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“When I Put on My Firespitter Mask”: Jayne Cortez’s (R)Evolutionary Musical Poetic Collaborations

Renee Michelle Kingan
College of William and Mary - Arts & Sciences, rmkingan13@gmail.com

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“When I Put on My Firespitter Mask”:
Jayne Cortez’s (R)Evolutionary Musical Poetic Collaborations

Renee Michelle Kingan
Williamsburg, Virginia

Master of Arts, The College of William & Mary, 2009
Master of Arts, George Mason University, 2002
Bachelor of Arts, James Madison University, 1997

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Doctor of Philosophy

Renee Michelle Kingan

Approved by the Committee, April 6, 2018

Susan V. Donaldson
Committee Co-Chair
Professor Susan V. Donaldson, American Studies & English
College of William & Mary

Herman Pinson
Committee Co-Chair
Professor Hermine Pinson, English
College of William & Mary

Arthur Knight
Associate Professor, American Studies & English
College of William & Mary

Charles F. McGeown
Associate Professor, American Studies & History
College of William & Mary

Bill Cole
Professor Emeritus, African-American Studies
Syracuse University
Research approved by

Protection of Human Subjects Committee

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ABSTRACT

From the 1960s, through the Black Arts Movement, until her sudden death in December 2012, Jayne Cortez used her dynamic voice to fight oppression. As the first multiple-chapter study of Cortez’s musical collaborations, this dissertation adds to a growing body of critical work that examines Cortez’s radical poetry. In her unpublished “African Confluences” keynote address at Rutgers University (circa 1989), Cortez described herself as a member of a global community of black writers “protesting and calling for an end to self degradation, self fragmentation, self-corruption, and self-fear and selfishness… Poets using the image of Blackness to mean continuity, confidence, creativity and new possibilities.” Cortez created new possibilities through her collaborations with artists and writers across the African diaspora, including American free jazz musicians who worked alongside traditional West African master musicians. Cortez traveled extensively and cultivated lifelong relationships with musicians who challenged boundaries between artistic genres to create a distinctly kinetic form of jazz-inflected poetry that gave voices to black Americans and people displaced across the African diaspora. Cortez’s sustained collaborations with Bill Cole, Denardo Coleman, and her Firespitters band produced unparalleled multivocal cross-genre conversations that embodied the collective spirit of jazz improvisation.

“When I Put on My Firespitter Mask’: Jayne Cortez’s (R)Evolutionary Musical Poetic Collaborations” offers a chronological analysis of selected collaborative performances and recordings with musicians. Beginning with her earliest collaborations, Cortez’s poetry blended elements of surrealism, Pan-Africanism, ecofeminism, performative poetics, and black vernacular music into dialogic calls to action that embodied diasporic community building through harmolodic improvisation and musical call and response. This dissertation applies the aforementioned theoretical frameworks to close readings and historical contextualization of multiple revisions of eleven poems, including poems published in out-of-print chapbooks, studio recordings, live recordings, unreleased live performance recordings, and uncatalogued documents such as poem drafts, journals, and handwritten performance notes located in fifteen boxes Cortez donated to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The appendices provide the most comprehensive timeline and list of Cortez’s publications available to date, with the intention of providing points of departure for forthcoming critical explorations of Cortez’s archive of over 400 poems and more than ninety recorded musical collaborations.
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In the truest spirit of commencement, this document constitutes a point of departure rather than the completion of my journey into Jayne Cortez’s work. When I presented my undergraduate honors project more than twenty years ago, my preface proclaimed: “When I started to play the flute in fourth grade, I never imagined that I would someday present a jazz poetry reading as a saxophone-playing English major.” As I look back at the decades since my first experiences with jazz poetry, I never would have imagined my aesthetic inclination to combine the two art forms I love would lead to a global education that has evolved into a lifelong commitment to increase critical engagement with Cortez’s poetry. Over the years, an expansive network has provided tangible support in addition to a number of auspicious revelations that have guided me to this specific moment. I give thanks to an eclectic team of unassuming giants on whose shoulders I gratefully stand.

Joanne Gabbin introduced me to Jayne Cortez at my undergraduate alma mater and—to my astonishment—told both of us I would be writing my Master’s thesis about her work with the Firespitters. Charlie McGovern and Arthur Knight have been with me since I began my research into Cortez’s musical collaborations; their instruction, close reading, and thoughtful stewardship have supported me at critical moments on this winding path. Through coursework and my comprehensive exam, Leisa Meyer graciously helped me develop my historical and theoretical understandings of movements that shaped Cortez’s work. In the space between coursework and comps, Joanne Braxton provided an unimaginable opportunity for me to play my saxophone for Jayne Cortez. In the glow of Cortez’s vibrant energy that day, neither of us imagined we would attend her Celebration of Life at the Cooper Union Great Hall just one year later. For the last few years, my dissertation committee co-directors Hermine Pinson and Susan Donaldson have provided invaluable guidance that helped me hone an overwhelming amount of raw material into this document. Their expertise has kept me honest, and their careful reading and tough questions have framed my work within larger critical conversations devoted to literature and music of the African diaspora.

When I began reaching outside my institutional network, I quickly learned that Cortez’s friends and colleagues in her overlapping communities of artists and activists want her work to reach a wider audience. Most notably, Bill Cole graciously invited me into his home and shared with me several unreleased recordings of his personal collaborations with Cortez. Hearing Bill rehearse and perform with Cortez’s colleagues in person, and later having the opportunity to perform “For the Brave Young Students in Soweto” with him, Warren Smith, and Joseph Daley has given me an unmatched understanding of the way Cortez and her musical collaborators worked to create their interactive art. Additionally, Bill’s participation on my dissertation committee has provided anecdotal and
documented support for my suppositions along with an unexplored window into Cortez’s creative collaborative process.

T. K. Blue, Bern Nix, Alex Harding, Quincy Troupe, and Robert Hershon granted me personal interviews that likewise confirmed my observations and opened new pathways to understanding Cortez’s work. Troupe also told me about Cortez’s papers at the Schomburg Center, and the archivists there granted me access to their uncatalogued collection of manuscripts and ephemera Cortez meticulously maintained and donated. Additionally, I give thanks for those who reached out to me when they learned of my interest in Cortez’s work, especially Laura Hinton, Everett Hoagland, and Eugene Redmond.

Countless others have shared with me their ears, eyes, minds, and hearts. They provided nourishment that has sustained me through the journey. This project revolves around Jayne Cortez’s community, and I could not have brought it to fruition without mine. You know who you are, and you know how much I love you.

Finally, I would like to thank Steve, Eileen, and Cheryl Kingan. Thank you, Dad, for instilling in me the value of creativity and selflessness. Thank you, Mom, for always listening and for sharing with me your love of language and learning. Thank you, Cheryl, for opening new worlds and continuing to expand my horizons. You have all shared and fostered my lifelong passions for music and travel, both of which have fueled my passion for this project. I love you.
For Jayne Cortez
When I put on my Firespitter mask
to ride the rough ocean currents,
I follow evolutionary changes within the music,
making a direct path
for sucking every superstition
out of every shadow on the planet.¹

– Jayne Cortez

Among the secret Senufo society of the Poro in what is now the small country of Côte d’Ivoire on the west coast of Africa, one ritual funeral tradition involves masqueraders wearing heavy “Firespitter” masks carved to resemble a combination of a warthog, crocodile, and antelope. Senufo Firespitters play drums and dance, while creating the illusion of spitting fire from their jaws by blowing on smoldering pieces of wood.² Their explosive ceremony honors the dead and wards off evil spirits the same way a brass band in New Orleans, followed by a jubilant second line of dancers, sends off the soul of a departed loved one. American poet Jayne Cortez combined elements of these African and American traditions in collaborations with her Firespitters band, a group of jazz musicians she worked with for over thirty years. Cortez first adopted the Firespitter tradition as an extended metaphor in a poem she wrote to commemorate a 1977 international festival of African culture in Nigeria called FESTAC ’77. Cortez and her husband sculptor Melvin Edwards were among almost 500 artists who represented the United States at FESTAC ’77 along with over 16,000 participants from around the world. Though this was not their first trip to Africa, Cortez and Edwards’s participation in FESTAC ’77 solidified their mutual artistic and ancestral bonds to western Africa, imbuing their creative endeavors with a strong Pan-African aesthetic that would grow even stronger over the next three decades. Like other Pan-African thinkers who came of age during the Black Arts Movement, Jayne Cortez worked to reconstruct her own personal connection to West Africa by embracing different

cultural customs. Cortez’s poetic collaborations with musicians critique capitalist structures that subjugated these traditions, destroyed millions of lives, and tried to erase traditional cultures through centuries of displacement that formed the African diaspora.

As a result of her commitment to Pan-African ideology, Cortez’s collaborations in the Firespitters band with her son, drummer Denardo Coleman, were revolutionary both in form and in content. Her poetic subjects and themes ranged from elegies for fallen luminaries, to eyewitness accounts of injustice across the African diaspora, to celebrations of jazz and blues music, to observations of everyday life. Because she began performing her work in collaboration with musicians during the Black Arts Movement, Cortez’s poetry maintained its revolutionary focus throughout her career, though it changed incrementally like the lines in so many of her pieces, as she travelled and collaborated with international artists and activists fighting for justice and peace on a global scale. Cortez’s collaborations with musicians provide a rich archive of her revolutionary and evolutionary performative poetics, and her body of recorded work remains largely unexamined through a critical lens. Though awareness of Cortez’s work is on the rise, publications released through her own Bola Press are now out of print. Her legacy is only readily available in a few dozen audio and video performances on YouTube, in two books she published through Hanging Loose Press in 2002 and 2009, and in scattered anthologized samples of her best known poems, some of which are now also out of print. Consequently, this project presents a mostly chronological exploration of Cortez’s collaborative work with musicians, starting in 1960s Los Angeles, and it includes some resources that are not yet available to the public. These sources include Cortez’s personal notebooks and papers collected at the Schomburg Center of the New York Public Library and unreleased recordings with a diverse cast of musicians that ethnomusicologist Bill Cole has graciously donated to this project. Placing Cortez’s published body of work—now increasingly difficult to access as a result of its limited production—in conversation with these unexplored archives of her musical collaborations reveals the core of my
argument: Cortez’s decades-long career of collaboration with the same musicians yielded dynamic integrated musical poetry with a level of verbal and musical reciprocity that few, if any of her more famous poetic contemporaries accomplished over a sustained period. Their partnership allowed Cortez and the Firespitters to rehearse and experiment with different musical settings and motifs, vocal inflection, pacing, and textual revision that enhanced and supported the meaning of Cortez’s poems in cohesive multi-genre performances that continued to evolve spontaneously as Cortez and the musicians listened and responded to each other.

Prior to forming the Firespitters, and more than a decade before FESTAC ’77, Cortez wrote poetry that interrogated social and economic disparity, and she performed some of her poems with musicians in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles before she moved to New York City and established herself in the center of the vibrant East Coast Black Arts Movement. Cortez expanded her worldview from the issues she tackled in her first two chapbooks that captured her ideology as a performer and deeply engaged community organizer within the Los Angeles Black Arts Movement. As she increased her participation in cultural festivals and political endeavors outside the United States, Cortez’s poetry more deeply reflected and commented on disparities and incongruities she witnessed as she traveled and built a global network of writers, musicians, and visual artists committed to an elusive dream of equality. Additionally, Cortez’s work reflected her increasingly global perspective as it commented not only on the everyday tribulations of New York City denizens, but also on ecological concerns resulting from modern warfare, jazz and blues music, nihilistic global capitalist markets, violence against individual people of color, and the reclamation and celebration of important black American and African artists and activists. Once settled in New York, Cortez established long-term creative partnerships with non-Western woodwind musician Bill Cole and a diverse group of musicians who worked in overlapping circles that spiraled out from their associations with Horace Tapscott’s UGMA in Los Angeles, Wesleyan University, Ornette Coleman’s Prime Time Band, the World Saxophone
Quartet, the St. Louis Black Artists’ Group, and Pan-African pianist Randy Weston’s ensembles, to name just a few. In addition to demonstrating influences of free jazz on the musicians and their collaborations with Cortez, these groups also included African musicians who brought ancient aural traditions to her work, complementing poems about global issues endemic to the African diaspora.

After publishing three books of poetry and performing in different venues, Cortez began documenting her musical collaborations on her first album, 1974’s *Celebrations and Solitudes*. This LP captured ten years of prior experience mixing poetry and improvised music, as she experimented with different musicians connected with Wesleyan College and with her son Denardo from her first marriage to jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman. By the time Cortez published her fifth book of poems, *Firespitter* (1982), she and Denardo had formed a strong musical/poetic partnership that led to their creation of her Firespitters band. Cortez named the group Firespitters, and Denardo led the band that contained fellow members of his father Ornette’s Prime Time band. Guitarist Bern Nix and bassists Al MacDowell and Jamaaladeen Tacuma became the regular Firespitter rhythm section, while saxophonists Frank Lowe, T. K. Blue, James Carter, Alex Harding, and Charles Moffett, Jr., were among the saxophonists who played live performances and recorded eight studio albums that featured their interactions with Cortez’s dynamic poetic voice. Though Amiri Baraka, Gil Scott-Heron, Quincy Troupe, Yusef Komunyakaa, and other poets successfully created collaborative pieces with musicians that demonstrate nuanced listening and the kind of give-and-take essential in successful jazz performances, Cortez is unique in that she worked with the same musicians for over thirty years—a group that revolved around Denardo and other members of the Prime Time band.

Situating Cortez within the trajectory of the black American poetry canon provides a better understanding of her specific contributions that built on those traditions and opened new possibilities for her contemporaries and those who continue to write. When I began this project in
2006, there existed about six chapter-length scholarly treatments of Cortez’s work, only half of which discussed her music in any detail. In the last decade, especially following Cortez’s unexpected illness and sudden death at the end of 2012, more dissertations and book chapters have emerged, including four chapters in Laura Hinton’s *Jayne Cortez, Adrienne Rich, and the Feminist Superhero: Voice, Vision, Politics, and Performance in U.S. Contemporary Women’s Poetics*. Additionally, *The Black Scholar* and *Black Renaissance Noire* published posthumous tributes by Baraka, Troupe, Harryette Mullen, Norman Redding, and Evie Shockley that provide deeper insight into Cortez’s significant impact on global literature. Baraka, Troupe, Danny Glover, Eugene Redmond, and Randy Weston also expressed their respect for Cortez’s singular career when they spoke and performed at her Celebration of Life in February 2013.

Cortez’s careful control of her own production and her selective associations with different academic and political organizations made her a comparatively elusive figure within the canon of twentieth-century black American poets, despite her renown among and close ties to those whom she herself might have deemed the “You Know” people.\(^3\) In 2006, when I personally asked Cortez about purchasing copies of her earlier out-of-print chapbooks, she informed me that many of the poems were reprinted in more recent collections that were available for sale at the time; she clearly intended for her earliest chapbooks to remain archives of her early career, rather than current representations of her work. Throughout her publishing career, Cortez performed both with and without musicians in hundreds of venues, from clubs and cafes in New York, to major universities and international arts festivals. Though her work consistently drew popular and critical acclaim with very little printed evidence of negative reviews, Cortez remains less well known than her contemporaries like Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni.

Like many black American poets of her generation, Cortez cites Langston Hughes as an inspiration for her writing, and her earliest performances at the Studio Watts Theater and Watts

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Repertory Theater Company included dramatic presentations of Hughes’s work. By combining themes from everyday life with musical elements like scat and call and response, Hughes, Sterling Brown, Jean Toomer, and many who followed them created poetry in which aesthetic considerations of form and language consciously supported social messages in their work. Brown, like his contemporary Hughes, deployed black American vernacular in his verse, and while Hughes captured urban experiences in his work, Brown gave voice to people in the rural American South. Rather than solely rely on Eurocentric modernist verse and canonical forms rooted in an elitist academic tradition, Hughes and Brown created new possibilities for black writers. Thus, as poets experimented with nuances of orality in their work during and following the Harlem Renaissance, they, like contemporary pioneers of jazz music, created amalgamations of different poetic elements and traditions that more fully represented different black Americans’ lived experiences. From among many poetic influences as a young fan of jazz and blues music in Los Angeles, Cortez felt the strongest aesthetic bond with Hughes’s verse that incorporated jazz themes, blues structures, and writing techniques that replicated elements of black music. His grounded vernacular language provided fuel for Cortez’s creative fire, and Hughes also demonstrated collaborative possibilities through his own performances with musicians. Though Hughes’s recorded collaborations suggest little interaction between his vocal delivery with musical accompaniment relegated to the recorded background, his blending musical and poetic genres opened myriad possibilities for musicians and poets to perform together.4

4 Hughes recorded his collaborative work on 1960’s The Weary Blues, though there is documentation of his collaborations as early as the 1930s; however, this recording of Hughes reading his poetry with Leonard Feather and Charles Mingus fails to create the dynamic interplay that makes Cortez’s collaborations meaningfully congruent. Significantly, the WorldCat summary of the recording deems the LP: “Thirty three poems read by the author with incidental music for dance orchestra recorded Mar. 17–18. 1958.” Meta Jones made the following observation of The Weary Blues: “One alternative criticism that mitigates my dichotomy between Hughes’s literary and literal voice is that no ‘actual’ voice exists. There is no there, there. What we have access to is more accurately described as a technical voice—that is, the voice of Langston Hughes ‘taken out of his body and placed into a machine.’ Had his voice not been captured on the available sound recording devices, we could not access sonic performances of the literary body of Hughes after the absence of his literal body.” Meta DuEwa Jones, The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 67–68.
Contemporaneous recorded collaborations between 1950s Beat poets like Lawrence Ferlinghetti and dexterous jazz musicians like Stan Getz similarly fail to integrate words and music because the poets and musicians sound as though they are reading and improvising in isolation, rather than listening to engaging with one another. Though the Beats used jazz as a metaphor for their burgeoning countercultural aesthetic, most were unsuccessful in attempts to integrate the two art forms into unified, truly collaborative performances. Despite their intentions to the contrary, Kenneth Rexroth and Kenneth Patchen are both Beat poets whose recordings sound as if they are simply reading their work while jazz was happening rather than directly engaging the musicians sharing their bandstands. Thus, even though Hughes and the Beats were among the first writers to blend these genres, their recorded collaborations sound flat and disjointed in contrast to Cortez’s highly interactive performances. While Patchen, Rexroth, and Ferlinghetti paid tribute to jazz and worked with musicians, black Beat poets Ted Joans, Bob Kaufman, and Amiri Baraka built upon their Beat aesthetic to celebrate jazz through collaborations that incorporated revolutionary content. Joans, Kaufman, and Baraka venerated music in their verse, but they also connected jazz music to the people who were creating it by relating music to aspects of everyday black American life. When they eventually broke from their Beat contemporaries to write poems that more clearly articulated their concerns as black men, Joans, Kaufman, and Baraka also performed with musicians in ways that demonstrated more attentive listening and interaction among performers. In addition to writing and performing his poetry, Baraka’s work as a music critic in *Blues People* and *Black Music* pronounced that “new music” or free jazz of the 1960s was the purest artistic expression of burgeoning Black Nationalist ideology because it eschewed hegemonic European song forms. As he produced these pioneering studies of black American vernacular music, Baraka made a complete break from the Beats and shifted his poetic focus toward a Black Aesthetic, expressing black solidarity and separation from the oppressive white American mainstream.
Directing their artistic intention toward this clearly articulated Black Aesthetic, Cortez and Baraka’s contemporaries found new ways to use their words to fight oppressive forces. Baraka, Larry Neal, Stephen Henderson, and Addison Gayle published collections of essays and poems that became vibrant manifestos of the movement, and Jayne Cortez’s early poems, though not included in these pioneering anthologies, embodied the same principles. Black Power put into practice Black Nationalist ideology by creating symbols that signified a unified, autonomous black nation within yet separate from the white-dominated United States. Writers of this period developed a new vocabulary to articulate their goal of achieving solidarity through self-expression. Stephen Henderson, for example, appropriated the NASA acronym “mascon,” meaning “massive concentration,” to describe a uniquely black experiential energy that gave music, poetry, and speech meaning for people living both within and apart from an oppressive society. Cortez and other Black Power proponents wrote poems that foregrounded this experiential energy and built communities by celebrating unifying physical characteristics that debunked the historical Euro-American stereotype of blackness as aesthetically “ugly.”

Prominent theater critic Paul Carter Harrison’s concept of “nommo” is another Black Arts term that aptly describes one function of naming throughout Cortez’s body of work. Jennifer Ryan-Bryant invokes “nommo” in her analyses of Cortez’s poems that feature speakers who possess “the ability to articulate the name that exactly suits this one subject and no other, to find its nommo, [and] …access the inherent potency of speech and activate a political presence.” In her

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poetic embodiment of politically-invested first-person speakers, Cortez intermingled her own observations and lived experiences with those of people across the African diaspora, effectively giving voice and political agency to those who were otherwise silenced by the oppressive power structures by which they were bound.

Through the processes of naming and community building inherent in terms like “nommo” and “mascon,” Black Aesthetic works of activist art emphasized political significance in black American cultural creations that undermined a hegemonic white aesthetic. This project’s argument supports the view that Cortez and her contemporaries created a new system, operating apart from oppressively racist mainstream cultural mechanisms, and her kinetic poetry and collaborations with musicians—even into the twenty-first century—embody the radical spirit of the Black Arts Movement. In one interview she elaborated, “The arts are just part of the weapons in life. Protest is only one part of social expression…. We protest against injustice and everybody in the world protests and expresses their feelings on those things in literature, in the visual arts, etc. In literature, we talk about everything and everybody—family, love, work, poverty, nature, music, sex, God, etc.”

Though Cortez’s themes and subjects changed incrementally to incorporate a wider diasporic focus over her lifetime, they remained rooted in first-person responses to history, witnessing different events that shaped her ethical commitment to social justice. For this reason, poets, musicians, artists, and scholars of the Black Arts Movement and performative poetics continue to hold Cortez in high esteem for her consistent genre-bending work that spanned four decades; nevertheless, critical accounts of her work often focus solely on her words, rather than discussing the specific ways in which she and the Firespitters band fused her poetry with music.

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In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Cortez’s writing and dynamic reading style began receiving public accolades from Eugene Redmond and other contemporaries like Ishmael Reed, who dedicated a portion of his *Yardbird Reader* to Cortez.9 Just one decade into her publishing career after she had released three chapbooks and her first LP, Cortez’s contemporary Redmond praised her in his critical history *Drumvoices*. In a short overview of Cortez’s creative work in Watts, Redmond wrote: “Her themes and styles are broad, but mostly they embrace music as aspect and form. Africa as struggle and spirit is also a dominant theme in her poetry…. Her struggles are more than simple ‘contrivances’ as they chronicle the hardships and good times… a veritable poetic tapestry of black expression in defiance of death.”10 Despite this growing body of praise by eminent artists and scholars, Cortez eluded the public spotlight that found some of her other contemporaries who also performed their poetry with music. Cortez’s poetic colleagues in the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni also worked with musicians, and their poetry confronts similar themes. Cortez, however, refused the mainstream by choosing to remain just outside the academic limelight, often working with marginalized free jazz musicians who likewise chose to avoid the mainstream of an already marginalized musical genre. Meanwhile, Baraka, Sanchez, and Giovanni became outspoken public intellectuals and highly lauded, prolific poets.

Unlike academy-trained writers, some of whom also apprenticed outside the academy with established poets, Cortez was an “organic intellectual” whose formal education ended in junior college.11 Cortez’s voracious appetite for reading, daily writing practice, correspondence with international activists, participation in and leadership of myriad groups of writers and

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11 Although I do not use the term “organic intellectual” in the same way as Antonio Gramsci, his theoretical frameworks for socioeconomic classes provide interesting possibilities for interpreting Cortez’s work.
different artists, and world travel all contributed to her education outside the formal academic
realm. Cortez consistently refused to acquiesce to the strictures of the academy while her
contemporaries from the Black Arts Movement fought to define the nascent field of Black Studies
in colleges across the country.\(^{12}\) As these academic programs became more established, Cortez
maintained tangential affiliations with a few universities, preferring to participate on a “guest”
basis, which offered freedom to pursue her own agenda, rather than follow guidelines tenured
positions impose on professors. Just as Cortez made divergent decisions regarding her academic
affiliations, her poetics also differ from Baraka, Sanchez, and Giovanni. Poetically, Baraka and
Sanchez eschewed many conventions of standard written English, and their refusal to conform to
these constraints created a visual fissure between their work and what had come before.\(^{13}\) While
Cortez bent grammatical rules to a lesser extent, her experimentation on the page is more
apparent in her imagery than in her usage and spelling. Furthermore, though Cortez sometimes
delivered speeches and essays in prose, Baraka, Sanchez, and Giovanni regularly published in
other genres, including plays and widely circulated critical essays and books released through
larger publishing houses.

Despite these generalized differences, these four poets all worked with musicians at
various points in their careers, and music was an integral aspect and central theme of their work.\(^{14}\)

\(^{12}\) Cortez’s contemporaries like Sanchez and Askia Touré helped create Black Studies programs and fought
for increased opportunities for black Americans within the academy. Once firmly entrenched, these
programs changed the course of higher education by extending opportunities to a new generation of
warriors who would wield their pens in myriad ways.

\(^{13}\) Meta Jones, by way of Aldon Nielsen, describes the way Sonia Sanchez’s Black Arts era “consonantal
use of alliterative visual capitalized play indicate[s] that not only do black poets read and revise each
others’ ‘typographical representations of Black speech,’ but they also form a relationship with each other
such that the poetry refers to the music, in part, through the poetic conventions established by other poets”;
Jones also suggests creative language usage constitutes “poets’ translation of jazz language into written
form.” (Jones, 101).

\(^{14}\) In the 1970s, Giovanni recorded her poetry with the New York Community Choir on the LP *Truth is on
Its Way*, and the resulting album, infused with ebullient gospel music, was a carefully-planned and
executed collaboration that lacks the spontaneity of jazz poetry infusions from the same period. In 1971,
Smithsonian Folkways released *A Sun Lady for All Seasons Reads Her Poetry*, an LP of Sanchez reading
without musicians. Her 2004 album *Full Moon of Sonia* captures a studio-pristine archive that represents
Sanchez’s many collaborations with musicians. Amiri Baraka fused poetry and jazz in the 1970s when he
performed “Black Art” with drummer Sonny Murray after recording the polemic “Black Dada Nihilismus”
Unlike Cortez, however, Sanchez and Baraka both sang and scatted as part of their poetic performance repertoire; each used the voice as a singer might, while Cortez’s musicality in her performative vocalizations resulted from her spoken tone and pace. Furthermore, in their archived performances with musicians, Giovanni, Sanchez, and Baraka demonstrate less intentional improvised interaction with musicians than Cortez, and this was likely the result of Cortez’s consistent work with Denardo Coleman in a reciprocal relationship that began on the page, often with music already in mind. This study further explores this practiced reciprocation through a consideration of specific written and performed texts that set Jayne Cortez apart from poets who, though they collaborated with musicians in meaningful ways, did not have the benefit of the intimate familial bond that built the Firespitters and maintained its central core for most of her performing career.

While Cortez may have the most in common with Sanchez, Baraka, and Giovanni, she formed coalitions with other poets who tore down barriers for black American poets and blazed trails for younger writers. In the Midwest, born just a generation before Cortez, Gwendolyn Brooks became the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize, and her work with Haki Madhubuti established Third World Press in 1967. Along with Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press established two years earlier, Third World still provides crucial circulation for Black Arts writers and the generations that followed. Both Randall and Madhubuti’s publications encouraged Cortez to release books and recordings through her own Bola Press. Meanwhile, Mari Evans, Carolyn Rodgers, and other women followed Brooks’s lead to become prominent black American voices of their generation. Contemporary poets and musicians also forged more meaningful connections between words and music, as The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Archie Shepp, and Cecil Taylor all

with Roswell Rudd, and these collaborations contain volatile declarations of Black Nationalism, strengthened by the interplay of voice and music. Peter Doggett, There’s a Riot Going On (Edinburgh, UK: Canongate Press, 2009), 32.
produced work similar to Jayne Cortez’s collaborations with musicians.\textsuperscript{15} Cortez was firmly established and well respected among her peers, but, even with all these similarities, she remained just outside the limelight of wider public recognition of her work.

Despite the emergence of jazz poetry collaborations among writers and musicians during the Beat period of the 1950s and the Black Arts Movement thereafter, relatively few critical studies discuss specific collaborative processes by analyzing the ways in which writers and musicians interact in their recorded performances. Thus, though there exist useful frameworks for understanding Cortez’s creative output, few scholars have applied these frameworks directly to Cortez’s collaborative performances with musicians. Cortez’s collaborations with the Firespitters pose interesting canonical challenges that set her apart from Baraka, Sanchez, Giovanni, and other poets with whom her work overlaps; her kinetic poetics and evolutionary performance practices exude energy and movement in both subject and form. As such, this project employs overlapping literary, musical, cultural, and performance theories that examine literal and figurative movement in her performative poetry. The word “movement” provides several points of entry into conceptualizing the narrative arc of Cortez’s career as an artist-activist. W. E. B. Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness expresses a fragmentation that urged Cortez and her colleagues in the Black Arts Movement to explore the tension within the construction of their own African and American identities. Cortez worked to bridge this gap in her own understanding through the literal movement of travel, networking, experiential learning, and observations of others’ lived experiences that crafted her own worldview as a personal ontology that invariably led to Africa.

\textsuperscript{15} Several other poets have performed and recorded successful collaborations with musicians, but none have maintained an enduring artistic partnership matching Cortez and Denardo Coleman. Notable collaborations include Amiri Baraka with David Murray and Steve McCall, Yusef Komunyakaa with John Tchicai, Curtis Lyle with Julius Hemphill, Nathaniel Mackey with Royal Hartigan, and Ishmael Reed with Conjure. (Graham Lock and David Murray, \textit{Thriving on a Riff: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Literature and Film} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10–11. Musicians who also wrote and performed their poetry include Marion Brown, Andrew Hill, Bill Dixon, Max Roach, George Lewis, and Oliver Lake (Lock, 11).
To colonized Africans struggling for autonomy around the continent, black Americans in the 1960s shared analogous struggles as they fought remnants of imperialism. To black American descendants of enslaved Africans, the monolithic continent represented a unified mystery enveloped in profound loss. Decades earlier, Marcus Garvey insisted that by returning both physically through travel and spiritually through art, black Americans could construct an imagined past that defied reconstruction during centuries of enslavement. Cortez’s Pan-African perspective grew from the belief that understanding one’s roots in a tangible past ensures a stronger sense of self. Accordingly, Cortez aligned her thinking with Négritude writer Aimé Césaire, who, by way of the founder of surrealism André Breton, declared, “The past is the past, and any emotional rooting in the past must be a source of strength for future social and political revolt.”

Rather than allow their ancestral pasts to remain inscrutable, Cortez and other Pan-African thinkers constructed a new collective past to answer questions of existence and to find strength to combat oppression. Though there are Pan-African themes in most of the poems presented in this project, “Kai Kai,” “Make Ifa,” “I’m Gonna,” “I Have Been Searching,” and “Janjaweed Militia” especially demonstrate the evolution of Cortez’s Pan-African thinking through her collaborations with musicians from different traditions within the African diaspora.

As Cortez deepened her personal connection to the African continent, she combined theories of Négritude and surrealism as catalysts for constantly evolving forms of repetition and signification in her printed work. The surrealist affinity for primitivism also provides a framework for understanding Cortez’s use of the Senufo Firespitter mask as the symbol for her collaborations with Denardo Coleman and the Firespitters band. First attracted to the Négritude poets as a young writer, Cortez became an active practitioner of surrealism in her own writing, and critics like Robin D. G. Kelley, Kevin Meehan, and Penelope Rosemont all equate her incremental repetition as strings of surreal images. Not surprisingly, Cortez’s first direct call to

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Africa came from her early interest in a collection of Négritude poetry published by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps.\textsuperscript{17} In one interview, Cortez asserted:

\ldots I was inspired by the whole Negritude movement\ldots. They were against colonialism and imperialism. They were asserting their blackness at a time when it was not the popular thing to do. Damas and Césaire had revolutionary intentions\ldots. They were students of literature, students of history. They were interested in African liberation, in black freedom. They explored conditions and possibilities in their poems. Damas used rhythms. Césaire used surrealism, and Senghor was a pro-African romantic. Negritude encompasses everything. It has variety, it’s a way of life.\textsuperscript{18}

Négritude poets combined elements of Pan-Africanism, Black Nationalism, surrealism, existentialism, Marxism, and the radical activism of the Harlem Renaissance in their work, and Négritude was a pioneering modern black aesthetic movement that actively worked toward cultural and spiritual redemption for people throughout the African diaspora.\textsuperscript{19} The impulse to convert these theories into praxis drove Aimé Césaire and other young intellectuals around the world to adapt surrealist ideology and deploy it as they were elected to positions of political power in their respective countries. Inspired by Négritude poets’ commitment, Cortez’s exploration of surrealist imagery became more evident through the 1980s, and poems like “Firespitters,” “No Simple Explanations,” “Stockpiling,” and “Make Ifa” contain different examples of her myriad creative uses thereof.

While Négritude and surrealism offered Cortez a means of imagining her African roots, black American vernacular music offered additional revolutionary possibilities, as Cortez’s

\textsuperscript{17} Presumably Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, \textit{The Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1949; An Anthology} (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1949).

\textsuperscript{18} Meehan, 164.

\textsuperscript{19} In the 1960s, black radical activists studied Marx, Lenin, Mao, Fanon, C. L. R. James, and other leaders in the Third World anticolonial movements for independence. These radical thinkers reshaped existing systems of thought, helping workers develop a political-economic theory that would better support their needs. Judson. Jeffries, \textit{Black Power in the Belly of the Beast} (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 138.
written body of work expresses a restlessness and kinetic energy that becomes even more evident through an examination of her collaborative work with musicians. Houston Baker’s figuration of the “blues matrix” provides another way of understanding Cortez’s perpetual artistic motion, especially when she worked with musicians to lift her written words off the page. Like Négritude activists and surrealists with whom Cortez identified, Baker describes an openness in the blues that suggests unlimited possibilities for blues and, by extension, jazz practitioners, and, even more broadly, political and social activists.\(^\text{20}\) The persistent action of writing every day provided a constant forum for Jayne Cortez’s ideas. As she experienced different events and considered their implications, Cortez recorded her musings, thus creating an archive of her impressions. These notebooks provided inspiration for new poems, and though her notes contain some ideas that emerged as fully formed poems and poetic fragments, she sometimes transformed her notes through multiple phases of revision before they reached the printed page and later collaborative improvisations with musicians. In her notebooks and interviews, Cortez consistently sought multiple ways to present her work and to give voice to her thoughts and feelings. When Cortez explained her own connections to the blues in a 1990 interview, she explained:

> The blues is poetic… in the sense that it talks about everyday life, about conditions and solutions, about collective needs and personal desires. For me the blues is instinct and relief. It’s full of proverbs and secret meanings, double and triple meanings. It’s about being real and about being surreal. Sometimes when I’m working with musicians and we can’t decide on what piece to do, we follow that old saying, “When in doubt, play the blues.” And that’s it. The blues can be used as a unifying device or as a source for erotic feelings. It can also produce a very comfortable, joyful, realizing atmosphere. Or it’s like when you’re sitting around and everybody starts to talk about what’s bugging him or her and what they think the solution should be. It’s like hollering, crying, cussing,

whispering, joking, confessing, protesting and laughing in different voices at the same time.  

Cortez’s creative process with musicians involved rehearsals to establish parameters, but like all practitioners of improvised music in black vernacular idioms, when they presented the work in performance, they always explored different possibilities and demonstrated ample instances of intellectual and creative freedom within their established parameters. Cortez’s core collaborators, anchored by Denardo Coleman, consistently pushed boundaries and expanded possibilities for musical invention and musical/poetic interaction through extra-textual interplay.

