linking the role of BAM poets and musicians to Esu-Elegbara may not be available in Gates's text, his analysis of Esu's significance in African American culture and references to the religious significance of artists in Black society supports the crucial role of Black poets and musicians in the liberation movement. According to Sonia Sanchez, "[t]he poet and the priest were synonymous [in ancient Black civilizations]. The priest as poet devoted

him/herself to developing symbols of collective experience into teaching tools that inculcated social values and wisdom of the culture” (264). This underscores the pivotal role of poets and musicians in the evolution of a new Black consciousness, to which Brooks’s works made significant contributions.

In her third stanza, Brooks depicts the crowd’s celebration as a religious ceremony, evoking the communal spirit and ritual of an African tribal gathering. She dedicates the role of the priest to Cohran who “gives us messages and music” to honor the religious importance of artists in Black culture. The stanza is dominated by metaphors such as “developed bone” and “Hour”. In the second line, “bone” refers to the legacy of African and African American cultural heritage. According to John S. Mbiti, in African religious culture, bones had medicinal value. “Drinking ‘medicine’ made from the ashes of the burnt bones is a rite whereby the departed is mystically united with the members of his family and community who are still alive” (198). Mbiti further explains that bones were also used to invoke spirits in tribal rituals (261). This guides us to the interpretation of Brooks’s metaphor as the revival of an ancient cultural heritage and set of values that are celebrated by the Pan-Africanism of the Black Arts Movement. The following phrase “polished and honed cult” reinforces this interpretation in its reference to religious devotion reappropriated to the context of Black Power that counts African heritage among its vital sources. The stanza depicts the Wall’s dedication as a tribal rite: “It is the Hour of tribe and of vibration”. The next leading metaphor, “Hour”, emphasized by capitalization and repetition stands for the Wall’s celebration. The noun’s capitalization serves the emphasis on Brooks’s Signifying and the gradual changes in meaning. With each iteration, the word “Hour” gains new purport. Its temporal definition wanders into the oxymoron of “day-long Hour” referring to the Wall’s dedication. With the ultimate repetition, this meaning turns into a reference to the

gathering's political nature. A dramatic effect is created by the iteration of the powerful approximant /r/ and the fricative /f/ sound in the alliterating phrases "ringing rouse" and "ferment-festival" which contribute to the representation of the crowd's evolving power.

Throughout the poem, Brooks's use of alliteration creates acoustic effects that add emphasis to phrases, create underlying meanings and serve the imitation of music. Most frequent are fricative and plosive sounds such as /s/ in "South of success", /t/ in "tight teeth", /f/ in "fondle the fever", /g/ in "gloss and glass", and /b/ in "black boy-men". These consonants lend a firm and powerful vocal effect to phrases and contribute to a militant tone characteristic to the Black Aesthetic. In addition to alliterations, the repetition of sound is present in internal rhymes ("hair-their", "child-defiled") and end-rhymes ("gelatin-fever in", "me-ivory"). All of them contribute to the poem's cohesion by connecting ideas acoustically. Their web of phonetic linkages creates multiple semantic layers to mimic roots and criticize social structures thus contributing to the trope of Signifying. The poem's overall musicality created by these devices reinforces the expression of rootedness connecting the poem to Pan-Africanism and the Black Aesthetic.

A turning point is brought about by a perfect rhyme in the poem's fifth section: "All/ worship the Wall", marking the crowd's arrival to the Wall whose celebration is a "Hinge" in Black history. Opening in first person singular, the second part is dedicated to the speaker's recital in front of the Wall. On the phonetic level, consonance is substituted by assonance that lends a softer sound to the section aligning with the crowd's harmony. The speaker enters the stage and observes her audience:

I mount the rattling wood. Walter
says, "She is good." Says, "She
our Sister is." In front of me
hundreds of faces, red-brown, brown, black, ivory,
yield me hot trust, their yea and their Announcement

that they are ready to rile the high-flung ground.
 Behind me, Paint.
 Heroes.
 No child has defiled
 the Heroes of this Wall this serious Appointment
 this still Wing
 this Scald this Flute this heavy Light this Hinge.

(Brooks, lines 32-43)

The stanza continues the poem's liberating tone with the support of musical and oral features. Brooks uses references to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and types of repetition including rhymes, alliteration, and rifting. The opening sentence "I mount the rattling wood", shifts the poem's focus on the speaker. Its intertextual reference to Langston Hughes's 1926-essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" reminds readers to the event's historical significance in embracing racial identity and Black cultural heritage. The action of mounting the stage of visibility, self-determination, and cultural integrity invokes the topos of overcoming adverse circumstances by upward and forward movement often employed in African American literature. To salute and contribute to Black literary and linguistic tradition, Brooks alludes to one of the key features of Black vernacular expression. The word order in "She/ our Sister is" recalls the grammatical feature of copula omission in AAVE. The sentence bares a playful reference to the deletion of the copula verb *be* between the subject ("She") and its complement ("our Sister"). As Lisa J. Green underlines in her linguistic study of African American English, this is a characteristic of vernacular syntax (52). Brooks moves the copula ("is") to the end of the sentence to highlight the omission and mock the rules of mainstream English whose users render AAVE "ungrammatical" (Green 34). Her imitation of the vernacular reflects Brooks's commitment to the principles of the Black Aesthetic and affirmation of Black cultural heritage.

The figure of repetition remains the central organizing element of the poem. It creates cohesion and contributes to Signifying. In the stanza's fourth line, Brooks uses adjectives enumeratively to describe faces in the crowd: "hundreds of faces, red-brown, brown, black, ivory". She riffs on the first stanza's list of colors similarly describing the crowd's members. In this line however, the descriptive adjectives and the figure of metonymy become the riffs, while at the first occasion, the noun "ear" provides the axis for the changing adjectives. Her reading demonstrates the imitation of the improvisatory nature of music and rapping by the riffs' syncopating rhythm recalling off-beat swinging eights ("black ears, brown ears"), and fills that are small improvised embellishments played during a pause between chords ("red-brown, brown, black, ivory"). In addition to its cohesive riff, the stanza employs the repetition of sound in alliteration ("ready to rile") and internal rhyme ("No child has defiled"). In both instances, Brooks harnesses the sonic qualities of her delivery, elevating her pitch and dwelling on her phrases to amplify their significance in expressing the crowd's reverence and passion ("Side B" 00:20:10-00:20:20). The stanza's three closing lines rely on the iteration of the demonstrative determiner "this". It aids the development of multiple layers of meanings through metaphors that construct the event's significance. The Wall and its dedication signify a "serious Appointment", a "still Wing", a "Scald", a "Flute", a "heavy Light", and a "Hinge". The concepts are connected by the repeated determiner whose echo accelerates the poem's rhythm thus creating a contrast with the next section's slow, contemplative pace that contributes to the crystallization of meaning. The poem closes with the firm statement, "And we sing." Its length and musical reference create a structural frame with the opening lines, signifying both the celebration of Black cultural heritage and the arrival at a place of collective pride and affirmation.

In “The Wall,” Brooks enacts more than a poetic tribute; she stages a performative celebration in which word, sound, and image converge to affirm Black cultural pride and collective self-determination. Readers and listeners may imagine Brooks herself standing before her painted image on the Wall of Respect, her voice layering meaning upon the mural’s colorful surface with each spoken word. Through its free verse form, the poem mirrors the liberatory spirit of the Black Arts Movement, creating space for the blooming of new Black consciousness. Its references to African heritage, music, the imitation of vernacular speech, and Signifying through repetition all contribute to the Black Aesthetic and serve the articulation of political affiliation. By evoking African rituals, Brooks positions the act of poetic performance as a religious and political gesture. “The Wall” emerges as a poem of freedom and abundance, chosen and defined by the Black community, preserved through cultural memory and artistic expression.

In her later poetic phase, Brooks’s celebration of Black culture and African heritage becomes apparent in her aesthetic evolution. Her poems turn away from Anglo-European prosodic tradition and use the language of Black revolution. In addition to themes such as the problematic social condition and perception of Black people, historical events and figures of the Black Power Movement, and African heritage, she attends to conventional Euro-American literary subjects and forms only to subvert their meaning. In her “Sermon Trilogy,” Brooks engages with Western and African religious themes to support the ideology of political and cultural self-determination. She commemorates the African tradition of oration and proverbs and builds a gradually enfolding narrative of Black liberation. In her three Sermons on the Warpland, Brooks skillfully adapts her command of Western prosodic conventions to her new sense of Black integrity.

The poems' central theme is introduced by Ron Karenga's words opening the first sermon: "The fact that we are black is our ultimate reality". The quote proves Brooks's arrival to a reawakened racial consciousness reflected in her writing. Her three sermons explore the stages of evolving attitudes towards this "ultimate reality" by employing mythological imagery and cultural references. The poems construct an allegory for the evolution of Black power. To develop this allegory, Brooks uses symbolism relying on the four primordial elements. In addition to their religious significance, their metaphoric meanings express the graduality of cultural evolution. The first poem, "The Sermon on the Warpland" relies on the imagery of water, "The Second Sermon on the Warpland" employs the metaphor of air, while the third builds on the trope of fire. The elements trace the phases of African American history. Water has a complex symbolic presence in African American history, representing both trauma and transcendence. From the Middle Passage, where the Atlantic Ocean buried countless enslaved Africans, to rivers serving as escape routes and carrying baptismal imagery in Black spiritual traditions, water serves as a site of memory, loss, purification, and spiritual rebirth. In Brooks's poem its metaphoric meaning entails the possibility of liberation and transformation. Rooted in both African cosmology and biblical tradition, the imagery of the whirlwind evokes movement, disruption, and divine intervention. It appears in Black literature and sermons as a metaphor for change, upheaval, and the unpredictable force of resistance. As such, it becomes a powerful symbol of both destruction and renewal echoing the turbulent journey of Black history from slavery to freedom and the continuing pursuit of social justice. In the *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, editors Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama include an entry about Dogon cosmology explaining the beginning of life on Earth created by the main God, Amma.

