

“Ab-Soul’s Outro,” “HiiiPower,” and the Vernacular:

Kendrick Lamar’s Rap As Literature

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for graduation  
in the Honors Program  
Liberty University  
Spring 2015

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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## Abstract

Kendrick Lamar's "Ab-Soul's Outro" and "HiiiPower" employ complex patterns of Signifyin(g), testifyin', and other classical African-American literary tropes in order to construct a nuanced style. Lamar creates a double-voiced text not only within his narrative, but also within the form itself. Lamar plays on rap's unique status in African-American literature as an oral text; it is an extension of the vernacular. Through this oral text, Lamar decentralizes the Eurocentric focus of classical interpretation and qualification of literature to a new Afrocentric perspective that privileges the oral text. These raps are complex, wrapped up in their current context along with a deeply rooted historical and literary context. Closely read, the raps function as liminal texts, straddling the horizons of music and literature as well as the horizons of white and black literary conventions. Because of this complexity, Lamar's tracks transcend the techniques of interpretation readily applicable to music and thus can be classified as literature.

“Ab-Soul’s Outro,” “HiiiPower,” and the Vernacular: Kendrick Lamar’s Rap As  
Literature

*Listen to James Brown scream. Ask yourself, then: Have you ever heard a Negro poet scream like that? Of course not, because we have been tied to the texts, like most white poets. The text could be destroyed and no one would be hurt in the least by it. The key is in the music. Our music has always been far ahead of our literature. Actually, until recently, it was our only literature.* – Larry Neal, “And the Shine Swam On”

In the last two tracks of his 2011 work, *Section.80*, Kendrick Lamar weaves a singular text by deploying African-American vernacular literary tropes. Lamar’s *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* (2012) is hailed as “more than a great album; it was a landmark event, a modern masterpiece to rival *Illmatic*, *Reasonable Doubt*, and *Doggystyle*” (“Turn the Page”). Emblematic rappers such as Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, and Nas sing the two-time Grammy award winning artist’s praise. Critically-praised rapper Nas stated in a 2014 interview, “Kendrick shook up the rap game,” and by 2013, “MTV had named Lamar the Hottest MC and Complex declared him the Best Rapper Alive” (“Turn the Page”). Lamar’s praise is founded primarily in his complex style, which lends itself to literary interpretation because of the deployment of African-American poetic forms and literary tropes. His tracks “Ab-Soul’s Outro”—featuring fellow Top Dawg Entertainment lablemate, Ab-Soul—and “HiiiPower” on *Section.80* (2011) are explicit in their ideology and in their deployment of various tropes. While most of Lamar’s body of work deploys some sort of African-American literary tropes, these two tracks, connected by testifyin’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term testifyin’ is spelled in this manner to separate it from the white literary trope of testifying. Testifyin’ refers to the African-American oral form of communication that finds its genesis in the church. Testifying refers to the general practice of giving testimony or statement.

and structured by Signifyin(g),<sup>2</sup> use multiple tropes and forms. Thus these texts are an excellent example of how rap, and more specifically Lamar's rap, can be interpreted as literature.<sup>3</sup>

### **Postmodern Poetics and the Black Voice in Lamar's Rap Texts**

"Ab-Soul's Outro" and "HiiiPower" advocate a literary deconstruction that privileges Afrocentric literary tradition, replacing the Eurocentric literary tradition. Lamar's speaker distinctly urges the audience to refocus its perspective from the European literary tradition to the African. He advocates a poetic theory that places itself within in a separate tradition than that of the European, one that carries the flavor and voice of the black subject. Lamar essentially creates a diasporic aesthetic,<sup>4</sup> one that finds its origins situated in African religious myths, transferred in the bowels of slave ships, and grown in the cotton fields of the American South. Such a tradition deconstructs the idea of a mainstream American canon that is devoid of the black voice by refocusing the African-American literary tradition as a double-voiced text both within the Afro- and Eurocentric traditions. By advocating his audiences to "get off that slave ship / Build your own pyramids, write your own hieroglyphs," Lamar is suggesting that the linguistic

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<sup>2</sup> This spelling is borrowed from Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* in order to differentiate from "signifying," the critical term used to denote signs, referents, and symbols.

<sup>3</sup> The use of the term "literature" here does completely deny the presence of a text, as in Stanley Fish's "there is no text in this class," but it also does not limit the text to just form. Literature is the organization of words into a stable text, whether in literate or oral form.

<sup>4</sup> The term "diasporic aesthetic" refers to the artistic standard to which dispersed peoples of African descent must attend. It is naturally two-voiced, carrying African heritage along with its new situation. In America, the diasporic aesthetic in literature refers to the retention of African oral roots along with the adoption of new American (and consequently European) literary standards.

sign of blackness is found in both the Afrocentric and Eurocentric traditions. It is, in essence, both African and American.

Lamar's rap is heavily situated in the African-American poetic tradition, which privileges the written vernacular as a marriage of African and European forms. Blyden Jackson, African-American poetry scholar, suggests that "the black American poets are molded, too, by their own black tradition, by voices from their own black past, by a sense in black poet after black poet of what black poetry was before each of them came to add his, or her, peculiar bit to it" (xiii). This complex chain of poetics plays upon the idea that a diasporic aesthetic must contain strong thematic elements of blackness. Toni Morrison, struggling with the issue of creating a black poetic style within a Eurocentric tradition with European language, says, "I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language which are by no means marginal or already completely known and knowable in my work" (x-xi). Because of the subversive nature of using the language of the oppressor to create a style, African-American poetics carry a distinct flavor of poetry that is wholly different from the European standard.