Cortez’s interplay with Denardo and the Firespitters developed, in part, through their engagement with what Baker’s blues matrix. In particular, Cortez’s words, when saturated with music derived from blues and other African musical forms, embody Baker’s central argument about the blues: “Even as they speak of paralyzing absence and ineradicable desire, their instrumental rhythms suggest change, movement, action, continuance, unlimited and unending possibility. Like signification itself, blues are always nomadically wandering.” Cortez’s penchant for perpetual travel helped her conceive of “unlimited and unending possibilit[ies]” for human interaction that demanded social justice through her written work and her participation in different groups of creative intellectuals who committed themselves to these goals. In this way, Cortez was an intellectual and cultural wanderer, traveling first from America’s West coast to East, and then deeply engaging in a sort of diasporic reclamation project that helped her better understand her own roots. Baker asserts, “Fixity is a function of power,” so Cortez developed her own version of his “fluid, nomadic, transitional approach to honoring the subjects of her poems.” In short, reshaping her work for different presentational settings—both in published textual revisions on the page and in performance with and without musicians—was one significant way

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Cortez defied traditional power structures and the fixity they demand. This study will consider poems that defy this fixity, such as “Festivals & Funerals,” “Firespitters,” and “I Have Been Searching.”

Growing out of the blues tradition, Cortez’s collaborations with Denardo Coleman and the other Firespitters encompass another musical idiom that informs the musicians’ aesthetics as well as her own—harmolodics, or Ornette Coleman’s theory of free jazz improvisation in which a musician follows a chain of related ideas from one to the next, without regard to the conventions of musical song forms or chord progressions. Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism is an analogous literary theory, as both harmolodics and dialogism present an ongoing chain of communication that evolves as it moves among the different participants in a performed conversation. While Cortez may not have consciously conceived of her writing as dialogic or harmolodic, her written and performed collaborations demonstrate aspects of both performative practices. In most jazz combos, musicians listen to each other and play interactive musical ideas and phrases within the structure of a repeated chord pattern. Musicologist Ingrid Monson and bassist Richard Davis, Cortez’s sole musical partner on her LP Celebrations and Solitudes, both describe this kind of improvisation as a conversation in which musicians interact with one another as if they were talking.\(^{24}\) According to Davis, “it’s like a conversation and one guy will… create a melodic motif or a rhythmic motif and the band picks it up. It’s like sayin’ that you all are talking about the same thing.”\(^ {25}\) In these musical conversations, jazz musicians create interactive musical ideas, and they also build on each other’s themes and motifs in an act often described as signifying.

As such, jazz musicians continually signify on other musicians’ ideas, simultaneously alluding to the ubiquitous verbal practices within Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s larger rubric of Signifyin(g). Cortez’s poetic collaborations demonstrate further possibilities of ways in which, in Gates’s words, “When one text Signifies upon another text, by tropological revision or repetition

\(^{24}\) Ingrid Monson, Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 81.
\(^{25}\) Monson, 32.
and difference, the double-voiced utterance allows us to chart discrete formal relationships in Afro-American literary history.”²⁶ In *Thinking in Jazz*, Paul Berliner applies Gates’s literary theory to the kind of conversations Richard Davis described to Ingrid Monson. Berliner, in his own signification upon Gates, links improvised music to playing the dozens, testifying, rapping, and call and response—all of which reside under the rubric of Signifyin(g) in oral language. Jazz artists mimic these verbal acts through playing riffs, licks, antiphonal responses, cries, and hollers. These call-and-response techniques offer musicians tools with which they might alternately pay homage or poke fun in musical pastiche, allusion, and other troping mechanisms.²⁷ When Cortez collaborated with musicians, their conversations with each other and with Cortez’s words employed traditional forms of improvisation along with more experimental free jazz improvisation that demonstrates Ornette Coleman’s harmolodic theory. Cortez’s work also contains signifying analogic repetition that exemplifies another facet of the major trope of *The Signifyin(g) Monkey*. Scholars like Aldon Nielsen, Tony Bolden, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Jennifer Ryan-Bryant who provide important scholarly critiques of this imaginative incremental repetition describe it as an extension of her surrealist ideology. In considering Cortez’s work with musicians off the printed page, it is also possible to conceive of her constantly evolving repetition as an extension of Ornette Coleman’s harmolodic theory of free jazz improvisation. Though most critical studies of Cortez’s work have given considerable nuanced attention to this central facet of Cortez’s poetics, none has framed her use of surrealist incremental repetition as an extension of harmolodic improvisation that connects her writing to the free jazz musicians with whom she performed.

At its core, Cortez’s written and performed work engages with these musical and literary frameworks to address aspects of life for underrepresented people across the African diaspora.

The most pervasive poetic genre in Cortez’s corpus is the praise song, and each of her books contains multiple poetic celebrations of both the living and the dead. As with elegies written by her contemporaries Robert Hayden, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Michael Harper, and the many other poets who have written tributes to John Coltrane, Cortez’s elegies demonstrate another way her poetry embodies Baker’s figuration of the blues matrix. Thematically, celebrating a person’s life after death in the tradition of a second line and in the Senufo Firespitter ritual constitutes a response to “paralyzing absence” that refuses paralysis.\(^{28}\) In her acts of remembering, speaking the names of the departed, and honoring their spirits, Cortez extends their lifespans; thus, archiving these memories on paper in books and performing pieces that elegize and celebrate become ways to both honor the dead and to resist personal paralysis. Bringing a poem from the page into a live collaborative setting gives it new life, and Cortez provided ample opportunities for some of her pieces to find new purpose as she performed them in different settings. In this way, her words were able to perform multiple functions, again refusing paralysis and resisting outside control. Among her many praise songs, Cortez’s words transform her subjects in “Festivals & Funerals,” “Kai Kai,” “Commitment,” and “No Simple Explanations.” Through these expressions of respect for Cortez’s personal pantheon of luminaries, she adds to their mythos. Similarly, when she wrote about nameless underrepresented subjects, Cortez gave them eternal voices, valorizing them and inspecting their situations from different angles.

Examining Cortez’s performed collaborations of poems like “Commitment” and “Firespitters” alongside their printed versions also offers an opportunity to consider different issues Diana Taylor raises in *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Cortez’s books and studio albums act as mile markers or touchstones along Cortez’s creative journey, and they present archives for closer inspection. Cortez’s two live CDs, scattered live performance videos, and private audio recordings of her live performances provide a different kind of archive that comes nearer to

\(^{28}\) Baker, 8.
presenting her live repertoire, which Taylor asserts “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge…. The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission.”

I experienced four of Cortez’s live performances in different settings, and no recording can fully capture the subtle nuances and raw energy of her dynamic voice when she performed both with and without musicians. Taylor’s work suggests Cortez’s performative practices allow for an “alternative perspective on historical processes of transnational contact.”

Meta Jones likewise uses the word “archive” as a verb in *The Muse is Music*, wherein she explores archives of recorded jazz poetry to demonstrate ways in which “riffs and remembrances evident in these examples aurally showcase how the soundscape shapes African American poetry performances across a diverse sociopolitical and historical landscape.”

My own project connects Cortez’s rich body of work to Jones’s landscape by adding analyses of archived performances outside the scope of Jones’s project and placing them in conversation with multiple iterations of each piece.

In another applicable performance theory, Joseph Roach conceives of a circum-Atlantic dialogue as an extension of Pan-African ideology in which performers enact a process of surrogation as they cope with loss by creating alternative memory that cannot replace the vacancy, but rather “retains its consequences, one of which is that the unspeakable cannot be rendered forever inexpressible.” Cortez’s performed collaborations, especially those that celebrate the lives of departed heroes and loved ones, provide Cortez, her collaborators, and her audience a means to prolong life through the act of remembering. Likewise, Cortez’s poems that

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30 Taylor, 20.
31 Jones, 13.
expose and interrogate shocking human rights violations ensure these unspeakable acts are
commemorated and transmitted to audiences who can ostensibly either effect immediate change
or, at the very least, strive to keep similar acts from occurring in the future. David Román
conceives of this transmission as a means of forming a “counterpublicity to the dominant
discourses of the nationstate,” thereby proposing alternative viewpoints and emerging
perspectives that have the potential for disrupting inculcated power structures. These theories of
performance articulate an extension of Baker’s blues matrix with important links to Pan-African
activism that demonstrates additional ways in which Cortez’s writing and performed
collaborations exude motion and vitality.

In the last decade, ecofeminist literary criticism has emerged as another useful framework
for understanding Cortez’s interrogations of loss and violence. In her writing, Cortez often
conflates the human body with the earth, drawing explicit connections between personal and
environmental damage. In a tribute to Léon-Gontran Damas, Cortez wrote: “Damas could see that
the planet was in trouble, that resources were limited, that the atmosphere was polluted, that the
ecological system had already been affected by industrial technology.” Like Damas, Cortez also
felt a responsibility toward caring for the earth; thus, twenty-first-century critics often cite her use
of the human body as a metaphor for better understanding destructive capitalist forces that
subjugate human life and natural resources, especially in underdeveloped countries lacking a
strong infrastructure. Jennifer Ryan-Bryant describes this analogous relationship as “an
ecofeminist critique in [Cortez’s] poetry and performance that charges mainstream society with
the responsibility for concealing crimes perpetrated against women’s bodies in the land, both
national and natural, in which they live.” Bryant elaborates on her conception of Cortez’s poetic
politics as representing three interrelated ideas—historical texts, national land, and female

33 David Román, Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts (Durham,
34 Rosemont, Black, 304–05.
35 Ryan, 82.
bodies—all of which have been scarred, altered, and subjected to outside ownership. By conflating these entities, Cortez fosters autonomy and agency for all three and promotes healthy, socially responsible environmental stewardship. With ecofeminism among these overarching themes and theoretical frameworks in mind, the trajectory of Cortez’s life events in moving from a community activist in Los Angeles to a citizen of two continents who performed and organized global festivals represents a series of deliberate choices that developed her diasporic perspective and helped her grow as an artist.

To demonstrate this evolution, several factors informed my organization and selection of pieces from Cortez’s corpus of over 400 poems and more than ninety recorded collaborations. With a few exceptions, I chose poems for which there exist more than one recording, and about which exists little to no scholarly criticism. In my presentation of each piece, I provide a textual analysis, historical and social context, evidence of textual revision, musical analyses, anecdotal information from Cortez’s notebooks and contemporaries, and connections to Cortez’s larger body of work. In addition to presenting interpretations of each piece, I also synthesize my work with extant scholarship about Cortez’s poetry and about her contemporaries who engage with similar practices and subject matters. Each analytical chapter contains biographical information about Cortez’s publications and musical collaborations relevant to the poems at the core of the chapter, placed in the context of Cortez’s community building Pan-African aesthetic that grew through her travels and collaborations. Excerpts of critical reception along with references to major awards and recognitions provide greater insight into Cortez’s motivations for creating certain works at certain times.

The body of each analytical chapter develops different themes, critical theories, and ideologies by investigating thematically paired poems arranged in roughly chronological order. Chapter One, “‘This is the Word’: Pantheon Building in ‘Festivals & Funerals’ and Cortez’s Earliest Musical Collaborations,” explores one early poem and two different musical
collaborations from the period prior to Cortez’s formal creation of the Firespitters band. Cortez collaborated first with Clifford Thornton and then Richard Davis on performed versions of “Festivals & Funerals,” a piece she published in 1972 in her second chapbook of the same title. The poem expresses Cortez’s feelings of loss for Patrice Lumumba and Malcolm X, whose murders galvanized Black Nationalist ideologies and inspired Cortez and her contemporaries to take aggressive stances against insidious government entities that precipitated both of their deaths. The chapter begins with an overview of Cortez’s first book and unrecorded collaborations in Los Angeles before it presents “Festivals & Funerals,” one of Cortez’s best-known elegies. In addition to presenting a textual analysis, the chapter also presents two recorded musical collaborations that demonstrate the progression of her earliest recorded work with musicians prior to the formation of the Firespitters band with Denardo Coleman.

Chapter Two, “‘And I Like That’: Cortez’s Evolving Black Aesthetic Activism in ‘Kai Kai’ and ‘Commitment,’” presents two later elegiac praise poems that demonstrate Cortez and the musicians’ wide range of musical styles and thematic approaches for paying tribute to her contemporaries and forbearers. My discussion of “Kai Kai” introduces another important elegy that shaped Cortez’s early approach to collaboration and poetic expression. This piece elegizes Christopher Okigbo and Henry Dumas, again conflating an African and an American writer who shared analogous struggles for freedom. After examining the poem’s text from her 1977 American-Book-Award-winning Mouth on Paper, I present analyses of a recording without musicians from 1980, an unreleased recording of a live performance from the same year under Bill Cole’s direction, and a studio recording with the Firespitters six years later on the album Maintain Control. These three recordings show different iterations of Cortez’s performative practices—by herself and with different groups of musicians—as her collaborations as a participant in Bill Cole’s wide-ranging projects informed her work with her own band. The other poem in this chapter, “Commitment,” was also first published in Mouth on Paper, and it pays
tribute to Paul Robeson. Published in two different versions, “Commitment” and “Commitment 2” demonstrate Cortez’s revision process, and the recording on 1986’s Maintain Control is quite different from the musical setting for “Kai Kai.” Blending personnel and musical approaches in her work with Cole, this studio recording uses only a cellist and sparse orchestral percussion to enhance Cortez’s second version of the piece. Both “Commitment” and “Kai Kai” address themes of mourning and grief in divergent ways—one measured and the other explosive—showing Cortez’s diversifying creative approaches to writing and collaborating with musicians.

Chapter Three, “‘We’re Here’: Extending Community in ‘Firespitters’ and ‘No Simple Explanations,’” shows Cortez’s evolutionary revision process by bringing together two thematically different poems from Cortez’s 1982 chapbook Firespitter to formally introduce the musicians who formed the core of Cortez’s band. Cortez originally wrote the poem “Firespitters” in response to her experience at the FESTAC ’77 conference in Nigeria. After she formed the Firespitters band in 1980, Cortez first excerpted, and then spontaneously revised the piece as the band’s theme song. In addition to presenting textual analysis of the printed poem, this chapter presents three different performed versions of the same piece from 1990’s Everywhere Drums, 1992’s Poetry & Music, and an unrecorded 2006 performance, all of which demonstrate Cortez’s performative transformations from the page to the stage over more than twenty years. The other poem in this chapter, Cortez’s 1982 tribute to Larry Neal, “No Simple Explanations,” features Ornette Coleman and the Firespitters engaged in intricate harmolodic exchanges.

Contemporaneous with “Firespitter,” this piece offers additional insight into the individual band members’ approaches to harmolodic improvisation on 1986’s Maintain Control that fits perfectly with Cortez’s evolving chains of surrealistic images.

Chapter Four, “‘Let’s Move Toward Peace’: Waging War on War in ‘Stockpiling’ and ‘Push Back the Catastrophes,’” presents two poems Cortez wrote shortly after publishing Firespitter, both of which demonstrate her burgeoning ecofeminism and her work as an artistic
emissary in UNESCO. Like the poems in the previous chapter, Cortez wrote “Stockpiling” and “Push Back the Catastrophes” in the early 1980s, this time for UNESCO’s *War on War* conference in Paris. Cortez recorded both in the studio on 1990’s *Everywhere Drums*, an album that introduces an electronic aural palate through Denardo’s use of emerging technology. Cortez also performed “Stockpiling” in a strictly acoustic setting in Bill Cole’s final *Cycles* concert in 1982, and the contrasts between the two performed versions of the same poem again demonstrate Cortez and the musicians’ flexibility across a range of musical styles. In addition to showcasing Cortez’s global concern for the planet, these recordings also display a significant shift in the Firespitters’ performed collaborations toward electronic sounds and more controlled studio settings with less evident ties to free jazz.

Chapter Five, “‘My Hoodooistic Scream’: Signifying on Diasporic Religious Practices in ‘Make Ifa’ and ‘I’m Gonna,’” unpacks Cortez’s connection to diasporic rituals in its exploration of “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna.” In recordings and live performances of both pieces, Cortez and the musicians replicate different rituals inspired by Yoruba religious traditions, putting their own American free-jazz-inflected musical performance practices into direct conversation with West African traditions that crossed the Atlantic during the Middle Passage. These traditions now form the foundations of Haitian vodou, Cuban Santería, Brazilian capoeira and candomblé, and the hoodoo and voodoo practices around the American Gulf Coast. By signifying on these traditions, Cortez and the Firespitters suggest different ways in which these traditions follow the circum-Atlantic transmission of culture that provides a foundation for diasporic communities. Cortez published “Make Ifa” in 1991 after recording it on 1990’s *Everywhere Drums*. Significantly, Cortez also released a different live recording of the piece in 2001 on *As If You Knew*. This album contains the only recordings of several pieces Cortez performed with musicians during the last decade of her career. The other poem in this chapter, “I’m Gonna,” also stands as an important example of Cortez’s late collaborations, as she granted the Sanctuary for Independent Media
permission to share an archived live performance from 2010 on YouTube. As with “Make Ifa,” she first recorded the poem then published it on 1994’s *Cheerful & Optimistic* and in 1996’s *Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere*, respectively.

Chapter Six, “‘Beyond the Thinking’: Witnessing Turn-of-the-Century African Genocide in ‘I Have Been Searching’ and ‘Janjaweed Militia,’” examines two poems, one of which was also among the final pieces Cortez wrote and performed with musicians. Cortez’s 1996 poem about the Rwandan genocide, “I Have Been Searching,” is the eclectic result of her bringing together West African guest musicians with the Firespitters. She performed it live at *Dankarafule* in 1995 with only the Firespitters, and a video of the performance resides in the New York Public Library archive at Lincoln Center. In addition to this live performance in New York, Cortez invited four West African guests to record it with the Firespitters on her only major-label studio recording, 1996’s *Taking the Blues Back Home*. “Janjaweed Militia,” her poem about genocide in Darfur, evolved as a live performance piece before she printed it in 2007’s *The Beautiful Book*. A small segment of the piece is archived on her video compilation from the 2008 Slave Routes Conference, and she released a recording of “Janjaweed Militia” from a different live performance on her final album, 2011’s *As If You Knew*. Together, these two poems showcase varied musical and poetic approaches to two recent tragedies that historians and human rights activists have decried as preventable catastrophes rooted in post-colonial chaos.

The conclusion shares anecdotal thoughts on my voyage into Cortez’s work and suggests the import of some of her far-reaching legacy. I end with a brief excerpt from Cortez’s final live collaboration archived on Randy Weston’s 2016 recording *The African Nubian Suite*. Her contribution to Weston’s suite, “The Woman,” touches on all of the major themes she interrogated throughout her career, and thus it provides a satisfactory ending to my extended exploration of her life’s collaborative work with musicians. Following the conclusion, appendices offer transcriptions of the different versions of each poem in the analytical chapters, a timeline of
Cortez’s major life events, and a bibliography of anthologies and journals that contain Cortez’s work.

By connecting Pan-Africanism, Négritude, surrealism, blues, harmolodics, ecofeminism, and dialogism to Cortez’s collaborative poems through the ways these different ideologies inform her deployment of kinetic language and imagery to move audiences, this project further explores Cortez’s persistence in addressing the residual loss endemic to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Like blues and jazz musicians, Cortez crafted her poems as expressions of grief that defy oppression and ultimately transcend victimization by promising to move forward rather than refusing to succumb to loss. Cortez’s main mode of poetic creation took the form of a praise song, and she wrote these both as elegies and as tributes to the living. In her elegiac writing, Cortez also embodied Baker’s blues matrix, in addition to confronting issues Diana Taylor and Joseph Roach raise in their critical approaches to performance studies. Along with her elegies, Cortez’s written and performed collaborations bearing witness to instances of social injustice were her means of coping with individual loss as well as trying to make meaning out of the void created by centuries of displacement around the African diaspora.

As well as writing singular praise songs like “Festivals & Funerals” and “No Simple Explanations,” Cortez acknowledged nameless subjugated masses in pieces like “Push Back the Catastrophes” and “I Have Been Searching.” This project presents these and other pieces as exemplars of Cortez’s work to heal personal and public wounds. In addition to giving voices to the nameless, Cortez’s pieces, like “Stockpiling,” also enact an ecofeminist critique that connects human bodies to the earth, and her body of work provides innumerable instances of her pushing back against subjugating forces through imagery that invokes violence against human bodies, which are, inevitably, part of the larger global body. Taken together and examined alongside recorded performances of each piece, these different approaches illuminate the complexity and
scope of Cortez’s poetry—especially in the political and aesthetic concerns that define her
performed collaborations with musicians.
Chapter 1
“This is the Word”: Pantheon Building in “Festivals & Funerals”
and Cortez’s Earliest Collaborations

The space between festivals and funerals can be infinite or it can be deathly short…. But whatever the space, or the pace, we all slip, slide, soar, and trip as we make our way between the polarities… of the kind of life we live and the kind of death we die.¹ – Eugene Redmond

Jayne Cortez’s early poems explore the space between celebrations of life and death as they present a global history of obstacles, turning points, and reaffirmations that simultaneously challenge and reassure her audiences. More than a quarter of Cortez’s approximately 400 published poems honor significant figures in twentieth and twenty-first-century black life, from jazz musicians to African heads of state. The subjects of Cortez’s praise songs, both living and dead, encompass her pantheon of comrades and luminaries who inspired her active commitment to social justice. Immersed in black vernacular music at a young age, Cortez frequented live music venues in Los Angeles, where she bonded with musicians who expanded the jazz and blues canons through their explorations that evolved into “free jazz.” Through her connections with these musicians, Cortez incorporated elements of jazz with performative elements of blues in early poems she workshopped and performed with the Watts Repertory Theater Company. Living in Watts during the 1965 Rebellion also placed Cortez in conversation with grassroots community organizers who created art to affirm their identities and to connect with others living under oppressive socioeconomic conditions precipitated by racial discrimination. In this community, Cortez wrote poems that expressed frustration and redemption in the way blues lyrics allow singers to cope with and transcend their own burdens through musical expression. When Cortez began reading her work with musicians, they more explicitly connected her poetry to black vernacular musical forms and provided an interactive space in which the performers forged bonds of kinship rooted in a call and response with Cortez’s imaginative poetics.

Cortez wrote the paean “Festivals & Funerals” in 1971, during the first decade of her publishing career, and it articulates her Black Arts ideology as she celebrates the lives and mourns the murders of Patrice Lumumba and Malcolm X by connecting them to the men in her community. In the poem, Cortez engages the blues tradition of dealing with loss through expressive action, and she urges her audience to honor both men by pushing back against the oppressive institutional forces that killed them. “Festivals & Funerals” also presents an emerging expression of Cortez’s Pan-African ideology, in which she brought together American and African icons, seamlessly integrating expressions of loss for both men and reinforcing circum-Atlantic connections among African and black American cultural icons. In addition to providing insight into Cortez’s early poetics, “Festivals & Funerals” provides the text for Cortez’s two earliest recorded musical collaborations on LPs released in 1972 and 1974: Clifford Thornton’s *Communications Network* and Cortez’s *Celebrations and Solitudes*. Because of its inclusion on these two recordings, “Festivals & Funerals” provides a critical entry point into Cortez’s evolving body of collaborative work with musicians that shows her engagement with black musical idioms in multivocal circum-Atlantic dialogues.

Because “Festivals & Funerals” is one of Cortez’s earliest printed poems, several scholars and reviewers have published critiques of the piece, and most analyses constitute small portions of larger arguments that discuss Cortez’s early work in broad strokes. Anthony Ratcliff invokes the poem to explore dialectical Pan-African creativity during the Black Arts Movement amidst recurring assassinations of black revolutionaries.² Howard Rambsy likewise connects Cortez’s poem to the Black Arts Movement and describes “Festivals & Funerals” as part of a growing body of New Black Poetry that, rather than incite anti-white violence, documented “the facts” of anti-black violence by implicating the U.S. government in both murders.³ GerShun Avilez includes “Festivals & Funerals” in his argument that Cortez “summons sexuality-based

² Ratcliff, 199–200.
stereotypes to dispute their validity…. [D]isintegrating public sexual myths achieves the nationalist goal of reconceiving the public sphere.” While “Festivals & Funerals” has received critical attention that situates it in the context of the Black Arts Movement, this is the first project to present collaborative versions of the poem as foundational documents of Cortez’s performing career when she moved from Los Angeles to New York and began to archive and promote her poetic and collaborative practices in books and on recordings.

While Patrice Lumumba and Malcolm X occupy the foreground of “Festivals & Funerals,” Cortez also wrote the poem to celebrate cultural festivals in the 1950s and sixties that provided new opportunities for underrepresented artistic voices to emerge as powerful agents of political revolution. Starting in the 1970s, Cortez participated in many festivals that deepened her kinship with likeminded artists who fought for social justice throughout the African diaspora. “Festivals & Funerals” acknowledges these celebrations while it interrogates corruption within dominant government establishments. Cortez also wrote the poem to link two political icons who acted as role models for men and women in Cortez’s community. Malcolm X was an outspoken proponent of Patrice Lumumba’s revolutionary politics in the Belgian Congo, and American Black Nationalists idealized anticolonial African leaders like Lumumba. Cortez and her contemporaries identified with their fallen heroes because:

Reflected in their eyes is the same look of solidarity. This motivation, this quality, this strength like the speeches of Malcolm X… and the unforgettable face of Patrice.

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Lumumba is important to my work…. The combination of more than one person, more than one memory, more than one event… [is n]ecessary to the revolutionary stance i’ve [sic] taken against oppression in my work. It doesn’t mean the problem is solved, that the war is over, but revolutionary because the intent is revolutionary.6

Building on this intent, Cortez crafted “Festivals & Funerals” to unite two men who were committed to solidarity through revolution. Cortez wrote the poem within a larger Pan-African movement, during which her contemporaries also published poems that memorialized slain activists in their own artistic expressions of kinship and indignation.7

In order to contextualize Cortez’s two archived recordings of “Festivals & Funerals,” it is important first to understand her earliest musical influences and her connections to the burgeoning avant-garde jazz scene in Los Angeles during the 1950s and sixties. Born in 1934, Jayne Cortez was raised an avid music lover, and she befriended experimental musicians who, despite public criticism of their discordant and seemingly chaotic music, later earned international acclaim as canon-busting innovators.8 In the late 1940s, young Cortez frequented jazz and blues jam sessions at local clubs, including the one at which she met Ornette Coleman, a virtuosic bebop player whose musical nonconformity made it increasingly difficult for him to find work. Cortez and Coleman married in 1954, and though their marriage lasted only ten years, their creative collaborations evolved together for the rest of their lives through their independent

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6 Jayne Cortez qtd. in Ishmael Reed, Yardbird Reader, 5 (1976), 110.
8 Most secondary sources published before 2012 erroneously cite Cortez’s birth year as 1936 because she promulgated it as such. Cortez’s actual birth year of 1934 has been substantiated in printed obituaries and in the program for her Celebration of Life on February 6, 2013. Robert Hershon, interview by Renee Kingan, April 24, 2017, transcript.
projects with their son, drummer Denardo Coleman. Denardo began recording with his father at age ten, and when he was in his twenties, he became his mother’s primary musical collaborator, helping her form the Firespitters band with musicians from his father’s Prime Time band.

Denardo and the Firespitters performed live with Cortez and recorded several studio albums that showcased her poetry woven into a musical tapestry rooted in free jazz that combined African and American musical genres from blues to Ghanaian folk music. This community of musicians engaged in a meaningful call and response with Cortez’s words and amplified the blues-inflected Pan-African content of her poetry, making her one of the most prolific jazz-poetry collaborators of the twentieth century.

Almost twenty years before forming the Firespitters with Denardo, Cortez vigorously pursued her own education through reading, traveling, and bonding with artists, intellectuals, and political activists around the world. Cortez’s early training at Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles fostered her love of music, theater, and visual arts. After she graduated, Cortez became involved with the Watts Writers Workshop and helped found and direct the Watts Repertory Theater Company until 1970. Through these organizations, Cortez worked with Stanley Crouch and Quincy Troupe, both of whom would cross her path at various points in Cortez’s career, especially as each made their way from Los Angeles into the avant-garde jazz scene in 1970s New York City. While writing with Crouch and Troupe in Watts, Cortez also began performing her poetry with musicians including Horace Tapscott, a politically conscious pianist who used his

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9 As their marriage lasted only ten years in contrast to her forty-year marriage to Melvin Edwards, Cortez expressed disdain when people primarily identified her through her connection to Coleman. As a result, “[b]oth Coleman’s biographer, John Litweiler, and [interviewer D. H.] Melhem are strangely reticent about this marriage. Melhem does not even name Coleman in her biographical introduction to her interviews with Cortez, stating only that Cortez ‘was married early, in 1954, to a jazz musician.’” Aldon L. Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 222. Cortez’s indignation likely resulted from portrayals such as: “She herself dressed unconventionally, making her own clothes as she later made clothes for Ornette. She was an intelligent girl who was very well read; her record collection was enormous, and unusually informed in that it included the most advanced jazz and classical records of the time. She was also an extremely attractive woman, of mixed Negro and Filipino blood. Her mother had been one of a set of twins and her family was one of the most attractive in the Watts district.” A. B. Spellman, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1967), 108–09.
art to build community that bridged the divided landscape of Los Angeles. Cortez met Tapscott when she returned to Los Angeles in 1963 to organize a Friends of SNCC chapter after working with Fannie Lou Hamer in Mississippi. Cortez’s summer with Hamer galvanized her commitment to activism, and in a 2005 letter to poet Rosamond King, Cortez linked these early collaborations to the Watts Rebellion:

> When I first put words with music in performance in Los Angeles in 1964, there were no examples. For me it was a way of extending human rights and improving the condition of the community by giving examples of artistic performance possibilities….[A] cultural scene emerged with writing workshops, alternative reading/performance spaces, art galleries, and Board of Education programs that included creative writing….

In this fertile environment, Cortez and Tapscott collaborated with other musicians to create a one-woman show. Cortez described Tapscott in one interview: “Clearly among the musicians, Tapscott was the one with the most consciousness and dedication to the black freedom struggle…. We had a lot of conversations about music, about the daily rhythms of life, about family, friends, but we also talked a lot about liberation movements in Africa and around the world, about political situations.”

Though there is no recorded archive of these early collaborations, Cortez’s work with Tapscott inspired her to build her own community of likeminded artist-activists.

To commemorate these relationships, Cortez dedicated her first chapbook, *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man’s Wares*, “To members of The Watts Repertory Theatre Company,”

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and some of its poems are pieces she wrote to perform with musicians in Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{12} Though she published the book two years after she moved to New York in 1967, it provides an archive of Cortez’s work as a young West Coast poet engaging in artistic activism.\textsuperscript{13} Cortez’s imagery in \emph{Pissstained Stairs} foreshadows her stylistic signature: signifying strings of images that allowed audiences to create their own connections to diverse ideas she presented. Many of the book’s poems structurally and thematically replicate blues lyrics and deal with death, affirming Houston Baker’s assertion that the blues constitute a crucial means of reconciling personal loss. Cortez included tributes to specific musicians like Ornette Coleman (“Ornette” and “Lonely Woman”), Fats Navarro (“Theodore”), Clifford Brown (“Bright Brown Summer”), Sun Ra (“Sun”), Charlie Parker (“Suite”), John Coltrane (“How Long Has Trane Been Gone”), and Huddie William “Lead Belly” Ledbetter (“Lead”)—all but two of whom had died by the time Cortez published \emph{Pissstained Stairs}.\textsuperscript{14} In grappling with their deaths, Cortez also lamented the struggles of

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\item \textsuperscript{12} Incongruities in the spelling of “Theatre/Theater” exist in primary and secondary accounts of Cortez’s work with this organization.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Future husband Melvin Edwards’s illustrations portray phallic imagery, like many of his \textit{Lynch Fragments} sculptures, underscoring Cortez’s emphasis on black men in her early poems. Though Cortez and Edwards’s collaborations are not the subject of this project, they demonstrate the same kind of reciprocal exchange Cortez enacted in her work with musicians. Cortez’s bond of creative kinship with Edwards’s illustrations in her first two books foreshadowed the collaborative bond she would create with Denardo in future musical endeavors when they created the Firespitters band.
\item \textsuperscript{14} “How Long Has Trane Been Gone” is among Cortez’s best known poems and the sole sample of her work in the \textit{Norton Anthology of African American Literature}. As such, several critical observations of this poem exist as small pieces of larger critical studies. Kimberly Benston puts “How Long Has Trane Been Gone” in conversation with Walter Dancy’s “John Coltrane Sings,” David Henderson’s “Elvin Jones Gretsch Freak…,” Sonia Sanchez’s “a/coltrane/poem,” Haki Madhubuti’s “Don’t Cry, Scream,” A. B. Spellman’s “Did John’s Music Kill Him,” and Michael Harper’s “Dear John, Dear Coltrane” and “Where Coltrane Is.” Kimberly W. Benston, \textit{Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism} (London: Routledge, 2000), 186. Dara Green uses “How Long Has Trane Been Gone” in her exploration of “the ways in which black women poets operate as co-priestesses to jazz artists by activating nommo… through their writing.” Dara T. Green, “‘How We Got Ovah’: Afrocentric Spirituality in Black Art’s Movement Women’s Poetry” (Master’s thesis, Florida State University, 2007), 125. Tom Lavazzi also uses “How Long Has Trane Been Gone” as an example of how “a few of Jayne Cortez’s key Black Arts era poems… imagistically work through/perform the conflictual, complex nature of such an identity, attempting to trope the ‘dominant’ (American) cultural construction of African Americanness to realize a more genuine one, as the poems themselves struggle against their Anglo-European formal provenance”; Lavazzi also places Cortez’s poems in conversation with “DuBois’s shifting constructions of race.” Jacob Blevins, \textit{Dialogism and Lyric Self-Fashioning: Bakhtin and the Voices of a Genre} (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2008), 221. Howard Rambsy also examines “How Long Has Trane Been Gone.” Howard Rambsy, \textit{The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry} (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011).
\end{itemize}
nameless black Americans in pieces like “Noir Martyree,” or “Black Martyrdom.” From a formal standpoint, relatively few poems in *Pissstained Stairs* affect Cortez’s first-person poet-as-observer point of view that permeates her later work and imbues it with authority. Instead, the scattered poems written in first person, like “Suppression,” read as blues-inflected expressions of intense heterosexual female desire. In “If You Were Mine” and “Dinah’s Back in Town,” Cortez’s speaker dons the first-person personae of jazz and blues singers Billie Holiday and Dinah Washington to invoke the strength these two vibrant performers conveyed to their audiences. In these pieces, Cortez engages with longing and desire by naming each speaker’s grief through an articulation of Baker’s blues matrix that acknowledges loss to transform absence into presence.

Thematically, Cortez’s subjects reflect the Black Aesthetic that fueled her earliest published work. On the page, her style of rhythmic repetition became more sophisticated with each publication. Cortez’s most enduring early poems from *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man’s Wares* contain whole repeated lines and phrases, while in later pieces she often avoided refrain in favor of incremental repetition. Baker’s blues matrix, again, provides a useful

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15 Written to express analogous grief, Cortez’s poem “Race” includes controversial imagery that has drawn criticism regarding Cortez’s use of homophobic language to describe the plight of a black man in the 1960s. Kimberly Brown addresses homophobia in Cortez’s early work by citing an interview in which Cortez explains she wrote her 1968 poem “Race” for a homosexual friend who “never rejected the tone of the piece.” Jayne Cortez qtd. in D. H. Melhem, *Heroism in the New Black Poetry: Introductions and Interviews* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 207. Brown counters: “It is because of her apparent homophobia that one must question the extent of the inclusiveness of Cortez’s revolutionary agenda.... What is a bit sad and ironic is that had Cortez adopted [Huey] Newton’s position on homosexuals, she might have been able to see what Alexis DeVeaux sees, that society’s fear of lesbians is an indictment against female independence.” Kimberly Nichele Brown, *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva: Women’s Subjectivity and the Decolonizing Text* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 169. In an earlier essay, Brown invokes Cheryl Clarke who wrote: “Clearly, homosexuals, especially male homosexuals, had only counterrevolutionary currency and had to be eradicated in order to masculinize the ‘race.’ This model of reeducation, however, razed the canonical fortress and cleared the way for a multicultural generation of ‘guerrillas,’ particularly feminists, gays, and lesbians in the 1980s.” Cheryl Clarke, *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 58–59. Clarke later elaborates that homophobia in Black Arts writing unconsciously supported intersectional thinking through which “black feminists and lesbian feminists reclaimed past black women writers.” Clarke, 122–23. GerShun Avilez also places “Race” in conversation with “Festivals & Funerals” in his discussion of how “Cortez’s Black Arts poetry collections *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man’s Wares* and *Festivals and Funerals* turn their attention to limiting constructions of Black femininity and sexual minority existence that impede self-definition.” Avilez, 250.
framework for understanding this evolution of Cortez’s repetition: “At the junctures, the
intersections of experience where roads cross and diverge, the blues singer and his performance
serve as codifiers, absorbing and transforming discontinuous experience into formal expressive
instances that bear only the trace of origins, refusing to be pinned down to any final, dualistic
significance.”16 In her early blues poems, Cortez codified her own and others’ discontinuous
experiences, insofar as her juxtaposed snapshots offered new ways to name traumatic experiences
and created an expansive framework for understanding Cortez’s subjects’ unnamed and
previously unnameable grief. When Cortez later reframed these images in musical collaborations,
re-presenting her words for a live audience after internalizing and inscribing them on the page,
her transformations of each poem into collaborative cross-genre performances presented
possibilities that refused to be pinned down in simple either/or oppositions.