The Dogon creation myth begins with a primordial body called Amma's Egg, a conelike structure that is said to have housed all of the potential seeds or signs of the future universe. According to the Dogon priests, some undefined impulse

caused this egg to open, releasing a silent whirlwind that spun and scattered the seeds of matter in all directions and to all corners of the universe. The stars, the sun, and the planets were thrown out like pellets of clay. (Asante, Mazama 216)

Brooks's second sermon is the evocation of the Dogon creation myth. In addition to creation, it makes a reference to the power of language, another connotation of the wind-imagery. In Baluba belief, the imagery of wind and air is connected to breath and orality (287). A shared interpretation of the two beliefs supports the argument that language serves as a tool of creation that fosters social change; a central motivation of BAM writers. While Brooks's first and second sermon is shaped by motives of movement and change, the third poem depicts a resurrection and the ultimate awareness of power. The arrival to a new consciousness and liberation from the strains of white society is represented by a phoenix's rebirth from its ashes. The leitmotif of this poem is fire, recalling the spiritual concept of Kalunga in Bakongo cosmology. Its meaning refers to the boundary between the world of the living and the dead, and often symbolizes the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth. The *Encyclopedia* explains that Kalunga is understood as the force of fire. Upon emerging, it ignites and unleashes a storm of energy that creates life. Consequently, fire represents the source and generative principle of existence, embodying both life's origin and its ongoing potential. It symbolizes vital force, dynamic energy, and stands as a key agent of transformation and continual creation (Asante, Mazama 361). Brooks attaches these meanings to artistic creation in the poem by means of enumerating famous jazz musicians such as Melvin Van Peebles, James Brown, and Charles Mingus who engaged in the BAM's political discourse. The lines inspiring the title of this thesis, "You do not hear the remarkable music – 'A/ Death Song For You Before You Die.'/ If you could hear it/ you would make music too. /The blackblues." are shaped by Signifying, allowing the reversal of meaning and a reference to cultural rebirth. It is the death of the white aesthetic that

these lines refer to. The decease of all who suppress and inferiorize Black culture. The poem concludes with the seizure of pain and hurt and the settlement of dust as the phoenix catches up on its wings. This image, in its totality, represents the power of self-determination in regained cultural awareness. Although the three sermons form a trilogy their meanings are not contingent and allow independent readings. In the followings I provide a close examination of “The Second Sermon on the Warpland.”

The poem’s title alludes to the complexity of Black experience in America; the richness of African American culture shaped by both Western and African heritage. A sermon is defined as a “part of a Christian church ceremony [including] a talk on a religious or moral subject, often based on [...] the Bible” (“Sermon”). In a secular context, a sermon refers to a discourse with moral implications delivered by a social leader to encourage ethically right behavior in a community. With a genre-defining title, Brooks highlights the spiritual role and social responsibility of Black poets in encouraging collective responses to social injustice. Featuring the Black Aesthetic, the poem answers contemporary political discourse and becomes a representation of the BAM values.

Its meaning is anchored by the central motive of the whirlwind frequently occurring in sacred texts. In the Christian bible, air takes the shape of wind, whirlwind, storm, and hurricane symbolizing change and God’s power often fueled by his rage. In Genesis 1:2, the wind, or spirit of God moves over waters at the dawn of creation, signifying the breath of life animating a formless void. This association deepens in the New Testament, in Acts 2:1-4 where the arrival of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost is marked by a “rushing mighty wind,” signaling divine empowerment and transformation as the apostles begin to speak languages (Acts 2:2). Here, wind embodies both the invisible force of God and the radical life-giving power of spiritual awakening. Further, in Job 38:1, God’s voice emerges “out of the storm,” reinforcing the wind’s

symbolic function as a channel of divine authority and revelation, often accompanied by righteous fury (Job 38:1). Across these texts, wind serves as a metaphor for God's animating force, at once creative, disruptive, and transformative. Brooks's centralization of the motive and the poem's biblical reference invite a theological reading. In the second Sermon, the whirlwind becomes a symbol of Black Power, imagined as a sacred force equal to the Holy Spirit or God. It is a transformative presence that empowers and unifies a community. This symbolic elevation of Black political energy to a divine status through the poem's central metaphor resonates with the design and structure of Brooks's collection *Blacks*, which carries biblical weight in the Black literary canon. By means of fusing religious form and political content, Brooks constructs a poetics that undermines the authority of Western belief systems and sanctifies Black liberation. In addition to its biblical reference, the poem alludes to the Dogon creation myth of African origin. Akin to the biblical meaning, here too, the wind symbolizes the force of creation. The motive of whirlwind merges the two belief systems thus alluding to the complexity and richness of African American cultural identity.

The poem consists of four parts addressing a Black audience. Traditionally associated with spiritual completeness, balance, and stability, the number four reinforces the poem's grounding in both prophetic tradition and cultural renewal. In conjunction with the central metaphor, the whirlwind, the structure evokes the biblical motive of the four winds in Ezekiel 37:9–10. "Thus saith the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army" (Ezekiel 37:9–10). The scene depicts the resurrection of the dead with the help of divine intervention. Brooks sets her poem in conversation with this biblical story, where the four winds emerge as symbols of transformation, renewal, and resurrection. By invoking this sacred imagery, she aligns Black

cultural survival with divine powers, framing the poem's message in political and spiritual dimensions. Due to its complex reference system, the poem's reader navigates the underlying tension of biblical allusions and Black Aesthetic features echoing the works of Amiri Baraka and Langston Hughes thus reflecting the complexities of African American cultural identity emerging from Western and African cultural heritage. In addition to the subversion of the bible's authority, the Black Aesthetic is present in Black oral and musical features.

The poem's theological frame is complemented by sound imagery, phonetic and phrasal repetitions, and explicit musical references that contribute to its aesthetic principle. Loyal to the sermonic tradition, the poem opens as a prophetic oration with a short metaphorical imperative: "This is the urgency: Live!". The speaker takes the role of a prophet conveying a divine message carried by the whirlwind, one that powerfully calls for engagement, resilience, and self-appreciation amidst chaos. Similarly to Ezekiel's biblical story, the imperative serves the reanimation of the dead; an oppressed, dormant Black society. The whirlwind is the metaphor of Black history, representing the turbulence of systemic injustices and violence that shaped African American experience in America. By using the noun phrase "noise" as a sound imagery, Brooks introduces the "noise of the whirlwind" as the soundtrack of Black history reflected best by the medium of sound. She maintains turbulence with clamorous sounds in phrases such as "crack", "bells", "loud", and "boom". These contribute to the dynamic depiction of the whirlwind that causes damage while claiming space for its inhabitants.

While continuing with preacherly imperatives, the poem's second section exemplifies the contribution of sound to aesthetic development. The stanza's dominating poetic scheme is repetition which lends cohesion to the poem's overall structure. Most outstanding are the section's phonetic repetitions that produce auditory effects to reinforce semantic impact.

Salve salvage in the spin.
 Endorse the splendor splashes;
 stylize the flawed utility;
 prop a malign or failing light—
 but know the whirlwind is our commonwealth.
 Not the easy man, who rides above them all,
 not the jumbo brigand,
 not the pet bird of poets, that sweetest sonnet,
 shall straddle the whirlwind.
 Nevertheless, live.

(Brooks, lines 3-12)

The stanza is governed by both phonetic repetitions, such as alliteration, consonance, internal rhymes, and rhythm, and by phrasal repetitions including anaphora and metaphoric structures. These contribute to the development of musical qualities and resemblance of spoken word. The first line gains emphasis with its opening alliteration “Salve salvage”. The physical effort for the production of the fricative sound /s/ paired with the first stressed syllable conveys power and puts emphasis on the urgency of the imperative. The first four lines are rhythmically aligned resulting from the dominance of iambic feet. Nevertheless, their metrical pattern is broken and made deliberately irregular resembling the aesthetic of jazz music. The section undermines the regular iambic pentameter of the sonnet form which foregrounds the statement of lines 10-11: “not the pet bird of poets, that sweetest sonnet,/ shall straddle the whirlwind”. Against her earlier literary practice, here, Brooks refuses to frame her aesthetic in the Western prosodic tradition and elevates the Black Aesthetic above canonical conventions. The continued alliterations and internal consonant rhymes with fricative sounds /s/, /z/, and /f/ in lines 4-5 (“Endorse the splendor splashes;/ stylize the flawed utility;/ prop a malign or failing light”) maintain the poem’s powerful ambience evoking resilience and resistance. Furthermore, similarly to the internally rhyming [ai] diphthongs of line 6 (“malign or failing light”), they contribute to the flowing rhythm of the lines which is abruptly broken by the coordinating

conjunction “but” in line 7. The second part of the stanza avoids poetic meter and follows the spoken cadence of the oratorical tradition. Phonetic repetition is replaced by phrasal iteration in the lines’ central device, anaphora. The negating adverb “not” is repeated three times anaphorically in lines 8-10 to reject the norms and projections of white society onto Black people whose commonwealth is the whirlwind (line 7). According to Raymond Malewitz, the cautioning of line 7 suggests “both the commonwealth of a racially divided America and the commonwealth-to-be of a black nation state, Brooks’s whirlwind contains and combines both possibilities and then delivers them through her sermoniac prosody” (Malewitz 537). The allegory of whirlwind shapes the poem’s imagery. In this line it serves as the metaphor of the “commonwealth” which is in itself a metaphorical phrase. By means of Signifying, Brooks allows her metaphors to develop semantic complexity. The whirlwind represents Black history, culture, and identity whose survival requires endurance. Its force disrupts the discriminating system of white supremacy and resurrects Black cultural identity. On the other hand, the metaphor of “commonwealth” expresses the ambivalence of this cultural resurrection. The experience of racial discrimination and the need for cultural reconstruction is a shared burden. Signifying in the statement “the whirlwind is our commonwealth” expresses this emotional duality presented overall by the poem’s allegorical imagery. The stanza peaks in the turning point of line 7, giving a halt to the text’s accelerated, tornado-like pace and preparing the ground for the vehement rejection of limitations. In the anaphoric repetition of “not” and the parallelism of lines 8-10 the stanza regains its speed and returns to sound imagery. The plosive /p/, /b/ and fricative /s/ sounds in “pet bird of poets” and “sweetest sonnet” express Brooks’s condemnation of white supremacy, Western literary tradition and its insufficiency for Black cultural expression. The stanza closes with the cohesive repetition of the poem’s imperative “live” that returns in the next section too.