In order to achieve distinction and separation, black poets must deform and reform conventional European poetry to suit their own blackness. Winston Napier states, "In the proto-deconstructive spirit of a trickster, African American slaves, for example, constantly had to deform signature, sign, and context, in order to undermine and survive in a world where . . . laws negated the racial equality of black being" (7). Thus this deconstruction and subsequent deformation of literary form gave birth to a style of

language that privileged the vernacular over the highly florid literary language of the European tradition. African-American poets used the language of the oppressor to create a style of the oppressed. No longer was the “literary English of the poetry of idealism a suitable vehicle; its demands, expectations, and vocabulary were alien to the racial idiom. The model must instead be the folk tradition of black America itself, with its own cadences and metaphors” (Rubin 22). By employing vernacular revisions of black texts, Lamar situates his text in earlier forms of poetic discourse. Stephen Henderson charts the morphology of African-American poetics as follows:

	History→		Music→	
Formal:	Literary Ballads	Odes	Short formal lyrics	Free verse Experimental
Folk:	Worksongs Ballads	Blues	Seculars <sup>5</sup>	Blues Spirituals Worksongs Ballads <sup>6</sup>

Thus the formation of African-American poetics began at the “folk” level of work songs and ballads, and moved to the blues, to seculars, and eventually to “free verse” and “experimental” works. Consequently, the ideal black poem deploys some—if not all—of these classical African-American forms.

However, Lamar’s situation within the black poetic tradition is not sufficient in the African-American literary tradition to be considered literature, for a text must be

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<sup>5</sup> The term “seculars” refers to non-religious African-American oral communication. Geneva Smitherman, urban linguist, divides African-American linguistic communication into two categories: “Very broadly speaking . . . we can think of black language as having both a sacred and a secular style. The sacred style is rural and Southern . . . grounded in the black church tradition and black religious experience” (76), and “in the secular context, the subject matter includes such matters as . . . experiences attesting to the racist power of the white oppressor” (150).

<sup>6</sup> Found on p. 107 of “Saturation: Progress Report on a Theory of Black Poetry”

double-voiced,<sup>7</sup> including nods to European tradition and form. In reference to the literary conflict of the black poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar states

He [the black American] needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow of the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment

(Dunbar qtd. in Rubin 22).

Thus a distinctly African-American text must contain—to borrow Sartre's term—the *négritude*<sup>8</sup> of a text alongside its American-ness. The African-American vernacular tradition is held within the performative aspect of the rap text, and the European idea of the text is held within rap's stable core. In other words, "although power is located in the oral presentation of rap, rap rhymes are not the 'fixed, rhythmically balanced expressions' . . . but rhymes constructed in linear, literate (written) patterns. They are

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<sup>7</sup> The term "double-voiced" is borrowed from Bakhtin. It refers to the concept that language is always taken from others in order to make meaning, and more specifically, speech is an act of appropriation. Therefore any speaker has at once two voices: his own and that which he is appropriating.

<sup>8</sup> This term was appropriated by Sartre (and re-appropriated later by Fanon) in his 1948 treatise "Orphée Noir" in order to describe the inequities in Twentieth-century Paris regarding black intellectuals. His treatise had a "role in shaping the discourses and debates surrounding *négritude* and the relationship of black intellectuals to the rest of French society" (Jules-Rossette 265). The term is significant here because Sartre used it to describe the philosophical issues behind the movement in which black intellectuals sought to find their own voice in the midst of a dialectic dominated by French-Europeans. Since Sartre was a French European himself, the fact that *négritude* is most often attributed to his works is an example of the issue of French-European dialectical dominance.

rhymes, written down first, memorized, and recited orally” (Rose 88). Thus rap is not part of the purely oral tradition of Homer’s epics, which were not written down before they were performed. Rap is instead functions as a text of literate orality, of written performance.

As a result, rap represents an oral presentation of written literature, or a presentation of black vernacular merged with the European aspect of authorship and written text. Rose states, “[R]ap lyrics are the voice of the composer and the performer. Rap fuses literate concepts of authorship with orally based constructions of thought, expression and performance” (87). Therefore rap as a form accomplishes the goals of the black poet: making a black form out of white words. It deploys the performance and construction of orality and yet still retains structure and organization through literacy. One example of this is through the black use of tone. African-American subjects speak with a tongue “caught between a tone language (i.e., their native African tongue) and a “toneless” language (i.e., the English they were forced to adopt)” (135). Therefore they have to navigate the importance of tone in black linguistic heritage with the pressure of speaking English in America. As a result, “the Africanized English speakers seem to have mediated this linguistic dilemma by retaining in their cultural consciousness the abstract African concept of tone while applying it to English in obviously different ways” (Smitherman 135). Rap functions as an example of this use of tone. It retains the importance of tonality in African-American communication without sacrificing the literacy of European communication. It essentially bridges the gap. Lamar’s cadences reflect this linear stream of the poetic tradition and its two-ness, and his rap is situated well within the modern development of a black aesthetic.

Inserting this two-ness into his rap, Lamar plays on the white and black literary duality, recognizing that using the African-American form of rap with the idea of a stable, written text advocates for a new idea of an African-American text—the rap text. The idea of the rap text is referred to in his work as “hieroglyphs,” which are literally visual signs of literary concepts. Rap itself is an oral manifestation of literary concepts. His claimed creation of African-American language as hieroglyphics signifies the liminality of his text—it has one foot in European tradition and one in African. Lamar’s voice reflects this conflict as well, struggling to use white language to represent black experience. He reinforces the danger of using white language for black expression when he says, “I want everybody to view my autopsy / So you can see exactly where the government had shot me / No conspiracy my fate is inevitable / They play musical chairs once I’m on that pedestal” (“HiiiPower”). The pedestal signifies his voice, and he claims that the government will react violently to this acquisition of subjectivity. In other words, Lamar’s use of white signs to gain voice and subjectivity is a dangerous endeavor, for its consequence is clear—if Lamar continues his endeavor for a voice, he will pay with his life.