Cortez published her second book in 1971, and Festivals and Funerals demonstrates her
developing individual style, still rooted in stylistic and thematic concerns she presented in
Pissstained Stairs. Typographically, the poems in Festivals and Funerals are both double and
single-spaced, and alignment is left-justified. Formally, this collection shows Cortez’s decreasing
concern for poetic conventions outside her penchants for refrain, incremental repetition, and
occasional end rhyme. Most of the poems in this book suggest an attention to rhythm, though not
meter, and this element became more prominent in Cortez’s later poetry when she worked more
consistently with her Firespitters band.17 “Rhythm & Blues” uses music as an extended metaphor
for the speaker’s lover, while “A Blues” places American music in an African setting. In addition
to containing musical references, “African Night Suite,” “The Promise,” and “Solo” demonstrate
Cortez’s growing connection to Africa, and these pieces contain graphic imagery that reenacts
violence in Africa and America. While these themes play a significant role in Cortez’s early

16 Houston A. Baker, Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (Chicago:
17 Cortez never personally reprinted most of the poems in Festivals and Funerals, though she gave
permission for several to be reproduced in journals and anthologies. In 2011, eight poems were translated
into Spanish in Mandorla.
work, she also published pieces that demonstrated her commitment to activism that grew through working with Fannie Lou Hamer, Horace Tapscott, and other revolutionary organizers in Los Angeles and New York.\(^\text{18}\)

Poems like “I’m a Worker” and “Watching a Parade in Harlem” honor working-class black Americans relegated to the lowest socioeconomic level of urban life. Judith Butler asserts that relegation of this kind through naming carries with it a set of expectations and suppositions; once a body has been labeled in a particular way, it must assume the myriad responsibilities and behaviors intrinsic to that name.\(^\text{19}\) Cortez’s poetry in *Festivals and Funerals* names unjust practices and corrupt government actions that push back against ruling classes; she acknowledges social inequity contrasting with triumphant moments in which people resist manipulative power structures. In a 2002 keynote speech, Cortez explained: “The words that we use, the reason that we use them… are affected by all kinds of human events, some of them large and significant, some of them very trivial…. The writer is the transmitter and the audience is the receptor and the respondent[;] there is a reciprocal relationship, which includes cultivation and the learning and unlearning process in development.”\(^\text{20}\) Here, Cortez acknowledges the audience’s responsibility for interpreting her words to create their own meanings. When she invites these multiple possibilities for interpretation, Cortez destabilizes assumptions imbedded in social constructions like race and socioeconomic status. Cortez’s ability to inhabit different personae, including marginalized working-class voices, allows her to celebrate and advocate for those without voices


by exposing injustices wrought against them. This advocacy constitutes the core of Cortez’s later work, as she collaborated with radical musicians and writers across the African diaspora.

By the time Cortez published *Festivals and Funerals*, she had already performed some of its poems with Clifford Thornton, a Black Panther who studied West African music and taught at Wesleyan University in the early 1970s. Thornton was in a cohort of academically trained ethnomusicologists practicing different African musical traditions that blended with jazz and blues idioms in a confluence of Pan-African and Black Nationalist ideologies. Unlike Horace Tapscott and his grassroots approach to creating community in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods, as black scholars fought to gain ground in different colleges around the country, the musicians Cortez met at Wesleyan founded Black Studies programs that entrenched marginalized art forms within a largely white, Eurocentric, male-dominated academy. In this vibrant academic community, Thornton invited Cortez to perform at Carnegie Recital Hall in 1970 with his ensemble.\textsuperscript{21} A *New York Times* review praised the performance: “Miss Cortez read with rhythmic twists and turns, with bursts of arrogant joy, with the structural sound that might go into an instrumental jazz solo.”\textsuperscript{22} Another reviewer likewise commended the collaboration: “she breathed life and fire into the words she had written. With intuitive jazz phrasing and subtleties of voice shadings, she blended her artistry to perfection with the Thornton Ensemble. …[T]he thematic material which Thornton composed especially for Miss Cortez’ recitation, was the perfect backdrop for the poetry.”\textsuperscript{23} Significantly, both reviews suggest Cortez’s poetry foregrounded the music, though the second suggests aforethought and collaboration not often evident in contemporaneous recordings of poetry with music.

Cortez performed again with Thornton at Wesleyan University’s *Jubilee: A Festival of African-American Music* on April 17, 1972, and Thornton released a recording of this

\textsuperscript{21} Cortez saved two different posters from the Carnegie Hall concert. Jayne Cortez Papers, New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Black Studies.
performance, simply titled “Festivals & Funerals,” on the B-side of his 1972 album

*Communications Network.*\(^{24}\) This side features Cortez performing “Lonely Woman” from her book *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man’s Wares* along with “Initiation,” “I Would Like to Be Serene,” “I’m a Worker,” “Screams,” “Festivals & Funerals,” “Solo,” and “Pray for the Lovers” from *Festivals and Funerals.*\(^{25}\) For this performance, Thornton’s ensemble included young musicians in the Wesleyan community who later earned acclaim as performers and educators. Despite the high level of musicianship and dynamic musical interactions, however, Cortez did not grant Thornton permission to release this recording. One review of

*Communications Network* provides a plausible explanation for Cortez’s reticence: “Its musical inventiveness is unfortunately victimized by poor sound quality; Jayne Cortez’ excellent reading from her *Festivals and Funerals* is fuzzy, and none of the microphones was properly balanced…. …[T]echnical and production problems of this album might make poor quality tapes in the future.”\(^{26}\) Despite Cortez’s reservations and the poor audio quality, however, this rare LP contains the first archived recording of Cortez reading her work with musicians.

The 1974 studio recording *Celebrations and Solitudes* was the first authorized LP of Cortez’s musical collaborations. All but one of the pieces on this album come from her 1973 book *Scarifications*, the title of which refers to traditions of marking the body in several African cultures. Kimberly Brown also notes a secondary meaning in the title that “serves as an excellent

\(^{24}\) The album liner notes link this performance to this recording.

\(^{25}\) Cortez did not give permission for Thornton to release the recording, and she disagreed with his doing so without her consent. Bill Cole, Personal Communication, June 25–26, 2015. Cortez also alluded to this “unauthorized recording” in the liner notes of her LP *There It Is.*

example of how one can theorize through scars… [using] an ethnopoetics that blurs the lines between lived experience and theory.”

Scarifications contains a series of pieces about New York, including one of Cortez’s most frequently reproduced and analyzed poems, “I Am New York City.” Other poems about the city include “Under the Edge of February,” “Lynch Fragment 2,” “Orchard Street,” “3 Day New York Blues,” “Lexington/96 Street Stop,” “Bleecker Street,” “Herald Square,” and “Bowery Street.” As with the poems in Festivals and Funerals, Cortez interrogates ugliness in the city while also celebrating the spirit of its residents, thereby demonstrating her growing interest in juxtaposing squalid urban conditions with quotidian human triumphs.

As New York takes center stage throughout Scarifications, there are fewer praise songs, though Cortez includes “Song for Kwame” and “Remembrance,” pieces dedicated to African liberation heroes Kwame Nkrumah and Amilcar Cabral. Scarifications also delves into African cultural traditions in pieces like “Back Home in Benin City,” “Orisha,” “Libations,” and “Ife Night.” In these poems, Cortez combines African and American customs to represent the double-consciousness at the core of her growing Pan-African ideology. Likewise, the book’s cover art features a pattern of West African Adinkra symbols featuring the two-headed crocodile that represents unity in diversity, as the two animals fight over food, though they share a common

27 Kimberly Brown built own theory of scarification on the title of this chapbook and on Gates’s theory of Signifyin(g). Brown explains: “I had to step inside my anger, my humiliation, my pain, and ultimately, my pride and determination in order to see the greater potential for using scars to theorize critically. I borrow the term ‘scarification’ from the title and revolutionary message behind Jayne Cortez’s second [sic] book of poetry, a product of the Black Aesthetic Movement. Scarification can be interpreted in two ways: (1) in terms of the scars lefts by oppression, mental as well as physical scars, and (2) as ritualistic tribal markings that define not only the people to whom you belong but also the place.” Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 68–69.


29 Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega notes that Cortez presents images of New York City and juxtaposes them “against human interior and exterior body parts.” In most of the poems in Scarifications, she does not attempt to resolve those tensions. Poems lead readers through mazes of prepositional phrases that qualify an object, but that Cortez never brings to closure. Instead, the tensions become the methodology of her urban poetics.” Laura Hinton, Jayne Cortez, Adrienne Rich, and the Feminist Superhero: Voice, Vision, Politics, and Performance in U.S. Contemporary Women’s Poetics (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 260.
belly. The cover illustration and poems in *Scarifications* represent Cortez’s expanding Pan-African aesthetic and express her desire to better understand her ancestral roots in order to build a unified community to fight political and social oppression in the United States and in Africa.

When she brought several of this book’s poems into the studio for her first self-produced collaborative recording, she chose to work with a classically trained musician. Rather than feature the multivocality of Thornton’s free-jazz quartet on this LP that also includes a recording of “Festivals & Funerals,” the selections simply consist of Cortez and upright bass virtuoso Richard Davis working in tandem. June Jordan’s 1975 album review praises the collaboration: “The poems and the bass lines, both, vary from lyric to jump, from frenzy to beat, from funky to a laelike sighing to the night. Side one starts with Richard Davis on his bass: the blueblack depth of us opens up, resonating deep, deeper, dark as the spirit, and here comes Jayne Cortez, in perfect voice, sliding on top of the deep and the darkness…” Another review celebrates Cortez’s poetic subjects: “Thru the conspiratorial mysterious deaths of black political and cultural leaders of nations and tribes, signifying and meditating on the deaths of Nkrumah, Malcolm, Patrice Lumumba, in sadness and sorrow…. Jayne Cortez celebrates, berates, irritates, with solitary breaks, takes us on a journey thru the earth-scorching sixties… out of the skillet into the fire.”

In 1997, Aldon Nielsen examined *Celebrations and Solitudes* in the first published book chapter of scholarly criticism on Cortez’s musical collaborations:

> The recording of the jazz texts is a further materializing of the written, and Davis’s bass serves to underscore this materiality, to suture the words to the music. At some points we can even hear the sound of his fingers; moving along the strings of his instrument,

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though, as we listen repeatedly, he is not himself present to us…. Cortez’s speaking voice completes a triad of descending, spoken scales to Davis’s accompaniment.  

A more thorough analysis of this rendition of “Festivals & Funerals” reaffirms this praise and provides additional insight into this early collaboration that laid groundwork for Cortez’s future collaborative endeavors.

The professional studio setting on *Celebrations and Solitudes* provides an invaluable archive of Cortez’s early reading style and suggests her printed poems acted as flexible scripts for live and recorded musical collaborations. Recollecting the session, Cortez describes rehearsing each piece only once and telling Davis, “This is what I am going to do Richard,’ and he doesn’t like to rehearse and he says, ‘O.K. we’ll just do it’. So we went into the studio like he said and did it, and he listened to me and I listened to him and we got involved with what we were both hearing.” In this recording session, then, Davis uses Cortez’s words as inspiration for his improvisations; likewise, Cortez’s reading reflects her interplay with Davis’s musical interpretation of words she previously published. As such, Davis’s interaction with her poetry creates new meanings for Cortez and for audiences that hear this archived recording decades after they were in the studio together.

In the liner notes of *Celebrations and Solitudes*, Cortez shares the following fragmented thoughts about themes in her poem “Festivals & Funerals”: “The title of my second book of poetry. A poem of ritual feelings and repetitions. My respect for Lumumba and Malcolm. Contrast of predicaments.” More broadly, Cortez wrote “Festivals & Funerals” as a blues elegy for black masculinity as well as for the two individuals she named throughout the piece. Her liner

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notes affirm: “This Album is Dedicated to Our Men.” In some sections, the structure of the printed poem “Festivals & Funerals” recalls the traditional format of twelve-bar blues lyrics. Cortez repeats several lines and stanzas two times each throughout the poem, both as a structural allusion to this ubiquitous blues form, but also to acknowledge Malcolm X, Patrice Lumumba, and the unnamed men for whom she wrote the poem. Lines like “I lost a good friend and i / loved him” read as blues lyrics, and though she varies her line lengths, stanza lengths, and types of repetition, “Festivals & Funerals” returns to rhythmically structural blues techniques throughout. The printed poem also demonstrates Cortez’s affinity for the ampersand and her purposeful disregard of standard capitalization of the word “I” each time it occurs after the first word in a line.³⁷ The primary punctuation in the poem is the question mark, framing the piece as a musical call and response that functions as a rhetorical question. Otherwise, Cortez does not punctuate lines. On the page, this lack of punctuation gives the reader freedom of interpretation, and it functions in the same way for Cortez when she adapted “Festivals & Funerals” to read both with and without musicians.

The opening lines of “Festivals & Funerals” conflate Malcolm X and Patrice Lumumba and elevate them as religious martyrs: “They winged his spirit & / wounded his tongue / but death was slow coming.” When Cortez repeats the stanza, she punctuates it with a question mark, both to connote a change in pitch and to ironically imply death came too quickly for both men. Despite Cortez’s canonization, however, her paragons of freedom were complex men who inspired black American activists as they pushed back against established powers. Patrice Lumumba had a reputation for being volatile and impulsive.³⁸ After Lumumba became the independent Congo’s

³⁸ In 1960, Lumumba provoked Belgian ruling elite in a speech that resonated with black Americans: “We have known ironies, insults, blows that we endured… just because we were the negroes…. a black was not admitted in the motion-picture theaters, in the restaurants, in the stores of the Europeans…. we are going to show the world what the black man can do when he works in freedom.” Though the colonial government considered Lumumba’s speech an international insult, radical political activists identified with Lumumba’s powerful rhetoric; they likened it to “an arrow shot from a bow” that precipitated the end of Belgian rule.
first prime minister, for instance, his military attacked the new nation’s white population, and when Lumumba turned to the U.S.S.R. for support, U.S. President Eisenhower issued what amounted to an assassination order through which American intervention facilitated Lumumba’s capture and imprisonment. Lumumba’s supporters, including radical American activists, rallied behind him and precipitated a prison transfer during which Belgian soldiers beat, tortured, and executed him by firing squad. The opening lines of “Festivals & Funerals” contend that, despite his tortuous death, Lumumba’s spirit was “winged,” effectually transcending the abuse of his physical frame. As such, American Pan-Africanists viewed Lumumba’s murder as a lynching Americans could relate to their own experiences, including the death of Emmett Till and other lynch mob victims.

Malcolm X also spoke of Lumumba’s murder as a lynching, and he was a vocal opponent of the U.S. and Belgium’s roles in Lumumba’s assassination. Malcolm X was likewise critical of white media portrayal of racially motivated “riots” in the U.S., and he drew comparisons between media coverage of American “riots” and media coverage of the “savagery” Lumumba’s Congolese soldiers enacted against white Belgians in the Congo. Beginning her poem “Festivals & Funerals” with the word “They,” Cortez sets up an oppositional relationship between institutionalized oppressors and the two men she mourns. Through her speaker’s first-person perspective, Cortez laments: “I lost a good friend & I / loved him.” By using the word “friend,” Cortez draws two Black Nationalist icons close to the speaker as role models whose losses she grieves. Even more than Lumumba’s death, Malcolm X’s assassination galvanized many black


Americans’ belief that self-defense and proactive, separatist actions were more effective than nonviolent resistance to racial violence. Harlem bookstore owner Louis Michaux affirmed this call to action: “It’s things like the murder of Malcolm X that drive the masses closer together. He died in the same manner that Patrice Lumumba met his death in the Congo....”

The Ghanaian Times deemed Malcolm X “the militant and most popular of Afro-American anti-segregationist leaders,” and it added his name to a growing list of leaders, including Patrice Lumumba, “who were martyred in freedom’s cause.” Cortez employed this metaphor of martyrdom in “Festivals & Funerals,” then amplified it when she collaborated with musicians to perform the piece both live and in the studio.

Cortez expanded her personal community of artist-activists when she performed with Black Panther Clifford Thornton. On the live recording of “Festivals & Funerals” archived on Thornton’s 1972 album Communications Network, the musicians work with Cortez to embody the I/they relationship Cortez establishes in the poem’s first line. The musicians frame Cortez’s poem as one of eight pieces connected by musical interludes that create a seamless twenty-five-minute presentation of music and words. Their interlude prior to Cortez’s performance of “Festivals & Funerals” begins with Nathan Davis playing a high soprano sax motif that Clifford Thornton then plays on his cornet before transforming it into a rhythmic pattern. On bass, Andy González and percussionists Nicky Marrero, Jerry González, and Vincent George emulate Thornton’s rhythm and establish a 3/4 groove that quickly dissipates for Cortez to begin reading. As Cortez repeats her opening stanza, “They winged his spirit & / wounded his tongue / but death was slow coming,” Jay Hoggard plays diminished chords on his vibraphone and embellishes on

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44 X, Autobiography, 447.
45 Clifford Thornton, Communications Network (New York: Third World, 1972). The original poem title uses an ampersand, while the title of the piece on Communications Network and Celebrations and Solitudes uses the word “and.” Incongruities of this nature exist throughout different iterations of Cortez’s work, suggesting the continuous revision embodied in her evolutionary poetics. For the sake of continuity, this chapter uses the ampersand in the name of the piece in all three iterations and the word “and” in the title of the chapbook.
his opening melodic statement. Cortez changes her voice for each ensuing repetition, and Hoggard matches her pitch and intensity, responding to Cortez in the same way he responds to the musicians. The group’s reciprocal collective improvisation supports Cortez’s text, and they work together throughout the set, sometimes following Cortez’s lead, sometimes with Cortez following the musicians, to demonstrate their kinship that developed when these cultural icons were murdered.

When Cortez reads “C.O.D.” then follows it with the repeated phrase “collect on death,” she alludes to organizations that profited from Malcolm X and Lumumba’s deaths. Cortez’s use of these three letters underscores the oppositional relationship between the speaker and an “other” that placed cash-on-delivery bounties on the heads of two controversial figures who became martyrs in their fights for equality for black Americans and Africans. The CIA eventually acknowledged its complicity in both murders, and, at the time Cortez wrote and performed “Festivals & Funerals,” both the CIA and the FBI routinely subjected black American activists to violent scrutiny that often resulted in incarceration and sometimes death. Like Lumumba, Malcolm X garnered divergent reactions from those who heard him speak, and he lived under FBI watch because of his inflammatory public addresses, his role in the Nation of Islam, and his perceived Communist sympathies. His infamous “chickens coming home to roost” speech, often excerpted out of context, led many to believe Malcolm X celebrated John F. Kennedy’s assassination. These words strengthened government scrutiny through FBI and CIA surveillance, while members of the Nation of Islam openly threatened Malcolm X’s life.

46 After Kennedy’s death, Malcolm X fired his own version of Lumumba’s “arrow shot from a bow” when: “Without a second thought, I said what I honestly felt—that it was, as I saw it, a case of ‘the chickens coming home to roost.’ I said that the hate in white men had not stopped with the killing of defenseless black people, but that hate, allowed to spread unchecked, finally had struck down this country’s Chief of State. I said it was the same thing as had happened with Medgar Evers, with Patrice Lumumba…. X, Autobiography, 301. Additionally, Malcolm X expressed admiration for Lumumba at a 1964 rally, dubbing him “the greatest black man who ever walked the African continent…. They couldn’t buy him, they couldn’t frighten him, they couldn’t reach him…. [Lumumba’s speech before the Belgian government was the] greatest speech—you should take that speech and tack it up over your door.” Malcolm X, “Malcolm X
In addition to implicating these organizations, Cortez alludes to Christian iconography with phrases like “thorns on his casket,” “this is the word,” and “Our flesh of a flesh.” Though Cortez’s personal notebooks express skepticism of organized Western religion, she uses these images to canonize Malcolm X and Lumumba by equating them with the central martyr in Christianity. In another analogous set of images, Cortez riffs on the color red in the similes: “Roses red as my eyes,” “Red as the blackman’s blood consumed by vultures,” “Red like the open head of a panther.” Roses symbolize the Virgin Mary in Christian iconography, and Cortez repeats the single word “red” as both question and meditation, acknowledging that these deaths led to more violence than they precluded, in part through groups like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, whose activity increased in the wake of Malcolm X and Lumumba’s acts of resistance. By conflating Jesus with a one-time leader within the Nation of Islam and with an African revolutionary hero, Cortez demonstrates her Pan-African impulse to compare the struggles of oppressed people around the African diaspora. She also elevates Malcolm X and Patrice Lumumba to mythic status so their exemplary actions may call others to act, in the way biblical parables inspire people around the world.

When Cortez reframed the poem for her collaboration with bassist Richard Davis, he highlighted her images using musical techniques that demonstrate careful attention to Cortez’s words. On their 1974 recorded duet of “Festivals & Funerals” Davis responds to Cortez’s initial lines with bowed diminished chords he modifies to reflect Cortez’s subtle changes in vocal inflection with each new repetition. His tonality is reminiscent of the setting Thornton’s ensemble creates for “Festivals & Funerals,” but most aural similarities between the two recordings end there. Davis deftly plays in spaces Cortez leaves deliberately when she pauses between words and on Lumumba,” World History Archives, Hartford Web Publishing, last modified April 10, 2003, accessed August 4, 2016, http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/459.html.

47 In his final three months, Malcolm X radically shifted his ideology as a result of his hajj to Mecca, but those who had been plotting his assassination were unmoved by his transformation. The FBI and CIA continued monitoring Malcolm X, and at least five FBI informants were in the Audubon Ballroom when he was killed. For more on the FBI, CIA, and NOI’s respective involvements in Malcolm X’s death, see Manning Marable, Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention (New York: Penguin, 2011).
lines, and he also underscores and augments her words. For instance, when she reads “C.O.D.,”
Davis replies with pizzicato three-note arpeggios that mirror the three words: “collect on death.”
He then switches back to his bow for a dramatic descending glissando when Cortez first repeats
the word “red.” Just before Cortez repeats “red” a final time, Davis plays a glissando that spirals
upward into his instrument’s high overtones. Davis also plays short diminished questioning
phrases when Cortez first asks “Who killed Lumumba / What killed Malcolm.” Diverging from
the page, Cortez adds an extra repetition of these lines for this recording, giving Davis two more
opportunities to signify on his original questioning phrase. In her live performance with Clifford
Thornton, when Cortez repeats the word “red,” bassist Andy González plays emphatic chromatic
notes on his bass, and Thornton adds tremolos on his cornet. A percussionist plays a distinct
repeated rhythm on his shaker to match Cortez’s central questions, “Who killed Lumumba / What
killed Malcolm.” Cortez shouts these questions when she repeats them, pausing between each
while Davis and Thornton respond with equal ferocity on the saxophone and cornet. In these very
different collaborative performances, Cortez and the musicians enact reciprocal responses to each
other’s calls. These skillful interactions highlight the musicality of Cortez’s verse and her musical
sensibility as a performer; these aspects of Cortez’s poetic performance deepened as she began
working steadily with her son and the Firespitters over the next several decades.

In early poems like “Festivals & Funerals,” Cortez’s musicality is especially evident in
her engagement with traditional blues music. Loss pervades the blues idiom and makes it an
opposite mode for expressing Cortez’s grief over the loss of Malcolm X and Lumumba.
Following the opening lines of “Festivals & Funerals,” Cortez’s refrain “There are no tears / we
have no friends / this is the word” holds myriad possibilities for interpretation. Cortez suggests to
mourners that Lumumba and Malcolm X are no longer suffering, though her speaker, as part of a
collective black American “we,” has lost two important allies in the fight for equality. Thus, “the
word,” another allusion to Christianity as the gospel or truth of this poem, is rooted in this loss.
Cortez defines “the word” as a primordial force “winding through poverty and / bleeding into lips the blues.” With Houston Baker in mind, Kimberly Ruffin situates Cortez’s poetic themes among urban blues that grew out of the Great Migration, combining collective group concerns with individual expressions in a pronounced shift from the rural South to the urban North. Ruffin, like Cortez, acknowledges the dual role of the speaker in blues forms in which an expression of personal loss also speaks to the emotional needs of a larger community. Ruffin’s formulation of a blues epistemology expands on Baker’s matrix, and she places particular emphasis on the blues trope of “affirming collective experience” through an omniscient “bardic ‘I’” that speaks for a larger disadvantaged group and creates “a bottom-to-top perspective on life.” Ruffin elaborates that Cortez uses a blues “I” to speak for a global “we,” “[i]nfluenced by the repetition and refrain heard frequently in a blues song, witnessing and testifying advocate for both ameliorated personal and communal ecological experience.” By connecting Cortez to the blues singers in Angela Davis’s *Blues Legacies and Black Feminisms*, Ruffin notes that Cortez’s poems often “create the emotional conditions for protest” by naming “the problems the community wants to overcome.” Cortez often, Ruffin concludes, moves her poems a beyond the blues by including a clear call to action.

Rather than overtly engage in the aural vocabulary of the blues on *Communications Network*, however, Thornton’s ensemble enhances the “emotional conditions for protest” with

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48 An avid blues fan, Cortez sometimes signified directly on blues lyrics in her poetry. “We have no friends” may be an allusion to Brownie McGhee’s “We Have No Friends” or to Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s “The Orphan Ballad Singers.” McGhee’s song begins “Just me and my dog, we don’t have no friends right now.” Alan B. Govenar, *Untold Glory: African Americans in Pursuit of Freedom, Opportunity, and Achievement* (New York: Harlem Moon/Broadway Books, 2007), 269. Landon’s “Orphan Ballad Singers” includes the lines: “We have no home—we have no friends / they said our home no more was our [sic].” George N. Wright, *The Gallery of Engravings* (London: Fisher, 1845), 108.


50 Ruffin, 141–42.

51 Ruffin invokes blues epistemology to explicate Cortez’s ecofeminism in her poem “I Got the Blue-Ooze” that “employs repetition and the collective ‘I’ so common in blues music, yet it also speaks to the incredible reach of the blues subject; she goes outside the well-worn topic of human sexual/romantic relationship and alerts others to numerous world crises at once.” Ruffin, 145–47.

52 Ruffin, 146.
free jazz. During “Festivals & Funerals,” they play softly when Cortez repeats: “There are no tears / we have no friends / this is the word.” Jay Hoggard plays active whole-tone scales on the vibraphone, and the horn players maintain soft sustained notes that match Cortez’s “murmuring.” They continue in this way under the next several lines, mirroring Cortez’s words through their quiet, intense collective improvisation. Similarly, the percussionists replicate the rhythm Cortez establishes when she repeats the words “festivals & funerals,” and the musicians play an extended collective solo during which Thornton’s is the predominant musical voice. In her later work with the Firespitters, Cortez often built in breaks of this nature to allow musicians space to solo and signify on her poetic imagery. In this performance of eight poems within a continuous flow of music and words, Thornton’s solo is the only extended instrumental break in the middle of a poem; interestingly, it also coincides with the page break in the printed version of “Festivals & Funerals.” The alignment of these breaks suggests Cortez’s adherence to the printed text as a script for this performance. Archives of different performances from later in her career show that, in addition to including more frequent solo breaks, Cortez varied their placement. This later flexibility shows Cortez relying less on the printed text and more on her intuition as a member of an improvisational ensemble.

Throughout her body of work, and at various points in “Festivals & Funerals,” Cortez indicts engines of Western capitalism as impersonal forces that subjugate human life. For instance, Cortez’s personified blues become “the word” “screaming under oil fields,” “murmuring through veins of gold,” “crying through crushed and crumbled bones of / Chaney,” “walking the streets of Harlem / on the rusty rims of a needle,” and “coming through like axes.” Cortez evokes Congolese oil fields and mineral mines to recognize one force that conspired to bring down Patrice Lumumba. Battles over control of these natural resources in the Congo and elsewhere continue to instigate physical violence against people across the African diaspora. Cortez connects continents when she conflates the 1964 KKK murder of Civil Rights worker
James Chaney with Lumumba’s death. Cortez synthesizes these events to show that, despite differing locations and circumstances, these murders, like many in the 1960s, evolved from similar causes. When Cortez gives voice to silenced figures like Chaney, her performed poetry embodies the collaboration that undergirds the form and content of her art.

Cortez also addresses insidious systemic violence against marginalized people, again, demonstrating her call to give voices to the oppressed. Her reference to a needle in Harlem reflects Malcolm X’s adolescent drug use, and, though when Cortez wrote “Festivals & Funerals,” the burgeoning War on Drugs was just beginning, illegal drugs continue to provide a pervasive means of escape in the twenty-first century that ends in incarceration for many men of color. Cortez’s “axes” provides a dual image of music being played on “axes,” a vernacular term for musical instruments, while also alluding to implements of slavery and chain gang labor. With this image, like many Pan-African activists in the 1970s, Cortez draws parallels between Africa and the American South, combining ideas that evoke black American musical idioms alongside specific examples of the savagery Malcolm X decried. Here, Cortez acknowledges that musicians also commented on social conditions through their performances of blues and jazz. The images in this stanza culminate in what Cortez, in a probable allusion to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, deems “a million year lesson book on solitude,” punctuated with the austere statement, “we are alone.” In these lines, Cortez riffs on and reinforces her refrain “we have no friends,” echoing one type of loss that drives blues music. Here Cortez also emphasizes the shifting, collaborative

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54 Malcolm X ended his addiction in prison and later helped others “with an agonizing patience that might span anywhere from a few months to a year, our ex-junkie Muslims would conduct the addicts through the Muslim six-point therapeutic process.” X, Autobiography, 259–62.
55 Marquez’s novel begins with a firing squad, and Cortez likely made the connection to Lumumba’s death by firing squad. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude (New York: Harper Perennial, 1967).
nature of the blues by amplifying specific details of individual lives to reflect their relevance to a larger community connected across the African diaspora.

Cortez and the musicians further emphasize feelings of solitude in these two collaborative performances of “Festivals & Funerals.” In the studio with Davis, when Cortez repeats “There are no tears / we have no friends / this is the word,” Davis inverts his earlier “C.O.D” motif by playing the notes in the reverse order. This inversion is one way Davis engages in his own form of refrain that creates musical continuity throughout the piece. Davis then creates upward-winding sound effects that embody:

- the word
- winding through poverty and
- bleeding into lips of the blues
- screaming under oil fields
- stretching across swamp fields &
- laughing outside mine fields
- the word
- murmuring through veins of gold
- crying inside the crumbled crushed bones of

Chaney

Davis creates a tremolo effect that sounds like Australian aboriginal music that shimmers high in the overtones of his deep bass strings, until he suddenly drops his volume on the name “Chaney,” literally translating Cortez’s words into music. Through the next several lines, Davis plays variations of the same motif in lower increments. By the time Cortez reaches the word “solitude,” Davis pauses to emphasize her refrain: “we are alone.” Like the musicians in Thornton’s ensemble, Davis supplements Cortez’s tone throughout “Festivals & Funerals” by playing musical phrases that respond to Cortez’s poetic call. He employs different types of musical
dissonance and consonance in spontaneous improvised phrases to support Cortez’s images that alternately convey discord and reclamation.

The second half of the poem centers on a longer stanza that both celebrates and laments different forms of resistance against these oppressive forces. The line “In bebop livers of love” creates a double-entendre that recalls saxophonist Charlie Parker’s drug addiction and alcoholism that precipitated his 1955 death at age thirty-four. In some ways, Charlie Parker’s rendering of bebop made jazz music less accessible to white musicians and audiences who co-opted jazz music from black musicians in the 1930s and forties by performing for audiences that forbade black patrons. In “Festivals & Funerals,” Cortez shows acute awareness of the social implications of bebop as expressed by her contemporary Amiri Baraka. When she writes, “back when poets screamed ‘kill run kill walk kill crawl nigguhs / give me your money anything’ shame,” she alludes to Nikki Giovanni’s 1968 “True Import of the Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro,” where she wrote ”Nigger / Can you kill / Can you kill… Learn to kill niggers / Learn to be Black men.” Poems from this phase of Giovanni’s career emphasize shame in the word “nigger” and urge black people to claim their humanity rather than submit to racial epithets. Cortez’s references to contemporaries Giovanni and Baraka show her connection to a larger movement of artists who built community by articulating their identities and giving voice to communal feelings of loss. In solidifying her expressions of resistance during the Black Arts Movement, Cortez also engaged in the blues tradition that defined her voice and increased its strength as she continued to write, publish, and collaborate with musicians.

When she performed these lines with Thornton’s ensemble, Cortez demonstrated her broader connection to the multidisciplinary Black Arts Movement. In their performance of “Festivals & Funerals,” Cortez reads “in bebop livers of love,” and the musicians play fast.

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57 Nikki Giovanni qtd. in Redmond, Drumvoices, 362–63; This allusion also recalls Amiri Baraka’s “we want poems that kill,” a line in his 1966 poem “Black Art.” Peter Doggett, There’s a Riot Going On (United Kingdom: Canongate Press, 2009), 32.
melodic bebop lines. The musicians then stop playing, except for Hoggard, who sustains a chord on his vibraphone to emphasize Cortez’s “hurt in wailing hearts of fear so sad.” Conversely, when she describes “burgundy tongues of oppression” and screaming poets, the percussionists play short, brittle, repeated phrases. Thornton plays again when Cortez describes a time “back when cultural vaginas rushed through / streets urging men to die for shame.” In her later studio collaboration, she and Richard Davis engage in an equally dynamic interplay. Cortez modifies her printed line “that is the word,” and Davis launches into a steady bass line that signifies on the jazz standard “Seven Steps to Heaven”; this rhythmic ostinato is in the same key as his earlier C.O.D. motif, and Davis reestablishes a steady tempo while Cortez repeats “festivals & funerals.” Together, Cortez and Davis gradually speed up until she reaches the end of this section of the poem. Davis then immediately switches to his bow to quote another jazz standard, “The Theme.” This musical quotation is Richard Davis’s response to Cortez’s “bebop livers of love,” and though “The Theme” might be more aptly categorized as a hard bop tune, soloists on this tune often play active bebop-influenced lines that draw fully on the earlier form of improvised jazz Cortez names in this line. Both Davis and the members of Thornton’s ensemble perform ubiquitous jazz vernacular references that connect their music to Cortez’s larger mission of coalition building among artistic communities. In quoting these songs, Davis demonstrates his membership in an international community of musicians who create cohesive, collaborative art together because of their fluency in a common language. When she worked with musicians like Davis and the members of Thornton’s ensemble, Cortez more deeply connected her poetry, already thematically and structurally grounded in common languages of black vernacular music, to communities of artists who conscientiously used their art to forge bonds among disenfranchised black Americans.