The third stanza repeats the three-line anaphoric parallelism scheme of the previous section to emphasize meaning.

All about are the cold places,
all about are the pushmen and jeopardy, theft—
all about are the stormers and scramblers but

(Brooks, lines 13-15)

The first three structurally identical lines imitate the whirlwind's fast-paced, circular movement. Their acceleration peaks in the dactylic dimeter of the alliterating noun phrases "stormers and scramblers but" and breaks with the coordinating conjunction "but" at the end of line 15. The third section thus replicates the second stanza's grammatical macro structure, centering on an unexpected turn. The "but" standing in the center of both stanzas expresses contrast and unexpected continuation. With their loaded phrases, sound imagery and hectic pace the stanzas represent the whirlwind. The "but" in their centers symbolizes Black existence with its defiance despite adverse circumstances. Following the oratorical tradition the repetitive structure of lines 13-15 is succeeded by a rhetorical question and an imperative against fear:

what must our Season be, which starts from Fear?
Live and go out.
Define and
medicate the whirlwind.

(Brooks, lines 16-19)

The poem's speaker calls on the audience to battle fear, seek self-definition, and cultivate Black cultural heritage. Building on the three recurring imperatives to "live" in each preceding stanza, the fourth section emerges as a culmination; a conscious, militant embrace of existence in the whirlwind. Here, the dominant whirlwind-allegory is replaced by the metaphor of a blooming flower which contributes to a change of pace. In addition to this imagery, the advent of

becoming is represented by an explicit musical reference celebrating Black cultural heritage rooted in music.

The time
 cracks into furious flower. Lifts its face
 all unashamed. And sways in wicked grace.
 Whose half-black hands assemble oranges
 is tom-tom hearted
 (goes in bearing oranges and boom).
 And there are bells for orphans—
 and red and shriek and sheen.
 A garbageman is dignified
 as any diplomat.
 Big Bessie's feet hurt like nobody's business,
 but she stands—bigly—under the unruly scrutiny, stands in the
 wild weed.

In the wild weed
 she is a citizen,
 and is a moment of highest quality; admirable.

(Brooks, lines 20-35)

The stanza's aesthetic qualities are dominated by oral and musical features to maintain the expression of new Black consciousness. Similarly to previous sections, Brooks employs sound imagery with alliterating consonant sounds and internal rhymes ("furious flower", "half-black hands", "bearing [...] boom [...] bells", "shriek and sheen", "Big Bessie", "wild weed") which underline meaning and sustain auditory effect. Additionally, the verb "sways" expresses the deceleration of rhythm, while onomatopoetic phrases such as "tom-tom" and "boom" contain cultural references. "Tom-tom" resembles the sound of drums and echoes the beat of percussive instruments in African rituals. While this reference returns to the roots, "boom" can be interpreted as a sonic metaphor for creative power and Black assertion during the BAM. In addition to the fundamental meaning-making role of sound imageries, the stanza's central motive is a reference that evokes the vocal musical tradition through associative quotations. In "Big Bessie's feet hurt like nobody's business", Brooks's refers to Bessie Smith, the famous blues

singer of the Harlem Renaissance era, and the song “’Tain’t Nobody’s Biz-ness if I Do.” The tune thematizes pride in self-determination regardless of social judgement arising from the intersectional discrimination of Black women. Bessie Smith’s persona creates an allusion to Black women’s struggle that opens up new aspects of social criticism in the poem. The lines “Big Bessie’s feet hurt like nobody’s business/ but she stands- bigly- under the unruly scrutiny” refer to self-preservation regardless of pain caused by the environment’s hostility. The word “bigly” hints at the Signifying neologisms of African American Vernacular English. With using this unusual word form, the poet aims at expressing pride in Blackness.

Based on the analyses of “The Wall” and “The Second Sermon on the Warpland,” it becomes apparent that Brooks’s poetry during the Black Arts Movement aligns with the Black Aesthetic. Both poems address a Black audience and convey explicitly political messages. The most prevalent aesthetic facets, characteristic to the Black Aesthetic, are oral and musical features. While honoring African American cultural heritage, these features serve the celebration of a new Black consciousness. Both poems follow the tradition of orality and use aspects of music, such as rhythm, as means of communication. Their sound imagery establishes the foundation of Brooks’s aesthetic that contributes to the effective delivery of her political messages. These poetic features play an essential role in the practice of Signifying, enabling semantic revision. As the following chapter shows, they were integral parts of Brooks’s aesthetic in her pre-1967 work, implicitly carrying her social criticism that became foregrounded during the Black Arts Movement as her aesthetic evolved.

Chapter 3

Brooks's Black Aesthetic Before the Black Aesthetic

Gwendolyn Brooks's lifework demonstrates an experience of balancing on a tightrope stretched between two worlds: the literary establishment dominated by white critics and urban, Black experience. The core message of Brooks's work, involving her socio-economic and Black feminist criticism of white patriarchy remained constant in her changing poetic forms of delivery. Her style was shaped by the aesthetic influences of literary spaces and traditions which she navigated throughout her life. Her exceptional social and aesthetic sensitivity aided Brooks not only in the authentic representation of Black urban life, but also in engaging with the finest nuances of poetic style merging Western prosody with the black aesthetic. In her biography of Brooks, Angela Jackson refers to a 1975-caricature in the *Chicago Defender* by Chester Commodore, depicting the poet between two books, resting her shoulder on the Pulitzer-winning collection *Annie Allen*, while anchoring her opposite hip against *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*, a collection from 1971, including "In the Mecca". According to Jackson, "[t]he caricature conveys Gwendolyn in a dilemma [...] Perhaps her identity issues had not been fully resolved. [...] She was not as black conscious as she said she was, the drawing conveys" (Chapter 8).



Chester Commodore: *Gwendolyn Brooks*

Brooks's dilemma was unquestionably more about the aesthetic qualities of her self-expression than about her orientation towards the Black community. In her early poetic phase, before 1967, she worked towards appropriating Western literary conventions to express the Black urban experience, whereas her post-Fisk writing demonstrates full engagement with African expressive traditions and the Black Aesthetic. Nevertheless, as D.H. Melhem observes, in Brooks's oeuvre "[n]o facile demarcations exist [...] between 'early,' 'middle,' and 'late' or 'in-progress' Brooks. At times the past is 'made new'; at others, it is discarded" (2-3).

Brooks's racial consciousness, and her engagement with the black aesthetic establishes continuity in her poetics. This is supported by George E. Kent's recollection of his conversation with Larry Neal where he highlights Neal's statement that "[u]nlike many blacks who were returning to the community in the sixties, she had never been alienated from black life, as evidenced by how completely she saw her people" (*A Life* 227). Neal observation aligns with Kent's own: "Gwendolyn Brooks shares with Langston Hughes the achievement of being responsive to turbulent changes in the black community's vision of itself and to the changing forms of its vibrations during decades of rapid change" (*Adventure* 104). Brooks's daughter, Nora explains that "[literary critics] didn't realize what she was saying before 1967 and didn't fully appreciate who she had been before 1967 in her work. It was a matter of style change. She had not dumbed down her work, but stripped it to a leaner style" (Jackson, Chapter 8). The change in Brooks's aesthetic was not a simplification but a deliberate refinement of her poetics to foreground the political function of her work. Nevertheless, her critical views still manifested in her early years in her use of black aesthetic features including oral and musical referents. These can be detected in the poems "Queen of the Blues" from *A Street in Bronzeville*, in "I Love those Little Booths at Benvenuti's" from *Annie Allen*, and in her semi-autobiographical poetic-prose novel *Maud Martha*, all re-printed in the collection *Blacks*. In their aesthetic features, they

demonstrate Brooks's authentic representation of Black realities and convey her social criticism. They can be interpreted as forerunners of the poet's later affiliation with the Black Arts Movement. This chapter examines Brooks's early engagement with the black aesthetic, most specifically oral and musical traditions to communicate critical awareness. Brooks's engagement with these traditions fostered the development of themes, prosody and sound in her poetry that significantly shaped Black literary expression.

Navigating between the white literary establishment and Black communities, Brooks crafted a poetic voice that simultaneously served dominant cultural institutions and affirmed the realities of being Black. During the Chicago Black Renaissance in the 1940s, white critical elitism dominated the mainstream literary discourse of transatlantic modernism. Brooks and her contemporaries who engaged with the Black vernacular tradition involving blues and jazz aesthetics faced exclusion and adversity from white critics. In his biography of Brooks, George E. Kent notes that "[t]he poet recalls hostile responses to *The Bean Eaters* from white critics who accused her of forsaking lyricism for polemics and felt that the book was too 'social'" (146). In alignment with Brooks's experience, Stewart Habig points out that the literary establishment referred to black aesthetic features to label the work of African American writers as unrefined or illegitimate. Nevertheless, Brooks, alongside many of her contemporaries, including Ralph Ellison and Margaret Walker, "develop[s] a subversive [...] aesthetic that confronts, challenges, and undermines an oppressive mid-century literary discourse that marginalizes contributions by African Americans" (Habig 2). This aesthetic is largely shaped by the diction of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and blues- and jazz-inflected verse that aid the lyrical expression of social criticism. A representative in Brooks's repertoire is her poem "Queen of the Blues," first published in 1945 in her collection *A Street in Bronzeville*. The poem is dedicated to the blues and its role in Black female self-expression. By drawing on the blues aesthetic, Brooks

not only affirms Black female identity and vernacular heritage but also constructs a historical continuity between the social realities of Black women in the early twentieth century and those of the 1940s. In writing a blues poem, Brooks becomes a singer herself; an artist visible yet unrecognized. Through this, she demonstrates her awareness of the social and economic oppression of Black women.