By punning these white signs, Lamar deforms the expected forms of truth and reality. Lamar suggests, “My issue isn’t televised and you ain’t gotta tell the wise / how to stay on beat, because our life’s an instrumental... / and everything on TV just a figment of imagination / I don’t want no plastic nation” (“HiiiPower”). By deconstructing the typical form of American truth—television—Lamar is calling for a new form of truth through the presence of his voice and subjectivity. He is acting as a deconstructive figure, renaming truth, just as in the black literary tradition.

Lamar's text both deconstructs and reconstructs the black aesthetic to include signs of whiteness and blackness. His voice is doubled, and his form is liminal. By employing both African-American literary techniques and European concepts of authorship and stable, written texts, Lamar marries the concepts of an Afrocentric and Eurocentric tradition. His text is truly African and American, and he demonstrates this dual identity through his deployment of the vernacular and black oral traditions in the text.

**A Case Study of the Two-Toned Voice: Bakhtin's Dialogisms, Du Bois' Veil, and  
Lamar's Text**

In both "Ab-Soul's Outro" and "HiiiPower," Lamar's speaker echoes the techniques of Bakhtin's double-voicedness and Du Bois's double-consciousness to create a complex literary narrative. Bakhtin's double-voicedness is the idea that writing, in essence, is the apropos appropriation of someone else's language, which creates a subject with two influences—that of the self and that of the other. Du Bois claims that the black subject operates in two-toned discourse by necessity. At all times, African-American discourse contains black signs through white language, and thus every black subject must negotiate black and white discursivity. Lamar takes these two influences—the double-voice in writing and the double-consciousness of the black subject—and fuses them, creating a black text that is two-toned.

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism is a key concept in Lamar's creation of the black text. Bakhtin states, "Language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the presence"

(676). This is the heteroglossia of black text, the double-voicedness that is implicit in every black text from Wheatley to Hurston to Lamar. The manner of the black referent itself in vernacular discourse uses white language to signify itself. It represents the 'contradiction' of blackness, the struggle to find subjectivity in narrative discourse that uses white language.

Lamar presents this struggle fairly consistently in "Ab-Soul's Outro." The unnamed speaker raps, "Eat your fast food, use your fluoride toothpaste / Hide your feelings from the public, work your lil' nine-to-five / Don't forget to pay your tithes and thank God you alive." The speaker is appropriating white symbols of wealth—dining out, over-attention to hygiene, privacy, stable employment, and religious involvement—in order to show their futility. Engaging in critical dialogue of these practices, he does not criticize them externally; that is he does not say, "White people are hypocrites for whitewashing their life and ignoring my reality of poverty and death." Rather, he takes white language and appropriates it for his own use. This track shows that "the word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (Bakhtin 677). This is key in understanding Lamar's struggle for subjectivity. In order to gain voice, he must draw from signs of whiteness and subsequently deconstruct those signs in order to critique them.

To exemplify the linguistic complexity of this process, the speaker employs the dialogism again in the second half of the text, "What's your life about? Enlighten me / is you gon' live on your knees or die on your feet? / Take out that student loan and pay off your college degree / and do exactly what you see on TV" (Lamar "Ab-Soul's Outro").

There is a distinct double-voice present in this passage, particularly in the linguistic choices of the two lines. The juxtaposition of “is you gon’ live on your knees or die on your feet” and “Take out that student loan and pay off your college degree” demonstrates Bakhtin’s dialogism through the shift from the black vernacular to “proper” language. The speaker uses the vernacular—“is you gon’”—to communicate an idea of blackness, that servitude and objectivity is not an option for the black subject. However, once the speaker enters into Bakhtinian dialogism, he switches to white language, “take out that student loan and pay off your college degree,” to critique the security of college that is not universally available. There is a hybridity in the construction of these two passages.

Bakhtin promotes a similar hybrid construction in his criticism. He proposes, “What we are calling hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ‘languages,’ two semantic and axiological belief systems” (680). The text is hybrid in its employment of black and white signs in conjunction with one another. This hybridity not only creates a double-voiced text that is in a sense bilingual, but it also critiques the white sign in a similar manner to Dickens’ sociopolitical subversion in *Little Dorrit*. Just as Dickens uses “a parodic stylization of the language of ceremonial speeches” in which “the speech of another is introduced into the author’s discourse in concealed form,” the speaker introduces parodic white discourse to play off the expected vernacular (Bakhtin 679). Using the vernacular or “low” language in close juxtaposition to white or “proper” language issues a scathing critique of the latter, for it is the black voice that is speaking both. The speaker in the text is the single black subject who is manipulating “two speech

manners, two styles, two 'languages'" in order to critique whiteness in its exclusion of blackness. Lamar employs this technique to create a highly literary and intertextual style (intertextual in the sense of discourse power), one that employs the voice of white language to grant subjectivity to the black speaker.

Lamar also employs double-consciousness in his narrative to develop a two-toned voice. The second speaker in "Ab-Soul's Outro" testifies, "See a lot of y'all don't understand Kendrick Lamar / because you wonder how I could talk about money, hoes, clothes, God, and history / all in the same sentence / you know what all them things have in common? / Only half of the truth, if you tell it." Here Lamar's second speaker, speaking as Lamar himself, hoists himself into a discussion of double-consciousness, Du Bois's idea that the black literary voice must not only mitigate black literature with its traditions and conventions but also white literature and its traditions and conventions. Du Bois states, "[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (2). Lamar recognizes this theory, that discourse power for the black voice must be acquired through a balancing of double-consciousness. In "HiiiPower" Lamar raps, "Last time I checked we was racing with Marcus Garvey / on the freeway to Africa 'til I wrecked my Audi." The reference to Garvey symbolizes the black realm of consciousness, particularly with his African/Jamaican/Black American heritage. He is, in essence, the ultimate sign of blackness.