58 “The Theme” follows the same chord progression as “I Got Rhythm,” known in the jazz lexicon as “Rhythm Changes.” Miles Davis, Seven Steps to Heaven (New York: Columbia, 1963). “The Theme” is also a signification on the “Count Basie ending,” a standard cadence in the jazz idiom that features a passing diminished chord between the last minor II chord and the tonic. Basie plays it at the end of the track “Splanky” on Count Basie, The Atomic Mr. Basie (New York: Roulette, 1950).
Even as it connects disenfranchised activists, however, “Festivals & Funerals” resists intersectional thinking. Cortez disparages Betty Friedan and the National Organization of Women: “the word shame / enemy to revolutions that lesbian conspiracy / back when cultural vaginas rushed through / streets urging men to die for shame / dashikis in the wind.” Members of the Black Panther party promoted the idea that “power flows from the sleeve of a dashiki”; thus, Panthers and other radical black Americans wore African clothing and hairstyles to show their ancestral connections to Africa. In this line, Cortez juxtaposes gendered and racial activism and shows her audience that the two were in opposition during the 1970s. Furthermore, Cortez expresses frustration at raced and classed trifurcation in organizations fighting against one other for equality in different venues. At the time Cortez wrote “Festivals & Funerals,” some activists decried intersectional thinking, and it was socially unacceptable for black women to question black men’s actions; thus, many felt pulled in opposite directions by loyalties to their race and loyalties to their biological sex. As such, these lines of “Festivals & Funerals” read as a homophobic vestige of a period during which lesbian feminist activists were dubbed “the Lavender Menace” by the white leader of the National Organization of Women. Analogously, queer people of color fought similar stigmas within movements for racial equality; thus, Cortez’s “lesbian conspiracies” allude to a prevailing contemporary mindset among Black Arts activists, despite the many queer people working among them. Images that reflect resistance to

61 In 1969, members of NOW considered lesbians within the women’s movement a threat to their fight for equal rights; thus, they deemed their minority lesbian members the “Lavender Menace.” Susan Brownmiller, In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution (New York: Dell, 2000), 70–73. Banned from various feminists groups, lesbians reappropriated the term as a badge of honor and changed public opinion through peaceful actions at the 1970 Second Congress to United Women, where “Women began to realize that they could not claim exclusion and mistreatment from men and then turn around and hand out the same to other women.” Rita Mae Brown, “Lavender Menace,” The Reader’s Companion to U.S. Women’s History, accessed November 26, 2016, http://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/rcuswh/lavender_menace/0.
intersectional thinking in Cortez’s early poetry stand as markers by which her evolution toward more inclusive verse can be measured.

On the studio recording of “Festivals & Funerals,” Richard Davis employs different musical ideas and techniques to amplify the complexities Cortez investigates in this section of the poem. At one point, Davis uses his bow to slide chromatically into shimmering overtones that emulate “wailing hearts” and other painful images Cortez presents. Davis abruptly stops his sliding runs when Cortez emulates her screaming contemporaries with the words: “kill run.” On the word “shame,” Davis returns to a pizzicato jazz style, playing short, repetitive descending lines, just short of establishing a regular rhythmic pattern. These abrupt changes in musical phrasing echo the discord Cortez describes. In collaboration with Richard Davis, Cortez’s words have more weight, as the contrast between harmony and discord becomes more pronounced in conversation with his musical ideas.

In direct contrast to her divisive imagery in the center section of “Festivals & Funerals,” the poem’s final twenty lines contain bodily imagery that joins Africa and America. Indicative of her developing Pan-African ideology Cortez’s speaker affirms: “our flesh is united / Flesh / Our flesh of a flesh.” This phrase recalls Cortez’s earlier allusion to Jesus’s body and blood being one with his followers—another metaphor for the community Cortez worked to build during the Black Arts Movement. This extended physical metaphor implies Lumumba’s ideas brought together continents through their common bloodlines, “as the / speech of his thoughts & the death of / our fear through the dark of his meat.” When Lumumba and Malcolm X were murdered, two symbols of strength and courage were extinguished, leaving many black Americans feeling empty and alone. To further cope with this loss in Cortez’s collaborative performance with Thornton’s ensemble, Jay Hoggard and Andy González join together to play chromatic notes that build until Cortez reads “our flesh of a flesh is Lumumba.” Thornton also mirrors Cortez’s rhythm, filling her brief pauses after every two words with two notes that form a call and response with the
words “our flesh.” On *Celebrations and Solitudes*, Richard Davis bows long legato notes on the word “flesh” and sustains a tremolo as Cortez riffs, “Our flesh of a flesh / in our mouth on the head of our souls / for the skin on his eyes”; he sustains another tremolo, again venturing into his overtones until Cortez speaks the name “Patrice.” While Cortez says, “our flesh of a flesh is Lumumba our flesh Lumumba / flesh,” Davis momentarily stops playing to emphasize these lines and allow Cortez’s voice to come to the forefront. These ascending musical lines in both versions of “Festivals & Funerals” represent the ascent of these two figures into Cortez’s pantheon of luminaries.

In different ways, the musical settings of these two recordings come together as Cortez closes the poem with the quatrain: “the vanguard of precision / the virgin of communications / the erotic improvisation of uprooted / perfection the Blues.” “Vanguard” refers to the Black Panther Party leadership, founded on the principle that a strong core of elite leaders must guide the party. The word “Uprooted” asserts Malcolm X and Patrice Lumumba’s deaths left black Americans with a hole that could only be filled through creative action and the definitive expression of loss: the blues. Cortez also presents both men as spiritual role models through juxtaposed images of carnality and purity in blues lyrics. The last line of the poem, the simple noun phrase “perfection the Blues,” again demonstrates Cortez’s belief in the blues as an ideal mode of expressively coping with the loss of two international paragons of freedom.

Twenty-five years after publishing “Festivals & Funerals,” Cortez shared her thoughts on this “perfection” at the Bouki Blues Festival:

The poetry coming as blues and the blues coming as poetry… is marked by black snakebites and is jammed with sermons at the crossroads, shipwrecks at the temptation club, conversations with invisible forces, competitive triangles, self-centered fixations, the aftermath of rebellious gestures and the meanness of madness smoldering and pacing
in a circle of 4/4 time. It is the feeling behind the feeling. And like the Bouki character of black folktales, the blues makes and solves its own contradictions.62

Thirty years after writing “Festivals & Funerals,” Cortez expresses the emotional impact of blues music in this string of images that conjures both the American South and its African ancestors; these images also represent Cortez’s decades-long efforts to connect black Americans to their African roots. Cortez equated poetry and blues, insofar as both strive to express emotions that might otherwise feel inexpressible. Thus, ending “Festivals & Funerals” with “perfection the Blues” expressed the strong emotions Cortez and other black Americans shared in the immediate wake of Malcolm X and Patrice Lumumba’s assassinations.

During the final lines of her collaborative performance of “Festivals & Funerals” with Thornton’s ensemble, each musician takes a literal approach to the text by connecting Cortez’s words to recognizable musical forms that reinforce connections between music and poetry in her emerging body of work. When Cortez returns to the final refrain, “There are no tears / we have no friends / this is the word,” Hoggard mirrors her spoken rhythm on his vibraphone. Then, as Cortez finishes the last four lines of the poem, the ensemble reduces its volume, with only Hoggard playing a bebop-inflected line that evokes Cortez’s “erotic improvisation.” Nathan Davis launches into a soprano saxophone solo break that grows out of the final words “perfection the Blues,” and Andy González walks a blues bass line that results in a flurry of activity from the rest of the musicians. To close the recording of “Festivals & Funerals” on Celebrations and Solitudes, Richard Davis recapitulates his C.O.D. motif a final time to signal Cortez’s closing refrain: “There are no tears / we have no friends / this is the word.” This musical refrain echoes the structure of the blues Cortez finally names, and Davis repeats the same line, pausing at the end of each phrase as Cortez finishes the poem. During this early stage in her career, as Cortez

explored connections between her words and black vernacular music forms with different musicians, they created evolving possibilities for interpreting the text of “Festivals & Funerals.” These different interpretations confirmed the poem’s meaning while also providing new possibilities for connecting textual images to distinctive aural timbres and musical allusions.

As she experimented with reading her poems in different musical settings, Cortez developed a collaborative aesthetic that solidified through decades of collaboration with her own Firespitters band. Cortez’s artistic collaborations across media and disciplines demanded reciprocal interchanges that mirrored circum-Atlantic exchanges of cultural customs, and these conversations invited individual and community responses to issues Cortez interrogated in her work. The last half of “Festivals & Funerals” demonstrates varied reactions among different radical activist communities; thus, “Festivals & Funerals” spoke to many politically radical musicians who were working at a grassroots level to organize musical communities of likeminded individuals. Cortez initially began reading in this type of community in Los Angeles with Horace Tapscott and his contemporaries. When she moved to New York in 1967, she first worked with Black Panther Clifford Thornton who embraced a similar radical resistance ideology. Because of their shared commitment to activism, Thornton became a natural collaborator who captured Cortez’s first archived collaboration with musicians.

The resulting recording of Cortez’s live performance with Clifford Thornton is an energetic demonstration of Cortez’s work with freelance free jazz musicians in both Los Angeles and New York in the decade before she established the Firespitters band with Denardo Coleman. In sharp musical contrast, Cortez and Richard Davis’s carefully managed studio session for Celebrations and Solitudes showcases Cortez’s one-on-one interactions with an established jazz master who remains one of the top upright bass players in the world.63 Together, both recordings

63 After their work together in the studio, Cortez and Davis continued to collaborate in live performances together for at least five years. Cortez shared an anecdote about playing with Davis in 1979 as the opening act for reggae icon Peter Tosh in Ceil Tulloch, Remembering Peter Tosh (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Pub., 2013), 56–57.
archive the work of a dynamic poet with an emerging Pan-African aesthetic rooted in the blues tradition who refused to repeat herself. Cortez’s evolutionary impulse in these recordings reflects Houston Baker’s assertion that expressions of the blues continue “absorbing and transforming discontinuous experience into formal expressive instances that bear only the trace of origins….”64 While characteristics of both these efforts reappear in different iterations throughout Cortez’s collaborative career, she consistently altered her interpretations of individual poems as she listened and responded to musicians whose unique approaches to their instruments and to her poetry suggested new possibilities for interpretation. Examining these very different presentations of “Festivals & Funerals” captured on Celebrations and Solitudes and Communications Network provides an understanding of Cortez’s singularity among her peers as her collaborative efforts grew through the next four decades. Following her early work with Thornton and Davis, Cortez’s collaborations grew stronger through the continuity of performing and recording with the same core of musicians, some of whom she met through her work with Thornton at Wesleyan.

64 Baker, 8.
Chapter 2
“And I Like That”: Cortez’s Evolving Black Aesthetic Activism
in “Kai Kai” and “Commitment”

But I keeps laffin’
Instead of cryin’
I must keep fightin’;
Until I’m dyin’,
And Ol’ Man River,
He’ll just keep rollin’ along!¹
– Oscar Hammerstein II

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and seventies codified an aesthetic through
which writers articulated their blackness in sharp opposition to constricting white European
ideals. As he sings the final refrain of “Ol’ Man River” in the musical Show Boat, the character
Joe articulates an indomitable life force that fueled twentieth-century movements for equality
across the African diaspora. Despite the Mississippi River’s indifference to his struggles in the
Jim Crow American South, Joe renews his daily commitment to fight adversity. Though Show
Boat received mixed responses from black audiences, singer Paul Robeson adopted “Ol’ Man
River” as his signature song in the late 1920s because he wanted its message to encourage black
Americans to keep fighting for basic human rights. Decades later, Jayne Cortez’s colleagues in
the Black Arts Movement answered Robeson’s call to action through their own performative
activism. Following his death in 1976, Cortez crafted an elegy that honored Robeson’s memory
and expressed her desire to emulate him in her own performed art. “Commitment,” Cortez’s elegy
for Robeson, took a different shape than “Festivals & Funerals,” as Robeson, Patrice Lumumba,
and Malcolm X lived different lives; however, Cortez and her contemporaries connected these
luminary figures through their outspoken actions that garnered government surveillance and
obstruction. Another of her early elegies first printed with “Commitment” in 1977’s Mouth on
Paper, “Kai Kai” more explicitly articulates Cortez’s growing Pan-African ideology as the
poem’s speaker travels between Africa and North America, lamenting the loss of two young
writers who were beginning to earn recognition before their untimely deaths. Cortez wrote “Kai

Kai,” sometimes called “For the Poets,” to honor Nigerian Christopher Okigbo and American Henry Dumas. Because Okigbo and Dumas’s fiery rhetoric differed from Robeson’s stately performance style, Cortez’s elegiac tributes took varied forms both on the page and in performance with musicians. This chapter will mainly concern itself with “Kai Kai” and then present “Commitment” as a contrasting companion piece.

As she moved from the first to the second decade of her publishing career, “Kai Kai” and “Commitment,” both in print and in performance, further defined Cortez’s Pan-African aesthetic of kinship by expanding her pantheon of luminaries who inspired her activist art. This aesthetic consisted of her comingling and signifying on traditional cultural customs from locations across the African diaspora. Cortez used signifying syncretism to emphasize connections among black American vernacular art forms and African ritual traditions. Through reenvisioning her printed poems in collaboration with musicians, Cortez embodied transformation and transcendence beyond restrictive regimes. Combining elements of African and American musical traditions, Cortez’s work with Bill Cole and with the Firespitters created connections that emphasized Pan-African kinship and cultural exchanges across the African diaspora that championed equality for their American audiences.

In contrast to the subject of the previous chapter, “Festivals & Funerals,” Cortez created “Commitment” as a simpler elegy for Malcolm X and Patrice Lumumba’s predecessor Paul Robeson. Through his vocal political engagement, singer and actor Robeson became an early twentieth-century trailblazer for Jayne Cortez and her contemporaries as they came of age during his career’s zenith. Paul Robeson was born in 1898, and he was one of the first singers to achieve fame performing formal vocal recitals that included Negro spirituals. As his popularity increased, he gave increasingly eclectic performances that consisted of spirituals, songs about global political struggles, and the Broadway hit written for him, “Ol’ Man River.” Robeson also performed an extensive repertoire from the European “classical” music canon, but he remains
best known for his promulgation of black American vernacular music in formal concert settings.\(^2\)

Inspired by his artistry and dedication to dismantling racial barriers, Cortez crafted a straightforward, loving elegy for Robeson she called “Commitment.” Cortez revised “Commitment” for collaboration with musicians on her 1986 studio recording *Maintain Control*, and she later printed this revised version as “Commitment 2” in 1991’s *Poetic Magnetic*. Cortez’s revision for performance and the uncomplicated accompaniment by only two musicians on *Maintain Control* demonstrate evolving iterations of a tribute that reflects her appreciation for a black American icon. “Commitment” honors Robeson’s musical legacy both in form and content, and Cortez wove him into her network of diasporic kinship that acknowledges her gratitude to a pantheon of inspirational artists and activists.

The musical framing for “Commitment 2,” simply called “Commitment” in the album liner notes, is beautifully spartan, befitting Cortez’s reverence for Robeson. Unlike his playing on “Kai Kai” in Bill Cole’s *Fifth Cycle*, cellist Abdul Wadud takes a traditional approach to playing on “Commitment” for the 1986 studio recording *Maintain Control*; this choice mirrors Paul Robeson’s classical performance style. This setting for the piece, though improvisatory, lacks some of the elements an audience might expect from a “jazz poem.” Wadud’s cello and Coleman’s tympani are not stereotypical jazz instruments, and they employ neither a swing feel nor follow noticeable chord progressions of form-driven straight-ahead jazz. As seen in Chapter One, many musicians Cortez collaborated with over more than thirty years are multi-faceted performers, renowned for their facility in different genres, ranging from jazz to traditional European musical styles. In addition to her work with Abdul Wadud, Cortez also collaborated with African musicians, both in Cole’s *Cycles* and in her own subsequent projects. By working with musicians proficient in varied musical genres, Cortez directly connected her text to African and black American musical traditions. In their performed collaborations, she and the musicians personified the transformative Pan-African aesthetic that connected artists and intensified their

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political approaches to making art during the Black Arts Movement. “Commitment,” like many pieces she recorded with musicians throughout her career, breaches musical genre boundaries in the same way Cortez and her artistic contemporaries transformed grief into social activism that eroded political barriers to equality.³

At the same time Cortez created and performed the intentionally minimal “Commitment” for Robeson, she crafted a complex, explosive lament for Christopher Okigbo and Henry Dumas called “Kai Kai.” In addition to weaving together complex images that allude to both writers in “Kai Kai,” Cortez wrote onomatopoetic syllables at the end of almost every line that express visceral emotions that transform from grief to defiance throughout the piece. Three recordings of “Kai Kai,” ranging from a 1980 reading without musicians, to Bill Cole’s organic Fifth Cycle, to an electric studio recording with the Firespitters band, show Cortez’s performative flexibility as she grew in skill, confidence, and political sophistication. Despite their differences in personnel and approach, all three versions of “Kai Kai” encompass Cortez’s energetic, visceral declarations against grief. Like “Festivals & Funerals” in Chapter One, “Kai Kai” brings together analogous activists on different continents. This praise song commemorates Okigbo and Dumas who were both killed in their mid-thirties, in 1967 and 1968, respectively. Okigbo was a Nigerian Igbo poet who was killed in battle after he ended his academic career to fight as an officer in the rebel military during the Biafran civil war. Henry Dumas was killed in an exchange with New York Transit Police in a Harlem subway station.⁴ Still relevant in the twenty-first-century contexts of American police violence against black men and religiously-motivated terrorist attacks by groups like Nigeria’s Boko Haram, “Kai Kai” traverses a human landscape that moves beyond recounting singular incidents in a single location. As in many of Cortez’s poems, the speaker in

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⁴ The specific circumstances of Dumas’s murder were obscured lack of witnesses and bureaucratic mishandling of documents, but Dumas reportedly had an altercation with at least one other person on the subway platform, and he may have provoked the officer by refusing to desist. Jeffrey B. Leak, Visible Man: The Life of Henry Dumas (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 145–46.
“Kai Kai” encourages other artist-activists to break as-yet unbroken cycles of violence across the African diaspora. Cortez brought together Okigbo and Dumas in a timeless poem that calls into action all poets who continue to honor their commitments to fighting for social change. This timeless quality is an eerily prescient feature of Cortez’s verse through which many pieces remain relevant decades after she wrote and performed them.

Though both writers Cortez elegizes in “Kai Kai” had distinct voices, their commitments to Pan-African ideologies called their audiences to dismantle oppressive regimes. Dumas wrote in a straightforward manner befitting his subjects who often found themselves marginalized by a dominant white America. Arnold Rampersad praised Dumas’s use of language: “Remarkably present in his writing is the quality of eager wrestling with the word, in a mixture of rage and almost erotic delight, that one finds in the work of so many very good writers, of all races, who find themselves in a state of permanent and irreconcilable tension with a dominating and essentially hostile culture.” In “Kai Kai,” Cortez uses this “irreconcilable tension” to link Dumas and Christopher Okigbo, who combined the languages of modernism and Igbo culture in his own work. In “Kai Kai,” as in “Festivals & Funerals,” Cortez interrogates postcolonial violence, invokes spiritual traditions rooted in West African culture, celebrates musicians, and orchestrates a transnational dialogue against racial violence and injustice. To do so, Cortez embodies a speaker who “needs” to numb her pain with alcohol, who “needs” to perform voodoo rituals, who reaches into the past to find respite from a postmodern circum-Atlantic world grappling with increased drug convictions, HIV, and insidious forms of racially-motivated oppression.

Additionally, Cortez’s speaker intones alternately questioning, anguished, and guttural cries at the end of each line that punctuate her melancholic exclamations with terse, forceful human outcries of pain and strength. Cortez riffs on list and recipe poems to create a formula her poetic speaker uses to assuage her grief. She presents images as ingredients for making a potion,

6 “Ibo” and “Ebo” are other common spellings.
and she invites the audience to envision her adding these ingredients to an elixir that will honor “living dead Dumas” and “living dead Okigbo.” The rhythmic punctuation at the end of each line provides a release for Cortez’s speaker and implies she can bring about a temporary reprieve from pain by concocting “a delta praise for the poets.” Cortez’s first recording of “Kai Kai” is from a 1980 reading she gave for the Before Columbus Foundation that Smithsonian Folkways released on the LP *Poets Read Their Contemporary Poetry*. Most scholarly attention devoted to Cortez’s performances praises her vocal musicality, and this recording showcases Cortez’s rhythmic awareness, varied inflection, and precise diction. Though few of Cortez’s poems conform to constraints of accentual syllabic poetry, many lines exhibit accentual repetition; they contain the same number of accents, especially when she reads them aloud. When Cortez reads the first several lines of “Kai Kai” on this recording, the natural rhythm of her speech gives each line four stressed syllables, punctuated by an onomatopoetic utterance that shifts incrementally as she moves through the piece. Cortez’s vocalization increases in rate when she reads longer, more complex lines, and then increases further as her lines shorten. The mounting complexity of Cortez’s rhythmic poetics demonstrates her growing musicality as she spent more time collaborating with the same musicians, both in her new Firespitters band and in Bill Cole’s *Cycles* performances.

Later the same year, Cortez performed “Kai Kai” with musicians at Dartmouth College in Bill Cole’s *Fifth Cycle* concert honoring master Cuban percussionist Chano Pozo. After hearing Cortez’s work with Clifford Thornton, his student Bill Cole invited her to join the performers in his *Cycles* concerts.7 Beginning in 1975, Cole assembled groups of varying sizes to create

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7 Thornton, who played Indian shenai, trumpet, and valve-trombone, was one of Cole’s musical mentors. Fred W. Ho and Bill Mullen, *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 257–59. At the 1972 Jubilee that introduced Cole and Cortez, Cole also met musicologist Fela Sowande, who would become Cole’s most significant musical mentor. Sowande gave Cole a collection of 500 Yoruba proverbs that provided inspiration for hundreds of compositions, including his large-scale works *The Seven Cycles*. Cole recalls Sowande’s “spiritual energy was so strong that I felt a tremendous need to see what he was about. We
musical collaborations that replicated the seven Nigerian Igbo reincarnation cycles. Cole built each presentation around a theme dedicated to twentieth-century American luminaries such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Duke Ellington, and John Coltrane. Cole invited Jayne Cortez to join his Second Cycle in 1976. Cortez participated in every subsequent Cycle, and her collaborative relationship with Cole developed into a deep kinship that resulted in their working together for the rest of Cortez’s life. Their contributions to each other’s creative endeavors shaped Cortez’s Pan-African aesthetic, as Cole practices a syncretic approach to improvisation that marries Asian instruments with African musical traditions both within and outside the American context of free jazz. Cortez both wrote pieces specifically for the Cycles and incorporated poems she had already written into the thematic framework for each concert. Cole and Cortez also shared a blues aesthetic that engages the emotional energy Cortez channels in “Festivals & Funerals” and many of her other poems. Thus, when Cortez performed “Kai Kai” with Cole during his Fifth Cycle, their work together embodied this blues aesthetic. Their performance also incorporates West African musical traditions, as Cole brought together cellist Abdul Wadud and low brass specialist Joseph Daley with percussionists Warren Smith, Hafiz Shabazz, and Abraham Adzenyah to provide a dense interactive musical soundscape for Cortez’s performance of “Kai Kai.”

began by just having conversations about his beliefs concerning the traditional life style of African people.”
9 In the liner notes to a tribute album, Cole shares: “When Jayne Cortez died… it put a hole in my life and in my heart. We were artistic associates for 40 years but most of all we were friends. Jayne was a person with excellent judgment, dedicated to her art, and an innovator…. I looked to Jayne for advice, counsel and her participation in musical creations I made. She was always ready to contribute wonderfully. Jayne was the ultimate professional artist. I loved being around her energy, and receiving her insights and knowledge about Africa. For me Jayne is still here.” Untempered Ensemble, Tribute to Jayne Cortez: Politics (New York, 2013).
10 In addition to performing in Cole’s Cycles, Cortez often appeared as a special guest with Cole’s Untempered Ensemble in their tributes to black Americans and significant historical events. Cole, in turn, was a guest musician with Cortez’s Firespitters band from 1979 through 2010, both for live performances and on the recordings Unsubmitable Blues, There It Is, Everywhere Drums, Find Your Own Voice, and As If You Knew.
11 Abraham Adzenyah’s name is also spelled Adzinyah in several sources. Though a written page of musical manuscript titled “Kai Kai” exists in the Schomburg archive, the music on this page does not represent notes played in either Cole’s Fifth Cycle or on Maintain Control, as both iterations of “Kai Kai”
In 1986, six years after performing in Cole’s *Fifth Cycle*, Cortez reenvisioned “Kai Kai” in collaboration with the Firespitters for her fourth studio album, *Maintain Control*. In this contrasting musical setting, Cortez’s recording with the Firespitters presents a reggae-infused electronic version of “Kai Kai” that conveys Cortez’s indignation in an Afro-Caribbean musical context. As with the two recorded versions of “Festivals & Funerals,” “Kai Kai” also underwent multiple interpretations, depending on the inclinations of those with whom Cortez collaborated for each performance. Though this recording of “Kai Kai” involves less overt interplay between Cortez and the Firespitters quartet than the intimate duet recording of “Festivals and Funerals” with Richard Davis, this version of “Kai Kai” demonstrates the synergy Cortez forged as she continued to work with her son and the other Firespitters over the next three decades. This synergy of close listening and reciprocal responses between Cortez’s vocal delivery and the musicians’ improvised rhythms and notes demonstrates a growing bond between poet and musicians even more evident in subsequent recordings and performances.

While engaged in global artistic conversations in the collaborative setting of Cole’s *Cycles*, Cortez published her fourth book, *Mouth on Paper*, in 1977, and it contains the first printings of several poems Cortez performed regularly during the next thirty-five years. In addition to “Kai Kai” and “Commitment,” this book includes other praise songs, and their subjects include South African students murdered in 1976; Claude Reece, Jr.; Josephine Baker; Melvin Edwards; Carolina Kingston; and Alberta King. As with Cortez’s previous three books, the blues also permeate *Mouth on Paper*. “Drying Spit Blues” and “Grinding Vibrato” contain overt blues references, while “Nighttrains,” “Rose Solitude,” and other pieces connect to Baker’s blues matrix in more subtle ways. Significantly, eight poems in this book provide the basis for subsequent musical collaborations on studio recordings. As a result, Jon Woodson suggests Cortez wrote the poems in *Mouth on Paper* with vocal performance in mind: “The length of the

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Cortez recorded with musicians followed more of the free, evolutionary format of Cole’s previous *Cycles*. Jayne Cortez, Jayne Cortez Papers, New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Black Studies.

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poems in the volume gives the reader time to build the themes, line by line, into structures that nearly approach jazz solo improvisations in their achievement of complexity and variation of sound.” In all, *Mouth on Paper* showcases Cortez’s expanding diasporic awareness that investigates variegated cultural customs and political challenges faced in Caribbean, African, and North and South American countries. After Cortez received international recognition for this book, she reframed many of its poems for musical collaborations that formed her core performance repertoire for the rest of her career.  

In 1980, Cortez earned an American Book Award for *Mouth on Paper*, and Smithsonian Folkways released a recording of her solo reading at the award ceremony on an LP that also features her colleagues Ishmael Reed and Amiri Baraka. Given by the Before Columbus Foundation, the American Book Award is based on the writer’s “outstanding contribution to American literature in the opinion of the judges,” with the expressed intent of giving all writers an equal opportunity of winning, regardless of their backgrounds “because diversity happens naturally.” The LP *Poets Read Their Contemporary Poetry* liner notes contain the following excerpted mission statement: “The Foundation is involved with re-discovering America through

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13 In 1979, Cortez released *Unsubmissive Blues* as the first album on her own Bola Press, and it features collaborations with Bill Cole, Denardo Coleman, Joe Daley, and Bern Nix. In addition to setting five poems from *Mouth on Paper* to music, this studio album showcases elements of Cortez’s participation in Bill Cole’s *Cycles*. *Unsubmissive Blues* also demonstrates the type of musical collaboration that became a hallmark of her personal style for the rest of her life. When she formed the Firespitters band, Coleman and Nix constituted the core of the rhythm section, while Cole and Daley remained frequent musical collaborators on different projects throughout Cortez’s career. In the liner notes, Cortez shares: “For the past five years I have worked with Bill Cole, Joe Daley and other musicians in the John Coltrane Memorial World Music Series…. Regrettably, I could not use all of the people involved in the series, but I think that some of the artistic energy on this recording is an example and an extension of that experience. The quality of Bill Cole’s improvisations, the elephant, bull-roarer, diesel truck sound of Joe Daley’s tuba playing, Denardo Coleman’s interpretation and illumination of the poems on drums, drum rhythms as opposed to my own rhythms, Bern Nix’s response to the poetry, and his perception and presentation of the blues, contributed to the vitality and richness of this recording. The very old sound—thousands of years old—and the very new sound of today. *Unsubmissive Blues*, another way of saying confidence.” Jayne Cortez, *Unsubmissive Blues* (New York: Bola Press, 1979). Daley and Cole performed “For the Brave Young Students in Soweto” from this album at a tribute to Cortez at CUNY on February 17, 2017.

the works of a unique and multi-cultured literature. It is an exciting prospect of which the reading documented on this record serves to indicate."\(^{15}\) Cortez’s recognition by the Before Columbus Foundation lauded her revolutionary poetics that challenged European literary and musical traditions by eradicating boundaries between African and American art forms through juxtaposed images, figures, and musical elements that represented places and people around the African diaspora. This album is one of the only professionally produced recordings that captures Cortez reading live without musicians. Cortez’s award recognition and her inclusion on this LP further established her place in an expanding American literary canon and brought her work to a wider audience that grew through the next thirty years of active publication, performance, and participation in numerous festivals and conferences.

In addition to providing context for the American Book Award, the *Poets Read Their Contemporary Poetry* liner notes contain the text of the poems on the recording, including pieces by Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka, and David Henderson. The notes confirm this version of Cortez’s “Kai Kai,” called “For the Poets,” is identical to the original she published in *Mouth on Paper*.\(^{16}\) This recorded performance stays very close to her published text. In this poem honoring Christopher Okigbo and Henry Dumas, the most notable aspect of Cortez’s reading is her dynamic performance of the onomatopoetic expressions she wrote at the end of each line. Even on the page, Cortez clearly meant for these syllables to be read aloud. Nicky Marsh suggests Cortez “uses stuttering and breathy line-endings as reminders that we are reading a verbal score, the ‘fleshy blues kingdoms’ of the physical.”\(^{17}\) Cortez changes these visceral endings throughout the piece, varying each repetition to create effects Barbara Christian likens to “a ritual chant…. [Cortez] practices the first meaning of poetry—words as music. Her poetry is a musical blending of words, whether she is informing us of the greedy men that are destroying our lives, our world,

\(^{15}\) *Poets Read Their Contemporary Poetry*, Before Columbus Foundation (New York: Folkways Records, 1980).
\(^{16}\) *Poets*.
or whether she is capturing the feeling of ‘the people’ who speak the ‘you know language.’” Cortez likely incorporated these sounds from a Yoruba linguistic convention Zora Neale Hurston called “woofing,” in which people use the syllable “o” to link sentences. Cortez’s language in “Kai Kai” emulates the musicality and community in sound at the heart of Yoruba language, and the “a” Cortez pronounces at the beginning of the piece recalls a traditional greeting response, a “powerful ‘I’m here! I hear you! I’m with you!’” These syllables attest to the orality of Cortez’s writing and connect “Kai Kai” both to her Pan-African aesthetic as well as her use of musical jazz and blues techniques in her writing and performance.

Cortez’s speaker begins “Kai Kai” expressing her need for kai kai and akpetese, regional variations of a homebrewed West African beverage with anti-colonial roots:

I need kai kai ah
a glass of akpetesie ah
from torn arm of Bessie Smith ah
I need the smell of Nsukka ah
the body sweat of a durbar ah

When she invokes kai kai and akpetese in the poem’s first two lines, Cortez alludes to popular resistance against oppressive colonial forces. This opposition undergirds the entire poem, in which Cortez includes little personal detail about either Okigbo or Dumas. She chooses, instead, to weave a tapestry of images that draws together locations and conflicts around the African diaspora. Alcohol and body parts become connective tissue among seemingly disparate images in

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19 Mei Mei Sanford, Personal Communication, November 26, 2017. Grammatically, these exclamations could be classified as non-lexical utterances, paralanguage, vocal segregates, or, more simply, guttural noise Cortez employs to imbue her lament with visceral humanity that amplifies her speaker’s expression of loss.
20 In the 1930s kai kai and akpetese were produced despite prohibition by the British colonial government. Kwame Nkrumah symbolically drank akpetese in 1957 after he became Ghana’s first president. Roberto Valussi, “Ghana’s Anti-Colonial Beverage Gets Rehabilitated,” Al Jazeera (June 17, 2015). “In Yoruba, [kai kai is] an expression of wonder and amazement, as in ‘Kai, kai, kai, Yemoja olodo!’ In the 1950’s lesbian life, it meant someone who jumped outside the categories of butch and femme.” In each iteration of its meaning “kai kai” represents ineffable resistance and subversion. Sanford.
the poem, as Cortez’s speaker struggles to make meaning of loss through conflicting impulses of escapism and proactive acknowledgement. In Cortez’s first stanza, she uses “ah” as a release, but her speaker finds no relief in these opening lines.

Though Cortez uses different expressions to end every line in each section of the poem, the “ah” syllable returns frequently, regardless of where she situates the speaker. In the first line, the speaker needs bootleg alcohol, punctuated by a forceful “ah,” and then ending in an upward inflection that connotes a questioning tone. The second stanza changes to “a,” and in her reading on the Before Columbus recording, Cortez pronounces this syllable as a long “a” sound. Cortez’s reading of “a” recalls the rhetorical Canadian “eh” or an “ay” of assent; as with “ah” in the first stanza, she deploys it more as a question than as an answering release. In the third stanza “oh” again takes the shape of an interrogative rather than an exclamation or exhalation. Cortez then returns to “ah” as her ending sound when the poem moves to New Orleans and seems to find respite among different musical expressions of praise that culminate in a direct expression of admiration for Henry Dumas. Cortez shifts again to the affirmative onomatopoetic expression “uh-huh” when she elaborates on the reason the speaker needs alcohol:

Because they’ll try and shoot us
like they shot Henry Dumas  huh
because we massacre each other
and Christopher Okigbo is dead  uh-huh
because i can’t make the best of it  uh-huh
because I’m not a bystander  uh-hun
because mugging is not my profession  uh-uhn

In these lines, rather than connote a question, the last word constitutes the punctuated answer to a call and response. In these words, Cortez’s speaker seems to have found a temporary reprieve for an unquenchable thirst. Moments of respite such as this again harken to blues music in which a
singer expresses loss, sometimes in guttural onomatopoetic vocalizations, and then finds comfort and redemption through the act of naming and claiming agency over the loss.

Cortez makes overt connections to the blues and the American South when she names canonical musical figures in “Kai Kai.” In terms of locating her speaker, though the poem begins in West Africa, Cortez invokes the “torn arm of Bessie Smith,” immediately redirecting the poem to Mississippi, where Smith died at age forty-three due to inadequate medical attention. With this reference, “Kai Kai” enacts circum-Atlantic movement that frames Smith, Okigbo, and Dumas as three brilliant artists who died young as casualties of colonialism, ethnocentrism, and racism. As she continues to move, Cortez’s speaker visits Nsukka, the site of Nigeria’s first university, at which Okigbo was Assistant Librarian when he published his first two books of poetry. Cortez then moves her speaker back to Ghana, alluding to akpetese, when she invokes “the body sweat of a durbar.” Oscillating between consuming kai kai and akpetese to express her praise and admiration for these deceased poets through music and dance, Cortez conflates Okigbo and Dumas with Ashanti royalty. Cortez then connects West African ritual dancing to skillfully choreographed American tap dancing when she refers to “five tap dancers,” most likely movie personalities the Five Blazers who gained acclaim in Duke Ellington’s 1929 movie Black and Tan Fantasy. With this image, the movement from African ritual tradition to black

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American vernacular art exemplifies Cortez’s Pan-African impulse to draw strength from connections across the diaspora.