By situating the poem within the woman-oriented context of the blues tradition, Brooks underscores the genre's significance as a catalyst of Black self-expression and a site of female agency denied in other social spheres. The poem's title foreshadows its tone and duality. The phrase "Queen of the Blues" refers to a woman who suffered the most, and to one who has spiritual authority in her community. Despite a pool of representative singers to choose from, Brooks avoids naming one blues singer in her title thus making her poem communal and identifiable. Set in a midnight club, it follows the performance of a blues singer called Mame. This poetic persona invites the consultation of Angela Y. Davis's compelling analysis of the blues tradition in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, where she points out the co-occurrence of the classic blues era dominated by women with the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s. In her study of the legacy of singers Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, she proposes that Black women were pioneers on the blues scene producing the first blues records. As singers and band leaders, they contributed to the cultural liberation and redefinition of African American identity and post-slavery community building. Despite their significance, the genre has been denied comprehensive engagement by contemporary writers. Davis observes that blues was "seen by some Renaissance strategists as antithetical to the aims of their cultural movement" due to the singers' embodiment of sexuality and their association with the Black working-class (Introduction). Brooks's poetic persona represents these associations in the first stanza of the poem:

Mame was singing
 At the Midnight Club.
 And the place was red
 With blues.
 She could shake her body
 Across the floor.
 For what did she have
 To lose?

(Lines 1-8)

The poem's opening lines rely on the polarity of meaning already established by its title. The stanza's central poetic device, synesthesia, emerges from the phrase "the place was red/ With blues" and brings together two complementary metaphors. It appeals to visual and auditory senses with the descriptive adjective "red" and the noun "blues." The color red invites associations with sexual desire, domination, resistance, passion, and blood. Blood further connotes life and death, thus alluding to the early twentieth century Black female experience filled with loss and danger due to the measures of institutionalized racism and patriarchy. The semantic translation of the color metaphor is supported by Brooks's riff on her synesthesia in the second stanza. Her protagonist mourns the loss of her mother "with roses and tears"; two metaphors whose visual associations rhyme with the colors red and blue. Furthermore, the associations of red connect the adjective adequately to its counterpart "blues." The term "blues" is synesthetic in itself, making the previous one a trope of a trope ("red blues"); an act of Signifying. Brooks signifies on the meaning of the blues that has two connotative dimensions. Its first semantic component is the color blue associated with sadness, melancholy, and depression lending its connotations to the musical genre of the blues. The second component is the sound of the blues. According to Ted Gioia, musically, the blues are "characterized by the prevalence of 'blue' notes", flattened or bent notes that create harmonic tension (13). These blue notes contribute to the melancholic sound of blues harmonies that create a unique sound. The

blues sound carries the Black experience of difficulties and strife for economic survival in the post-Civil War era. According to Amiri Baraka,

[t]he emancipation of the slaves proposed for them a normal human existence, a humanity impossible under slavery. Of course, even after slavery the average Negro's life in America was [...] a shabby, barren existence. [...] [T]he blues was a music that developed because of the Negro's adaptation to, and adoption of, America, it was also a music that developed because of the Negro's peculiar position in this country. Early blues, as it came to differ from the shout and the Afro-Christian religious music, was also perhaps the most impressive expression of the Negro's individuality within the superstructure of American society. (*Blues People* 40-43)

As a result of its self-expressive nature, the blues idiom later developed as a means of preserving Black identity and cultural heritage. This brings us back to the meaning of Brooks's color metaphor of red representing sexuality and aliveness. Brooks's synesthesia, "the place was red/ With blues" is a form of Signifying on the original meaning of the blues associated with melancholy. It invites the translation: *a woman's blues is red* which leads to the assertion that Brooks aims at distinguishing the female Black experience from the collective Black experience. She signifies this difference in her 1961-recording of the poem where she uses her voice as an instrument of expression. When pronouncing the word "red" she exploits the liquid, resonant quality of the [r] sound and turns its coloring effect into a vocal glide from a deeper to a higher tone, as if singing the word ("Side A" 00:08:06-00:08:07). Her performance is what Meta DuEwa Jones calls "speech-song" involving the vocal use of blues tonalities (8). By employing a different vocal technique, Brooks highlights the word and contributes to its semantic meaning of a distinguished female experience. The poem's closing stanza further supports this reading:

Men are low down
Dirty and mean.
Why don't they tip
Their hats to a queen?

(Lines 86-89)

The stanza reflects on the social perception of female blues singers by men. Despite their central role in music and in the Black community, women were deprived of social acknowledgement and respect due to the genre's transgressive nature. Among the taboos addressed by the blues, Davis lists "extramarital relationships, domestic violence, and the ephemerality of many sexual partnerships," all rejected by the popular musical culture of swing orchestras of the time, entertaining white audiences ("I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama").

Nevertheless, for the Black community, blues was not only a source of entertainment. Davis underlines that the works of female blues singers "addressed urgent social issues and helped to shape collective modes of black consciousness" (Introduction). Along these lines, Farah Jasmine Griffin extends the scope of Black vocal tradition and describes it as ending up "in service to a nation that has been hostile to the aspirations of black people" (104). The Black woman's voice contributed not only to the evolution of an aesthetic that continues to shape Black art and reflect American reality but "calls into being a version of the United States as it wishes itself to be" (Griffin 119). Despite this spiritual and political power, the fact that the aesthetic revolution of the blues was led by Black working-class women lent the genre a transgressive reputation. Owning their sexuality, women blues singers subverted and undermined the roles they were assigned in patriarchal society. The poem's closing lines represent this subversion. Brooks signifies on the popular associations of female blues singers with low morale and assigns the qualities "low down," "dirty," and "mean" to the men surrounding Mame in the Midnight Club. Her subversion of the mainstream discriminatory discourse on Black female singers highlights the fragility of male power and its dependence on social hierarchy. By closing her poem with an open-ended question ("Why don't they tip/ Their

hats to a queen?”), Brooks leaves her protagonist in the powerful position of questioning and undermining male authority.

By engaging in the practice of Signifying, Brooks continues a heritage not foreign to the blues aesthetic. Blues as a mode of expression highly depends on clever manipulations of language. In her book, Davis refers to Henry Louis Gates’s study of African American meaning-making when stating that the genre was associated with the African trickster figure, Esu-Elegbara. She goes on to create a direct link between the blues and the practice of Signifying when explaining that the “[b]lues make abundant use of humor, satire, and irony, revealing their historic route in slave music, wherein indirect methods of expression were the only means by which the oppression of slavery could be denounced” (“I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama”). Davis’s statement is tightly connected to Houston A. Baker’s observation in his study of what he calls the “blues matrix” and vernacular culture in Black literature. Baker points out that “the blues radically condition African American cultural signifying” (*Blues* 5). Although it is challenging to pin down one single definition of the blues, it can surely be understood as an emotion, an attitude, a trope of Signifying, and a musical genre. In Baker’s words, the blues are “expressive dignity”, “music [that] recapitulates experience” (13, 6). The poem “Queen of the Blues” explores multiple aspects of the genre in its theme, semantic layers, and architecture.

The poem’s adaptation of the blues form functions as an intermedial gesture, transforming musical conventions into poetic architecture while undermining Western literary conventions. The poem’s structure of twelve stanzas signifies on the classic twelve-bar blues composition and, consequently, the vernacular tradition. According to Gioia, from a music theory perspective, “the term ‘blues’ refers to a precise twelve-bar form” (13). Through history, the twelve-bar blues form retained its structure while lending itself to a wide variety of modern genres, from jazz to rock and hip hop. Garth Alper observes that “[o]ne reason [it] has exerted

[a] far-reaching influence has been its ability to morph in order to suit a wide variety of musical visions” (1). This ability stems from what Baker defines as the genre’s “intersubjectivity” (*Blues* 5). Blues themes as well as their musical form make marginal experience identifiable, expanding it from the individual to the community. Brooks takes advantage of this attribute with an intermedial reference to fit her criticism of racism and sexism facing Black women. She uses the genre’s flexibility to combine two culturally related yet different poetic forms: the ballad and the blues.

The “Queen of the Blues” is a song within a song; a blues composition framed by balladistic stanzas. Its combination of the two musical and poetic forms represents black aesthetic features and aids the expression of social criticism. Brook’s employment of the ballad form contributed extensively to her gaining recognition from the white publishing industry as many critics viewed her work as “an acquiescence to a dominant white modernism” (Habig 146). Nevertheless, she used the form primarily to contribute to the African American counter-tradition of ballads protesting the white legitimization of extrajudicial, racist violence against Black people as discussed in Chapter One. In “Queen of the Blues”, she continues this tradition to carve space for the black aesthetic and express social criticism against the intersections of racism and sexism faced by Black women. In combining the blues and the ballad, Brooks commemorates the early connection of blues with the European form. As Baraka underlines, “[v]ery early blues [...] utilized the structure of the early English ballad, and sometimes these songs were eight, ten, or sixteen bars” preceding the traditional twelve-bar structure (41). While constituted of twelve stanzas resembling the classic 12-bar blues structure, the poem is dominated by eight-line balladistic stanzas. This architecture resembles the roots of the blues idiom developing in the beginning of the post-Civil War era. Nevertheless, the combination predominantly serves the aesthetic contrast between the two forms. It is a representation of

Euro-American cultural influence on the evolution of Black American identity. As Baraka underlines, this identity was produced by “the retention of some parts of [African] cultures in America, and the *weight* of the stepculture” (14, original emphasis). Brooks represents this “weight” by the ballad framing the blues of her protagonist (stanzas 1-5, 9-12). The frame signifies how mainstream American culture enfolds and confines Black self-expression. This interpretation is supported by Brook’s use of the form in her anti-lynching ballads (“A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Woman Burns Bacon” and “The Last Quatrain of The Ballad of Emmett Till”) to criticize the discursive frame that justified the arbitrary murder of Black people. While the European ballad and the blues might share vernacular roots, their aesthetic contrast allows the poem to climax in Mame’s blues song framed by balladistic stanzas. This central position foregrounds the blues’ emergence from the Black American experience simultaneously shaped by and resistant to oppression. The cultural tension represented by balladistic and blues stanzas is complemented by the contrast between the dominant iambic rhythm (♩ -) and the poem’s content. The second stanza suitably demonstrates the discord between the cheerful iambic cadence and the subject matter. Below, stressed (-) and unstressed (♩) syllables are indicated for illustration.