In juxtaposition to Garvey is the Audi, representing privilege and wealth as well as European origin. Lamar is playing with the concept that his black and white discursive

properties are in opposition to each other; there is an internal conflict between the two. Du Bois states, "One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (2). Indeed Lamar's speaker feels this too in "HiiiPower," for he is threatened by those trying to silence his black voice: "Frightening, so fucking frightening / Enough to drive a man insane, a woman insane, the reason Lauryn Hill don't sing, or Kurt Cobain / loaded that clip and then said 'Bang!' / it drives these brains crazy." Lamar presents the speaker as a tortured being, torn between his two voices, placed behind a veil. He experiences "the double-aimed struggle of the black artisan—on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde" (Du Bois 3). This double-voice in the narrative is a necessary presence for it to be qualified as African-American literature, for the unique status of the African American in the United States merits a two-toned literary voice.

Such a two-toned literary voice is found also in Lamar's repeated hook in "HiiiPower." His speaker raps, "I be off the slave ship / building pyramids, writing my own hieroglyphs." Lamar employs the vernacular in the first line to capture his black subjectivity, but he also applies a historical black sign in "hieroglyphs." He is playing on the sign of black speech in hieroglyphics that was first deployed by Zora Neale Hurston: "The white man thinks in written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" (32). Lamar's revision of "hieroglyphics" into the black vernacular "hieroglyphs" transforms this pastiche into a vernacular revision; that is, it better represents the complexity of black speech. This particular sign is important because hieroglyphics are the merging of black

historicity and white literacy. The sign of the hieroglyph itself is representative of twoness, particularly in the voice of the speaker. Du Bois states, "This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius . . . the shadow of a mighty Negro past flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx" (5). The historicity of the Egyptian linguistic sign of blackness is utterly important to the concept of double-consciousness, because in order to communicate the concept, the speaker must use white language (writing) in a black form (rapping). The speaker merges the written, the oral, and the pictorial in a depiction of the black sign of hieroglyphics. The sign appears twice more, once as a command, "so get up off that slave ship / Build your own pyramids, write your own hieroglyphs," and once as a boast, "cause we been off them slave ships, / got our own pyramids write our own hieroglyphs" ("HiiiPower"). This extended metaphor of black writing and the black subject demonstrates Lamar's commitment to the reality of double-consciousness. He deploys this concept throughout his work and does so to create a nuanced, two-toned text.

However, double-voicedness and double-consciousness present themselves differently in the writings of Bakhtin and Du Bois, and this distinction can be found in Lamar's rap text. Bakhtinian literary theory chides authoritarian literature for not being open to double voice and privileges the double-voiced text because "the semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever new ways to mean" (Bakhtin 685). In other words, the appropriation and expropriation of language promotes

the positive creation of meaning. Thus, double-voicedness is a positive result of creativity and language appropriation.

Du Bois, on the other hand, suggests that double-consciousness and the appropriation of language are necessitated by racist oppression. Double-consciousness was discovered when the black subject “sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back, that dead-weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem. He felt his poverty; without a cent, without a home, without land, tools, or savings, he had entered into competition with rich, landed, skilled neighbors” (Du Bois 4). Double-consciousness, then, is a result of oppression, of poverty, of a burden, and is the problem that all African-American subjects must encounter. The concept of double-consciousness is particularly interesting because Lamar incorporates both elements rather expertly in his narrative. He incorporates the positive aspect of double voice in “Ab-Soul’s Outro”: “started HiiiPower because our generation needed a generator / in a system made to disintegrate us,” and in the negative aspect of double-consciousness in “HiiiPower” in the lines of government assassination quoted above. Voice, then, in its duality has whiteness and blackness; it both advocates and warns against the issues of double-voice and double-consciousness. In this synthesis, the narrative creates another layer of duality, bridging the white voice of Bakhtin and the black voice of Du Bois.

This discussion of Du Bois and Bakhtin is integral to the qualification of the Lamar’s rap as literature. Underlying the concept of double-voicedness and double-consciousness is the idea that there is a new ideal of literature, one that must include the black voice, for “what we are asking for is a new synthesis; a new sense of literature as a living reality” (Neal 78). The white accepted spectrum of literature must accommodate

for the black subject's voice by synthetically incorporating elements of the black tradition within white literary tradition. Linguistically, "the experiences of Black and white speakers of English are so bifurcated that it is hard to conceive of a criticism that does not deal with the fundamental distinctions raised by a concern with language" (Baker, "On Criticism of Black American Literature" 123). Bakhtin incorporates the synthesis, and Du Bois incorporates the difference in order to create a fully nuanced African-American text. The conglomeration of whiteness and blackness creates

black texts [that] are "mulattoes" (or "mulatas"), with a two-toned heritage: these texts speak in standard Romance or Germanic languages and literary structures, but almost always speak with a distinct and resonant accent, and accent that Signifies (upon) the various black vernacular literary traditions.

(Gates, "Introduction to *The Signifying Monkey*" 343)

This accented language, or even double language, is that which is deployed in Lamar's narrative. In Ab-Soul's "Outro" and "HiiiPower" Lamar takes elements of both types of discourse and inserts them into his text, thus creating a performative work of African American literature.