In a similar connection, Cortez’s speaker invokes the American South when she alludes to juke joints and “belly-roll forward praise.” Cortez, through her speaker, demands physical rhythmic tributes “for Christopher Okigbo” that blend the transformative power of blues music with Okigbo’s poems that incorporate music and dance. While Cortez and Okigbo brought together disparate resources ranging from vernacular experiences to esoteric literary allusions in their poetic imagery, music permeates both their oeuvres. Okigbo’s use of music in his poetry earned him a place in Cortez’s pantheon of artistic luminaries and inspired her imagery that represents the circum-Atlantic dialogue across the African diaspora.26 When Cortez first collaborated with musicians to present “Kai Kai” in 1980 during one section of Bill Cole’s *Fifth Cycle*, she worked with them to weave her text into their complex musical tapestry that combined African, European, and American musical influences. Before Cortez begins reading “Kai Kai” in this performance, Cole establishes the musical mood on his Indian shenai. Then percussionist Warren Smith establishes a tempo on tom-toms that cellist Abdul Wadud and percussionist Hafiz Shabazz mirror in a triple-meter groove. Wadud’s pizzicato cello playing sounds like a jazz string bass, and he intermittently plays double-stop chords that create an open harmonic drone to complement his rhythmic interplay with the percussionists. Like the poetic images in “Kai Kai,” this rhythmic backdrop combines contemporary jazz rhythms with contrapuntal African rhythms from which jazz evolved. Americans Smith and Shabazz complement Ghanaian Adzenyah with

26 Okigbo studied British classics, and some critics characterize his verse as dense, drawing stylistic connections to Western modernists Eliot and Pound. Okigbo’s writing is also teeming with music and surreal imagery. Sunday O. Anozie, *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric* (New York: Africana Pub. Corp., 1972), 2. Though Okigbo published little during his life, he received international recognition when he won the first prize at the Negro Festival of Arts in 1966. Okigbo was also an accomplished pianist who accompanied Wole Soyinka in a public singing appearance. Donatus I. Nwoga, *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1984), 33, 28. After Okigbo died, contemporary Chinua Achebe, expressed his grief: “He was not only the finest Nigerian poet of his generation but I believe that as his work becomes better and more widely known in the world he will also be recognized as one of the most remarkable anywhere in our time.” Nwoga, 12–13.
amalgamated African and American sounds that aurally represent Nigerian Okigbo and American Dumas. This musical footing mirrors Cortez’s circum-Atlantic tribute to Okigbo and Dumas by adding layers of connective tissue between the continents.

In addition to combining musical styles from across the African diaspora, the musicians in this performance of “Kai Kai” engage in careful reciprocal listening as they interact with Cortez’s words. In one instance, Bill Cole trills softly until Cortez reads her third “ah;” Cole responds with a pitch bend.27 Throughout the performance, each time Cortez changes her end syllable, Cole responds differently, often returning to the same pitch then embellishing and signifying on short musical motifs to create different effects. Each percussionist also fills the spaces after Cortez’s final syllable in each line, and cellist Wadud also interjects musical ideas in these spaces. Cortez and the musicians listen and respond to each other in kind, and Cortez’s energy at the end of each line builds on and adds to the forward drive the musicians maintain throughout the piece. When Cortez reframed “Kai Kai” in 1986 to record with the Firespitters band for her own album Maintain Control, a different group of musicians engages in similar textual and musical interplay. This studio recording of “Kai Kai” begins with Cortez and Denardo Coleman in a call and response that alternates her exclamation “ah” with horn hits played through a patch on his electronic drum kit.28 In the studio for Maintain Control, each time Cortez shouts an onomatopoetic guttural call, a different musician echoes her; in this way, interactions on this studio recording resemble Bill Cole’s echoed instrumental responses to Cortez’s calls throughout the version of “Kai Kai” they performed in the Fifth Cycle.

Denardo Coleman’s drum hits provide the most interaction with Cortez’s words throughout the piece, as he was intimately familiar with his mother’s text. After their initial call and response, Coleman keeps time using standard drum sounds on his electronic kit and then uses the synthesized horn sound to accentuate many of Cortez’s “ah” exclamations. The other

27 Bill Cole, The Fifth Cycle, Live Concert (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, April 12, 1980).
musicians follow Coleman’s lead to actively engage with Cortez’s changing syllables. One of the best examples of musical interaction with Cortez’s words comes when she modifies the ends of lines eighteen through twenty-two and again from forty-seven through fifty. Instead of saying “oh” or “uh-huh,” she says, “yo,” and after she reads “and Christopher Okigbo is gone,” she modifies the pitch of her “yo” to match the note Charles Moffett, Jr., plays on his saxophone.  

Shortly after, Cortez repeats “yo” at least nine times, and Moffett mirrors her rhythm on the same repeated note. Coleman then plays a similar rhythm using a synthesized temple block patch. Here, each performer contributes a repeated idea to a collective soundscape that demonstrates careful listening and instant reactions to different musical suggestions and motifs. Listening constitutes the core of harmolodic improvisation in which both Moffett and Coleman echo Cortez’s words as she calls and responds to their playing.

Just as these musical collaborations on Maintain Control and in Bill Cole’s Fifth Cycle bring together different aural textures and traditions, Cortez deftly maneuvers between continents throughout the text with multi-layered imagery. Despite her initial reference to kai kai, Cortez deploys open-ended images that invite her audience to make personal connections with broad applications. For example, “port of Lobito” alludes to the 1974 Carnation Revolution that granted Angola its independence but began a thirty-year civil war similar to the Biafran civil war that claimed Okigbo’s life. “Skull of a mercenary” refers to the regimental skull and crossbones symbol of one of Okigbo’s commanders, Rolf Steiner. “Ashes from a Texas lynching” alludes to several acts of violence, though Cortez was most likely referring to Henry Smith, lynched in

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29 Modified from “and Christopher Okigbo is dead” in the printed versions.
30 Post-production studio effects also add different textures to the collaborative work on Maintain Control. Engineers Jon Fausty and Shawna Stobie created a rapid echo effect on Cortez’s voice when she reads “on the end of a gaspipe.” They later applied the same effect on the “ah” following the refrain of “I need Kai Kai” near the end of the piece. The engineers used a different iteration of the same echo effect at the end of the piece by bending the pitch of the decaying recurring syllable on Cortez’s final repeated “ah” exclamations. During this section of “Kai Kai,” Coleman again responds to his mother’s words with synthesized horn hits, and as Cortez’s engineered echoes fully decay, Moffett, Nix, and MacDowell play a final descending scale to bring the piece to a definitive close.
Paris, Texas in 1893. “Sweet oil” could represent crude oil and elder trees, or it could be a reference to poets writing sweet words for others’ ears. Similarly, “delta praise” refers both to Dumas’s native Mississippi Delta and to Okigbo’s Niger Delta. Cortez’s juxtaposition of the Niger and Mississippi Deltas also acknowledges victims of the transatlantic slave trade. These lines invoke multiple possibilities for interpretation that highlight Cortez’s acts of “rememory” in the spirit of Toni Morrison. Like Morrison, Cortez blends her lived experiences with imaginative language that augments her diasporic awareness. With each allusion and fragmented poetic image, Cortez invites audiences to draw their own connections and make personal meaning that emphasizes the dialogic nature of these performed collaborations.

In her collaborations, Cortez also invites musicians to make personal connections to her words. In Bill Cole’s *Fifth Cycle* cellist Abdul Wadud and Cole engage in musical interplay with one another throughout their interactions with the text. For instance, when Cortez reads “on this day approaching me like a mystic number,” Cole responds with a trill, and Wadud counters his trill by moving to higher notes on his cello, playing a rhythm that replicates Cole’s rapid alternation between notes. They continue playing like this until Cortez reads “to boogie forward ju ju praise for Henry Dumas ah.” Here, she pauses to give the musicians a longer musical break

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33 Henry Dumas was born near Little Rock, Arkansas in 1934, and his family moved to Harlem, where he attended public schools and enrolled in City College before he left to join the Air Force. Over the next seven years, Dumas became involved with the Civil Rights Movement while writing, publishing magazines, and raising a family. Dumas later served as a social worker and published his writing on the Black Arts circuit. His increasing activism took him to East Saint Louis, where he met Eugene Redmond, who was impressed with Dumas’s “raw energy of mental machines poured into lectures, horns, drums, debates, dances, performances, concerts, the writings of Frantz Fanon, staff sessions, curriculum development, the Movement, Black Arts, theories of literature, the notion of the African Continuum, Pan-Africanism.” Eugene Redmond, “Introduction: The Ancient and Recent Voices Within Henry Dumas,” *Black American Literature Forum* 22, no. 2 (1988), 147–53. Redmond is Dumas’s literary executor.

while the conga player executes a series of quick rolls upon which Cole, Wadud, and the others signify. Musical moments like this demonstrate Cole’s harmolodic thinking as he and the musicians listen and respond to each other and to Cortez’s reading. When Cortez began regularly collaborating with Denardo and the Firespitters band, their performances augmented the call-and-response kinship Cortez manifests throughout her Pan-African oeuvre. When Cortez and her son interact with one another and with the other musicians, they demonstrate possibilities for community building that encourages connections that build strength among those of seemingly disparate backgrounds.

In addition to creating multiple opportunities for personal interpretation, “Kai Kai” embodies perpetual circum-Atlantic movement through images connected to ritual practices that took on new meaning during the Middle Passage: “in this dynamite dust and dragon blood and liver cut… / I need cockroaches… / congo square… / a can of skokian….”35 These images conjure voodoo rituals and invoke syncretic African traditions in New Orleans. As with her invocation of the blues and of Yoruba linguistic conventions, Cortez engages her audience in an intricate diasporic dialogue that excavates African memories in her elegies.36 Another aspect of this excavation comes through Cortez’s invoking Yoruba religious practices by name through “the midnight snakes of Damballah… / liquid from the eyeballs of a leopard… / sweet oil from the ears of an elder… / to make a delta praise for the poets….”37 These juxtaposed images express


36 Dragon’s blood is used as a coagulant in Yemen, and it is used symbolically to gather money and love in New Orleanian voodoo rituals. Toni Mount, Dragon’s Blood & Willow Bark: The Mysteries of Medieval Medicine (Stroud, UK: Amberley, 2015), 119–21.

37 Damballah-Wedo is a vodoun veve spirit depicted as a snake that practitioners conjure in ceremonies involving percussion and dancing to conjure wisdom and fertility. Leopard cults practicing rituals that invoked Damballah built coalitions against chattel slavery and later European colonial rule in Africa. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravinsi-Gebert, Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction From Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 127. In contrast, Nigerian leopard cults drink borfima to obtain superhuman power and mutilate
conflicting raw emotions that accompany grief and offer simultaneously peaceful and violent solutions to dealing with profound loss. Enacting West African ritual traditions through words and music, Cortez and her musical collaborators honor Okigbo’s Igbo heritage and connect it to Henry Dumas’s Pan-African ethos.

In addition to enacting ancient traditions, Cortez temporarily situates her speaker in New York City to create a wide-reaching praise song for all poets of African descent, in accordance with the poem’s alternate title “For the Poets.” When Cortez writes, “In this day of one hundred surging zanzi bars… / …of bongo clubs moon cafes and paradise lounges…,” she names different venues for live poetry readings. Here, Cortez interrogates venues in the city that coopt and commodify African culture because she laments the speaker’s current position: “In this day’s pounded torso of burgundy mush… / In this steel cube in this domino in this dry period…” Cortez juxtaposes mangled human flesh with the cold modernism of a “steel cube” that alludes to Tony Rosenthal’s 1967 sculpture Alamo in Astor Place. This combination suggests Cortez’s disdain for the white-male-dominated art market in the late 1960s. Cortez’s husband Melvin Edwards had a contentious relationship with arbiters of New York galleries, and her pointed images in “Kai Kai” indict business practices that either ignored or exploited black artists. To counteract this exploitation during the Black Arts Movement, Cortez and contemporaries like Dudley Randall and Haki Madhubuti maintained control of their own literary publication and circulation. When Cortez published and released her studio recording of “Kai Kai,” she did so using her own Bola Press; thus, she resisted cooptation of her work both in content and in practice of her diasporic aesthetic, again resisting capitalist colonization of her creative output.

In her collaborative musical performances of “Kai Kai,” Cortez and the musicians emphasize these images that affect their creative productivity and the circulation of their work. More than halfway through the version she performed in 1980 for Bill Cole’s *Fifth Cycle*, for example, when Cortez reads “in this day of surging zanzi bars,” cellist Abdul Wadud plays an insistent double-stop chord progression. Bill Cole and the percussionists support Wadud’s rhythm by mirroring it, and they continue signifying on this pattern through the end of the piece.

Throughout this version of “Kai Kai,” Cole employs a consciously limited palate of musical ideas on his shenai, but he rotates through bent sustained notes to tremolos and other flourishes that resonate with the turmoil Cortez conjures. She pauses to create open stanza breaks for the musicians to echo her words, and when she reads, “I need one more piss ass night to make a hurricane,” Cortez emphasizes these words, shouting angrily in a building vocal crescendo. Cortez delivers subsequent lines with similar emphasis, and the musicians match her intensity with emphatic fills and rolls. Likewise, on the studio recording of “Kai Kai,” Cortez and the Firespitters engage in a give and take that underscores specific poetic images. As Cortez reads, “in this time slot on death row yo,” guitarist Bern Nix plays a descending chromatic line, and Charles Moffett, Jr., continues this musical line when Nix stops. In a natural outpouring from this chromatic line, Moffett quotes the circus march “Entry of the Gladiators,” a song that denotes spectacle and chaos. Just as they listen to Cortez and interact with her words, all four musicians also carefully listen to and signify on one another’s ideas. These interactions, like those among Cole and the musicians in his *Fifth Cycle*, again demonstrate the musical and poetic kinship that defines Cortez’s syncretic performed representations of the expansive African diaspora.

“Kai Kai” reaches a climactic point when Cortez’s speaker forcefully states the purpose for engaging in these Pan-African traditions:

Because they’ll try and shoot us

like they shot Henry Dumas  huh

because we massacre each other
and Christopher Okigbo is dead uh-huh
because i can’t make the best of it uh-huh
because i’m not a bystander uh-hun
because mugging is not my profession uh-uhn

Here, Cortez’s speaker moves from a first-person singular stance to an inclusive plural that creates communion with the audience in another instance of dialogic performance. Cortez avoids issuing a direct call to action in these lines; instead, her speaker connects the audience as a body of mourners who refuse to let their colleagues’ work stop with their deaths. Cortez’s shift to affirmative expressions here, punctuated by the negative “uh-uhn” adds gravity to each line while Cortez’s speaker repeats previous images in her recipe for elegiac praise in the final stanza.

Cortez’s speaker restates most of “Kai Kai’s” major images in a condensed version of the poem, and her rapid recapitulation underscores a Pan-African aesthetic that draws together African rituals that evolved into syncretic American traditions:

I need kai kai ah i need durbars ah i need torn arms ah
i need cane fields ah i need feathers ah i need eyeballs ah
i need ashes ah i need snakes ah i need skulls ah
i need cockroaches ah i need sharkteeth ah i need buffalo ah
i need spirits ah i need ankles ah i need hurricanes ah
i need gas pipes ah i need blood pacts ah i need ah
to make a delta praise for the poets ah

On the Poets Read Their Contemporary Poetry LP, when she reaches this section of the poem and reads “sharkteeth ah / buffalo ah / guerrillas in the rainy season ah,” Cortez enacts a sort of call and response with herself. She gradually raises her pitch and increases her rate of speech. Leading up to the climactic lines “because they’ll try to shoot us / like they shot Henry Dumas,” Cortez’s rate and pitch ebb and flow naturally to build and release tension. Upon reaching this line, Cortez drives her message home. She emphasizes the repeated word “because” and then
issues a challenge through her inflection when she reads, “I need one more….” She then speeds up her delivery through the final condensed stanza in the same way she often increases her pace to a frenzied crescendo when she performs with musicians. Even without musicians, Cortez’s performative style exudes musical qualities, and this solo reading reflects her concurrent collaborative work in Bill Cole’s *Cycles*.

By writing a poem that culminates in this increased pace and repetitive structure, Cortez seems to have anticipated performance and collaboration with musicians in different venues that would heighten her expression of the speaker’s needs and more viscerally express her anguish. In “Kai Kai,” Cortez juxtaposes images in a combination of anticolonial beverages, voodoo ritual objects, body parts, catastrophic natural forces, and vestiges of enslavement, to create a tribute that simultaneously looks forward and backward. These performed versions of “Kai Kai” include connections in multiple directions, among subject matter, audience, and musical collaborators, that correspond to the kinship that defines the African diaspora for Cortez. She and her contemporaries built their artistic practices around ideas in Larry Neal’s Black Aesthetic outline that linked black American vernacular expressive arts to their African antecedents.⁴⁰

In all, the organic, structurally open environment of Cole’s *Fifth Cycle* provided many possibilities for Cortez and the musicians to interact, whereas her studio recording took a more controlled approach that incorporated similar elements. As a result, each version of the piece ends when Cortez shouts her exasperation with two different forms of violence against men of color: post-colonial African insurrection and urban American police violence. At the same time Cortez looks back to honor Okigbo and Dumas, she looks forward and encourages her contemporaries to use their own poetry to resist oppression. This commitment to resistance earned Cortez an award-winning position among the well-respected artist-activists in the late 1970s, and her three recorded performances of “Kai Kai” place her alongside eminent peers, through her multi-genre poetics that demonstrate true collaborative kinship.

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⁴⁰ Neal, 11–15.
Cortez expressed this collaborative kinship differently in “Commitment,” her elegy for Paul Robeson. This piece demonstrates her flexibility as a poet and as a performer in a reverential praise song that honors a man who started speaking out during the Harlem Renaissance and continued to use his art to fight for equality until his death in 1976. In this poem for Robeson, Cortez acknowledges their aesthetic differences, while also affirming their kinship as committed social activists. Cortez, though originally trained as a classical cellist, built around herself a community of experimental jazz musicians, and their collaborative performances incorporated elements of esoteric free jazz and gritty blues, far removed from the concert hall settings in which Robeson performed. To underscore their affinity rather than highlight their differences in “Commitment,” Cortez sets up a personal relationship between the poem’s subject and speaker. The intimate I/you connection is especially present in her refrain “I knew you in that way.”

Here, the word “knew” takes on several possible meanings. With Cortez being born more than forty years after Robeson, she presumably knew him in the way any person “knows” an international celebrity. When Cortez writes, “I knew you in the way / of the spirituals I loved / even though you didn’t sing in the style of my choice,” she uses analogy to place Robeson in conversation with oral history that evolves with each retelling in a new context.

Robeson became the subject of U.S. government scrutiny because he delivered political speeches during his eclectic concerts. Cortez introduces this conflict early in the piece, as “Commitment’s” first line refers to the U.S. State Department revoking Robeson’s passport for ten years. In 1949, Robeson gave a recital in Paris that included a piece about a Utah labor activist executed by firing squad in 1915, a revolutionary song from the Spanish Civil War, a piece from a Russian opera, and his customary finale, “Ol’ Man River.” Prior to singing, Robeson gave a speech that would later be twisted to present him as an anti-American Communist who insisted black Americans refuse to fight in unjust wars:

42 Goodman, 44.
We in America do not forget that it is on the backs of the poor whites of Europe… and on the backs of millions of black people the wealth of America has been acquired. And we are resolved that it shall be distributed in an equitable manner among all of our children and we don’t want any hysterical stupidity about our participating in a war against anybody no matter whom. We are determined to fight for peace.  

Robeson’s speech foregrounded ideas Lumumba, Malcolm X, and Clifford Thornton would echo in their own provocative rhetoric during the next two decades, and their words and actions inspired Cortez and her colleagues during the Black Arts Movement to make similarly bold assertions in their art. As a result of Robeson’s activities, the U.S. State Department revoked his passport for ten years. When Robeson finally regained his passport, he and his wife traveled to Europe, but he would never again perform.

In order to connect Robeson’s pioneering activism to her work during the Black Arts Movement, Cortez framed “Commitment” as a poetic apostrophe, in which her speaker directly addresses Paul Robeson as an informal personal “You.” The first printed version of “Commitment” begins: “You stood out in your passport / a committee of one / and I like that.” Cortez used “I like that” as another simple refrain to commend different aspects of Robeson’s commitment to political activism, despite its toll on his career, mobility, and health. For instance,

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44 As it did with later Black Power proponents, the U.S. government used this speech to restrict Robeson’s public appearances. The press also presented him as a traitor. When the House Un-American Activities Committee confirmed Robeson’s Communist Party affiliations, Robeson’s popularity continued its decline. A subsequent concert appearance in Peekskill, New York, ended abruptly in a anti-communist, white supremacist, possibly police-assisted riot that injured many concertgoers and caused Robeson to flee the venue, hiding in the back seat of a vehicle. Goodman, 45, 99–101,119–21.
45 In 1956 Robeson gave an impassioned speech to HUAC to regain his ability to travel and perform abroad: “…the reason that I am here today, you know, from the mouth of the State Department itself, is: I should not be allowed to travel because I have struggled for years for the independence of the colonial peoples of Africa…. The other reason that I am here today… is that when I am abroad I speak out against the injustices against the Negro people of this land…. You want to shut up every Negro who has the courage to stand up and fight for the rights of his people, for the rights of workers…. “You Are the Un-Americans, and You Ought to Be Ashamed of Yourselves: Paul Robeson Appears Before HUAC,” History Matters, George Mason University, accessed August 14, 2016, http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6440.
Cortez’s speaker likes the way Robeson was “making connections / being progressive,” and she likes “the fact that you interpreted / the symbol that your photograph had become / a powerful force significant to masses of people,” “as a person with confidence and political intent.” “Confidence,” “political intent,” and “making connections” are all attributes that link Robeson to Cortez’s contemporaries in the Black Arts Movement who continued fighting for economic, political, and social equality after his death. In her poetic celebration of Robeson’s work, Cortez encouraged others to follow his lead. At the end of the poem, when the speaker declares “I understood you in that way,” the word “understood” connects with the manner in which she “knew” Robeson earlier in the poem, again demonstrating Cortez’s affinity with Robeson’s bold actions. This kinship, like the kinship she expressed for Malcolm X, Patrice Lumumba, Christopher Okigbo, and Henry Dumas, constituted the core of Cortez’s Black Aesthetic that built coalitions of likeminded artists who used their work to fight inequality. Admiring his conviction in speaking against HUAC and the U.S. State Department, Cortez affirmed her own commitment to social justice, through which she more intimately came to understand Robeson’s sacrifices.

After Cortez confirms her speaker’s understanding of Robeson’s commitment, she distills Robeson’s accomplishments into two discrete actions: “never holding back” and “never selling out.” These are the actions Cortez’s speaker “knew,” “understood,” and ultimately liked most about Robeson. Throughout “Commitment,” Cortez channels her grief into a call for action, celebrating Robeson as an example for herself and her contemporaries to follow as they created their own politicized art that defied constraint.

When Cortez reframed the poem for her 1986 studio recording with the Firespitters, she signified on these discrete actions to make the new refrain “Never never never holding back / Never never never backing down / Never never never giving in.” Adding the insistently repeated “never” gives this refrain more weight than the original two lines printed in *Mouth on Paper*. The added line also exemplifies a stylistic move Cortez makes throughout this revised

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version of “Commitment.” In a 1997 interview, Cortez explained: “The refrain might be expected but what the refrain is relating to is unexpected…. There are always comings and goings. You go, you return, and in between there are internal and external changes, environmental changes, changes based on personal experience, based on information…. The refrain is a device to add the next layer of sound, next metaphor, next transformation.”

To add this “next layer” in this version of “Commitment” as well as other pieces she performed with musicians, Cortez added short refrains as textual roadmaps that mirrored Western song forms.

In this iteration of “Commitment,” Cortez also employs incremental repetition akin to the known/new contract in prose writing in which each sentence begins with a reference to the previous sentence before presenting new information to the reader. In the second version of the poem, Cortez strategically built new lines around a key word from the line before:

Paul Robeson stood out in his passport
a committee of one
a committee of one who covered
a lot of territory
the territory of dedication
a dedication to the freedom of his people

As in the first stanza, she begins lines with the word that ended the preceding line; the effect is a rolling evolutionary verse that unfolds as Cortez’s speaker’s thoughts about Robeson reveal themselves to the audience. This type of analogic repetition allows for a gradual development of ideas and smooth transitions from one to the next, and it mimics the musical evolution at the core of harmolodic improvisation in free jazz. Cortez emphasizes repeated words, and then she twists them, allowing each idea to evolve in increments. The revised version of “Commitment” contains textual evidence of dialogic expression and harmolodic motivic chain associations in which ideas

signify on and draw inspiration from one another in Cortez’s writing. The musical framework for
her collaborative version, however, avoids active harmolodic improvisation in favor of music that
more aptly represents and honors the poem’s subject.

On the recording of “Commitment,” cellist Abdul Wadud bows a slow, expressive
melody that portrays Robeson’s “dignity and love” Cortez’s speaker lauds throughout the piece.
This smooth, legato melody is a striking contrast to Wadud’s intense genre-bending performance
of “Kai Kai” in Bill Cole’s *Fifth Cycle*. Though he does not replicate songs Robeson performed
regularly, Wadud’s playing on “Commitment” draws aural comparisons by signifying on songs
Robeson performed like those collected on *Songs of Struggle*. The spare instrumentation is less
complex than many of Cortez’s collaborations with the Firespitters; Wadud plays a singular solo
instrument accompanied only by percussion, played with a regular precision that suggests
Denardo Coleman programmed his parts using a sequencer. The regularity of this percussive
foundation also creates the harmonic framework, rocking between notes in a I/V chordal
relationship, the ubiquitous cadence that forms the tonal backbone of Western music. Like
Wadud’s arco playing with a bow on his cello, this harmonic framework alludes to Robeson’s
traditional vocal solos in the classic European canon. Cortez honors Robeson aurally and
textually in this new arrangement of a piece she wrote almost a decade earlier.

The text for the collaborative iteration of “Commitment” more than doubles the original
version in length, though Cortez varied little of its content, choosing instead to use the first
printed draft as scaffolding for elaboration on her appreciation for Robeson’s work. For instance,
Cortez removed the repeated word “example” in lines nine and ten, added “democratic ideas”
between “talent” “and revolutionary gestures” in line eleven, and moved “being progressive” and
“making connections” to the end of the recorded version to form a longer tercet built around
incremental repetition. The revised version of “Commitment” contains repeated elements that
read almost like a traditional villanelle, though Cortez eschewed standard forms throughout her

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body of work and consciously chose, like her contemporaries in the Black Arts Movement, to avoid academic vestiges of white European traditions. Cortez’s incorporation of conventional poetic forms in this piece again suggests Cortez worked to replicate Robeson’s reappropriation of traditional European music in his own political performances. Despite these instances of regularity, Cortez also creatively uses rhythm and repetition to create an idiosyncratic original form throughout the recorded text of “Commitment” that supports her Black Aesthetic. Most repeated lines come in sets of three, but Cortez resists the temptation to write predictable verse that fits a pattern, choosing instead to effect a conversational tone in “Commitment.”

The most obvious textual change in the recorded version is Cortez’s shift in poetic point of view that changes the piece from an intimate expression of admiration to a more public declaration that invites her audience to actively emulate Robeson rather than passively admire him. In the later version, Cortez changes from the intimate first person/second person relationship in the opening lines simply by changing a few words; for example, “you” becomes “Paul Robeson” and “your” becomes “his”; Cortez commonly altered nouns and pronouns in this way to reframe poems and customize their foci for different presentations. Stating Robeson’s name at the poem’s outset firmly establishes the poem’s subject and renders it immediately obvious for performance and publication; it also allows the relationship between speaker and subject to gradually unfold. In the collaborative version of “Commitment,” Cortez also delays her early refrain of “I like that.” Instead of immediately sharing her speaker’s evaluation of Robeson, she embeds the sentiment in the new lines: “and I liked his baritone bass speaking and / booming out in artistic brilliance.” In this expanded version of “Commitment,” Cortez waits to use the stand-alone clause “I like that” in line fifty-three, specifically attaching her evaluation to Robeson’s “always trying to live the life of struggle and determination / instead of the life of glitter and degradation.” Cortez’s speaker likes Robeson’s willpower and “the fact that he could interpret the symbol that his photograph had become / a powerful force / significant to masses of people.” Thus, when Cortez repeats “I like that” just a few lines later, she connects with Robeson’s
decision to use his fame to effect social change, no matter the personal cost. In so doing, Cortez makes a tacit pact with her audience to do the same, again demonstrating an approach to writing and performance that invites interactive participation.

In addition to reaffirming her kinship with Robeson throughout the text, Cortez also connects with him in her musical collaboration. Throughout his musical interaction with Cortez’s words on *Maintain Control*, cellist Abdul Wadud’s melody uses a diminished tonality that features a kind of “blue” note and creates harmonic tension with Denardo Coleman’s repetition of the V/I tympani pattern. This juxtaposition of the most ubiquitous chord progression in Western music against a minor blues tonality strengthens tangible and metaphorical connections between “Commitment” and American black vernacular music. Coleman breaks from his pattern when Cortez reads “dignity and love” for the first time, but then he returns and breaks again when Cortez repeats these words. These breaks and returns provide stability and momentum while also emphasizing certain words and phrases. As Cortez and Denardo Coleman worked together with increasing frequency, his drumming became a natural extension of his mother’s words, and his intuitive playing and musical leadership created spaces for the other Firespitters to do so as well. In another such instance, Wadud breaks from his melodic line when Cortez reads “in the way of the spirituals I loved / even though you didn’t sing in the style of my choice / but what does style have to do with commitment / after all contributions go beyond songs.” Here, Wadud plays shorter, more aggressive double-stops on his cello, chopping across his strings in short strokes, to suggest the “style of [Cortez’s poetic] choice,” that featured short, percussive rapid-fire poetic lines. These short lines contrast with the long, flowing melodic lines Wadud played earlier to represent Robeson’s dignity through Cortez’s speaker’s eyes. Throughout the piece, Wadud restates the simple melody, at times recapitulating the aggressively disjointed double-stops, though the smooth legato melody he plays with his bow occupies the bulk of the piece, in a musical allusion to Robeson’s stately bass voice singing with the wide vibrato of a classically trained vocalist. Wadud’s musical contrasts replicate the tumultuous undercurrent that plagued
Robeson’s later career and blocked his ability to share his message of social justice with international audiences. These thoughtful interactions show Abdul Wadud and Denardo Coleman responding to the call of Cortez’s words to provide a nuanced portrait of Robeson’s political impact on Cortez and her contemporaries in the Black Arts Movement.

The most notable addition in this recorded version of “Commitment” is the following sequence of lines that builds on ideas she included in the original. Here, Cortez’s speaker more directly seeks to emulate some of Robeson’s noteworthy attributes:

And I want to be warm like him
funloving like him creative like him
unselfish like him
with his kind of awareness
his kind of generosity his
kind of critical understanding
kind of strength kind of vision kind of energy
kind of power kind of spirit kind of courage
kind of sensitivity
Though these words describe general characteristics, Cortez lists these traits and then provides specific examples later in the poem. Overall, this revised version of her elegy for Paul Robeson, rather than implying the speaker’s potential desire to emulate his actions through her own, demonstrates more clearly Cortez’s kinetic process of doing so by building a community of likeminded activists. In calling herself to action, Cortez demonstrates her own commitment to organizing movements for social justice and racial equality. Both printed versions of “Commitment,” though firmly rooted in Cortez’s oeuvre of elegies and tributes, commemorate a different kind of heroism to Cortez. Rather than expose and decry the indignities and injustices Robeson suffered, she portrays him as a transcendent freedom fighter who refused to allow agents of racism to deter him. On *Maintain Control*, Abdul Wadud, Cortez, and Denardo Coleman
capture Robeson’s dignity and singularity in their musically straightforward treatment of Cortez’s praise song. Cortez chose this less active collaborative presentation with fewer instances of overt musical and poetic interplay to more closely replicate what Cortez’s speaker liked about Robeson, explaining both musically and poetically why she appreciated his artistry.

This beautifully simple collaboration on “Commitment” along with the energetically vigorous collaborations in the different versions of “Kai Kai” demonstrate variety in Cortez’s written and collaborative work in the late 1970s and early eighties, and though these two elegies express similar emotions, they do so in distinctive ways. As Cortez gained more experience working with musicians, their collaborations proved to be as varied as their subject matters. In the same way she and the musicians interacted with one another, Cortez “listened” to her subjects and wrote poetic responses that expressed her admiration and parlayed that praise into demonstrative calls to action. Cortez shared these admirable traits with others through public readings and collaborative performances with her community of artist-activists who raised social and political awareness through their art. By writing poems that also served as scripts upon which she could improvise in different collaborative settings, Cortez emerged in the early 1980s as an important voice among artists like Amiri Baraka, the Last Poets, and Sonia Sanchez, who also combined music and poetry as political commentary. Cortez drew inspiration from subjects like Paul Robeson, Christopher Okigbo, and Henry Dumas, whose writing “asserts that the language you speak is a way of defining yourself within a group…. Language can protect, exclude, express value, as well as assert identity.” Like Dumas, Okigbo, and Robeson, Cortez used her art to strengthen her African identity in the context of her collaborations with musicians working in different settings.

While Cortez’s work with Bill Cole year after year in his *Cycles* provided the first sustained collaborative musical continuity for Cortez, her poetry in this context constituted a

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fraction of his larger works. When she and her son Denardo began regularly collaborating with
her poetry as the focal point, the Firespitters band provided a consistent platform in which Cortez
and Denardo took the lead in providing structure for each piece, while the other musicians
contributed to the creative process in various ways. Ultimately functioning as the leader of her
own band, Cortez had full artistic control over these musical collaborations in a way that most
other poets collaborating with musicians did not. Together, “Commitment” and “Kai Kai” show
contrasting examples of Cortez’s evolving poetic activism in two sustained collaborative settings;
one poem provides an explosive lament that manifests in a call to action, while the other provides
a stately appreciation and acknowledgment of artist-activist kinship. Archived recordings of these
pieces present a broadening spectrum of Cortez’s early performance style as her poetics matured
through public recognition of her work. After performing in Los Angeles and New York with free
jazz practitioners followed by the classically trained approach of bassist Richard Davis, Cortez
moved toward performing within the context of formalized musical arrangements that allowed
freedom for instrumental and vocal experimentation within a framework Cortez and the
musicians followed with more scripted regularity. Blending American and African cultural
customs, Cortez’s musical collaborations with the Firespitters and with Bill Cole created
connections that portrayed interactive kinship and circum-Atlantic cultural exchanges through
poetry and music.
Chapter 3
“We’re Here”: Extending Community in “Firespitters” and “No Simple Explanations”

Black Power is, in fact, a synthesis of all of the nationalistic ideas embedded within the double-consciousness of Black America. But it has no one specific meaning. It is rather a kind of feeling—a kind of emotional response to one’s history…. like all good theories, it can ultimately be defined only in action—in movement….1 – Larry Neal

The Black Arts Movement embodied perpetual motion, as writers, musicians, and other artists created a new methodology that engaged philosophies of Black Nationalism and Marxism to articulate their lived experiences in an oppressive society. In their efforts to resist inequality in the 1960s, protestors moved their bodies to march, sit in, sing, and serve time. In her life and in her poetry, Cortez enacted this motion through extensive travel to collaborate with likeminded activists and in her written and performed incremental repetition and surrealist chains of ideas akin to harmolodic improvisations in free jazz. Cortez looked to the Négritude poets as forebears of this Black Nationalist ideology that reciprocally encouraged and drew strength from American movements for equality. At a 1998 symposium honoring Léon-Gontran Damas, Cortez explained:

We encountered him as Negritude in motion…. His message concerned with the experience of the black world is condensed into a high voltage of metaphors, connotations, imagery, irony, and allusions…. Through these encounters I understood the concept of Negritude to be broad and subject to many interpretations and applications and to vary from place to place because the African Diaspora is large, broad, complicated, and crosses many cultures, many languages, many national borders, and a multitude of circumstances.2

Cortez connected with Damas and the values at the core of the Black Arts Movement through her own writing, publication, and performance practices. The kinetic energy in poems like “Kai Kai”

2 The complete speech is printed in Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, Black, Brown & Beige: Surrealism Writings from Africa and the Diaspora (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 304–05.
from the late seventies and early eighties reflects Cortez’s engagement with revolutionary movements through her use of surrealist imagery in performed collaborations with the musicians. Among other collaborations from this period, “No Simple Explanations” and “Firespitters,” provided dynamic musical frameworks for Cortez’s short, active, evolving poetic lines that challenged racially constructed social norms and demanded equality by illustrating political disparity through overlapping sounds and images in an interactive call and response.