♩ - | ♩ - | ♩
 She put her mama
 ♩ - | ♩ -
 Under the ground
 - ♩ - | ♩ -
 Two years ago.
 ♩ ♩ -
 (Was it three?)
 ♩ - | ♩ ♩ -
 She covered that grave
 ♩ - | ♩ ♩ -
 With roses and tears.

♪ - | ♪ -
 (A handsome thing
 ♪ -
 To see.)

(Brooks, lines 9-16)

The rhythm dictated by the dominating iambic feet lends the stanza a cheerful ballad quality which opposes the serious, melancholic subject of the singer's mother's death. This aesthetic choice represents what John Gery calls the "subversive parody" of Brooks. While form and prosody lend the poem a light and playful tone, its content presents difficult matters. With this aesthetic choice, Brooks underlines the inadequacy of the ballad form to articulate the Black experience. Her veiled message is targeted towards Western literary authority to confer critical acclaim over Black art.

This subversion of meaning is further achieved by the call-and-response structure characteristic of the blues. The alternation between lines of narration and parenthetical commentary resembles the musical structure inherited from early jazz. Gioia records the origin of the form in African music whose features are conserved in the work songs of the enslaved and, later, in blues and jazz (9). As a result of the crucial role of music in African American culture, the structure became a dominant black aesthetic feature in poetry. Both the micro and macro structures of the poem are predominantly determined by this feature. It is represented by the architecture of individual stanzas as demonstrated above, the alteration of the ballad and the blues form, as well as by the interchanging perspectives of the poem's external speaker (stanzas 1-5, 9, 11-12) and Mame's persona (stanzas 6-8, 10). The call-and-response structure affirms the poem's deep cultural rootedness in the blues idiom. Through the employment of deep-rooted aesthetic features together with its dedication to Black women, the poem foregrounds the

central role of women in African American culture. With this, Brooks highlights the urgency of addressing the issue of Black women's intersectional discrimination.

"Queen of the Blues," not only salutes the cultural and social role of Black women but also extends the legacy of pioneering blues poet, Langston Hughes, whose fusion of the vernacular and musical idioms deeply shaped the aesthetic sensibilities of post-Harlem Renaissance Black writers. Hughes plays an important role in the study of Brooks's poetics. Their relationship was grounded not only in Hughes's mentorship but also in a "warm and generous contact" that began during the early stages of Brooks's aspiration to become a poet (Kent 27).

Hughes considered poetry as a form of social engagement. In his defining essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," he states that "the duty of the younger Negro artist [...] [is] to change through the force of his art that old whispering, 'I want to be white,' hidden in the aspirations of his people, to 'Why should I want to be white? I am Negro- and beautiful!'" (59). His statement foreshadows the sentiment of the Black Arts Movement, defining African American art as a means of self-determination and resistance. The ideological parallel between Hughes and Brooks is important in understanding the aesthetic significance of Brooks's poem. Hughes's legacy plays a fundamental role when approaching "Queen of the Blues" from an aesthetic perspective not only because of his early influence on and personal relationship with the poet, as discussed by Kent, but also his seminal achievement in establishing blues and jazz as forms of poetic expression. "Queen of the Blues" expands on the aesthetic employed by Hughes, using blues as a literary referent in translating musical structures, tonalities, and thematic concerns into poetry to preserve Black cultural heritage and articulate criticism against the discrimination of Black female artists.

From these crucial functions of the black aesthetic rises the poem's primary dedication to the central role of Black women in shaping their community's cultural awareness. My analysis

demonstrates that Brooks's aesthetic choices support central tenets of Black feminism. They work to validate Black women's cultural authority, confront intersectional limitations of patriarchy and racism, and reclaim expressive space. Brooks employs two key features of the black aesthetic relating to the blues idiom: Signifying and call-and-response structure. By combining the blues and the ballad form, she subverts racist and sexist discourses on Black femininity. Furthermore, the poem's prosody exploits the semantic capacities of metaphors to revise established meanings, while the employment of synesthesia blends the distinct sensory modalities of literature and music thus contributing to the intermediality of the poem. Like the blues, Brooks's poem becomes a site of female agency affirming Black identity and vernacular heritage. She bridges the female experience over centuries and conveys a Black feminist statement against the marginalization of Black women maintaining urgency beyond the 1920s and 1940s.

Brooks's dedication to the Black community and veiled social criticism continues in her second, Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Annie Allen* (1949). Although white critics most likely prized her command of Western prosody and inspiration in Homer's epics, Black vernacularism and musicality remain in Brooks's aesthetic repertoire to engage the theme of racial discrimination. *Annie Allen*, a coming-of-age sequence of poems, maintains the poet's commitment to the Black feminist cause. It follows the story of a Black Chicago girl becoming a woman and a mother while facing the adversities of white American society including racial discrimination and economic hardships. The poem under analysis, "I Love those Little Booths at Benvenuti's," constitutes the seventh section of "The Womanhood," the third part of Brooks's narrative collection. It sets in a real-life café in the Bronzeville neighborhood on the Southside of Chicago. As described by Leslie Monsour, "Benvenuti's is a Bronzeville café where white 'tourists' from the northern suburbs come, expecting to be entertained and amused by the

antics of the ‘colored’ locals” (“The Early Work”). “I love those little booths at Benvenuti’s” is a poem about white voyeurism and Black entertainment. Its satirical representation of the white public seeking amusement in a Black neighborhood reaches its peak at the audience’s failure in finding validation for their need to justify their racism. This is illustrated by the poem’s closing stanzas:

But how shall they tell people they have been
Out Bronzeville way? For all the nickels in
Have not bought savagery or defined a “folk.”

The colored people will not “clown.”

The colored people arrive, sit firmly down,
Eat their Express Spaghetti, their T-bone steak,
Handling their steel and crockery with no clatter,
Laugh punily, rise, go firmly out of the door.

(Brooks, lines 41-48)

Although white visitors are deprived of their entertainment, Brooks’s poem enacts a parody that would, ironically, cater to their tastes, were they not themselves the object of laughter. In his book, *Furiously Funny*, Terrence T. Tucker attends to the humor of African American writers confronting racial oppression. He finds that African American humor manifests in comic rage which he defines as a form of cultural expression. He explains that

[i]n this vernacular, stereotypes about African Americans [...] and methods of perpetuating those stereotypes are exploded and interrogated to reveal hypocrisies in the construction of American identity, history, and culture. Comic rage centralizes African American experience and, fueled by militant rage, uses a comic lens to examine the complexities and inconsistencies in the American national narrative. (Tucker 2)

In her poem, Brooks uses humor to subvert racialized power dynamics, anticipating the militant and explicitly critical tone prevalent in her 1960s poetics. Amidst her mocking criticism of white voyeurism, she maintains Black cultural dignity by juxtaposing popular tunes of the era favored by white audiences and those preferred by the Black community.

Set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights era, “I Love those Little Booths at Benvenuti’s” confronts white entitlement to entering Black spaces during times of racial segregation. The mid-twentieth century marked a period of significant social and political change in the US, which culminated in the Civil Rights Movement. The political atmosphere highly influenced Black writers who responded to the harsh realities of urban life for Black people. The subject of economic disadvantage and segregation were literary themes markedly different from those of their Harlem Renaissance precursors. According to Miller, “[u]nlike Harlem Renaissance works, this body of literature tended to focus almost exclusively on urban blight rather than on the opportunities that cities might afford. The most prominent feature of black life in the mid-twentieth century as reflected in this literature is poverty, and the limitations to opportunity” (84). These limitations arose from the economic disadvantages rooted in institutional racism. Although Northern cities such as Chicago never enforced Jim Crow-style laws, segregation lasted a very long time through restrictive housing policies. In his dissertation, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*, Arnold Richard Hirsch explains that following the city’s 1919 race riot, segregation was viewed “not as a cause for violence, but as a possible remedy for it” (4). Despite the city council’s high hopes, the separation of Black and white citizens only transformed the expression of violence (Hirsch 4). In Northern states, white citizens channeled their hatred and illicit desires into surveillance and voyeurism. Brooks’s poem unmasks the infrastructure that allowed white people to cross segregational boundaries and penetrate Black spaces in search of entertainment.

The poem exposes the structural entanglement of white entertainment with racist stereotypes and the dehumanizing objectification of Black bodies. The history of Black entertainment reaches back to times of slavery. In addition to physical labor, enslaved people were often in charge of entertaining their masters. During and after Reconstruction this tradition

remained and performance became a profession that helped many Black people to make ends meet. Nevertheless, the standards of entertainment were still determined by the white population. According to Karen Sotiropoulos, due to racist ideologies that shaped American society, after World War I, Black people's "[p]articipation in public life required the careful monitoring and appeasing of white audiences, and artists conformed to white expectation by using the conventions of the newly popular vaudeville stage- including blackface makeup- in their productions [...] [T]he artists played to the white desire for racist stereotypes" (2). This aspect of entertainment contributed significantly to the maintenance of white supremacy. In spite of all hidden criticism expressed in Black vaudevillian performances, stages maintained the superiority of white Americans and exploited Black bodies. In his book-length discussion about race in America, George Yancy underlines that "[t]he history of the Black body in North America is fundamentally linked to the history of whiteness, primarily as whiteness is expressed in the form of fear, sadism, hatred, brutality, terror, avoidance, desire, denial, solipsism, madness, policing, politics, and the production and projection of fantasies" (xxx). In her poem, Brooks manifests white solipsism in the wish to satisfy desires and realize fantasies about Black people as a form of entertainment. The poem opens with a parody of the white tourists' excitement about experiencing the Black neighborhood of Bronzeville:

They get to Benvenuti's. There are booths
 To hide in while observing tropical truths
 About this- dusky folk, so clamorous!
 So colorfully incorrect,
 So amorous,
 So flatly brave!
 Boothed-in, one can detect,
 Dissect.