### **Vernacular Poetics: Lamar's Rap and Signifyin(g)**

The vernacular tradition in African-American literature is integral to the definition and qualification of Lamar's rap as literature. Lamar captures the vernacular tradition not only in his inclusion of black oral literary tropes in his text, but also in his treatment of orality and the importance of it in the creation of his rap. Discussion of Lamar's text as a vernacular or oral text takes its cues primarily from Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The*

*Signifying Monkey*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines the trope of Signifyin(g) “as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality, within the Afro-American literary tradition” (341). Signifyin(g) is the troping of a trope, or the use of the style and language of another black text in order to create a new, intertextual text. In black oral culture, this often manifests itself in the form of “Playing the Dozens” which is signaled by the revised repetition of insults and boasts. Such use of the vernacular demonstrates that the “vernacular tradition’s relation to a formal literary tradition is that of a parallel discursive universe” (342). In other words, a black text must contain elements of both the oral and the “literate” tradition<sup>9</sup> because it exists in parallel discursive privilege.

To Gates, the black author acts as the African-American trickster figure, The Signifying Monkey, who uses mastery of language and rhetorical tropes to trick his predator, the Lion. He also compares the Signifying Monkey to the Yoruba folk-trickster, Esu Elegba: “Whereas Esu serves as a figure for the nature and function of interpretation and double-voiced utterance, the Signifying Monkey serves as the figure-of-figures, as the trope in which are encoded several other peculiarly black rhetorical tropes” (341). In other words, black vernacular discourse is founded upon the troping of other tropes, or the use of language to interact with others’ use of language. Gates’ ideas of Signifyin(g) can be broken up into two sub-categories based on their interactions with other texts: monotextual and intertextual Signifyin(g).

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<sup>9</sup> The term “literate” here implying a physically written work, not implying the inability to read or write a written work.

Since the Trope of the Talking Book<sup>10</sup> arose in the early slave narratives, the vernacular and orality of African-American texts is privileged over the purely “literary” components of the accepted American canon. Thus the “text” of the African-American writer appears differently than that of the white writer, resulting in the presence of oral tropes. Through the use of monotextual and intertextual Signifyin(g), the black author creates a text that is strongly situated in the vernacular tradition. Monotextual Signifyin(g) represents the mastery of language, and intertextual Signifyin(g) represents the mastery of rhetoric. The black author must deploy methods of black communication in order to create a text in the vernacular. Rap, in its performative nature, deploys Signifyin(g), creating a verbal text. This, along with a postmodern shift in the definition of African-American literature, opens up the scope of the critical definition of literature to include such oral texts as rap. Graham, in her essay dealing with the shifting framework of postmodern black literature, states, “The foremost challenge we face in our critical and pedagogical practice is the ability of our current frameworks to capture the changing definition of what African American literature is and whom it serves” (57). Essentially, with the entrance of postmodern forms, such as rap, and with the shifting thematic framework from liberation to freedom in black texts, the definition of literature is shifting as well.

### **Monotextual Signifyin(g)**

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<sup>10</sup> “The Trope of the Talking Book” is an early African-American literary trope that arose in slave narratives. Slaves would see their masters and ministers reading the Bible or a popular novel, and they would think that the book was talking to them. When slaves themselves tried to make the book “talk,” it would not. Thus the Trope of the Talking Book found its way into the slave narrative, serving as a symbol for literacy and thus subjectivity, for slaves could not truly find subjectivity until they could read and write.

Lamar heavily employs monotextual Signifyin(g) in his text in order to deploy a literate orality within it. Within monotextual Signifyin(g)<sup>11</sup> lies testifyin', an African-American vernacular trope in which a speaker breaks from the narrative, or in this case rap discourse, to linguistically set apart a section of the text. Testifyin' began in the black church and secured itself as a trope in African-American literature because of its frank separation from the rest of a text and its deployment of the vernacular. Testifyin', as a sacred<sup>12</sup> form, gives the speaker an opportunity to bridge the gap between the speaker and the audience. Essentially, "to testify is to tell the truth through 'story' . . . In the sacred context, the subject of testifyin' includes such matters as visions, prophetic experiences, the experience of being saved, and testimony to the power and goodness of God" (Smitherman 150). Along with his deployment of testifyin', Lamar also demonstrates "The Dozens"—which is similar to the toast, an intricate braggadocious speech that puts down another speaker. The Dozens is a popular form of the Signifyin(g) in which the speakers create a complex boast by using language with great dexterity and revising the toast of the other speaker.

The most popular form of this type of Signifyin(g) is the "yo mama" toast. According to Tricia Rose in *Black Noise*, "The most frequent style of rap was a variation on the toast, a boastful, bragging, form of oral storytelling sometimes explicitly political and often aggressive, violent, and sexist in content. Musical and oral predecessors to rap music encompass a variety of vernacular artists . . ." (55). This classic black trope is

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<sup>11</sup> Monotextual Signifyin(g) is a term that I have created to denote the difference between Signifyin(g) that deals only with oral forms that are present in the text. Monotextual Signifyin(g) is opposed to intertextual Signifyin(g), which deals with oral forms revised and repeated from other texts.

<sup>12</sup> This term is borrowed from Geneva Smitherman's distinction of the sacred and the secular in African-American discourse.

demonstrated in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Peter Wheatstraw explicitly demonstrates this trope in his Signifyin(g) on the Invisible Man:

All it takes to get along in this here man's town is a little shit, grit, and mother-wit. And man, I was bawn with all three. In fact, I'maseventhsonof aseventhsonbawnwithacaulovertbotheyesandraisedonblackcatboneshighjohntheconquerorandgreasygreens . . . You dig me daddy?"

(Ellison 176)

This lyrical, loosely formed rhyming structure is typical of The Dozens and is deployed to humiliate the subject of the toast. Rose states, "Regardless of thematics, pleasure and mastery in toasting and rapping are matters of control over the language, the capacity to outdo competition, the craft of the story, mastery of rhythm, and the ability to rivet the crowd's attention" (55). The ability to use language dexterously is invaluable in African-American poetics, and thus the linguistically complex forms of testifyin' and The Dozens are primary forms of monotextual Signifyin(g).