Cortez first adopted the Firespitter persona and began to signify on Senufo funeral traditions in a poem that used surrealist imagery to celebrate artists who attended the 1977 Festival of African Culture in Lagos, Nigeria. Of her many trips to Africa with husband Melvin Edwards during their forty-year marriage, this well-documented event provides an exemplary lens through which to understand Cortez’s early evolution as a diasporic thinker and public intellectual who wrote poems that addressed common themes of disparity and social injustice she encountered as they traveled the world. While FESTAC ’77 was successful in bringing together artists, scholars, and activists from over sixty countries, critics condemned disparities between the amount of money the government spent for the festival and the inadequate operational infrastructure of Lagos, still one of the largest and most overpopulated cities in Africa. Cortez wrote her poem “Firespitters” to interrogate these incongruities by reframing her written anecdotal memories from the festival into powerful strings of surrealist imagery that superimpose beautiful African landscapes, urban squalor, and engines of war.3

Contemporaneous with the poem “Firespitters,” Cortez’s tribute to Black Arts writer Larry Neal, “No Simple Explanations,” takes similar textually and musically assertive approaches

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to elegizing Cortez’s friend and literary role model.4 While Cortez’s elegies honor the dead and express her own grief, she also crafted praise songs like “No Simple Explanations” and “Commitment” to inspire others to fight against injustice and human rights violations across the African diaspora. As with “Firespitters,” Cortez used fragments she drafted in her notebook to create a polished draft of “No Simple Explanations” for an event she coordinated to commemorate Neal’s life and accomplishments as an architect of the Black Arts Movement. Cortez helped organize the tribute to Neal on April 25, 1981, at Harlem’s Countee Cullen Library, and it featured artists including Stanley Crouch, Amiri Baraka, Askia Touré, Ted Joans, and saxophonist David Murray.5 At the event, Cortez’s poem issued a clear call to action to her colleagues who engaged with Neal’s revolutionary ideology. Neal and Cortez both wrote poems that illustrated one of Neal’s most straightforward definitions of “black art”: “I’m talking about a black art that sticks to the ribs, an art that through the strength of all of its ingredients—form, content, craft, and technique—illuminates something specific about the living culture of the nation, and, by extension, reveals something fundamental about man on this planet.”6 Though their poetics differed structurally, their work traversed common thematic landscapes of the 1960s and 1970s, including elegies for Malcolm X, praise for jazz musicians, paeans to Yoruba orishas, meditations on death, and interrogations of enslavement.7 “No Simple Explanations” combines these themes in an elegy for Neal that, like “Firespitters,” demonstrates Cortez’s expansive exploration of surrealist juxtaposed images like “the chalk eyed smell of wintertime” and “a slurring soprano dawn entering us” that complement improvised harmolodic musical collaboration.8

4 Neal described his friend Cortez as an “absolutely fantastic” poet in a 1974 interview reprinted in: Charles H. Rowell, “An Interview With Larry Neal,” *Callaloo* 23 (1985), 34. This tribute issue contains essays and reflections from several of Neal and Cortez’s colleagues, including Stephen Henderson, Ishmael Reed, Kimberly Benston, and Houston Baker.
6 Neal, *Visions*, 44.
Cortez published “No Simple Explanations” and “Firespitters” in her 1982 chapbook *Firespitter*. Prior to recording “No Simple Explanations” for her 1986 studio album *Maintain Control*, Cortez also performed her elegy for Neal in 1982 as part of Bill Cole’s *Seventh Cycle*, and this performance, like the *Cycles* performance of “Kai Kai” in Chapter Two, demonstrates Cortez’s flexibility in adapting her poems to different musical environments. Examining varied renditions of “No Simple Explanations” and “Firespitters”—from their original appearances in *Firespitter*, to studio recordings on *Maintain Control* and *Everywhere Drums* (1990), to Cole’s *Seventh Cycle*, a live recording on *Poetry & Music* (1992), and an unrecorded live performance in 2006—demonstrates Cortez’s drafting and revision processes from page, to studio, to stage. These wide-ranging collaborative musical performances of “No Simple Explanations” and “Firespitters” show Cortez to be a reflexive writer and a flexible performer, and they also demonstrate her increasing use of surrealist imagery in tandem with the musicians’ harmolodic approaches to improvisation. Aldon Nielsen described Cortez’s performative flexibility thusly: “For Cortez, each performance of a poem presents an opportunity for signifying improvisation, since each reading is built upon the traces of, and alters, prior readings…. Even the most determinedly improvising musicians make notes and pass them to one another, and Cortez improvises always with pen in hand.” Through her improvisational collaborations with Bill Cole and with her Firespitters band, Cortez defied fixity in her expressed commitment to Black Arts and surreal Négritude ideologies and their connections to black vernacular music.

Cortez’s book *Firespitter* built on momentum from her award-winning publication *Mouth on Paper*, and it also marked the official introduction of her band. When asked why she would chose this name for the band, Cortez briefly explained the origin of the word, and then quipped that “it just kind of made sense” to name the band after fierce ritual dancers who played with

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fire. Cortez saw the Firespitter mask as a pure expression of power transcending mortality that bridges the gap from life into death. The name “Firespitters” alludes to memory as life beyond death in the fire-spitting Senufo funeral ritual, and Cortez often conceived of connections to history as acts of re-membering a disembodied mass of humans. Re-membering, for Cortez, is akin to Toni Morrison’s “rememory” that “transforms memory into a property of consciousness with the heightened imaginative power.” As such, Cortez’s poetry does not romantically yearn for a simpler time. Instead, she assembled disparate parts of the displaced “African” experience into a personal ontology that refused subjugation and simple explanations. By creating the Firespitters band, Cortez more firmly established her own aesthetic that values collectivity and kinship, strengthened through dialogue and incremental repetition.

Cortez also used the Firespitter mask as an extended metaphor to connect her poetic collaborations to what surrealists valued as a “primitive” cultural custom. As Cortez anecdotally explained, at a basic level, a mythic creature that spits fire is an apt analogy for an improvising jazz musician; when one plays well, a musician is said to be “on fire.” “Hot” jazz is also a designation used for traditional improvised music played in New Orleans during the early twentieth century. When Cortez adopted the Firespitters moniker, she adapted it to her own purposes. In Cortez’s persistent remembrance of the dead through her many elegies, her work—especially with musicians—reenacts the Firespitter ritual, with her words providing the fire. In other poems like “Firespitters,” Cortez created a bond with her musicians, the visionary artists at FESTAC ’77, and Senufo ritual performers. This bond resulted in a kinship that became one of

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13 Early jazz was designated either “hot” or “sweet,” essentially meaning “black” or “white,” and music promotion industries marketed recordings as one or the other. Many aficionados privilege “hot” jazz over “sweet” jazz as a “more authentic” musical tradition, not subject to “whitewashing” by white musicians and businesspeople who coopted traditionally black musical styles for their material gains. Eddie S. Meadows, Bebop to Cool: Context, Ideology, and Musical Identity (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 57.
the most significant narrative arcs connecting poems Cortez wrote during more than four decades as a public intellectual artist-activist.

Once Cortez became the leader of a consistent group of musicians whose sole function was to support her poetry, these collaborations evolved through Denardo Coleman’s growing dexterity as a drummer and as a producer. Denardo matured from an interactive, supportive drummer into an organizer and a leader. His musical efforts outside the Firespitters to manage his father’s unorthodox creative career figured prominently in his approach to integrating music with his mother’s poetry. Like her son, Cortez valued professionalism and structure, and she followed a personal daily routine and kept meticulous notes that documented different formal and informal aspects of her artistic production. Some of the Firespitters’ anecdotal accounts of rehearsals highlight Cortez’s logistical and creative control of each endeavor. Despite this control, however, individual moments within each poem, as well as differing versions of the same pieces demonstrated Denardo and the other musicians’ immersion in a harmolodic style of musical improvisation. While Cortez understood Ornette Coleman’s harmolodic theory of improvisation that evolved through melodic changes rather than predetermined form, she did not think of her own writing as harmolodic. Nevertheless, her work with surrealists and her sustained collaborations with free jazz practitioners yielded evolutionary chains of seemingly disparate images and aural results that parallel harmolodic improvisations. This evolving analogic repetition connects disparate images in her poetry and anticipates what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., would develop into his theory of Signifyin(g). Cortez emphasizes community building in her use of Signifyin(g) repetition that challenges boundaries and incites dialogue; when she collaborated with musicians, the collective nature of these mixed-genre performances more fully realized and expressed the foundation of her diasporic aesthetic that privileged communal expression over a singular monolithic voice.

In addition to publishing *Firespitter* in 1982, Cortez also released *There It Is*, her first album that bears the Firespitters band name on its cover. Combining old and new, Cortez brought
together musicians with whom she previously worked in conversation with relatives of musicians she had known for many years. Other newcomers on this album were members of Ornette’s Coleman’s Prime Time band who met Cortez through Denardo Coleman. *There It Is* is Cortez’s first recording with electric bassist Jamaaladeen Tacuma, who began playing in Prime Time in 1975. Tenor saxophonist Charles Moffett, Jr., though not in Prime Time, was also connected to Ornette through his father, Ornette’s childhood friend and drummer Charles Moffett; he began recording with Cortez on this album and worked with her for the next decade.\(^\text{14}\) Cortez drew on familial bonds of kinship along with a network of musical kinship that inevitably linked most of the Firespitters to Denardo and his father Ornette. These bonds resulted in years of recording and performing together using elements of harmolodic improvisation that demanded reciprocal listening, strengthened Cortez’s performative poetics, and produced a vibrant archive of live and studio-recorded performances.

Despite the benefits of working within this extended musical family, Cortez still contended with logistical constraints of both live and recorded performances in which audio conditions were less than optimal for true collaboration. In one interview, Cortez explained:

> Anything can happen in a recording session. I’m usually in an isolated booth, and each instrument is usually isolated. Sometimes we can’t see each other. We are depending on the engineer and on the headsets. The sound in the headset always needs adjusting. We usually do a recording session in one day. We are wired up. It’s very intense. / In 1982,

\(^{14}\) In the album liner notes, Cortez also acknowledges: “Charles Moffett’s strong expressive playing. The Afro-American tone of the tenor saxophone. / Bill Cole’s incessant whine on an old instrument. Very old, very familiar but because of the context very new. / Denardo Coleman’s percussive exchanges, melodic exchanges, rhythmic exchanges, vocal tone exchanges. It’s always a pleasure to work with a creative, loose and instinctively strong tonal drummer, one who can go forward as well as in reverse. / Jamaaladeen Tacuma plays the bass like a horn. In some parts sounding much like a tuba. He’s into the kind of rhythms that you don’t expect from a string instrument. His playing is rich and full of fire. / Farel Johnson [Hafiz Shabazz] is an Afro-American drummer who is well versed in African and African Caribbean drumming. He’s really masterful. If drummers can call the spirit they also have to have the spirit and Farel definitely has a lot of spirit. / The same can be said for Abraham Adzinyah who has the direct knowledge of having grown up in African society and knowing African music and dance from the ground up and playing that way. / Bern Nix has a beautiful ear for the sound and meaning of the poetry. He plays old music in a new way or new music in an old way which is the way.” Jayne Cortez, *There It Is* (New York: Bola Press, 1982. 101
when we recorded the album *There It Is*, the setup in the studio was negative. There were no isolation spaces. I had to scream my lungs out in the middle of the room so the musicians could hear the words and respond.\(^\text{15}\)

The resulting album belies the difficulty of recording tracks in this setting and highlights the skill of the audio engineers. More significantly, the album also affirms the bond among the performers who created cohesive collaborations Cortez ultimately dubbed: “A collection of conscious/unconscious tonal attitudes, expressions, responses, and rhythms poetry/music collaborations concerned with human need.”\(^\text{16}\) Cortez’s liner notes affirm: “All of the music was collectively composed with the exception of Skin Diver and To A Gypsy Cab Man which were composed by Denardo Coleman.” Significantly, Cortez acknowledges the role of each musician in the collaborative act of spontaneous composition. Later albums included more of Denardo’s compositions that provided structured moments within which the musicians and Cortez engaged in improvisational call and response. *There It Is* presents pieces in different genres ranging from straight-ahead, or traditional, twelve-bar blues to Afro-Cuban jazz to completely free harmolodic improvisation. Abraham Adzenyah and Hafiz Shabazz use percussion instruments from around the world to provide tangible aural connections both to conguero Chano Pozo and to Cortez’s many images that conflate male treatment of female bodies with various percussion instruments in “If the Drum is A Woman.”\(^\text{17}\) These collaborators who worked with Cortez on previous *Cycles*...
with Bill Cole represent the “conscious/unconscious tonal attitudes” through which Cortez presents varied depictions of “human need.”

In their printed form, the collaborative poems on *There It Is* and in the book *Firespitter* evince the solidification of Cortez’s poetic style, as she evolved from what one reviewer called “the somewhat chaotic style of free verse… to the controlled evocation of otherness employed by the American surrealist poets.” While Cortez’s writing still eschewed strict formal poetic constraints, her increased use of evolutionary imagery that changed incrementally from line to line supports the revolutionary content of poems like “If the Drum is a Woman,” “Rape,” “Blood Suckers,” and “There It Is.” By deploying strings of Signifyin(g) analogic repetition, Cortez disrupted archaic academic traditions of writing and performing strictly metered poetry that conformed to prescribed conventions. *Firespitter* also contains several of her best-known praise songs like “Into this Time,” “Big Fine Woman From Ruleville,” “The Red Pepper Poet,” “I See Chano Pozo,” and “Solo Finger Solo.”

Other poems, like “Firespitters,” capture Cortez’s experiences at FESTAC ’77 through visceral depictions of her encounters at the Nigerian conference that expanded her commitment to surrealism and Négritude ideology. According to Aimé Césaire, Négritude helped displaced people of African descent reclaim their African cultural heritage by creating an authentic sense of self that was both black and African. Négritude encompassed a revolutionary humanism that translated the conceptual freedom of surrealism to fight racism, colonialism, and, by extension,

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capitalism. Cortez’s poem “Firespitters” exemplifies the aggressively positive energy of transnational artistic collaboration within rapid-fire collages of squalid imagery that superimpose a manmade “a river of asbestos” alongside a natural “tradewind of coral snakes” and “marrows of guinea fowl.”

Cortez explained her use of surrealism and revolutionary humanism in an interview with Theo Vincent at FESTAC ’77: “I have written about a lot of our heroes. I am interested in liberation…. I am concerned about loneliness, death. I am concerned about initiations…. I also like to write about other things that happen everyday [sic], such as whatever you are doing on your job and how you feel when you get up in the morning.” The poems in *Firespitter* share these concerns with Cortez’s audiences. Unlike “Kai Kai” and earlier elegies that encourage the living to honor singular deceased heroes, the poem “Firespitters” presents a collective representation of Cortez’s colleagues at FESTAC ’77 in which she portrays them as vibrant warriors engaged in a Yoruba-inspired battle for liberation. Throughout the poem, Cortez asserts that artists who have come from around the world to this festival are embroiled in cultural warfare. Cortez tempers potentially valiant metaphors with stark images of “spitting across syncopated roaches” and “dark puree of flesh,” grounding conference-goers’ heroic aspirations within the realities of the disorganized Nigerian government. After the Biafran War, an oil boom rebuilt Nigeria’s infrastructure, but oil remains “a highly fetishized commodity” that precipitated further unrest. From a positive standpoint, in addition to new roads and a state-of-the-art national theatre, the government also built the FESTAC Village with housing, shopping, banks, and generators. Conversely, poor organization and low attendance created a 98.7 percent budget shortfall, and erratic transportation, inadequate lodging, and food shortages were among several

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issues that frustrated festival participants.\footnote{Andrew H. Apter, The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 22, 47, 49, 209.} Cortez alluded to these incongruities in “Firespitters” by creating chains of juxtaposed images. These evolving chains demonstrate a more fully realized surrealism in poems Cortez wrote to subvert systems that repress revolutionary struggles for equality.

Tony Bolden is one of several scholars who connects surrealism and the blues in Cortez’s poetry to the larger aims of the Black Arts Movement: “In its rejection of simplistic either/or oppositions, surrealism has allowed Cortez to fully realize Larry Neal’s dream of a people’s poetry…. Cortez has employed surrealism to enhance her blues aesthetic.”\footnote{Bolden, 121.} Ron Sakolsky elaborates on Cortez’s evolving engagement with a Black Aesthetic that exemplified her kinship with surrealist poets by connecting improvisational jazz music to surrealism’s “emphasis on pure psychic automatism and its longstanding embrace of the international movement for Black Liberation—from Négritude to Black Power.”\footnote{Ron Sakolsky, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago: The Forecasts is Still Hot!,” Socialist Review 28, no. 1 (2001), 5, 33. Sakolsky is a radical scholar whose work intersects with Cortez’s at various points in both their careers. Sakolsky taught Public Policy at the University of Illinois and now writes about music, anarchy, and social activism.} Robin D. G. Kelley asserts Cortez’s use of surrealism was “less a revelation than a recognition of what already existed in the black tradition. For Cortez surrealism is merely a tool to help create a strong revolutionary movement and a powerful, independent poetry…. We hear in her performances with her band Firespitters… a vibrant poetic imagery drawn from the deep well of the blues.”\footnote{Robin D. G. Kelley, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 187–88.}

Kelley, Sakolsky, and Bolden acknowledge inextricable links among Cortez’s poetry, blues music, and surrealist ideology.

Like other surrealist writers and visual artists, Cortez recorded her dreams and mined them for poetic inspiration. Cortez’s personal travel notebooks from throughout her career contain fragments of remembered dreams, including those in which she spoke with people after they died, like her mother, Clifford Thornton, and June Jordan. Other dreams included slightly
twisted scenarios in which she experienced life just a little differently than normal. While her earliest published poems like “Festivals & Funerals,” contain juxtaposed images from her own dreams, Cortez’s active participation in the surrealist movement grew through her relationships with Ted Joans and Penelope and Franklin Rosemont. The Rosemonts founded the Chicago Surrealist Group in 1966 to organize events and publications that supported the political left, and they fought militarism, exploitation, and bigotry in their propagation of surrealist ideology. In his posthumous tribute to Cortez, Robin D. G. Kelley asserts:

> It’s not that she found Surrealism; surrealism found her, as it were. Ted Joans recognized it in her when they met in 1968; it was there in her vibrant poetic imagery drawn from the deep well of a blues imagination—except that her blues did not begin in the Delta or with W. C. Handy but in Africa, in the kora, in the tonal languages, in the drum, transmuted in the Middle Passage. Surrealism embraced her as one of its originals…. But like Amiri Baraka, she wasn’t simply interested in the disordering of the bourgeois world—she worked for its destruction.

The seeds of this destructive impulse were evident in Cortez’s early writing before she met the Rosemonts through Joans in the mid-1970s. Joans’s perpetual motion through travel and in his writing appealed to Cortez who likewise used her art to work toward transformation, “troping, signing and reassigning the racist violence of American history and of literary

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25 Jayne Cortez Papers.
28 Poet, musician, and painter Ted Joans originally befriended Cortez through their mutual affinity for jazz, as Joans’s early work in the 1950s with the Beats demonstrated his skillful poetic voice and deep understanding of black vernacular music. Like Amiri Baraka and Bob Kaufman, Joans became radicalized in the 1960s, and he began his voyage into surrealism when he left the U.S. Joans traveled incessantly, spending many years in Paris where he befriended André Breton and became an active member of the Paris Surrealist Group. Rosemont, Black, Brown & Beige, 249.
Cortez developed her own surrealist style of incremental repetition, and she employed it as a type of analogic repetition throughout her writing career. Like Larry Neal and other contemporaries during the Black Arts Movement, Cortez’s use of overlapping militant imagery in simulated streams-of-consciousness expressed her disapproval of oppressive forces.

In a 1997 interview, Cortez conveyed her distinctly surrealist modus operandi: “I would like to have no known references, let references pop up from the out-of-nowhere place in me. Just let it happen and write, or write and let it happen.” While her initial connections to Négritude and surrealism in the 1960s and seventies opened pathways for Cortez’s revolutionary thought, a more practical application later manifested itself in her lived response to André Breton’s call that “people be in permanent revolt against limits of all kinds.” Cortez demonstrates her commitment to revolution in the structure of the poem “Firespitters.” Formally, “Firespitters” has lines of varying lengths, punctuated by repeated one-word lines and incremental verb phrases. The poem’s idiosyncratic rhythm, precipitated by its uneven lines, seems to overflow the boundaries of the page as Cortez’s speaker recounts the overwhelming array of images she experienced at FESTAC ’77. Her lack of punctuation and deployment of active, often progressive, verbs propel the speaker from line to line, creating tangible movement. Together with Cortez’s evolving imagistic chains that placed “big city dumps” in conversation with “acrobatic fingers in green caps,” these elements resist traditional poetic form but create a cohesive repetitive structure. This type of repetition results in a kinetic poem that stylistically

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30 Sascha Feinstein, Ask Me Now: Conversations on Jazz & Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 51. Cortez used the imperative “just write and let it happen” in formal and informal writings, including a version of “I Wake Up Early” she performed in a 2001 Proverbs concert with Bill Cole’s Untempered Ensemble. While she uses the phrase as a persistent refrain in the performance with Cole, it appears just once at the end of the version she published in Fragments (1994) and Jazz Fan Looks Back (2002).
replicates its theme of finding artistic inspiration and strength in collectivity, despite unstable institutionalized infrastructure.

To recreate this united front at the beginning of the poem “Firespitters,” Cortez situates her speaker among the FESTAC ’77 artists in medias res:

Firespitters
spitting across the desert
into feverdust rituals on Badagery road
a sanctified road full of ghost writers
gin drinkers
lips spreading like
stripes and medals from the chest of my father
knife swallowers
wine tappers
torches gleaming like
the gold tooth of my mother\(^\text{32}\)

As in her earlier poem “Kai Kai,” Cortez includes images that recall West African religious rituals that traversed the African diaspora to influence different spiritual traditions in the Americas, such as “pine streaked thighs,” “bones like nightsticks,” “painted skins,” “sweet spirits of Nupe,” “chalk eyed smell of wintertime,” and “mask of spinning mirror.”\(^\text{33}\) Through these and other images in “Firespitters,” Cortez likens the artists at the conference to sacred performers and


warriors. She connects them with Larry Neal’s Black Aesthetic matrix concept of “Race Memory” that incorporates spirit worship through these ritual practices. Thus, Cortez’s Pan-African aesthetic, evident from the opening lines of “Firespitters,” links her poetry with the work of other artists fighting repressive regimes across the African diaspora.

Cortez develops modern martial similes as she compares festival facilities to a factory: “like a giant defense plant / we open our boot tops.” She likewise transforms problematic FESTAC ’77 busses into implements of war: “we stand on the blunt wings of steel bees / a unit of bent fingers and torsos bending forward / like sharkknives / we have jet propellered tongues.” These lines resonate with the automatism at the core of surrealist writing, and Cortez built these imagistic strings upon informal observations she recorded in her notebook. Cortez’s journal entries from FESTAC ’77 contain information ranging from quotidian observations to recollected dreams to fully formed poetry fragments. From the first entry, dated January 11, 1977, Cortez noted examples of general disorganization and last-minute preparations by the Nigerian government, which were problems endemic to many young African governments emerging during post-colonial revolutions in the second half of the twentieth century. Cortez refused to ignore or sugarcoat ugly realities of festival operations and instead created a nuanced portrait that shows moments of triumph amidst the sometimes chaotic festival operational structure. In her notebook, Cortez also listed and provided anecdotal information about participants at various points during the festival, including the flight to Nigeria. Personal documentation of this nature reflected Cortez’s membership in a growing community of Pan-African activists and provided anecdotal support for her poetry.

When she and Edwards arrived in Lagos, Cortez recorded in her notebook that their brand new apartment in FESTAC Village featured no running water and four fans with plugs that

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35 Out of respect for Cortez’s handwritten desire that the material in all of her notebooks at the Schomburg Center not be published, throughout this dissertation I have generalized personal information that Cortez recounted in much more specific detail.
did not fit the wall sockets.\(^{36}\) The next day, after viewing the art exhibition space in the National
Theater, Cortez penned the following fragment she later incorporated into the published version
of “Firespitters”: “I think we are living in Niagara Falls / the water is now running / many buckets
full.”\(^{37}\) Cortez inverted this logistical complication in the published poem, turning her memory of
a leaking FESTAC Village apartment into a powerful celebratory demonstration:

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one hundred and ninety spits in
a village libating like Niagara Falls
we drink this three thousand and seventy five proof
down-pour
spitting through chains of acrobatic fingers.
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Through this poetic reversal, Cortez refused to be subdued, demonstrating that despite
discomforts and logistical issues she experienced in FESTAC Village, she preferred being in the
village to staying in a hotel with more dependable amenities. Cortez wrote that the village was
fertile ground for spontaneous displays of music and dance, and she valued these organic
syncratic African artistic expressions more than she valued Western conveniences. In
“Firespitters,” Cortez’s poetic speaker refuses to submit to forces that would consciously and
unconsciously try to suppress artistic exchanges among FESTAC ’77 participants.

In addition to reappropriating details of her inadequate housing from her notebook into
lines of poetry, Cortez also transforms examples of erratic transportation and instances of
violence on and around the festival busses. Though physical conditions of the festival were less
than ideal, Cortez conveyed a positive overall impression of the event, cherishing reunions and
meetings with like-minded creative activists from around the African diaspora. In another
recollection, Cortez wrote: “Time moving in me at a fast pace / the sun wearing a red tam.”\(^{38}\)

Cortez later revised this impression for the published draft of “Firespitters” as “sunsets falling

\(^{36}\) Jayne Cortez Papers.
\(^{37}\) Jayne Cortez Papers.
\(^{38}\) Jayne Cortez Papers.
like orange tams / on the heads of sweating soldiers / tangerine spit balls / going down into sewers of dark stout.” As in other images in the poem, Cortez conflates festival participants with soldiers waging a cultural war, as surrealist André Breton wrote, opposing “limits of all kinds.”

This image also recalls contemporary violence still simmering in a country decimated by internal fighting in the decades immediately following the end of colonial control. Cortez uses another fragment from her notebook by making minor adjustments to line breaks to create the single refrain that underscores the dual nature of the idealized festival versus its realities: “Lagos / in your beautiful nasty self shake everything / we’re here.”

After the initial statement of these lines, Cortez signifies on the phrase “we’re here” to present the artists as warriors against corruption and inhumanity. While acknowledging logistical shortcomings of FESTAC ’77, Cortez empowers herself and other attendees by acknowledging their collective potential for enacting critical cultural changes. By embracing conflict and incongruity, Cortez’s poetry emphasizes this communal fight for equality as a central tenet of her diasporic aesthetic.

Though she published “Firespitters” in 1982, she waited to record it on the 1990 studio album *Everywhere Drums*. When Cortez recorded “Firespitters” with the band, she modified the text to remove specific references to Lagos by making the Firespitters band the subject of the poem rather than the participants of FESTAC ’77.

Through this significant revision more than a decade after the festival, Cortez implied that her work with the Firespitters band was analogous to her collaborative work with artists who attended FESTAC ’77. Cortez built coalitions in different aspects of her artistic and personal life that spread outward in concentric circles, inspiring and demanding of others that they become more actively engaged in their own struggles against oppressive forces. This recording and subsequent versions of “Firespitters” deemphasize the text

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39 Bolovan.
40 For the version of the poem she published in *Firespitter*, Cortez twisted these lines into a single refrain that underscores the dual nature of the idealized festival versus its realities: “Lagos / in your beautiful nasty self shake everything / we’re here.” After the initial statement of these lines, Cortez riffs on the phrase “we’re here” and continues to present the artists as warriors against corruption and inhumanity. Jayne Cortez Papers.
and showcase one of many ways in which Cortez collaborated with musicians over more than forty years. In their collaborations with Cortez, the members of the Firespitters band engaged in the kind of improvisation they learned in Ornette’s Prime Time band. One critic made the following analogy: “They serve as a kind of backbone for the complex welter of musical activity that is going on around them, or a skeleton to which the band adds flesh. More and more, the listener’s attention is drawn to the interaction between Prime Time’s musicians. They are still steadfastly rhythmic players, but they are able to move much more freely within the band’s urgent rhythmic imperatives.” Because of their strong bond within their shared experiences through years of working together in different settings, the Firespitters musicians’ style of playing provided freedom for Cortez’s words to grow and change.

In addition to truncating sections of “Firespitters” for this recording, Cortez also added multiple variations of the simple refrain: “Firespitters / talkin’ about Firespitters.” The musicians underscore these variations with a four-measure musical motif Denardo Coleman composed. The recording begins with guitarist Bern Nix playing Coleman’s melody on his guitar, while Coleman and bassist Al MacDowell accompany him, following a traditional twelve-bar blues chord pattern. On bass, MacDowell’s primary role when he worked with Cortez and the Firespitters was to establish a foundational groove for various pieces; however, working with Bern Nix, Denardo Coleman, and others well-versed in the free jazz idiom, MacDowell also freely interacted with Cortez and the other Firespitters. In this version of the piece every time Cortez yells, “Firespitters,” Bern Nix launches into the “Firespitters” refrain, and MacDowell, Coleman, and saxophonist Charles Moffett, Jr., immediately join them. Throughout the piece, Cortez and the musicians engage in unmistakable interplay, as she sometimes spontaneously jumps to a refrain in the middle of the standard blues form that provides structure and continuity.

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When Cortez reaches the end of a newly-formed stanza that acts as a verse in this piece’s chorus/verse format, she riffs on the word “Firespitters” by adding “listen to the Firespitters / a festival of Firespitters.” This short riff signals the “Firespitters” refrain; the band repeats the motif and returns to the blues for another stanza/verse. Cortez creates another refrain after “pine streaked thighs of big city funk,” adding “Firespitters / look at the Firespitters / a festival of Firespitters.” Cortez then eliminates the upcoming lines from the original text that mention Lagos, thereby further distancing the poem from its original context and giving it a broader application here as a showcase for the members of her band. Cortez and the Firespitters also choose to open up the piece for longer instrumental solos. When she signals each refrain, however, the musicians respond immediately to Cortez’s vigorous call, with everyone working toward an intuitive dynamic balance. After another refrain, Cortez’s final verse consists of lines forty-four through forty-eight from the original poem, stopping just short of the name Lagos. Instead of using the poem to describe her experiences at FESTAC ’77 in this setting, Cortez focuses on the musicians, foregrounding their varied musical contributions to her poetry by connecting them with impressions she recorded in Lagos.

Two years later, Cortez and the Firespitters demonstrated increased spontaneity in their live performance of “Firespitters” at the 1992 Women in (E)Motion Festival in Bremen, Germany, archived on the 1994 album Poetry & Music. This live recording features the same core Firespitters personnel as Cortez’s two previous studio albums, and it provides audiences a well-produced archive of live versions of pieces that all differ from the versions they recorded in the studio.43 The stripped-down versions of these pieces feature fewer musicians with only an acoustic drum kit that allows for different improvisational possibilities, and each musician has more of an opportunity to stretch out in this live forum than they did in the more tightly

43 Though some of the titles of pieces differ, “Adupe,” “They Want the Oil,” “Drying Spit Blues,” “What’s Happening,” “Drums Everywhere Drums,” “Maintain Control,” “In the Morning,” “Everybody Want’s [sic] to be Somebody,” “I see Chano Pozo,” “Maybe,” “Firespitters,” and “Expenditures Economic Love Song 1” all appear on prior recordings.
controlled studio environment. The fact that each piece was captured in one live take, without the benefit of cutting in and overdubbing also showcases Cortez and musicians’ interactive strengths and their thorough understanding of each other’s playing in fluid calls and responses.

This live version of poem “Firespitters” archives the most radical revision of the original piece. Following the 1990 studio recording, Cortez consistently used the poem “Firespitters” as the band’s theme song and as a vehicle for introducing individual musicians at the end of live performances. Unlike the studio version archived on *Everywhere Drums*, in this performance, Cortez jettisons most of the original poetic content, effectively removing any remaining references to FESTAC ’77 and Nigeria. The band plays Denardo Coleman’s melody and the “Firespitters” refrain they created in the studio but transforms the rest of the piece to showcase band members by name in an individual spotlight. In these instances, Cortez uses few words from her original poem and improvises introductions for each band member before they solo for the audience. In live renditions of “Firespitters” for the rest of her career, Cortez created text that signified on the original poem and improvised introductions for each band member on the spot. In this regard, “Firespitter” is the only piece Cortez radically refigured specifically to highlight the band, privileging their music over her words.

In this 1992 performance, Cortez introduces Moffett by mingling fragments of her 1982 text with a personalized introduction: “spitting across rivers / spitting across cities / spitting with the wonderful African American thunder of the tenor saxophone / that wonderful wonderful saxophone Firespitting player / Charles Moffett, Jr.” At the end of his solo, Moffett signals the beginning of the refrain, aurally showing the band members and Cortez he is finished. Cortez and the band immediately pick up another refrain of the “Firespitters” melody, setting up Cortez’s introduction for bassist Al MacDowell: “spitting fire and funk / from the bass into this night / that expressive creative Firespitter / Al MacDowell.” Cortez introduces guitarist Bern Nix after

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another “Firespitters” refrain with the lines: “spitting with gut-blasting moans of the blues / sweet spirits of Nupe / that fantastic guitar-playing Firespitter / Bern Nix.” Here, Cortez explicitly links Nix’s bluesy guitar work with one of its West African antecedents. Following the next short refrain, Cortez’s introduction of Denardo Coleman captures his rhythmic emotional intensity: “moving through the red fog like a giant defense plant / spinning in all directions / the dynamic drum-tapping Firespitter / Denardo Coleman.” Cortez’s reenvisioned version of “Firespitters” for this performance provides a vehicle in which the musicians have freedom to express themselves as soloists, whereas most recorded collaborations between Cortez and the Firespitters demonstrate their collective strengths that call and respond to one another’s musical and poetic ideas.

Almost fifteen years after this recorded performance in Germany, Cortez used a shorter iteration of “Firespitters” to introduce the musicians at a 2006 unrecorded live performance at James Madison University. This performance of “Firespitters” suggests the piece became part of Cortez’s standard repertoire with the band, and it demonstrates another aspect of Cortez’s evolutionary revision process with musicians. Cortez’s introductions for the band members at the 2006 JMU concert were longer than the introductions on the 1992 recording, Poetry & Music, with her spending more time recounting each player’s credentials. In a truly improvisatory moment during this concert, Cortez modified Denardo Coleman’s introduction mid-sentence, thereby increasing the spontaneity of the piece. Thinking quickly and responding in the moment are essential in jazz improvisation, and Cortez gracefully corrected what may have been a trip-up with a smile, barely missing a beat of her son’s introduction.\(^{45}\) In addition to careful listening Cortez and the musicians demonstrated in every live performance, visual contact is imperative in a piece like “Firespitters,” both to smooth the transitions between solos and refrains, but also because Cortez creates a further feeling of freedom with her omission of punctuation to drive her work rhythmically. In a heavily improvised piece like “Firespitters,” Jayne Cortez’s lack of

\(^{45}\) Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters, Live Concert, Jayne Cortez, T. K. Blue, Denardo Coleman, Al MacDowell, and Bern Nix (Wilson Hall, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, November 10, 2006).
punctuation often causes her to deliver enjambed lines, giving her the flexibility to engage with and allow for improvisatory moments in which she may repeat a phrase in response to a musical interjection. Cortez and the Firespitters maintain eye contact and use textual and musical cues to navigate each piece in live performance to highlight individual calls and responses.

This visual/musical/poetic dialogue was a crucial feature of Cortez’s musical collaborations, and it was also central to her political and social activism in performance and in unscripted moments in her daily life. Cortez surrounded herself with a community of musicians, artists, writers, and other activists who inspired her own work. At the time Cortez attended FESTAC ’77, she was already part of the Black Arts Movement, in a community writer Larry Neal helped to form and strengthen.46 In addition to Neal’s work among his contemporaries to build community and reshape racist ideologies, he also left a published legacy that preserves the history of Black Arts Movement ideology. In one of her notebooks, Cortez describes their first meeting at a party; already a fan of Neal’s verse, she recalled his hip, cool, well-dressed, smiling life-force that exuded the energy she captured in her own work.47 Their fourteen-year friendship culminated in their final meeting a few months before Neal’s death during which he encouraged Cortez to accept an offer to participate on the National Endowment for the Arts judging panel for literature, which awarded Cortez fellowships in both 1979 and 1986. This encouragement was significant because the NEA was under criticism for excluding women of color, and Cortez’s participation broadened the spectrum of writers represented by this prestigious award. Cortez learned of Neal’s death after returning from a trip to Cuba, and she wrote of her physical reaction

46Neal wrote two volumes of verse, several stories and plays, dozens of critical essays, and he founded Liberator and other Black Arts Movement journals. Neal also taught at City College of New York, Wesleyan, and Yale; he was at Wesleyan around the same time as Clifford Thornton and the other musicians who collaborated with Cortez early in her career. Neal partnered with Amiri Baraka to codirect the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem. During his association with Baraka at BARTS, Neal wrote and published foundational essays that helped to establish the “black aesthetic” which signaled a move from an “assimilationist” to a “Nationalist” perspective. Nilgun Anadolu-Okur, Contemporary African American Theater: Afrocentricity in the Works of Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, and Charles Fuller (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 26–27.
47Neal’s papers also reside at the NYPL Schomburg Center in Harlem.
to the news as a manifestation of deep sorrow. One of Cortez’s notebooks also contains an excerpt suggesting the genesis of the title “No Simple Explanations.” Cortez was close to Neal’s wife Evelyn, so, upon hearing the news of Neal’s death, Cortez paid her a visit. When she arrived, Evelyn was visiting with mutual friend Yvette LeRoy who ran Harlem’s Liberty House bookstore. During their conversations, LeRoy, devastated by her friend’s sudden death asked, “Why?” Cortez replied, “It’s no simple explanation,” which later became the title and refrain of her elegy for Neal. This reflection in Cortez’s notebook, like those she recorded at FESTAC ’77 provide a window into her creative process and confirm that inspiration came from myriad sources, including conversations, dreams, and daily observations.