(lines 1-8)

The speaker represents the perspective of white guests coming to Benvenuti's whose dedicated booths allow the secret observation of locals. Beyond satirizing white fascination with Black "exoticism," Brooks subverts the racist discourse that confines Black identity within the performing body. Rather than constraining Black people by racist stereotypes, she limits and immobilizes the white visitors closeted in their booths and gazes. Being "[b]oothed-in" signifies seeing without being seen, a condition inherently tied to the concept of the white gaze. According to Yancy, the white gaze render[s] the Black body hypervisible [and] white bodies [...] invisible (157). White voyeurism reinforces racial hierarchies maintaining the power dynamic between the unseen whites, "dissecting" and "detecting," and the objects of their gaze who are denied agency. This phenomenon develops as Frantz Fanon terms it in *Black Skin White Masks* a "third-person consciousness" in Black people (110). He echoes DuBois's concept of "double consciousness" that relies on a third-person perspective in the perception of one's self. Nevertheless, the local people in Brooks's poem disregard their white observers. This disrupts white supremacist power dynamics and deprives white visitors of their identities leaving them in the darkness of their booths. In a conversation with Kevin Bezner, Brooks talks about the origin of her poem:

That used to be a very popular sport for whites, to go to black cafés and watch the natives perform. In preparation to write this poem, my husband and I went to Benvenuti's [...] It was very quiet that evening and the whites didn't get a show at all. They didn't get one from my husband and myself. With my poem, I wrote down exactly what I was looking at (*Conversations* 118).

Indeed, the poem's observing speaker affirms Brooks's presence. With the stanzas' anaphoric repetition of the personal pronoun "they", the speaker subverts the dynamics of the gaze and becomes the active agent observing white visitors in their booths instead of aligning with the role of being objectified. At the white audience's disappointment, Black locals challenge

imposed ideas of Blackness simply by maintaining the ordinariness of their daily routines. This implies that the humanity of Black people disrupts the dynamic by rejecting racist white projections on the Black body.

In addition to the stanza's allusion to the white gaze, it satirizes racist power dynamics with the help of musical Signifying. The rhythm and rhyme scheme of descriptive adjectives "so clamorous!/ So colorfully incorrect,/ So amorous" (lines 3-5) recalls George and Ira Gershwin's famous Jazz Age tune "S'Wonderful". The composition's lyrics might have served as inspiration for Brooks's parody:

'S wonderful, 's marvelous
You should care for me
'S awful nice, 's paradise
'S what I love to see

You've made my life so glamorous
You can't blame me for feeling amorous
'S wonderful, 's marvelous
That you should care for me

Written in 1927, the tune became popular when white ballrooms were flourishing as prominent sites of big band performances and social dance. In his description of 1920s musical culture, Gioia points out the influence of the mass marketing of music on jazz. He states "'jazz' as a category of entertainment came to occupy a wider [...] orbit, encompassing a broad spectrum of popular culture. [...] Note, for example, music from the hit 1927 movie *The Jazz Singer*, the first talking film, which was much closer to popular music than to jazz; or Gershwin's 'jazz'-based classical compositions" (77). The Jazz Age was characterized by the appropriation and commodification of Black music to satisfy white taste, as a result of white dominance on the music market. This information helps contextualize Brooks's poem and understand why she chose a reference to Gershwin's tune. The intermedial rendition aids her parody of both white

imitations of Black culture and of the expectations of white audiences about Black performers. It highlights the similarity in white misconceptions about Black music and Black people.

In addition to satirizing the white imagination, the poem uses explicit musical references to express pride in Black cultural identity. By means of intermedial connections, Brooks juxtaposes white expectations with Black culture as an act of resistance against white definitions of Blackness. While the first stanza's reference to Gershwin's composition signifies white ideas of Blackness, the eighth lists four titles solely written by Black musicians:

They play "They All Say I'm The Biggest Fool"
And "Voo Me On The Vot Nay" and "New Lester
Leaps In" and "For Sentimental Reasons."

(lines 38-40)

The enumeration of songs contributes to the depiction of the café's atmosphere and represents Brooks's dedication to the tradition of meaning-making through Signifying. The first tune, "They All Say I'm The Biggest Fool", was written and recorded by Buddy Johnson in 1944. Johnson was the leader of one of the first orchestras after World War II. In an interview with *Down Beat* magazine, he remembers his roots as such: "[O]ur bread and butter is in the South. The music I play has a Southern tinge to it. They understand it down there" (Johnson in Russel 125). In addition to the song's popularity in Chicago during the time Brooks wrote and published her poem, her choice of quoting Johnson's tune might have been motivated by the musician's Southern origin. With her reference, Brooks honors the Southern heritage including the historic legacy of slavery and the blues idiom.

The stanza's second tune "Voo Me On the Vot Nay" imitates spoken word. It is Brooks's phonetic and stylized rendering of the actual title "Voot Nay On the Vot Nay" associated with the vocal group The Basin Street Boys who recorded the song in 1946. The song is an early Rhythm and Blues about a peculiar kind of language originating from Harlem. As its lyrics

describes it, “Voot” is a “blasé” hip slang presented in the scat solo of one of the singers (00:01:50-00:02:13). The tune is a meta-reference to the practice of Signifying in African American meaning-making. The “Voot” slang symbolizes the coded meanings of Black music and language. Although Black musicians adapted to the demands of the white entertainment industry, the practice of Signifying preserved layers of meaning inaccessible to white audiences. Consequently, it enabled self-expression within mainstream popular culture that rejected the authentic representation of Black experience. With her reference to “Voot Nay on the Vot Nay”, Brooks herself signifies on the song’s meaning. She uses the title to imitate spoken-word and underline the falsity of white assumptions about Black entertainment.

Among the greatest entertainers of the 1940s was William James “Count” Basie and his orchestra. The third referenced composition, “New Lester Leaps In”, a swing tune composed by Basie in 1939, is a reinterpretation of his tenor saxophonist Lester Young’s “Lester Leaps In”. In his historical account, Gioia describes Basie as “[o]ne of the most singular keyboardists in the history of jazz [...] It was almost as though jazz piano, under Basie's tutelage, stopped shouting and learned to talk, learned to banter and whisper, at times even hold its tongue in a silence that said more than the most high-flown oration” (163). Indeed, Count Basie and his orchestra redefined jazz and provided the foundation for the new language of modern swing music. Nevertheless, the orchestra’s repertoire of blues-based compositions and arrangements kept the African American vernacular traditions at the core of jazz, even as the music entered mainstream popular culture (Gioia 162-164). In addition to the tune’s popularity in the 1940s, “New Lester Leaps In” represents the practice of revision essential in Black art. This intermedial reference enables Brooks to further foreground the richness of Black vernacular culture and the importance of Signifying.

The stanza's fourth musical reference, another popular tune of the forties, is "Sentimental Reasons" first recorded by its author Deek Watson and His Brown Dots in 1945. As the genre evolved, the tune became a jazz standard included in the repertoire of many vocalists and instrumentalists to this day. The individual interpretations allow revision through repetition, a defining feature of Signifying which fosters the evolution of meaning and maintains the roots of Black language and music in vernacular expression.

Brooks's use of implicit and explicit musical references in "I love those little booths at Benvenuti's" serves the juxtaposition of reductive white expectations about Black entertainment and the authenticity, diversity, and richness of Black cultural expression and life in Bronzeville. The poem resists the objectifying white gaze by portraying Bronzeville's local people as active agents who "go firmly out of the door," refusing confinement within externally imposed roles. In turn, it is the white visitors who remain restricted to their booths. By means of this inversion of roles, Brooks not only subverts dominant racial discourse but also satirizes its absurdity, exposing the fragility of white voyeuristic desire. In light of the poem's referential system, the title's declared affection for the booths becomes an instance of irony. Brooks values the dedicated booths for white visitors as symbolic spaces that restrain their spectatorship while liberating Black self-expression, effectively turning the mechanism of the white gaze back upon its own agents. White visitors are left alone in their booths to enjoy the café's music undermining their expectations. The subversion of power dynamics is not uncommon in Brooks's work. As presented by the poems above, to assert agency, she consistently employs Black musical and oral traditions.

Her semi-autobiographical novel *Maud Martha*, first published in 1953, most distinctly exemplifies the musicality of Brooks's language relying on these traditions. With its poetic prose, the novel maintains Brooks's style and anticipates the aesthetic evolution in her later work. Its

complex socio-political themes, including poverty, racism, and inequalities within the Black community, are addressed not only by narratological means but also by the aesthetic choice of poeticizing her prose. This poeticization is exemplified by features of the black aesthetic including Signifying that relies on intermedial references to music, allusions to oral traditions, humor, and prosody.

Maud Martha is a collection of thirty-four short stories from a young Black woman's life. Each chapter is a fragment that depicts an everyday, seemingly insignificant event with such sensitivity to detail that it draws readers into the protagonist's life. The novel's stylistic qualities contribute to an authentic milieu, poetic voice, and narrative encouraging empathic resonance. As a piece of poetic prose, the novel can be described by narrative looseness allowing space for readers to inhabit the text and the complexities of meaning to evolve. Meanings are layered in tropes and figures of language that strongly appeal to auditory and visual senses. Brooks's attention to language also becomes evident in the musicality of her prose shaped by its prosody. She focuses deeply on internal landscapes, which lends emotional depth to the novel. Empathy towards the protagonist is primarily evoked by the text's introspection and evocative tone. These qualities align with the black aesthetic and contribute to Brooks's unveiling of the socio-economic situation of Black women and institutionalized racism. Despite *Maud Martha* being the poet's only novel, it remained undervalued by contemporary critics. As noted by Megan K. Ahern, "what little criticism has come out on this [...] novel is generally split between commentaries that discuss its understatement, its fragmented nature, and its 'limited' viewpoint and subject matter, and those that argue for reading these as symptoms of a suppressed rage" (313). Ahern herself, however, underlines that the novel has passages that "suggest irony, ambivalence, or a sort of [...] innocent sincerity with either implied or explicit protest" (313). In my analysis, I rely on this approach and argue that Brooks's aesthetic choices

of applying oral and musical features aid her in expressing resistance and drawing an authentic picture of Black womanhood.