Lamar begins monotextual Signifyin(g) in his troping of the Holy Trinity. Ab-Soul's speaker raps, "There's a fire in the streets, fire in the swisher / fire in between the two legs of your little sister" (Lamar, "Ab-Soul's Outro"). The trinity is presented, but instead of the Father (the creator), the Son (the Savior), and the Holy Ghost (the Counselor), there is the fire in the streets, a fire which is the creation of the bleak community conditions; the fire in the swisher, a double pun that suggests that marijuana and alcohol are the ways that the speaker 'saves' himself; and the fire in the little sister, an insult suggesting that the audience's sister is the source of the speaker's sexual guidance. The speaker, using the trinity present in rapper Kanye West's track "The Joy,"

then tropes upon his first trinity, “one, two, three, four grams, and a fifth of Hennessy / a bad bitch.” This trinity revises the first, but in the new context it implies a form of separation by juxtaposing this trinity with the line “Uncle Sam ain’t no kin to me.” This line suggests that marijuana, alcohol, and a woman are what separate the speaker from presumably white America represented by Uncle Sam. Marijuana is the source of creativity and thus creation (the Father), alcohol the savior (the Son), and women the source of guidance (the Holy Ghost). It also is a distinct nod to Kanye West’s track, which names the trinity as marijuana, alcohol, and women. This trinity is his trinity of differentiation.

Lamar then takes this repetition of the trinity and revises it for his own uses later in the same text. His speaker raps, “I’m not on the outside looking in, I’m not on the inside looking out, I’m in the dead fuckin’ center looking around.” This trinity actually acts as a metaphor itself of Signifyin(g). Lamar is not on the outside looking in (the white voice), or on the inside looking out (the black voice), but he is in the center, which suggests that he is at the intersection of discourse; he is intertextuality. The speaker himself claims to lie at the center of this fulcrum. Lamar re-tropes the Trinity one last time in the text as he raps, “I’m not the next pop star, I’m not the next socially aware rapper / I’m a human motherfucking being.” This trinity, troping upon the trinity of Signifyin(g), which troped on the trinity of separation, which troped upon the trinity of Black survival, which troped upon the biblical trinity, is the trinity of subjectivity. Lamar is establishing his voice, not as a popular artist or “conscious” rapper, but as a human partaking in a discursive event. It is his fight for voice that provides the capstone to this particular Signifyin(g) chain in the text.

Later in the text, Ab-Soul's speaker deploys monotextual Signifyin(g) through testifyin' in "Ab-Soul's Outro," in order to remove a section of text from the ideology and point toward the audience. He says, "Is you gon' plead the fifth or sound the horn? / The time is now my child, come on." The speaker directly addresses the audience and uses the rhyming vernacular to create a rhythmic couplet. This section stands apart because of its use of testifyin', and it is used to urge the audience to take action. Testifyin' is also what connects the two halves of the text, "Ab-Soul's Outro" and "HiiiPower." At the end of the first half of the text, the music in the background drops off, just leaving an unnamed speaker with the audience:

I watch this fire that we're gathered around  
 and see that it burns similar to the fire that burns inside you  
 Section.80, Section.80 babies<sup>13</sup>  
 A generation of bliss and disobedience  
 No they can't control us, no they can't control you  
 No they can't control us, but we control each other  
 We build our own world  
 If you don't leave with nothing else tonight, you will leave knowing  
 yourself  
 You will leave knowing you represent something that's bigger than all of  
 us

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<sup>13</sup> Section.80 is Lamar's term that represents his ideology. It is a revision of "Section 8," which is the housing code for housing projects in his native city of Compton. "80" refers to the decade in which he was born. Therefore "Section.80" suggests that his voice comes from the context of someone who was raised in the housing projects in the 1980s and 1990s.

Or our family  
 Heart, honor, and respect  
 This is you, this is me, and we are HiiiPower  
 (“Ab-Soul’s Outro”)

This complex textual event uses testifyin’ not only to connect the two texts, but also to deploy an African-American literary trope upon the overall narrative. This section has the textual feel of the cadence of a preacher with variation in syntax to control the rhythm and flow. It is certainly not rap, which has a rather fixed flow and rhythm. The deployment of testifyin’ here is significant because the debarkation from the rap genre shows that Lamar’s text is more than two songs; it is a complex literary text complete with a variety of literary tropes. Lamar continues this testifyin’ on the other half of the text. He testifies, “Everybody put three fingers in the air / The sky is falling, the wind is calling / Stand for something or die in the morning / Section 80 / HiiiPower” (“HiiiPower”). The cadence is similar to the last section of testifyin’, with varied sentence length and the repetition of the “-ing” ending. This repetition creates a particular cadence that is better classified as testifyin’ than as rap, poetry, or any other form of written discourse. Therefore, the presence of this trope throughout Lamar’s text situates it directly within the black oral tradition. Lamar’s deployment of testifyin’ suggests that his text transcends a musical event by employing non-musical oral literary tropes.

Along with his deployment of testifyin’, Lamar also demonstrates “The Dozens” in the second half of his text, “HiiiPower.” Lamar raps, “Back to put you backstabbers back on your spinal bone / You slipped your disc when I slid you my disc.” Lamar is playing with a form of Signifyin(g) to establish his creative discourse power. He is

establishing his dominance through his ability to manipulate language. The deployment of such linguistic complexity in Lamar's rap not only establishes his authorial dominance, but it also effectively connects him to African-American literary tradition. His play on The Dozens in "HiiiPower" demonstrates his creation of an oral black text.