Almost a decade after publishing and performing her elegy for Neal, Cortez composed her thoughts in a short prose piece she called “Larry’s Time”:

Larry Neal jumped into the middle of the whirlpool of cultural activity in the early 1960s and 70s. A young man. A young poet/writer/activist, with friends and associates who together doo wopped, finger popped, name dropped, orally bounced information off of each other, offered social and political comments to audiences, and produced books, magazines and articles that gave voice to unheard voices of alternative attitudes and viewpoints. Larry Neal, smack dab in the center of the swirl of events, teaching, writing, linking his poetry to the black struggle for liberation, stood in the front row of the literary part of the march for civil rights, the literary part of the need for revolution. He wrote about Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, the Watts & Newark rebellions, historical African roots, and the current affairs affecting people in his community. Neal, an urban poet, syncopating and mixing dissonant levels of insults, mythologies, ideologies,

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49 Jayne Cortez Papers.
appropriations, clichés and rhetoric as poetic combinations, was still evolving, still in the first draft of his research when “touched by death’s whisper.”

In the way she praised Paul Robeson’s commitment to his art, Cortez speaks warmly of Neal’s skill as a writer and his dedication to political activism. Almost ten years earlier, Cortez’s fresh poetic response to her friend’s death took a much more fragmented surrealistic approach to unpacking her grief in a time of intense political unrest.

In the first line of her praise song “No Simple Explanations,” Cortez asserts: “There are no simple explanations,” transforming her anecdotal response to Yvette LeRoy’s grief from her notebook into a means of making sense of Neal’s death. As in her poem “Firespitters,” Cortez tempers valiant, life-affirming imagery with turbulent, active verbs that represent political unrest in Neal’s life. Cortez compares his ideas and achievements to “excesses,” “accumulations,” “lips of magnetic lava,” “liver of explosive slits,” and “heart ready to shoot off like a volcano.”

In addition to celebrating Neal’s energy in the opening stanza, Cortez engages the literal, conflating Neal’s heart attack at age forty-three with a volcano. Unlike Christopher Okigbo, Henry Dumas, and other luminary subjects of her posthumous praise poems, Neal was not a victim of ad hominem violence; rather, he was the sudden victim of unexpected “natural causes.” As in “Commitment,” “Kai Kai,” and “Festivals & Funerals,” Cortez crafts a unique elegy for Neal that combines her signature poetics with nuanced stylistic gestures that honor her subjects’ unique modes of communication. Her word choice, structure, and imagery constitute tangible responses to the call posed by Neal’s sudden absence in Cortez’s life.

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51 The printed version of the text in Firespitter contains slight modifications from the draft Cortez created in her notebook that make the poem accessible to an audience of her peers outside the intimate space of Neal’s home where Cortez consoled his wife after his sudden death. These slight alterations move the poem’s ritual from one definite moment to any moment and allow the audience to envision a broader subject than the second person, ostensibly Neal, Cortez targets in the earlier draft.
“No Simple Explanations” often moves between the literal into the spiritual, as Cortez conjures images of a voodoo ritual like the West African traditions she presents in “Firespitters” and several other poems. She invokes African spiritual practices here to contrast Neal’s mortality with rituals that blur boundaries between life and death. When she writes “The altar will not fit another skull / and there are no more volunteers… no alliances drinking together,” Cortez asserts there is no chance of bringing Neal back from his transition to the other side. Here, Cortez also laments the end of the Black Arts Movement in what she has deemed “a night of dead events / [with] no bulletproof faces in the air.” Similarly, “collectivity of ants” depicts a communal effort rooted in Marxist ideology some intellectuals in black communities practiced as a means of pushing back against the white American ruling class. “The advance” conjures Neal’s advancement of an ideal Black Aesthetic at the core of the Black Arts Movement. Despite the “end” of the Black Arts Movement, expressions of its foundational Black Aesthetic still celebrate creative production by black artists that continue to inspire Neal’s contemporaries as they persist in their fights for equality thirty-five years after his death. Starting with her early poems and collaborations in Los Angeles, Cortez’s work expressed her evolving Pan-African commitment to a community-building diasporic collectivity that grew to the end of her career.

Cortez also conjures bodily imagery throughout “No Simple Explanations,” and she often used images of this type to evoke visceral audience responses to the violence she interrogated in her poetry. Cortez portrays “madness” through biological imagery mixed with violent natural images of “sharks / having feeding frenzies in the middle of foreheads.” Rather than descend into madness, Cortez insists that her poetic colleagues and likeminded activists:

Let the index finger

52 Chapter Five explores Cortez’s use of voodoo and other syncretic diasporic ritual practices in her poetry. Chapter Five in Laura Hinton’s Jayne Cortez, Adrienne Rich, and the Feminist Superhero presents related rituals in Brazil through my analysis of Cortez’s “Samba is Power.”
54 Chapters Four and Six explore Cortez’s use of ecofeminist ideas in poems that combine biological imagery with ecological destruction.
take responsibility
for its smell
let the chickens protrude from drums
let the lagoon the boat the ancestors
enter pores of a poet of pretty smiles.

Cortez invokes the index finger as a powerful instrument that points to draw attention or to lay blame. In these lines, Cortez insists “the poet of pretty smiles” “take responsibility” for continuing Neal’s work. When Cortez writes an expression of sorrow, as in “Firespitters” and in her elegies “Festivals & Funerals,” “Commitment,” and “Kai Kai,” she also pens a call to action, never merely a lament to commemorate loss. This call suggests Houston Baker’s figuration of the way singers and musicians use the blues to name their losses and redirect feelings of grief into potential for transformation and reclamation.

Since Neal’s death came toward the beginning of a period of insidiously institutionalized racist incarceration under the guise of the American government’s “War on Drugs,” Cortez imbues her words with urgency. In the next stanza, Cortez tells her audience to create their own ritual practices that act against oppressive forces by “passing up the motif of sorrow / let it pass.” Cortez encourages her audience, originally Black Arts Movement contemporaries gathered at the Countee Cullen library, to remember Neal by converting their grief into tangible action. If Neal’s ideas die with him, Cortez implies he will have lived in vain. Later in the poem Cortez’s speaker exhorts her colleagues to continue their fight:

because

suddenly it will be too soon
suddenly it will be too late
suddenly it will be too sudden

55 Cortez’s notebooks and papers record her disdain for Reagan’s presidency, a period that subjugated millions of black Americans, despite the federal government’s purported protection of their Constitutional rights. Jayne Cortez Papers.
and there’ll be no tuning forks left
in palm of a poet on a cold morning

Cortez conflates the work of poets with the work of musicians and any artists striving to create in the face of overwhelming oppression. Cortez also lists other forces in opposition to black artist-activists: “abusive forces,” “burial grounds,” “unfinished poems,” and “time dismantling itself”; she again reminds her contemporaries that injustices will continue to oppress them unless they push back. Thus, as in “Firespitters” and in elegies discussed in Chapters One and Two, Cortez reinforces the necessity for sustained fighting through artistic means—a central tenet of her diasporic aesthetic that continued to evolve from the Black Aesthetic Neal promulgated during the Black Arts Movement. As Cortez continued to travel and work with the same artists over several decades, her poetry emphasized the importance of sustained communal conversations that converted grief into action.

Cortez also calls upon jazz and blues music to urge her colleagues to convert their grief when she writes the lines “let it go down / like body and soul / in horn of Coleman Hawkins.” Here Cortez replicates jazz allusions that appear throughout Neal’s writing because, like Neal, Cortez was consistently experimenting with music in her poetic language. As a result, several images in “No Simple Explanations” celebrate their mutual affinity for jazz. A more subtle allusion occurs when Cortez conflates anatomical imagery relating blood and the human body to music through her reference to “sub-dominant tilt of flinching eyeballs.” In music theory, the subdominant chord is the fourth scale degree, crucial to the fabric of the traditional twelve-bar blues format. Like images in her other poems, this line is open to multiple interpretations; in sociology, for instance, a subdominant culture is a subculture or counter culture. This line, then, also suggests Cortez and Neal’s participation in the fight against white cultural dominance.

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through publication and community outreach during the Black Arts Movement, analogous to artists throughout the diaspora like those Cortez celebrated in “Firespitters.”

In another jazz reference, Cortez quotes Neal’s conflation of urban bebop music with creole religious rituals in a short, summative refrain that uses incremental repetition:

Not for the flesh of incarcerated bones
not for the tongue of deified soot
not for the womb of “hoodoo hollerin’ bebop ghosts”
No simple explanations.

In these lines, Cortez refers to Neal’s collection of poetry *Hoodoo Hollerin’ Bebop Ghosts* and its eponymous poem. Neal’s 1969 poem presents the squalid world of a jazz club where men deal drugs, engage in explicit sexual acts, and where, his speaker conversely notes:

Even in our weakness here, somewhere we are strong
some snake skinned god hisses here:

hoodoo hollerin’ bebop ghosts
some eternal demon squirming
in his head—that’s why he be bad
and all them things.

Cortez’s lines signify on the idea at the core of Neal’s poem, celebrating strength and beauty in the “badness” inherent in artistic struggles for equality. Neal’s poem suggests that creating jazz is itself an act of resistance, and Cortez alludes to this fundamental idea by quoting Neal’s words in her homage. Throughout her written and performed work, Cortez converts her grief into motivation for further action. Here, as in other elegiac poems like “Commitment,” Cortez uses Neal’s words to inspire others.

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58 Neal, *Hoodoo Hollerin’ Bebop Ghosts*. 
After reading “No Simple Explanations” at her tribute to Neal in Harlem, Cortez worked with Bill Cole to reframe the poem for an October 1982 live performance in his *Seventh Cycle* that honored tenor saxophone legend John Coltrane. Cortez chose “Stockpiling” and “No Simple Explanations,” pieces she had recently written for other events, as two of the works she performed with a large group of musicians as they collectively improvised their tribute to John Coltrane. “No Simple Explanations,” though written for Neal, also evokes Coltrane’s death from liver cancer in the image “liver of explosive slits.” In this rendering of “No Simple Explanations,” Joseph Daley makes the first melodic statement on his baritone horn, playing a moderately paced progression of four notes over a slow tympani in the background. Thereafter, the other musicians pass the melodic idea around the ensemble while Cortez weaves her tribute to Larry Neal into this intricate musical conversation. As they embellish on Daley’s melody, the other wind and string musicians deploy elements of Ornette Coleman’s harmolodic theory of close listening to form a dense musical tapestry that builds as Cortez’s intensifies her vocalizations. In this performance, Cortez observes the published poem’s stanza breaks as short pauses, though she does not pause long enough for instrumentalists to expand their individual improvisations, as she often does in her own work with the Firespitters. Though it is hard to hear Cortez clearly on this particular recording, this complex musical framework is a fitting setting for this poem Cortez reframed to honor both Larry Neal and John Coltrane. Throughout this

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59 Chapter Five highlights Bill Cole’s application of ethnomusicologist Fela Sowande’s theories to Coltrane’s playing in the context of Jayne Cortez’s tribute to Sowande, “Make Ifa.” Cole’s preface to the book notes: “I had an inkling early in life of Trane’s greatness as a musician, but his merits were more clearly pointed out to me by my teachers: Nathan Davis, Clifford Thornton, Sam Rivers, Warren Smith, and Jayne Cortez.” Bill Cole, *John Coltrane* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1976), v.

60 When Cole honored Coltrane in his *Seventh Cycle*, he assembled his previous collaborators Warren Smith, Joseph Daley, Hafiz Shabazz, Abraham Adzenyah, and Gerald Veasley and then added saxophonists Julius Hemphill and Hamiet Bluiett, trumpeter Stanton Davis, and Ornette Coleman’s Prime Time guitarist Charles Ellerbe. With the exception of Davis and Ellerbe, all of the other musicians had participated in prior *Cycles* concerts.

61 Bill Cole, *The Seventh Cycle*, Live Concert (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, October 11, 1982).

62 By the time trumpeter Stanton Davis joins the building collective improvisation, Cortez’s reading voice begins to be lost in the musical activity of this unmixed lived recording; thus, it is difficult to discern changes in her vocal inflection or moments of musical interplay she shares with the musicians through their interactions with her words. In some of her handwritten notes from live performances and recording
collaborative performance, without one voice overpowering another, the musicians share the musical spotlight. Meanwhile, Cortez uses her strong voice to weave another strand into the musical tapestry rather than taking the prominent position she has when she reads with her own Firespitters band. Bringing together voices from different musical traditions across the African diaspora, Cole’s *Cycles* concerts aurally complement the Pan-African intent of Cortez’s poetics in unified expressions of rebellion against communal grief.

The 1986 studio recording of “No Simple Explanations” places Cortez’s poem in conversation with a much smaller ensemble than that in Cole’s *Seventh Cycle*. In the studio, the Firespitters foreground Cortez’s text, as one of three voices engaged in a harmolodic call and response. “No Simple Explanations” is the only recording of Ornette Coleman playing with the Firespitters, and it shows that though Cortez and Ornette divorced in 1964, their artistic connections continued through the rest of their lives. Their son Denardo naturally embodies different aspects of both his mother and father’s aesthetic sensibilities, and, as he and some of the other Firespitters on this recording were also performing and recording in Ornette’s Prime Time band at the time they recorded *Maintain Control*, Denardo’s interplay with bassist Al MacDowell on this version of Cortez’s tribute to Larry Neal showcases elements of their work with Ornette. When Cortez collaborated with musicians on this later version of the poem, they created a less complex setting than the one in Bill Cole’s *Seventh Cycle*, not only to foreground Cortez’s words but also to highlight Ornette Coleman in this singular piece of recorded evidence of his collaboration with Cortez. Unlike their work together in Prime Time, rather than having every musician improvise with equal importance on this version of “No Simple Explanations,” guitarist Bern Nix, tenor saxophonist Charles Moffett, Jr., and drummer Denardo Coleman all play a slow repeated motif in the background that supports Ornette and MacDowell for the nearly seven-

sessions, Cortez comments on the balance among the musicians and her voice, and she used these notes to make adjustments in future performances.
minute-long piece. The Firespitters begin with a simple descending four-note melody, and Denardo accompanies this melody on tympani using an approach similar to Cortez’s earlier collaboration with Bill Cole for his Seventh Cycle. Similarities to the earlier performance end with Denardo’s drumming, as Ornette and Charles Moffett, Jr. harmonize guitarist Nix’s original motif with complementary notes on alto and tenor saxophones. In this carefully managed studio session, Cortez, the Firespitters, and Ornette Coleman provide a textbook demonstration of harmolodic improvisation in which each voice is distinctly recognizable as part of a unified whole.

Cortez adds her voice to the harmolodic landscape when she begins to read, confirming that there is no easy way to explain the sudden end to the complex life of her friend Larry Neal. The second time Cortez reads “There are no simple explanations” to end the first stanza, she increases her volume and raises her pitch to create a sense of urgency. As she moves into the second stanza, Ornette Coleman starts to signify and improvise on the melody while Cortez reads “no mixture of eyelashes and drops of blood.” Coleman continues as the primary soloist until Cortez reads “tongue of deified soot.” At this point in the piece, bassist Al MacDowell steps forward, increasing his volume and activity in response to Ornette’s solo lines. Through the rest of the piece, MacDowell and Coleman carry on a musical conversation on bass and alto saxophone. Much like his playing for “Commitment” on the same album, Denardo Coleman’s tympani creates the harmonic foundation a bass player usually provides in a jazz combo, and his simple deployment of tonal percussion on this piece allows MacDowell more freedom to improvise on his bass. The interplay among bass, alto saxophone, and Cortez’s voice demonstrates careful listening in which all three interact with one another. This call and response

Moffett is the only musician on this track who was not a member of Prime Time, though Moffett’s father Charles was Ornette’s drummer and childhood friend in Fort Worth. Moffett, Sr. moved to New York and became a member of Ornette’s octet in 1961. More information about their work together appears in Chapter Twenty of Dave Oliphant, Texan Jazz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

is again indicative of Cortez’s commitment to create interactive art that fosters conversation in community.

Ornette’s solo lines evolve through his responses to the band’s repeated melody, and they become increasingly complex as he and MacDowell build their harmolodic conversation with Cortez’s text. In one such instance, Ornette plays a downward frenzy of notes that evoke “sharks / having feeding frenzies” and “vomit splattering pages.” He and MacDowell also respond to Cortez’s brief pause after her refrain of “No simple explanations” in line thirty-one. As in her recorded performance of “Festivals & Funerals” with Clifford Thornton, this pause coincides with a page break in the published version of the text. When Cortez resumes reading “Let the index finger / take responsibility for its smell,” Ornette Coleman increases the level of activity in his soloing, demonstrating the kind of responsibility collective free jazz soloing requires. Bassist Al MacDowell and Ornette further intensify their interplay when Cortez reads “This piece is passing up the motif of sorrow / let it pass,” and this is a particularly apt moment in the poem for them to noticeably pass melodic motifs around the ensemble. Another notable musical and textual connection comes when Ornette follows Cortez’s “let it go down / like body and soul / in the horn of Coleman Hawkins” with his own energetic descending melodic line. When Cortez collaborated with musicians, she encouraged them to use their own voices rather than take a literal approach to the pieces they created together. Thus, Ornette plays an original solo line in his distinctive voice, rather than literally quote the jazz standard “Body and Soul” in the style of Hawkins. Later in the piece, bassist MacDowell engages in a representational call and response when he echoes Cortez’s “sparrow house bubble of quiver” with an ebullient flurry of rapid notes. As he continued to collaborate with Cortez over the next twenty-five years, MacDowell’s call and response with Cortez’s words on the Firespitters’ archived recordings shows his kinship with Cortez’s language and echoes her commitment to this musical community.

Though Cortez’s musical collaborations with the Firespitters were designed to foreground her poetry, harmolodic improvisation often created spaces in which Cortez’s performances
resisted an individual spotlight in favor of creating a multivocal space in which several collaborating voices provided opportunities for new meanings to emerge from Cortez’s original text. This multivocality is the epitome of Cortez’s diasporic aesthetic that prizes kinship and collaboration over a single, dominant voice. In their performance of “No Simple Explanations,” Cortez, Ornette Coleman, and the Firespitters engage in a conversation that brings new meaning to her tribute to Larry Neal, while also demonstrating their artistic kinship with one another, with Neal and with their audience. Coleman synthesized the term “harmolodics” to reflect the unity he achieved through an equal fusion of harmony, motion, and melody that sparked musical conversations among the members of the group, rather than following a standard musical form.\textsuperscript{65} From a harmolodic standpoint, Cortez’s words functioned as the melody upon which the musicians signified. Likewise, on the page, her words signify on each other, and her incremental repetitions read like strings of musical motivic chain associations that emanate from a core idea or experience. Expansion is integral to movement, and Cortez’s words expanded from a central core that resulted from Cortez’s internalization of exterior surroundings during her travels. Cortez brought together lived experiences in poems and performances that inform audiences to likewise turn outward. Incremental harmolodic chains allowed her strings of surrealist free associations that offer multiple interpretations to a wide audience, those perhaps not unwilling, but rather unable to risk fighting against oppressive regimes. Different performances and presentations of “No Simple Explanations” and “Firespitters,” along with Cortez’s earlier work with Bill Cole and Clifford Thornton all provide opportunities to examine this aspect of Cortez’s creative process.

Cortez performed “No Simple Explanations” and “Firespitters” in different settings to build communities that emphasized multivocal call and responses to tragedies and political struggles. Archived performances of both poems contain repeated melodic and harmonic threads that provide a space for improvisation and signification. The relative simplicity of the initial

melodic ideas allows for complex interactions among Cortez and the various musicians who share her commitment to commemorate artists who worked toward similar goals. In both poems, Cortez calls her audience to action to invoke their response, and collaborative performances of each piece with musicians heighten the call through kinetic improvisations. As she moved through the second decade of her career as a public intellectual, writing, performing, and collaborating with Bill Cole and with the Firespitters band, Cortez’s calls to action became more persistent and more wide-ranging than her earlier works.

When Cortez became active in the surrealist movement, she joined an expanding community of activists that provided her with linguistic tools to further develop her personal style of written analogic repetition. Franklin Rosemont celebrated Cortez as a poet who exemplified global surrealists as an open-ended, welcoming group of artists who embodied an oppositional force to hegemonic bureaucracy; he also conceived of their work “as part of the broader project of revalorizing blackness that Breton and his friends shared with the protagonists of Pan-Africanism and Négritude.”

Penelope Rosemont added to the body of public praise for Cortez’s work: “Benjamin Péret’s famous maxim, ‘The poet has no choice but to be a revolutionist or cease to be a poet,’ is second nature to Jayne Cortez. One of the strongest surrealist voices of our time, she is a brave example of the true poet….” Cortez’s participation in FESTAC ’77, the Black Arts Movement, and the surrealist movement in the U.S. was integral to the formation of her Pan-African aesthetic that used the tools of surrealism to further realize her revolutionary poetics. Cortez used black vernacular music forms, especially in her collaborations with musicians, which also incorporated surreal imagery from the African continent in poems she revised and reappropriated for different purposes. By placing her work in conversation with other artist-activists, Cortez’s creative process included a multivocal approach to creating and revising art that worked to dismantle capitalist power structures across the African diaspora. As she continued

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66 Rosemont, 33.
67 Rosemont, 338.
to work in this manner through subsequent decades, Cortez began to turn her attention away from personal loss toward more global poetry that addressed anti-war concerns that remain relevant in the twenty-first century.
Chapter 4
“Let’s Move Toward Peace”: Waging War on War in “Stockpiling” and “Push Back the Catastrophes”

The reason why poets have been so attracted by war is because it provides experiences of actual living in which people are reduced to the elemental conditions of their existing: death; the sense of being at once isolated and belonging to a community; the cause worth living and dying for, camaraderie—war provides a terrible testing in which, through being made aware of their courage or cowardice men realize some significant truth about the quality of their own physical and spiritual nature which would never be revealed in years of peace.¹ — Stephen Spender

While poems like “No Simple Explanations” that praise important figures in Jayne Cortez’s life constitute at least a quarter of her oeuvre, other poems, like “Firespitters,” were generated by the “terrible testing” of war and political upheaval. Cortez used her voice as a public intellectual to acknowledge nameless war victims across the African diaspora, and as she traveled with Melvin Edwards, they both created art that brought attention to underrepresented populations. After participating in FESTAC ’77, Cortez and Edwards attended several international conferences for writers and artists committed to social justice, some of which were organized by components of the United Nations. In December 1982, the same year she published Firespitter, Cortez traveled to Paris to participate in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s War on War poetry conference to expand and expound upon her poetic insights on the horrors of war. In addition to participating in panel discussions, Cortez performed at least two new poems she wrote specifically for War on War: “Stockpiling” and “Push Back the Catastrophes.” Rather than focus on a singular conflict, both poems speak to the global nature of violence in the second half of the twentieth century, and both clearly articulate Cortez’s ecofeminist standpoint that intertwines images of the earth and the human body as mutual victims of mass destruction. Cortez’s performances of ecofeminist anti-war poems “Stockpiling” and “Push Back the Catastrophes” call for resistance and global community building through participation in international events like FESTAC ’77 and War on War. These poems issue contemporaneous calls to action that incorporate Cortez’s concerns from the Black

Arts Movement into poetic collaborations that advocate for environmental responsibility on behalf of global warfare victims.

In his opening essay in the November 1982 commemorative issue of the Unesco Courier, Jean-Jacques Lebel describes the impetus for the War on War conference:

The idea was simple and inspiring: that the vision and language of the poet as such should be presented without constraint or censorship on the stage of Unesco, which is by definition supranational. We wanted to provide an opportunity for poetry, with all its spirit, rigour, passion, and complexity to be read aloud to an audience by its authors in a prestigious setting.²

Cortez and her international contemporaries at the conference came together as “supranational” public intellectuals, and “Stockpiling” and “Push Back the Catastrophes,” like other poems written for War on War, retain their currency in the context of twenty-first century global threats of terrorism, genocide, and renewed nuclear paranoia. War on War organizer Stephen Spender, in his elaboration on Lebel’s conference mission statement, contended that dehumanization following World War II required a poetics that interrogates the destructive potential of technological war machinery. Spender viewed contemporary anti-war poems as radical representations of the human struggle against our own destructive powers.³ Cortez’s anti-war poetry indicts this catastrophic potential, and in so doing urges audiences to push back by building coalitions against violence. Analyses of different performed and printed versions of Cortez’s “Stockpiling” and “Push Back the Catastrophes” show her growing visibility as a public

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³ Spender, 21.
intellectual expanding the scope of her performed poetry to encompass issues that affect a broader
global human body.

Spender praises Cortez’s “Stockpiling” as “a magnificent effort to make poetry out of
total inhumanity, the metaphors having the effect of making the forces of nuclear destruction accessible to the imagination.”

Despite his praise of “Stockpiling,” however, Spender expresses skepticism at poetry’s real power to wage war against perpetual cycles of violence when he observes Cortez “has been all too successful in inventing metaphors for the inhuman scientific progress of destruction for us to feel that ‘being into life’ has much chance to save the world…. On the other hand, what alternative to the technological inhumanity is there except brave assertions of life and humanity?”

Embracing this paradox through her first-person poetic “assertions of life and humanity,” Cortez used her poetic collaborations to expose the horrors of war in her determined battle against the military-industrial complex. Interrogating the same thematic content as “Stockpiling,” “Push Back the Catastrophes” is a shorter, more straightforward critique of the horrors of war. “Push Back the Catastrophes” contains a more forceful call to action, in which Cortez’s speaker urges her audience to resist oppression.

Through this call to action, Cortez’s poetry embodies Spender’s assertive affirmations. When Cortez performed both pieces with musicians in different settings, their collaborations celebrated their own humanity and encouraged audiences to work together to prevent further destruction.

In 1982 while she was writing “Stockpiling” in preparation for reading at War on War, Cortez performed the poem with music as part of Bill Cole’s Seventh Cycle, and as with her

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4 Spender, 21.
5 Spender, 21.
6 Laura Hinton connects “Push Back the Catastrophes” to Fred Moten’s In the Break and to Cortez’s 1977 Mouth on Paper, observing the poem “illustrates that bodies formed ‘in the break’ of dominant culture suffer but also resist their cultural-economic usurpations by the globalism and imperialism that gained new momentum under the U.S. Reagan administration in power when this 1984 poem was published…. Bodies ‘push back’—against victimization; they do so through the intervention of the poet-speaker’s ‘mouth on paper,’ which reframes their embodied hyper visibility as riddled with sonic force—through the sheer power of the ‘mouth.’” Laura Hinton, Jayne Cortez, Adrienne Rich, and the Feminist Superhero: Voice, Vision, Politics, and Performance in U.S. Contemporary Women’s Poetics (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 201.
collaborations in previous *Cycles*, this performance with musicians from different traditions mirrors the international confluence of anti-war poets at *War on War*. Though Cole’s collaborators had a less explicit political message, both groups of artists transcended international boundaries to build coalitions through conversation and reflection. Cortez later printed both “Stockpiling” and “Push Back the Catastrophes” in the 1984 collection *Coagulations*, and then reprinted both in 1991’s *Poetic Magnetic*, after recording each in the studio for her 1990 CD *Everywhere Drums*. Like “No Simple Explanations,” the version of “Stockpiling” Cortez performed with Cole differs significantly from the version she recorded with the Firespitters in 1990, and these contrasting collaborative versions present Cortez as a performer in a free jazz context with interconnected global musical traditions, and then in a more controlled studio environment in call and response with computer-generated sound effects. Conversely, the studio recording of “Push Back the Catastrophes” is a slow, gritty, urban blues drawing on the same traditions Cortez engages in earlier collaborations like “Festivals & Funerals” and “Firespitters.” Analyses of these different performed and printed versions of Cortez’s ecoalism anti-war poetry from the 1980s show Cortez’s application of elements from her early collaborations into new poems that appealed to broader audiences in larger venues. These differing approaches emphasized surrealist juxtaposed images of the human body as sites of violence, and Cortez and her musical collaborators explored new aural possibilities in these pieces that insisted on audience engagement to create a larger global community united against oppressive capitalist engines of warfare both within and beyond the African diaspora.

Because of their Pan-African commitment to social justice, Cortez and Melvin Edwards began to forge relationships with different organizations within the United Nations as they participated in UN-sponsored events around the world.7 Their involvement over several decades

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connected Cortez with artists working both in and outside the African diaspora to disrupt oppressive regimes. In the 1980s Cortez started working with PEN International, a non-governmental organization that promoted young writers through UNESCO by publishing their work for international audiences. Cortez served on the PEN America board of trustees for several years, including 1988-1994, and their work aligned with Cortez’s personal mission as a writer and political activist. In conjunction with her work with PEN, Cortez also participated in UNESCO’s 1997 “La Route De L’Esclave” conference in Guadeloupe. That same year, Cortez also worked with UNESCO to secure partial funding for her first Yari Yari: Black Women Writers and the Future: An International Conference on Literature by Women of African Descent. The Yari Yari conferences became one of the most far-reaching accomplishments in Cortez’s long career of artistic activism that grew from her writing and collaboration with musicians to organizing conferences and promoting other writers committed to social justice on a global scale. As such, Cortez’s involvement with UNESCO provided opportunities for her to join other artists to amplify their work against worldwide oppression. Cortez’s incorporation of ecofeminist imagery in her collaborative performances with musicians likewise reached wider audiences. As she continued to collaborate with her own Firespitters band, Cortez’s archived revisionary

participated in socialist and communist organizations that fought exploitive totalitarian and capitalist regimes. Given Cortez’s comments about Reagan in her notebooks, she and Edwards likely participated in UN-sanctioned events without official U.S. government support. After participating in War on War, Cortez returned to Paris for another UNESCO event in November 1984. Jayne Cortez Papers, New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Black Studies.

9 The PEN charter proclaims: “LITERATURE knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals. IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES, and particularly in time of war, works of art and libraries, the heritage of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion.” “PEN Charter,” PEN America, accessed December 31, 2016, https://pen.org/pen-charter.
10 Cortez presented a paper at this conference that was translated for the audience while she read. She also played collaborative recordings of “Taking the Blues Back Home” and “Everywhere Drums.” In subsequent years, Cortez helped organize two Slave Routes conferences at NYU. Jayne Cortez Papers.
practices reflect her own growth as she interacted with other like-minded artists and activists at these different UNESCO-sponsored events.

As a result of her collaborations with well-known poets at *War on War*, Cortez’s publishing work from the 1980s shows an increase in anti-war ecofeminist writing that suggests her deepening commitment to expressing women’s concerns that were often suppressed through dehumanizing consequences of war. In addition to releasing *Firespitter* and *There It Is* in 1982, Cortez co-published *Merveilleux Coup de Foudre* with Ted Joans and coedited the surrealist publication *Free Spirits* with the Rosemonts. Cortez and Joans dedicated their book to Cuban painter Wifredo Lam, whom Cortez met in Cuba on a trip Ana Mendieta organized for Cortez and Edwards in 1981. This visit to Cuba, like Cortez’s travel to Paris for *War on War*, increased her perspective as a dynamic, publicly engaged poet building her reputation among major names in international artistic communities. In 1982, Cortez also performed her tribute to a Cuban percussionist, “I See Chano Pozo,” with the Firespitters for Ron Mann’s film project *Poetry in Motion* that, like the Before Columbus LP *Poets Read Their Contemporary Poetry*, placed her work in conversation with well-known voices in twentieth-century American literature, including *War on War* co-presenter Allen Ginsburg. This film marked Cortez’s second appearance in a compilation project of this magnitude, and it was the first widely marketed, professionally edited video of her performing with the Firespitters. This live performance is also archived on the accompanying LP *Life is a Killer*. Cortez’s participation in these projects brought her work to larger audiences with the potential for effecting greater social change through political action.

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12 In a limited run of 100 copies, *Merveilleux Coup de Foudre* contains Joans’s and Cortez’s poems translated into French, and all but two of Cortez’s pieces come from her 1973 chapbook *Scarifications*. This title literally means *Wonderful Thunderbolt*, though *coup de foudre* is an idiom for “love at first sight.” The poems were translated into French by Ila and Sira Errus, and the chapbook features collaged illustrations by the Erruses that appear to have been photocopied. The small number of copies suggests that they may have created this book for distribution at *War on War*, or it may have been a long-term project that coincidentally came to fruition in 1982. Ted Joans and Jayne Cortez, *Merveilleux Coup de Foudre: Poetry en Français of Ted Joans and Jayne Cortez* (Paris: Handshake Editions, 1982).
13 Ron Mann, *Poetry in Motion* (Los Angeles: Voyager Press, 1982).
Following Cortez’s various projects in 1982, she published the next collection of her own work two years later in *Coagulations*. On its back cover, Maya Angelou alludes to Cortez’s travels and expanding international audience in her praise, “Cortez has been an explorer, probing the valleys and chasms of human existence. No ravine is too perilous, no abyss too threatening….” Released by a larger press than Cortez’s Bola imprint, *Coagulations* contains the first printed versions of *War on War* poems “Stockpiling” and “Push Back the Catastrophes,” along with the first instance of her self-anthologization that became a staple of later books she published herself. She included approximately ten poems each from *Scarifications, Mouth on Paper,* and *Firespitter,* omitting all of the poems from *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man’s Wares* and *Festivals & Funerals*. This editorial choice suggests Cortez wanted her first two chapbooks to remain unrevised archives of early work; perhaps she felt certain aspects of the rhetoric and poetic style she published during the Black Arts Movement were too limited to fully represent her evolving global aesthetic that resulted from her participation in projects like *Poetry in Motion* and *War on War*. As Cortez began to focus more on women’s bodies in the context of global warfare, her audience grew to incorporate those from whom the Black Arts Movement had worked to separate itself. Reprinted poems in *Coagulations* include some that received wider circulation in journals and in varied anthologies grouped around different themes including African American literature, anti-war poetry, poems by women of color, postmodern poetry, and surrealist writing. *Coagulations*’ last section includes fourteen new poems, and some of these, including “Stockpiling” and “Push Back the Catastrophes,” became part of Cortez’s regular performance repertoire. The new poems in *Coagulation* show that Cortez’s diasporic perspective,

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16 This collection was released in the U.S. by Thunder’s Mouth Press and in the U.K. by Pluto Press, making it Cortez’s most widely published work to date and her first book printed overseas.
17 Most poems in these books have all but disappeared from Cortez’s known oeuvre, and copies of each sell for over $200 from rare book collectors, though the printed cover price is $2.50.
18 Among these, “I am New York City,” “For the Poets” (“Kai Kai”), “For the Brave Young Students in Soweto,” “I See Chano Pozo,” “Firespitters,” “If the Drum is a Woman,” “Rape,” and “No Simple Explanations,” have received notable critical attention.
rooted in her commitment to social justice from the Black Arts Movement, expanded its focus in
the 1980s to include environmental issues that affected people both inside and beyond the African
diaspora.

Like some of the earlier poems collected in _Coagulations_, “Stockpiling” began as a poem
fragment in a notebook. This draft of “Stockpiling” consists of a list of rhyming and alliterative
images Cortez morphed incrementally by changing one syllable or sound at a time.

frozen trees
deep freeze
death root
defoliants
pine forest
acid tongue
virus cross infections
benzine
vaccine
super sonic rockets
mouth vapors
blood drapers
military fantasies
fissions
fusions
disappearing visions
lung fleas
clam breath
carcinogenic bladder
snake hiss
vomit piss panic spit

bomb kiss reality

toxic tears

fried pus & apathy

This analogic chain of noun phrases combines natural imagery, biological images, and toxic pollution rooted in the science of war. In published versions of “Stockpiling,” Cortez incorporated the first two lines from this drafted list into longer verb phrases. Cortez sometimes uses the drafted phrases as she originally conceived them; other times, she breaks them apart, spinning off in different directions. For instance “acid tongue” becomes “Stockpiles / of agent orange agent blue agent white acids / burning like the hot hoof of a race horse on / the tongue.”