Brooks's aversion to white supremacy is linked to the resilience in her portrayals of Chicago's Black community. She articulates her social criticism of Black people's intersectional disadvantages through aesthetic means that often invite emotional engagement. Chapter Twenty-three, "kitchenette folks", introduces the dwellers of the building that Maud Martha calls home through the protagonist's perspective. She ruminates whether she likes Mrs. Eugena Banks, a "white woman married to a West Indian who lived in the third-floor kitchenette next Maud Martha's own" (*Blacks* 254). She is unsure because of the woman's constant singing of the same popular tune "varying the choruses, using what undoubtedly were her own improvisations, for they were very bad" (254). The passage employs ironic understatement to disguise Maud Martha's strong judgment about the quality of Mrs. Banks's singing as a casual, humorous remark. The text benefits from the subversive nature of situational irony and implicitly refers to the difference between Black and white approaches to music. By describing the white Mrs. Banks's improvisation as bad, Brooks subverts the white rhetoric about Black music. Early critics often regarded the music of Black people with little or degrading commentary. As pointed out by Amiri Baraka, the first jazz critics were white "influenced [...] by the social and cultural mores of their own society. And it is only natural that their criticism [...] should be a product of that society" (*Black Music* 12). By identifying bad musical taste and skills with white people, Brooks racializes sound and attributes quality to Black music and musicians subverting the rhetoric of white criticism. The narrator's description justifies this in the statement "Maud Martha had her own ideas about popular songs", referring to the protagonist's inherently better taste in music (*Blacks* 254). In the passage, Signifying is constituted by situational irony and synesthetic imagery in Brooks's association of whiteness with unpleasant

sound. This white out-of-tuneness subverts the mainstream discourse about Blackness and Black music and underlines that in Black aesthetic terms, the sound of whiteness is “very bad”. Further on, the text reveals that Mrs. Banks uses singing to appeal to her West Indian husband.

This woman would come over, singing or humming her popular song, to see Maud Martha, wanting to know what special technique was to be used in dealing with a Negro man; a Negro man was a special type man; she knew that there should be [...] a special technique to be used with this type man, but what?

(Brooks 255)

The passage exemplifies a case of white racism. Mrs. Banks’s inauthentic imitation of Black culture through singing is a “special technique” to serve her husband, a “special type man”. Although seemingly without harmful intent, her approach highlights ethnic difference and racially discriminates. The character’s racist orientation is not only intra-marital but also targeted to her neighbor, Maud Martha, who is expected to teach her about the special treatment of Black men. The text carries on its situational irony which enfolds in the repetition of phrases (“special technique”, “special”, “Negro man”, “type man”). As a figure of Signifying, these phrasal repetitions develop and highlight the character’s racist attitude, and intensify Black otherness. In addition, they dictate the text’s rhythm, accelerating its flow which is abruptly stopped by a rhetoric question. Brooks ridicules white ignorance by this sudden break and by leaving the question unanswered. Maud Martha’s lack of contribution to Mrs. Banks’s quest suggests that there is no “special technique.” This ellipsis can be interpreted as a critical statement against the homogeneous treatment of Black people based on the color of their skin and an indirect acknowledgement of individual needs regardless of race.

The introduction of Mrs. Eugena Banks ends with a hint at the inherited patterns of racist behavior. She contemplates returning to her mother who ceased correspondence with her due to her interracial marriage: “Her own mother would not write to her; and she was, Mrs. Eugena

Banks whined, beginning to wonder if it had not all been a mistake; could she not go back to Dayton? could she not begin again?" (256). The anaphoric repetition of the phrase "could she not" and the iambic pulsation of the interrogatory clauses contribute to the text's lyricization that highlights Mrs. Banks's uncertainty about staying with her husband. The poetically playful style addressing the character's agony adds to Brooks's mockery of white prejudice and the situational irony developed in earlier passages.

In addition to prosody, the text's aesthetic is shaped by explicit references to the Black oral tradition and the use of African American Vernacular English. Among the kitchenette folks, the narrator introduces Clement Lewy, a little boy from the second floor who lives with his mother. He has the habit of entertaining himself with songs, poems, and stories. "At home he sang. He recited little poems. He told his mother little stories wound out of the air by himself" (256). His character represents life in poverty where one is left to their own devices, relying mostly on creativity, that cannot be measured in monetary terms. His introduction is an indirect reference to the importance of ephemerality in Black art. As discussed in Chapter Two, the ephemerality of music and spoken word was crucial in healing and maintaining Black cultural identity during times of slavery. As part of African American cultural heritage, the oral tradition remained an essential part of everyday life in Black communities and an inspiration for Black art. Although no longer subjected to the threat of slavery, in the twentieth century, Black inhabitants of cities often faced insurmountable economic disadvantages that led many into lives of poverty. Under such circumstances, music and literature remained accessible and vital forms of self-expression. As many Black children growing up in poverty, Clement Lewy discovered forms of imaginative play that required no financial resources from his single mother.

Creative expression however, does not only serve the self-amusement of children. It plays an essential part in the evolution of Black vernacular language. Through the character of Mrs. Teenie Thompson, the chapter presents the dynamics of vernacular language use. She works as the housemaid of North Shore people and always becomes “pepper” when she talks about her employers (*Blacks* 261).

“She went to huggin’ and kissin’ of me- course I got to receive it- I got to work for ‘em. But they think they got me thinkin’ they love me. Then I’m supposed to kill my silly self slavin’ for ‘em. To be worthy of their love. These old whi’ folks. They jive you, honey. Well, I jive ‘em just like they jive me. They can’t beat me jivin’. They’ll have to jive much, to come anywhere *near* my mark in jivin’.”

(261, original emphasis)

In addition to the characteristic grammar of African American Vernacular English and its phonetic imitation, the text is driven by a riff on the verb “jive”. According to the *Merriam Webster* online dictionary, “jive” derives from AAVE and originates from the 1920s. When used as a verb, it means “to say foolish, deceptive, or unserious things.” In the passage, it becomes a three-fold trope within a trope within a trope. On the meta-level, Brooks’s signifies on the use of AAVE, while her character, Mrs. Thompson, twists the meaning of jiving. The foundation of this semantic pyramid is the metaphor “jive” which stands for the verb “deceive”. The AAVE verb is in itself a trope signifying a word in American English. The second level of meaning relies on Mrs. Thompson’s repetition of the verb “jive” and its gerund form “jivin’” which develops a riff on the meaning the word. This meaning is intensified in the figurative battle of who jives who with the call-and-response alternation of personal pronouns “they” and “I”. Here, the focus is on the opposition of the Black housemaid and her employers in the competition of deceiving each other with seeming affection. The third level of Signifying happens on the text’s meta-level in Brooks’s rendition of vernacular language use. By means of Mrs. Thompson’s character and her use of AAVE, Brooks signifies the protest against “slavin’” for white people and Black self-

preservation through language. This artful meaning-making through Signifying is a major characteristic of the black aesthetic that helps criticizing the social dynamics between Black and white people in mid-twentieth-century urban America.

Brooks's aesthetic mediation of meaning manifests in sonic and visual dimensions inviting closer attention to the poetic nature of her novel. Chapter Thirty-three provides further examples of these qualities such as the imitation of music and the revision of western idioms and metaphors. The chapter's title "tree leaves leaving trees", anticipates the tension evolving through the narrative. Its playful tone develops from a riff on the homographic word stem of the plural noun "leaves" and the participial adjective "leaving". The tone conflicts metaphorical meanings that signify the impermanence of life. Although it is a story about a little girl's first encounter with Santa Claus, the title does not anticipate Christmas spirit. It rather foreshadows the fading of childhood illusions about the world. The story indeed thematizes a mother's struggle to preserve her daughter's belief in human goodness in a world where even Santa Claus is complicit in racial discrimination. As a result, the "tree leaves leaving trees" become symbols of a child's fading illusions. By approaching this matter with a playful tone, Brooks leverages the subversive nature of humor that shifts power dynamics. She signifies on the child's experience of racial discrimination by ignoring Christmas and instead validating the natural rhythm of passing.

The chapter opens with the enumeration of toys in a run-on sentence demonstrating Brooks's rhythmic virtuosity:

Airplanes and games and dolls and books and wagons and blackboards and boats and guns and bears and rabbits and pandas and ducks, and dogs and cats and gray elephants with black howdahs and rocking chairs and houses and play dishes and scooters and animal hassocks, and trains and trucks and yo-yos and telephones and balls and jeeps and jack-in-the-boxes and puzzles and rocking horses. And Santa Claus.

(Brooks 313)

This passage is a poetic imitation of improvisation. It is initially accelerated by the trochaic pulsation of alternating nouns and coordinating conjunctions. The regular rhythm is then broken by the preposition “with” in “elephants with black howdahs”. It decelerates the flow by continuing with nominal phrases and breaking the pattern of trochaic feet. This change in rhythm serves the gradual direction of the focalizer’s gaze to Santa Claus. While the initial fast pace signifies Paulette’s excitement about the presents, the text’s slowing rhythm guides her glance to Santa Claus. Her deceleration and arrival in a feeling of awe is marked by two full stops surrounding the phrase “And Santa Claus.” Rhythm, in this passage, signifies a child’s innocent excitement about Christmas, while also representing improvisatory practices in Black music, poetry, and the practice of Signifying. Oral tradition is further referenced by rhyming phrases such as “if a curl was golden and sleek enough he gave it a bit of a tug, and sometimes he gave its owner a bit of a hug” that maintain the text’s lyrical quality (314).