### **Intertextual Signifyin(g)**

In conjunction with the monotextual Signifyin(g) demonstrated in Lamar's troping and re-troping of the trinity and his play on The Dozens, Lamar also employs complex intertextuality that Signifies upon classic African-American authors. Lamar creates intertextuality from revised repetition and pastiche, because in essence, rap as a form must use the text of other texts in order to be considered a black literary form. It must contain a conglomeration of revised voices. Intertextual Signifyin(g) occurs when a black author uses revised repetition of another text to either reinforce or criticize the ideology of an author. This revised repetition in effect creates an intertextual text. Black authors create intertextuality from revised repetition and pastiche, because "for rap's language wizards, all images, sounds, ideas, and icons are ripe for recontextualization, pun, mockery, and celebration" (Rose 3). Thus rap, as a black form, can use intertextuality to play off of, support, or criticize another author's ideology and text. Gates quotes Houston Baker as saying, "Black folklore and the black American literary tradition that grew out of it reflect a culture that is distinctive both of white American and of African culture, and therefore neither can provide valid standards by which black American folklore and literature may be judged" ("Preface to Blackness" 159). Thus the intertextuality of the black text is the true judge of its quality; its blackness alongside its

whiteness is the fulcrum of African-American literary interpretation. Lamar's text rests upon that fulcrum, containing elements of both black and white texts.

The type of Signifyin(g) that uses revised repetition to support another text is called Rewarding the Speakerly; it is a form of pastiche<sup>14</sup> with the absence of a negative critique (Gates 346). In other words, Rewarding the Speakerly is a textual act of homage in which authors wish to situate their ideas or techniques within the context of another author's works. However, using revised repetition to criticize or humiliate another author is called The Talking Text. This pattern uses other texts and slightly modifies them in order to critique them; it deploys a "close reading" and subsequent revised repetition of a text in order to invert its meaning (Gates 346). The Talking Text creates intertextuality by recontextualizing another author's work and inverting it in order to critique. It appropriates the words of another in pun or mockery.

Lamar opens up his narrative with a nod to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., "Is you gon' live on your knees or die on your feet?" This is a reference both to King's position that "a man who won't die for something is not fit to live" (114) and X's position that "a man who will not stand for something will die for anything" (1865). Lamar tropes upon the concept of living in servility as opposed to dying in rebellion, and this dual nod suggests that this notion is a universal truth carried by two opposing philosophies in black liberation.

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<sup>14</sup> Pastiche as a general term refers to the repetition or reproduction of the style of another artist. In African-American literature, it functions as the primary force of intertextual Signifyin(g), occurring when African-American authors include nods and revisions to the style and content of other authors in their work. In African-American literature, pastiche can function either to critique or to reinforce.

Lamar then continues Signifyin(g) in “HiiiPower.” His speaker raps, “Malcolm X put a hex on my future, someone catch me / I’m falling victim to a revolutionary song / The Serengeti’s clone.” Lamar tropes upon the teachings of Malcolm X, who advocated “the teachings of Mr. Muhammed [leader of the Nation of Islam]” that “stressed how history had been ‘whitened’ - when white men had written history books, the black man simply had been left out;” therefore “you can hardly show me a black adult in America—or a white one, for that matter—who knows from the history books anything like the truth about the black man’s role” (Malcolm X 1864). Lamar follows Malcolm X’s idea that in order to achieve equality, black people must have their own history. He is Rewarding the Speakerly by using revised repetition to reinforce Malcolm X’s ideology of self-defense and violent revolution. X’s ideology is reinforced in Lamar’s repeated hook “So get off that slave ship / Build your own pyramids, write your own hieroglyphs” (“HiiiPower”). Lamar is advocating a rewriting of history, washing it of its whiteness rather than a whitewashing of it. In other words, Lamar advocates the construction of a history that does not favor the white subject over the black subject. The presence of the black signs—slave ships, pyramids, hieroglyphics—presents a similar deconstruction advocated by Malcolm X. Lamar is troping upon the philosophy of X and is incorporating his philosophy into his text. Thus Lamar’s text nods to Malcolm X’s teaching to reinforce it rather than critique it. He engages in a wholly intertextual act.

Lamar also Signifies upon the textual presence of Martin Luther King Jr., but does so to critique King rather than to reinforce his ideology. Lamar raps, “Visions of Martin Luther staring at me / If I see it how he seen it, that would make my parents happy / Sorry mama I can’t turn the other cheek / They wanna knock me off the edge”

("HiiiPower"). At first in "HiiiPower," the speaker is tempted to follow Martin Luther King Jr. because of his parents' support of King; they were members of the "first graduating class of affirmative action babies" for whom "Dr. Martin Luther King's dream of civil rights as a way to open doors of opportunity was working for some" (George 1). They therefore cast most of their support toward Dr. King. However, the speaker exists in a post-Cold War America, and he sees the crippling effect of Reagan and post-Reagan presidencies on inner city communities; thus he cannot affirm the passive resistance advocated by King. The presence of the religious sign "turn the other cheek" signifies upon King's professional career as a minister as well as his ideology of nonviolent resistance, and uses that literary language to critique it.

Lamar's rejection of King's philosophy is within the second pattern of Signifyin(g): the Talking Text. Lamar is using the signs of King to critique him, to show that his philosophy has not provided a lasting solution to black uplift<sup>15</sup>. This play on King's philosophy uses Signifyin(g) to distinguish Lamar's text from King's voice, and the complexity in this technique shows the literary structure of Lamar's text. It is in its essence intertextual. Lamar himself is functioning as the source of the black voice in his text, the Signifying Monkey. Lamar is this trickster, not only troping to reinforce, but troping to revise. He uses the signs—linguistic and visual—of other black writers in order to create a truly nuanced, intertextual work, one that is well within the African American literary tradition.

Along with Signifyin(g) upon Malcolm X and King, Lamar also centers his work within the Black Arts tradition by Signifyin(g) upon authors such as Amiri Baraka, Huey

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<sup>15</sup> The term "uplift" here means specifically the physical, civil, economic, and political improvement of African-Americans.