Rhythmic patterns and rhymes often serve the accentuation of poetic figures. In the lines “[h]er insides scampering like mice. And, leaving her eyeballs, diamonds and stars”, Brooks signifies on an idiom when describing Paulette’s anxious excitement about meeting Santa Claus (314). She revises the idiom “having butterflies in one’s stomach” as “her insides scampering like mice.” The scampering of mice is an unexpected metaphor to describe a child’s nervous excitement but the imagery of butterflies is inadequate to foreshadow the story’s events and anticipate Santa Claus’s interaction with Maud Martha and Paulette. He treats them with prejudiced contempt, as if they were mice: “Santa Claus’s neck turned with hard slowness, carrying his unwilling face with it” (315). As a result, “mice” serve as a metaphor for Paulette’s emotions and, more broadly, for the experience of Black people under racism. This experience is further depicted by the semantic contradiction between Brooks’s revisionary idiom and the

conventional metaphors “diamonds and stars” that refer to Paulette’s eyes. The contradiction contributes to the poetic representation of double consciousness and the tension shaping Black people’s reality in a racially divided society. The trope of Signifying contributes to Brooks’s semantic revision, the depiction of double consciousness, and her criticism of racial discrimination against Black children.

To express Maud Martha’s helplessness as a mother who has no means to protect her child, Brooks continues using references to music and orality. The following description illustrates the protagonist’s paralysis in the face of white supremacy: “There were these scraps of baffled hate in her, hate with no eyes, no smile and- this she regretted, called her hungriest lack- not much voice” (318). Sound and vocality are crucial means of self-expression in Black culture. Maud Martha’s lack of a voice to articulate hatred highlights both the absence of platforms for Black self-expression in white America and the fact that Black expressive traditions are oriented towards affirming Black love rather than articulating hatred toward white oppression. This interpretation is supported by the mother’s closing wish to maintain Paulette’s illusions about human goodness: “Keep her that land of blue!” While “land of blue” serves as a metaphor for an imaginary realm with dreamlike tranquility, African American literary context allows for its association with the blues idiom. Maud Martha’s wish signifies blues as a source of peace and a vehicle of Black self-expression that helps maintain cultural identity and regain lost voices.

Musicality and orality play a central role in Brooks’s novel, *Maud Martha*. Her poetic prose draws on the black aesthetic through its Signifying practices in prosody, humor, and references to Black musical and oral traditions. As the analyses show, Brooks portrays the realities of white supremacy, including racial prejudice and poverty in Black urban communities, while offering means of self-preservation through a carefully honed aesthetic. She relies on situational irony,

the revision of conventional meanings through Signifying, rhythmic structures that evoke music and oral performance, and the expressive capacities of African American Vernacular English. These aesthetic features remain inevitable in Brooks's poetics to maintain her authenticity and provide truthful representations of Black urban life. They lay the foundation of the poet's politicization of the poetic and pave her way to an overtly constructed Black Aesthetic that characterizes her later work.

Conclusion

*Sometimes in life
things seem to be moving
and they are not
and they are not
there.
You are there.*

*Your voice is the listened- for music.
Your act is the consolidation.*

Gwendolyn Brooks's dedication to the Black experience, and therefore to the human experience, made her a timeless poet whose legacy exceeds geographical borders. The above excerpt from "Young Heroes-II, To Don at Salaam" included in *Blacks* shows her moral stance on the alignment of one's voice and actions. I chose to quote these lines to provide a poetic explanation for the harmony of Brooks's aesthetic and values. Her aesthetic might "seem to be moving" through time but her social commitment and loyalty to the Black community never ceased. My thesis aimed at finding the aesthetic continuities in Brooks's work that maintain her authenticity and service to the Black community. Her early poetry demonstrates active engagement with the African American oral and musical tradition which anticipates the poet's overtly political voice supporting the Black Arts Movement.

In my analysis of Brooks's four poems and semi-autobiographical novel preceding and following her participation in the 1967 Fisk Writer's Conference, I found that the black aesthetic in her style consists largely of oral and musical features that maintain the legacy of these key elements in Black cultural expression.

In her two post-Fisk poems, the Black Aesthetic is evident. "The Wall" is shaped by musical references to African cultural heritage including onomatopoeia, sound imagery, rhythmic

patterns, and an explicit reference to Philip Cohran's music. A further trope of Signifying is repetition that serves a core function in the revision of meanings. Common to BAM writing, the poem is shaped by the spirit of Black communality. Continuing the Black Aesthetic practice "The Second Sermon on the Warpland" represents a combination of biblical and African creation myths. Phonetic and phrasal repetitions contribute to the poem's musical aesthetic which is most apparently signaled in a reference to singer Bessie Smith. These aesthetic features support the poem's encouragement of resisting hostile social circumstances.

The tendency of using Black oral and musical features to express social criticism is present in Brooks's pre-Fisk works, proving her aesthetic continuity and moral consistency. "Queen of the Blues" is shaped by the blues idiom and a revisionary approach to the ballad form. While translating musical structure, tonality, and theme into poetry, Brooks salutes the legacy and role of Black female singers, and women, in their communities. Signifying serves as a tool for subverting power dynamics similarly in "I Love Those Little Booths at Benvenuti's". The poem confronts racism with humor to criticize segregation, white voyeurism, and the objectification of Black bodies. Here, implicit and explicit musical references serve the juxtaposition of Black and white culture. This contrast also appears in Brooks's novel, *Maud Martha*. The novel's poetic prose allows the complexities of meaning to unfold from the text's musicality, rhythm, and poetic figures. Alongside renditions of vernacular speech, Brooks employs references to music and oral tradition to continue Black cultural legacy. She maintains her humor as a key element of Signifying that aids revision and sheds light on the intersectional struggles of Black women.

References to Black oral and musical traditions remain constant throughout Brooks's oeuvre, and their significance only becomes more apparent when explicitly politicized in her post-1967 works. In her aesthetic evolution, Brooks's commitment to her community and to the

cause of social justice remains persistent, allowing the interpretation that her early work also served a political purpose. Rather than her guiding principle, it was the context that shifted and nurtured a more authentic and overtly political voice.

The significance of my contribution lies in my approach to Brooks's figurative language, prosody, and formalisms using theories of Black literary criticism, including Black Aesthetic theory and the semantics of Signifying. They aided me in finding authentic explanations for the poet's aesthetic choices and the role of oral and musical features in her work. Prosodic and stylistic analyses exist in Black literary criticism, but it is not a dominant method. The most popular approaches to Black literature include critical race theory, Black feminist and womanist criticism, ecocriticism, and diaspora theory. I find it most interesting how these theories complement each other and contribute to a fuller interpretation of texts. I touched upon critical race theory and Black feminism to show how Brooks expresses social criticism against intersectional problems in aesthetic terms. Signifying with figurative language, prosody, and form that reference Black oral and musical traditions does not exist arbitrarily in Brooks's work, but maintain cultural legacy, transform Black self-expression, and shape the collective conscious in the context of racial oppression.

The limitations of my research include the absence of a thorough semantic analysis and the lack of a nuanced interdisciplinary approach that Brooks's work invites. Future research may target an overarching intermedial scrutiny of Brooks's work, her performance art, and Black music, leading to a wider study of contemporary Black oral performance culture. Spoken-word performance practices are part of what Dr. Carole Boyce Davies in a recent lecture called "uprising textualities." In her discussion of political radicalisms today, she referred to the work of Audre Lorde who connects creative energy with resistance. In the age of neoliberal capitalism fueled by new forms of colonialism, the media's deliberate exclusion of marginal

social groups, and the normalization of racial discrimination, art remains a form of resistance against the domination of global hegemonies. It is artists like Gwendolyn Brooks who laid the foundations of a tradition that helps surviving this permanent revolution.

30,778 words

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Appendix

English abstract

This thesis examines the poetics of Gwendolyn Brooks from an aesthetic perspective. It proposes that Brooks's early poetry, prior to her participation in the Second Annual Fisk Writers Conference in 1967, preserves African American oral and musical traditions and anticipates the prevalence of the Black Aesthetic in her later work. The study relies on the aesthetic and prosodic scrutiny of Brooks's pre-1967 writings, as well as two of her later poems. It offers close readings and close listenings of "Queen of the Blues," "I Love Those Little Booths at Benvenuti's," *Maud Martha*, "The Wall," and "The Second Sermon on the Warpland" from the collection *Blacks*. Approaching these texts through the lens of Black Aesthetic theory and the semantic theory of Signifying reveals that oral and musical aesthetic features significantly shape Brooks's poetics and support the poet's self-preservation and expression of social criticism. The thesis proves that Brooks consistently engages these traditions to demonstrate her political awareness from the early stages of her career. Her post-Fisk affiliation with the Black Arts Movement reflects an aesthetic evolution and the poet's moral commitment to addressing social problems affecting Black people.

Deutsches Abstrakt

Diese Thesis untersucht die Poetik von Gwendolyn Brooks aus einer ästhetischen Perspektive. Sie vertritt die These, dass Brooks' frühe Lyrik, vor ihrer Teilnahme an der Second Annual Fisk Writers Conference im Jahr 1967, afroamerikanische orale und musikalische Traditionen bewahrt und zugleich das spätere Aufkommen der Schwarze Ästhetik in ihrem Werk vorwegnimmt. Die Studie stützt sich auf die ästhetische und prosodische Analyse von Brooks' Schriften vor 1967 sowie auf zwei ihrer späteren Gedichte. Sie bietet text- und klangnahe Analysen von „Queen of the Blues“, „I Love Those Little Booths at Benvenuti's“, *Maud Martha*, „The Wall“ und „The Second Sermon on the Warpland“ aus dem Band *Blacks*. Die Betrachtung dieser Texte durch die Theorie der Schwarzen Ästhetik sowie der semantischen Theorie des Signifyings zeigt, dass orale und musikalische ästhetische Merkmale Brooks' Poetik wesentlich prägen und zu ihren Praktiken der Selbstbehauptung und sozialen Kritik beitragen. Die Thesis belegt, dass Brooks diese Traditionen konsequent nutzt, um ihre politische Bewusstheit bereits in den frühen Phasen ihrer Karriere auszudrücken. Ihre post-Fisk-Verbundenheit mit der Black Arts Movement spiegelt sowohl eine ästhetische Fortentwicklung als auch ihr moralisches Engagement wider, soziale Probleme anzusprechen, die Schwarze Menschen in der U.S.A. betreffen.