Newton, Bobby Seale, and Fred Hampton. Ab-Soul's speaker raps, "We're not victors, we're victims" which echoes Baraka's essay "A Theatre of Victims." Baraka states that the role of the black theater—his privileged form of text is the theater, but it is universally applicable to a black text—is to "Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims. It looks at the sky with the victims' eyes and moves the victims to look at the strength in their minds and bodies" (1960). Lamar is Rewarding the Speakerly here by repeating Baraka's language and ideology. This technique places Baraka's text concentrically within Lamar's, for their philosophies function together. Lamar is continuing the idea of the theater—or text—of victims. Lamar also uses Baraka's frequent reference to police officers as pigs: "I got my finger on the mothafuckin pistol / Aimin' it at a pig, Charlotte's Web is gonna miss you" ("HiiiPower"). Although not unique to Baraka and other Black Arts authors, this term for them operated as a derogative reference to police brutality. By reproducing this term, Lamar is positing that his narrative is in a similar context to that of Baraka's.

In addition to repetition of Baraka's textual elements, Lamar Signifies upon the founding triad of the Black Panther Party—Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Fred Hampton. Lamar says that "he is falling victim to a revolutionary song" such as that laid out by Newton in his writings in *Revolutionary Suicide*. Newton says that a revolutionary is "a doomed man. Unless he understands this, he does not grasp the essential meaning of his life" (Newton 6). Lamar struggles with this concept of dying for his cause, and it weighs on him heavily. He eventually concedes to this teaching, admitting Newton into his HiiiPower movement by saying "Huey Newton goin' stupid / you can't resist his

HiiiPower.” By including him within his revised repetition, Lamar reinforces Newton’s militant ideology, which complements his Talking Text revision of King.

Lamar goes on to rap about Bobby Seale, another founder of the Black Panther Party. Lamar says, “Bobby Seale making meals / you can’t resist his HiiiPower,” which refers to his “Free Breakfast for Children” program that fed underprivileged children breakfast at no cost. Lamar acknowledges Seale’s direct method of uplift by empowering young blacks via provision of meals, and by repeating this method, Lamar is Signifying upon Seale’s ideology. Lamar also says in the line before, “five star dishes / food for thought bitches / I mean this shit is,”<sup>16</sup> making a metaphor that speaks of the depth of Seale’s program. Lamar insinuates that Seale’s free breakfast program not only feeds the body but feeds the mind as well. He reinforces this when he says, “this is physical and mental / I won’t sugarcoat it.” Lamar is thus Signifyin(g) upon Seale’s service in the Black Panther Party, referencing Seale’s physical uplift while simultaneously pointing forward to Fred Hampton’s educational service.

The mental aspect of Lamar’s textual theme emerges from Fred Hampton. Lamar refers to Hampton’s career teaching collegiate Political Science classes in his line, “Fred Hampton on your campus / you can’t resist his HiiiPower.” Lamar Signifies upon Hampton’s idea that revolution will start with the youth of the country, for he claims that his music is for Generation Y and that “your son will play me even if the radio don’t / Daughters that just turn one to 21 listen to Kendrick” (“Ab-Soul’s Outro”). Later in the same text, Ab-Soul’s speaker urges people of all creeds and colors to come to their

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<sup>16</sup> This is also a reference to Kanye West’s “So Appalled.” Thus this line is not only Signifyin(g) upon author and Black Panther Bobby Seale by also modern rapper Kanye West. It is double-layered Signifyin(g).

concerts to “see the diversity / Unify the people they gonna peep it universally” (“Ab-Soul’s Outro”). Fred Hampton called for the union of Black Panthers with American Indians, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Chinese, poor whites, women, and homosexuals and named it the “Rainbow Coalition” (Brown xvii). By Signifyin(g) upon Hampton’s teachings, Lamar claims the same coalition among his followers; his performances are directly reminiscent of the vision of unity held by Black Panther activists like Fred Hampton. By Rewarding the Speakerly in the texts of the Black Arts authors, Lamar historically and literarily connects his text to theirs. He re-situates their teachings into his context, and this revision serves as a nod to their ideology. In doing this, Lamar’s text becomes intertextual and thus part of the African-American literary tradition because of its revised repetition of literary text.

Lamar’s incorporation of different forms of Signifyin(g)—monotextual, and intertextual—gives his text a distinctly literary quality. He weaves in non-musical aspects of the Afro-Diasporic oral tradition and revises the work of significant black authors, creating a text that is complex and intertextual. Since Signifyin(g) is absolutely necessary in understanding and critiquing black literature, Lamar’s employment of it in his text is significant. The orality of Signifyin(g) is presented in the performative aspect of the text, and the literary significance is weaved into the text’s content. By mirroring African-American literature both in the form and performance of Signifyin(g), Lamar’s rap can be understood as an oral text with two tones crying out in the dark: the white and the black.

### **Conclusion**

Through his deployment of vernacular tropes alongside oral and written literary forms, Lamar weaves a text nuanced both in meaning and construction. His construction

of an oral text, both performative and literary, situates him well within the African-American literary tradition. His use of Signifyin(g) as a troping trope of other literary and vernacular artists and his use of testifyin' in the narrative connects him to classic African-American literary techniques and creates a singular text out of "Ab-Soul's Outro" and "HiiiPower." The presence of Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse and Du Bois' double-consciousness demonstrates that Lamar's text holds up both under Afro-American and European literary criticism. With the conglomeration of all of these elements, Lamar creates a narrative that transcends the definition of simply rap or simply music. He creates a form that merges the oral and the written, the African and the European, and the white and the black. His rap not only functions as text but becomes it, and therefore "Ab-Soul's Outro" and "HiiiPower" can be seen as a work of African-American literature.

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