“Fried pus & apathy” become lines in two separate stanzas of the published poem: “The accumulation of fried phosphoric pus graffitied / on fragile fierceness of the moon” and the last climactic push to the poem’s end: “before the choking / before the panic / before the penetration of apathy rises up / and spits fire / into the toxic tears / of this stockpile.” This poetic fragment from Cortez’s notebook, like those she used to build “Firespitters” and “No Simple Explanations,” shows she used anecdotal journal entries and informal lists as scaffolding for poems she revised for presentations in multiple settings.

In the revised published version of “Stockpiling,” Cortez expanded this list and used incremental repetition to give each stanza rhythmically accentual cohesion. The first stanza alternates lines “stockpiling of frozen trees / in deep freeze of the earth / stockpiling of dead animals / in exhaust pipes of supersonic rockets.” The rhythm replicates mechanical collection as it provides examples of destruction. Because Cortez was a reflexive poet who self-anthologized and constantly revised and edited her work, both on the page and in spontaneous improvisatory moments during live performances with musicians, she removed the article “the” from most lines.

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19 Jayne Cortez Papers.
in the first half of the poem. Eliding articles is one strategy Cortez used to provide interpretive freedom when she built poems from drafts in her notebooks, published them in multiple settings, and continued to modify their structure in collaboration with musicians. This syntactical choice also represents Cortez’s desire to allow spaces for improvisation in communal dialogue to emerge within the performance of each piece.

In terms of poetic point of view, Cortez uncharacteristically assumes a third-person stance in the first stanza of “Stockpiling.” Her speaker issues the imperative: “Look at it / through antibodies in the body / through multiple vaccines belching in the / veins / through cross-infections of viruses / stockpiled.” Cortez insists her audience see that biological weapons infect rather than inoculate human bodies. Here Cortez also alludes to the military-industrial complex’s figuratively diseased effect on the body politic. Cortez uses “through” as a repeating element in this stanza, tracing destruction into and within the body, through “gaseous bowels of military fantasies” and “white radiation of delirious dreams.” When Cortez commands “Look,” she breaks the stanza’s mechanistic forward drive and varies her repetition. She creates irregular lines, merging together different stockpiles, fusing images into an explosive “boom” of “the nuclear bleach of reality.” Cortez then strings together surrealistically overlapping images of human organs, insects, and poisonous effects of U.S. warfare in the twentieth century:

Where are you going
with that sucked liver of mustard flint
the split breath of hydrogen fumes
the navel pit of invisible clams
the biological lung of human fleas
the carcinogenic bladder of sponges

21 Kimberly Ruffin places the first stanza of “Stockpiling” into conversation with “I Got the Blues-Ooze,” “You Know,” “Tell Me,” and other poems in her longer discussion of Cortez’s use of the bardic “I” speaker common in blues music to address ecological issues. Kimberly N. Ruffin, Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 149.
She moves from World War I mustard gas to hydrogen to biological weapons to chromosome damage in order to delineate historical trajectories of war-inflicted damage that evolves in the human body, metastasizing long after the impact of the initial attack has passed.

When she asks, “Just where do you think you’re going / with that stockpile of / contaminated stink,” the poem’s speaker personifies and chastises the military-industrial complex that hoards and deploys weapons she likens to sewage. Cortez then shifts to her familiar first-person point of view, the “bardic ‘I’” subject position of the blues singer, when she begins the third stanza with the imperative “Listen.” Here, Cortez’s speaker fully assumes the “bardic ‘I’” and asserts: “I look at this stockpiling / at this rotting vegetation / and I make myself understand the target / That’s why I say I’m into life.” After demanding her audience witness different targets, Cortez issues a lead-by-example call to action that chooses respecting life over amassing deadly weapons. Cortez makes one of the “assertions of life and humanity” that permeates her anti-war poems and other pieces throughout her collaborative body of work.  

When she makes assertions of this kind, Cortez engages with the aftermath of the Vietnam War, still smoldering in the United States. Cortez places “agent orange” alongside “agent blue agent white acids,” and she refers to twenty-million gallons of herbicides that fueled a lucrative U.S. chemical market during the war. Cortez’s “white acids” refer to nitroglycerine, and her speaker implicates profitable chemicals that decimated food sources when she presents images of “rotting vegetation,” “desiccated plants,” and “defoliants.” When Cortez evokes “lips made of keloid scars,” she alludes to the shape of the Vietnam Wall, often described as a scar in the earth of the National Mall. Likewise, memorial designer Maya Lin conceived of the Wall as a bodily wound: “I wanted to work with the land and not dominate it. I had an impulse to cut open the earth… an initial violence that in time would heal. The grass would grow back but the cut

22 Spender, 21.
would remain.”

Cortez extends Lin’s memorial metaphor through the black vernacular blues tradition when she writes of “memory in numb section of the chromosomes.” Like a blues singer, Cortez addresses numbness by first recognizing the wound, then by fostering awareness to begin healing. In her presentation of Cortez’s blues epistemology, Kimberly Ruffin quotes Aldon Nielsen’s observation that “Cortez has an ‘insistent physicality of even the most fantastic-seeming imagery. This is a constant note in Cortez’s writings, and it is everywhere joined to her insistence upon the physicality of writing and the textuality of the word.”

Incorporating this physicality into a blues trope constitutes a thematic strand in Cortez’s body of written and performed work that promotes social change through acknowledgement and commiseration. In these anti-war poems, Cortez connects surreal strings of biological images to help herself and others gather strength to counter destructive forces.

Ruffin and Kimberly Brown also examine Cortez’s poetry within the framework of racially-conscious ecofeminism, and, like the poems they analyze, “Stockpiling” contains multiple images in which “Land is personified in the black body. Thus abuse of the human body equals the abuse of the land.” Cortez’s “keloid scars” pinpoint another instance in which “Stockpiling” works as an extended metaphor wherein Cortez uses the body as a recurring motif. Cortez defines stockpiling weapons as violence against the earth and as a more intimate violence against a singular human body. When Cortez juxtaposes “desiccated plants” with “death root of an abscessed tooth,” she subjects both the earth and a person to impersonal forces that subdue both the planet and its individual inhabitants. Thus, a forest constitutes the earth’s skin, and CFCs in aerosols become “the pink smoke of a human corpse.” Cortez deployed ecological imagery with increasing frequency in the 1980s as she continued traveling, organizing events, and

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25 Cortez substituted “memory” in place of the word “poems” from earlier versions of “Stockpiling.”
26 Ruffin, 145.
27 Ruffin quotes Brown’s critique (in *Other Sisterhoods*, revised in *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva*) of Cortez’s poem “They Came Again in 1970 and 1980” to substantiate her argument about ecofeminism in Cortez’s work. Ruffin, 152.
engaging with people across the African diaspora through the second half of her career.

Juxtaposing images of the earth with those of human bodies, Cortez wrote global anti-war poems that supported nameless victims.

“Stockpiling” also includes critiques of male privilege and institutionalized suppression in the Third World. Cortez equates the male-dominated scientific field with “the filthy dampness in scientific pants / of a peace prize,” a phrase that sexualizes the uncomfortable overlap between the science of peace and the science of war.28 Twenty-first-century Nobel Peace Prize winners have included women; however, the history of Nobel’s awards in different categories—sometimes celebrating people whose discoveries precipitated significant loss of human life—reveals the dark underpinnings of the glossy exterior Cortez indicts.29 In addition to criticizing gendered recognition in the field of science, Cortez’s portrayal of the media in “Stockpiling” alludes to the complicated relationship of Western media with UNESCO in the late 1970s and early eighties.30 She implies “the mass media’s larvae of lies stockpiled / in plasma of the ears” is as lethal as the physical effects of war. When Cortez overlaps biological and martial images, she again uses surrealist juxtaposition of ecological imagery to interrogate toxic Western media practices. Cortez also attacks lax government environmental regulations on big business when she writes of “the stockpiling of shattered spines / in chromium suits / under / polyurethane / sheets.” These images allude to hexavalent chromium drinking water contamination lawsuits like the one

28 Alfred Nobel established his awards in 1896 to change his image as a scientist supporting the dynamite business to that of a man who promoted the science of global peace. Ironically, past Nobel Science award winners have included the Curies; Fritz Haber, a German scientist who developed poison gas in World War I; and Antonio Egas Moniz, the inventor of the frontal lobotomy. Richard Stone, “At 100, Alfred Nobel’s Legacy Retains its Luster,” Science 294 (2001), 288–89.

29 Cortez believed Aimé Césaire deserved the Nobel Prize in literature: “…if they were giving it based on the fact that you did something with the language and based on that you are a great poet, then they would have given it to him, but obviously that’s not the reason that you get the vote…. The Nobel committee is not of noble intent. Nobel is a prize backed by dynamite. Negritude is too explosive.” Meehan, 165.

30 At a 1980 UNESCO general conference, Third-World and communist countries requested a “new world information order” to counter the Western bias in global media. Though they requested an international code of press ethics, UNESCO acquiesced to U.S. pressure. Waxman.
dramatized in the movie *Erin Brockovich.*

Cortez indicts insufficient government regulation of businesses that pollute water, and she once again demonstrates her commitment to Pan-African analogic expression as she connects different forms of socioeconomic disparity in an evolving motivic chain of images. Like other poems, “Stockpiling” reaches across the African diaspora, continues to remain relevant in the twenty-first century, and demonstrates Cortez’s forward-looking, far-reaching criticism of the global military-industrial complex.

Cortez further expanded the piece’s diasporic applications when she performed it in different collaborative settings with musicians, and these collaborations reached larger audiences with the potential to heed Cortez’s call to action against global warfare. When Cortez performed “Stockpiling” as part of Bill Cole’s *Seventh Cycle* concert a few months before she attended *War on War* in 1982, the music framed Cortez’s words with non-Western sounds that transport the audience across the African diaspora to experience the horrors of war in multiple aural dimensions. Along with “No Simple Explanations,” Cortez performed this piece as part of Cole’s final Igbo *Cycle* in honor of John Coltrane. For many jazz musicians, Coltrane’s late recordings represent the pinnacle of soul-searching musicality, and Coltrane was an ideal symbol of the Igbo reincarnation cycle in which a soul becomes a master teacher of other souls. As such, there are several ways to interpret Cortez’s choice to bring this text into conversation with Cole’s larger collaborative artistic representation of Igbo spiritual cycles. Pragmatically, at the time of the concert, “Stockpiling” was a new poem Cortez was revising for presentation at *War on War.* Thematically, however, the piece addresses the horrors of recent wars and urges people to curtail the accumulation of weapons that lead to continued global suffering. Performing this poem in Cole’s *Seventh Cycle* implies the U.S. and Soviet governments were metaphorically lesser-evolved souls requiring instruction from those with more evolved empathetic wisdom.

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To aurally substantiate this metaphor, Bill Cole and the other musicians frame Cortez’s words within a chaotic soundscape that echoes the horrors portrayed in the surrealistic imagery of “Stockpiling.” Cole played a double-reed Chinese sona in call and response with Cortez, and he introduces the piece with bent tremolos that set a disquieting tone for Cortez’s words. Cole reacts to and interacts with Cortez, and though she begins reading in the lower register of her voice, she raises her pitch to meet Cole’s intensity and more forcefully deliver her words. When she begins reading, Cole plays a repeated three-note pattern to match the three syllables in the word “Stockpiling,” and he often plays syllabic patterns to mirror the subjects of his compositions.32 Percussionist Warren Smith similarly engages with Cortez’s words to support the text. Cortez invites her audience to “Look at it,” and she raises her pitch and varies her vocal inflection through the delivery of each line; in response, Smith crescendos his cymbal rolls, and Cole plays more tremolos.33 Throughout the performance, Cole and Smith’s playing echoes Cortez’s ideas; thus, they play explosive figures that replicate “fissions / exploding / into the shadows of disappearing space.” This reciprocal musical call and response with Cortez’s images and her changes in pitch, tone, and volume in “Stockpiling” give this version of the piece an intense visceral impact, provoking an audience response to their rumbling, crashing, and strident playing.

During Cortez’s brief pause after “tell me,” in another instance of musical and textual call and response, Smith plays a series of intermittent cymbal crashes that demand a response to the expanding question:

Where are you going
with that sucked liver of mustard flint
a split breath of hydrogen fumes
a navel pit of invisible clams

32 For instance, in his piece about Fannie Lou Hamer, he plays a five-syllable pattern to match the syllables in her name; other pieces based on Yoruba proverbs contain rhythmic patterns that match the syllables in each text. Bill Cole, Personal Communication, June 25–26, 2015.
33 Bill Cole, *The Seventh Cycle*, Live Concert (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, October 11, 1982).
a biological lung of human fleas
a carcinogenic bladder of sponges
and lips made of keloid scars

As she extends her question through this surreal string of images, Cortez matches Smith with her volume and rate of speech. Smith crashes, then retreats into a roll, pausing when Cortez says “Listen.” This pause arrests the audience’s attention and demands they heed the speaker’s imperative. Smith and Cole then build toward a climax when Cortez says, “That’s why I say I am into life / preservation of life now.” Cole uses cycle breathing to sustain a high A-flat, releasing in an upward scoop that suggests hope after the end of his long, wailing moan. Underneath Cole, Smith plays a martial cadence that drives the piece to its conclusion and aurally evokes a call to action with a military tattoo, urging listeners to join the fight against stockpiling. Supporting Cole’s theme of the seventh incarnation of the Igbo soul, Cortez, Cole, and Smith act as teachers, instructing others to unite against mass destruction. Working together, Cortez, Smith, and Cole improvise their responses to one another, and this interplay affirms each performer’s commitment to diasporic community building through multivocal collaborative performances.

A few months after performing in the Seventh Cycle, Cortez gave a very different collaborative performance of “Stockpiling” with musicians at the War on War conference. According to her notebook, Cortez learned after breakfast on the day prior to her performance that she was scheduled to read with an African band with whom she had never worked. A meticulous planner, Cortez bemoaned the lack of preparation time, so they decided together that the familiar twelve-bar blues format would be the safest musical framework for the poem. Cortez and the musicians found a common ground within the circum-Atlantic black American vernacular blues idiom. The following day, Cortez was unable to rehearse with the band, but the performance was warmly received despite her “too much worry about nothing.”

Cortez performed “There It Is,” “Stockpiling,” and “Push Back the Catastrophes” with the band, and

34 Jayne Cortez Papers.
though she wanted more rehearsal time, she felt their performance was successful. After that evening’s reception, Cortez summed up the event as “a dynamic night—well organized.” Cortez’s notes of this kind demonstrate her preference for ample preparation for collaborative performances, and her notebooks express appreciation for the consistency of working with Denardo Coleman and the Firespitters.

When Cortez recorded the 1990 CD *Everywhere Drums*, her third studio release with the Firespitters band, she and the musicians created well-planned collaborations that still allowed for improvisatory freedom within the structure of each piece. Cortez’s subsequent performance tour of England with the Firespitters solidified her relationships with radical writers and publishers in Europe, and it showcased an updated electric sound that Denardo also used in his playing with his father’s Prime Time band. This album incorporates elements of Cortez’s previous musical collaborations, from her work with traditional African percussion, free jazz, blues, and funk, to different appropriations of Caribbean-inflected Latin jazz and African high life music. When Cortez and the Firespitters reenvisioned “Stockpiling” for *Everywhere Drums*, they chose a style that diverged from the blues in her *War on War* collaboration and from her earlier performance in Cole’s *Seventh Cycle*. Saxophonist Frank Lowe and Denardo Coleman use instruments of the same families in very different ways than Cole and Smith in the *Seventh Cycle*, and this recording recalls computer-generated industrial music of the 1990s. In some ways, Cortez and the Firespitters CD *Everywhere Drums* signals a shift away from free collaborations toward more structured frameworks for musical collaborations.

On this recording, Coleman and Lowe interact with “Stockpiling” in a technologically-mediated setting, apropos of its contemporary context. Throughout this rendering of

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“Stockpiling,” neither Coleman nor Lowe function as a jazz musician, per se. Instead of playing melodic or harmonic ideas or engaging in their traditional roles of drummer and saxophonist in a jazz idiom, Coleman and Lowe create a tense musical background that functions primarily as an undercurrent to Cortez’s words. Perhaps the most notable feature of this recording is Coleman’s use of electronic percussion. His playing replicates machinery with six discrete patches: rumbling low-pitched motorcycle vibrations; human inhalations in at least three different pitches and speeds; rapid breathing in and out; fluttering, reminiscent of alternating typewriter keys; machine gun bursts; and screeching motor belts. Lowe uses his saxophone to create complementary textures with nonstandard playing techniques that include slap-tonguing popping sounds; multiphonic longtones that recreate the sound of factory whistles or steamboat horns; periodic tremolos; and short multiphonic screeches. Coleman evinces little of his trademark percussive interplay with his mother’s words, and Lowe, rather than interact with Cortez in either a literal or symbolic way, plays in short bursts that are less melodic motifs than they are sound effects. Though this method of musical collaboration is less melodically interactive than that of Cole’s *Seventh Cycle*, it creates a more eerie tone.

Cortez establishes the metric feel for the piece, reading with the kind of regular rhythm she enacted in solo performances without musicians. Lowe begins the piece in the lowest register of his tenor saxophone, playing ominous multiphonics that recreate the menacing hum of machinery. Coleman’s percussive contributions create faint rumblings that add texture and motion without a perceptible beat. Though Lowe underscores the first stanza with low growling notes, he and Coleman abruptly shift to higher, shorter screaming sounds when Cortez shouts her short refrain of “Stockpiling.” Lowe’s anthropomorphic renderings of human distress sounds sharply disrupt the disquieting soundscape with unexpected, irregular outbursts that complement the uncomfortable surrealist imagery Cortez deploys throughout the poem. By replicating human cries of agony, Lowe forces the audience to confront horrific imagery through their own visceral responses to his cries. Lowe begins to add a different aural texture with short trills and tremolos
in the upper register of his horn when Cortez reads “through cross-infections….” Lowe’s ornamentations increase the musical movement to match the movement in the images “through benzene vapors shooting / into the muscles of the / stars / through gaseous bowels of military / fantasies / through white radiation of delirious / dreams.” In contrast with her collaborative performance with Smith and Cole in the Seventh Cycle, Lowe, Cortez, and Coleman engage in a less melodic dialogue that evokes different audience responses by requiring them to confront Cortez’s text within an emotional soundscape that more literally replicates the sounds of war.

The dialogic nature of Cortez’s writing and the musicians’ signifying improvisations provide audiences space to synthesize connections from among the strands that connect Cortez’s hundreds of poems. In one such instance, Lowe’s playing replicates a clucking chicken, and this sound provides an aural allusion to chickens brooding, or coming home to roost, as Malcolm X infamously proclaimed. Lowe’s playing thus brings a central theme of Cortez’s early poem “Festivals & Funerals” into conversation with “Stockpiling” and “Brooding,” another poem that alludes to Malcolm X. When Cortez pauses after she shouts “boom,” Coleman and Lowe also pause to allow Cortez’s “boom” to linger and emulate the impact of a nuclear explosion. After this break, Lowe briefly develops his musical ideas alone, before Cortez continues reading. This break underscores the subsequent line “this is the final nuclear bleach of reality.” Cortez pauses in a few other places throughout the piece to create similar emphasis that gives the audience time to process the finality of nuclear destruction. In another, she pauses for a shorter time before saying, “where do you think you are going?” The musicians continue their foreboding rumblings during Cortez’s pause, and gaps like this demand the audience’s attention while simultaneously reminding them that the machinery of war takes no notice of one person’s frustrated attempts to disrupt its perpetual violence.

37 Cortez published “Brooding” in Mouth on Paper and in Coagulations. She recorded it with Joseph Daley, Bill Cole, Denardo Coleman, and Bern Nix on Un submissive Blues.
Coleman and Lowe again respond to Cortez’s pauses when the poet reads, “I look at this stockpiling / at this rotting vegetation / and I make myself understand the target.” All three performers intensify this feeling of panic as Coleman increases the volume of his electronic screams and Cortez increases her volume as she reads the final lines. Both her son and Lowe musically shout along with her final repeated refrain of the word “Stockpiling.” Again, Cortez and the musicians provide space for the audience to absorb the deafening impact of a nuclear explosion as the inevitable outcome of continued nuclear stockpiling. This disquieting framework amplifies Cortez’s anti-war imperative by aurally adding to the visceral impact of her text. This recording of “Stockpiling” once again demonstrates the increased power of Cortez’s dynamic vocal delivery in conversational collaboration with musicians playing in different musical genres. Together, the archived performances of “Stockpiling” in Cole’s *Seventh Cycle* and the reframed version on *Everywhere Drums* demonstrate Cortez’s commitment to create visceral art that interrogates injustice and provokes a response. By interacting with different instrumentation in each version of the piece, Cortez continues to demonstrate her flexibility and underscores her assertion that the horrors of war, here shown through overlapping images of biological infection, are neither confined to one geographic setting nor one group of people.

While the performed and printed versions of “Stockpiling” twist through technical scientific imagery that implicates capitalism’s role in the destructive horrors of war, “Push Back the Catastrophes” offers a shorter, broader picture of ways natural disasters exacerbate human-made catastrophes. In contrast to “Stockpiling,” the simplified structure of “Push Back the Catastrophes” presents a more pressing call to action, and the two pieces work together as blues texts both to express Cortez’s dismay and to encourage communal action to counter destruction wrought by human greed and natural disasters. Scanning the poem’s first eight lines shows an irregular number of syllables per line, but the accent pattern generally contains either three or four stressed syllables per line, giving it a more regular rhythm than “Stockpiling.” Cortez begins “Push Back the Catastrophes” in the first person, and the speaker of the poem functions both as a
human and as the earth. If Cortez’s speaker is the personified earth, the repetition of “I don’t want” places the earth in opposition to destructive human forces:

I don’t want a drought to feed on itself
through the tattooed holes in my belly
I don’t want a spectacular desert of charred stems and rabbit hairs
in my throat of accumulated matter
I don’t want to burn and cut through the forest
like a greedy mercenary drilling into
the sugar cane of the bones.\textsuperscript{38}

If Cortez’s speaker is human, she takes up a similar opposition; this duality and contradiction embodies Cortez’s poetic perspective through which her poems pit opposing forces against one another. The poetic “I” counters forces that inflict injury on natural resources and on people who are unable to protect themselves from analogously destructive human forces. This speaker, another example of Cortez’s use of the “bardic ‘I,’” fosters community in the manner of a blues singer to change her situation.\textsuperscript{39} The “I” in the first several lines of “Push Back the Catastrophes” is not the “greedy mercenary drilling” into the earth, and she cannot fight against destructive forces without invoking assistance through this poetic call to action. By naming this oppositional relationship between her first-person speaker and different destructive forces, as she does in other anti-war poems, Cortez’s words assume a combative stance.

In her performative gender theory, Judith Butler asserts that every name carries with it a set of expectations and suppositions, and once a body has been labeled, it must assume the responsibilities and behaviors intrinsic to that name.\textsuperscript{40} Butler examines various taxonomies as naturalizing forces that inflict harm on the body, and “Push Back the Catastrophes,” like Cortez’s

\textsuperscript{38} Cortez, \textit{Coagulations}, 63.
\textsuperscript{39} Ruffin, 141–42.
\textsuperscript{40} Judith Butler and Sara Salih, \textit{The Judith Butler Reader} (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 219.
other poems, names unjust practices and corrupt government actions in an effort to invert the
social order. Cortez exposes social inequity and acknowledges triumphant moments in which
subjugated people resist manipulative power structures. Jennifer Ryan-Bryant conceives of
Cortez’s naming as “affirming the personal worth and communicative resonance of the
nicknames by preceding each with a chanted phrase, a reiteration of Cortez’s ‘incarnation of
secular priesthood’ that lends them rhetorical weight…” Through incremental repetition in the
repeated clause “I don’t want…,” Cortez proposes an alternate viewpoint to the “dominant
discourses of the nationstate” that reinforces the power of naming. “Push Back the
Catastrophes,” then, also functions as a secular sermon in which Cortez’s speaker takes the stance
of a preacher, akin to the “bardic ‘I’” of the blues, who encourages her audience to join her in
pushing back against destructive forces.

Cortez intensifies the act of naming when she introduces the “push back” refrain, using a
chain of noun phrases that provides specific examples of “catastrophes”:

Push back the advancing sands

the polluted sewage

the dust demons the dying timber

the upper atmosphere of nitrogen

push back the catastrophes

Here Cortez employs incremental repetition to maintain a rhythm that propels the piece from line
to line. Cortez also leaves out conjunctions in these lines, and her use of asyndeton works with

41 In her analysis of “The Guitars I Used to Know,” Ryan-Bryant links this naming to Cortez’s use of poetic
anaphora: “These instances of anaphora are all indented several spaces in from the left margin to underline
the way in which their proud self-declarations intervene in the poem’s narrative of creative celebration and
resistance. …Cortez employs anaphora to mimic the effects of live performance, creating both a chant-like
rhythm and an accelerated delivery pace…” Ryan-Bryant qtd. in Hinton, 246–47; Tony Bolden’s
presentation of Cortez’s “secular priesthood” forms the core of his pioneering study of Cortez’s
collaborations with musicians in Tony Bolden, Afro-Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and
Culture (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 120–41. Bolden published an earlier iteration of
this chapter as “All the Birds Sing Bass: The Revolutionary Blues of Jayne Cortez,” African American

42 David Román, Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts (Durham,
the repetition to move her audience from one image to the next. In these lines, Cortez connects human neglect to decaying natural resources, and she insists that humans and the earth are inextricable partners. Impoverished, oppressed people suffer living in the harshest environments because they do not have the means to live in areas equipped with sufficient disaster mitigation systems; therefore, in order to delineate specific causes of suffering, Cortez focuses her critique on underlying environmental factors precipitated by destructive capitalist agendas.

After naming several of these causes that disrupt prevailing discourses of capitalist nation-states, Cortez’s speaker pronounces “Enough” as an ultimatum for the military-industrial complex to cease its destructive occupations:

Enough of the missiles
the submarines
the aircraft carriers
the biological weapons
no more sickness  sadness  poverty
exploitation  destabilization
illiteracy and bombing.

As in “Kai Kai,” “Firespitters,” and other poems that demonstrate Cortez’s commitment to building a global Pan-African community, these lines juxtapose martial images that expose postcolonial aftershocks in the African diaspora. Cortez refuses to identify specific aggressors complicit in actions these noun phrases enact against unnamed parties. This tactic more broadly implicates anonymous military-industrial capitalist entities across the African diaspora and beyond.

Because of its ambiguity with broad applications, “Push Back the Catastrophes” may seem to embody a universal message. Cortez, however, avoided this classification. At FESTAC ’77 she told an interviewer she preferred the term “international,” because
…the whole feeling about the word universal and the way in which it has been projected or used, to mean that you are writing something that everybody can understand and also is about a standard that has been set by the Europeans…. It is an European standard. It is something that they have used to say that if you don’t speak English, which is a universal language, then I don’t understand you…. I think, we have to find another word for that because I think the word “universal” has gone too far.43

In accordance with Butler’s figuration of normalization that excludes certain people, Cortez conveys her own postmodern critique of “universalism” wherein she uses her poetics to avoid language that deemed people as “other.” Cortez, like other public intellectuals engaged in building global communities after the Black Arts Movement, wielded poetic images of violence against black and female bodies to promote a “politics of difference that eschews essentialist constructs of community.”44 Madhu Dubey asserts the importance of the black body in resisting these postmodern challenges: “If the referent has waned under the pressure of digital technologies, African-Americans have managed to maintain a connection, at once mystical and visceral, to material reality. While the hyperreality of postmodern urban existence attenuates bodily experience, the black body alone continues to shimmer with the aura of presence.”45 In “Push Back the Catastrophes,” as in “Stockpiling” and other anti-war poems, Cortez gives voice to an assertive poetic speaker who refuses to submit to the technology of modern warfare. Cortez’s contemporaries at War on War and earlier in the Black Arts Movement interrogated postmodern themes of dehumanization in the face of immovable forces. In 2018, the challenges black Americans face as they continue to struggle for legal and socioeconomic equality resemble the “terrible testing” Stephen Spender describes in the context of twentieth-century warfare.46

45 Dubey, 8.
46 Spender, 21.
Rather than name themselves victims of these dehumanizing forces, Cortez and other black writers of her generation confronted postmodern themes by asserting they were neither too disaffected nor too traumatized to use writing as a catalyst for pragmatic political change.

To precipitate this change in “Push Back the Catastrophes,” Cortez increases the poem’s pace from beginning to end, bringing it to a climax before suggesting a resolution through a call to action. The verb phrases in the last stanza are positive affirmations of the speaker’s desire for basic human rights, calling for a global push against all catastrophically destructive forces. In line twenty-one, Cortez presents that call when her speaker urges: “Let’s move toward peace / toward equality and justice / that’s what I want,” and the rhythm and syntax in the remaining lines recall the rhythm at the end of the first stanza in Langston Hughes’s “Dream Variations” when he writes “That is my dream.”

Cortez then writes “To breathe clean air,” and continues her rhythmic allusion to Hughes’s line “To fling my arms wide….” Here, Cortez evokes her poetic ancestor to reinforce the bond between humans and nature, as she blurs the delineation between the poem’s speaker as a both human and earth, allowing for multiple simultaneous interpretations of this inclusive call to action. Cortez’s intentional slippage between speakers reflects her surrealist ideology through dialogism that engages her audience in the conversation. In subsequent poems, Cortez often linked the fate of the environment to the fate of subjugated people around the African diaspora. As Cortez wrote poems that reached larger audiences, she expanded her diasporic aesthetic to model empathy through human connection and artistic interaction.

Cortez’s vocal interactions in her collaborative performances with musicians create a reciprocal dialogue that models interdependence among humans and between people and our natural environment. When Cortez brought “Push Back the Catastrophes” to the Firespitters for the 1990 studio recording archived on Everywhere Drums, they transformed it from a poetic call to action to a traditional blues song that enacts its resistance through musical analogy. The blues idiom is an apt conduit for this collaborative performance that allows the speaker, in this

rendering of the poem more likely a human voice than a personified earth, to shout disapproval and bemoan the aftermath of too-frequent global catastrophes. As in “Stockpiling,” the Firespitters band amplifies Cortez’s violent imagery by creating visceral tonal soundscapes that heighten the tension and discomfort in Cortez’s words. Their choice to set this poem within a traditional blues framework also mirrors Cortez’s modification of her original text, deploying more colloquial diction in the repeated phrase “I don’t want no….” In early lines, Cortez pauses after important words to establish her rhythm and to give weight to each idea she introduces. In addition to substituting “no” for “a” early in the poem, Cortez introduces the one-line refrain “I don’t want a catastrophe” to this version. The refrain supports the poem’s structure, reinforces its call to action through direct repetition, and allows Cortez to communicate with the musicians as she moves through different sections of the poem. Each time she reaches the refrain, Cortez’s voice becomes more insistent, adding gravity to her call. While the printed version of the poem conveys increased intensity, Cortez’s performed version with musicians strengthens her words through intricate dialogue and strident musical assertions that create a strong visceral impact on the audience to stir them into action.

As Cortez’s vocalizations become more forceful, Denardo Coleman increases the activity of his drumming. Though he maintains an even tempo on the hi-hat cymbal in contrast to his playing on “Stockpiling,” Coleman’s characteristically active playing on the bass drum and snare lends an intentionally disorderly tone to the overall rhythmic feel that alludes to catastrophes Cortez lists throughout the piece. In his guitar solo, the only instrumental solo in the piece, Nix expertly navigates blues tropes as he bends long notes that echo the frustration of a speaker who persists “I don’t want a catastrophe.” When Nix and bassist MacDowell reach measure ten of the traditional twelve-bar blues form, Cortez begins reading and cuts into the end of Nix’s solo, in the way a catastrophe interrupts daily life, to begin a new section of the poem. The archive of Cortez’s recorded collaborations contains several instances in which Cortez interrupts musical

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48 Cortez, Everywhere Drums.
phrases, showing moments of improvised spontaneity interposed with intentional disruptions that
aurally illustrate her surrealist ecofeminist poetic representations of war through fluid call and
response with the text.

The stanza after Nix’s guitar solo contains textual revision, as Cortez changed the poem’s
original imagery to reflect contemporary concerns six years after the poem first appeared in print;
“submarines” become “plutonium” and “aircraft carriers” become “reactors,” updating the poem
with images that allude to the catastrophic aftermath of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear meltdown.
Cortez later adds “malnutrition” and “starvation” to her list of byproducts of both destructive
human and natural forces. As Cortez addresses more of these unresolved issues, the tone of this
revised collaborative version feels angrier than the version she printed in Coagulations. The
inserted attachment of the word “no” to almost every image, often multiple times within one line,
gives Cortez opportunities to shout her message emphatically. In this recording on Everywhere
Drums, Cortez’s speaker no longer wistfully dreams of a better world like Langston Hughes; she
insists on it. To emphasize the speaker’s unanswered demands, rather than end on a major chord,
a musical trope that provides resolution, the Firespitters end with Nix’s open guitar chord
hanging, almost asking a question. In their updated collaborative performance of “Push Back the
Catastrophes,” Cortez and the Firespitters challenge audiences to answer a call they updated for
their contemporary listeners.

This evidence of Cortez’s ongoing revision process demonstrates her commitment to
keeping her message relevant over the course of her forty-year career as a public intellectual.
These examples of revision also reflect Cortez’s overarching theme throughout her body of work
that engines of subjugation cannot remain unchallenged in their positions of dominance. After
recording collaborative versions of “Push Back the Catastrophes” and “Stockpiling” with the
Firespitters on Everywhere Drums, Cortez reprinted the 1984 versions of each text without her
recorded textual revisions in a 1991 compilation of poems she recorded on her two previous
studio albums. This book, Poetic Magnetic, provides an invaluable resource for examining
Cortez’s printed work alongside her performed collaborations on *Everywhere Drums* and *Maintain Control*. The structure of some pieces, especially “Maybe” and “Everybody Wants to Be Somebody,” suggests Cortez created them in the studio through spontaneous improvisation with the musicians, rather than first drafting and preparing them for print. As such, though the studio recordings of “Push Back the Catastrophes” and “Stockpiling” have more structure than some of her earlier musical collaborations, both *Maintain Control* and *Everywhere Drums* archive some of the freest collaborations Cortez recorded with the Firespitters. This freedom is indicative of Cortez’s evolving creative processes that perpetually defied fixity, even as other aspects of her collaborative practices became more consistent. The rest of the poems printed in *Poetic Magnetic* come from earlier books *Coagulations* and *Mouth on Paper*, with the exception of “ Firespitter” and “No Simple Explanations,” which both appeared in *Firespitter*. As with “Push Back the Catastrophes,” Cortez reprinted these two poems in their original published iterations, though the versions on both albums contain multiple instances of revision that demonstrate Cortez’s collaborative flexibility.

Cortez’s global political engagement and her work with free jazz musicians fostered her improvisatory revision process, and her ability to prepare and rehearse different iterations of pieces like “Push Back the Catastrophes” and “Stockpiling” afforded her additional possibilities for interpretation and performance to larger audiences. Cortez allowed her text to remain fluid or

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51 Sometimes Cortez made the poem title singular, though she more frequently used the plural “Firespitters.”
slippery in the way that the melody and chord changes of a jazz standard are fixed in neither time nor space; jazz and blues musicians constantly revise and embellish upon traditional melodies and harmonies that continue creating something new. Most musicians fluent in these idioms never play the same melodic improvisation twice, and they would likely be unable to recreate any given solo note for note from one performance to the next. Cortez’s collaborative performances were likewise subject to different arrangements that resulted in interactive, individualized interpretations that were unique to each performance. Musical frameworks are suggestions, rather than mandates, and, though Cortez was a meticulous performer who preferred a well-rehearsed presentation, a structured rehearsal process gave her and the musicians freedom to enact different forms of improvisation within the already-established framework of her words and the Firespitters’ music. This collaborative freedom reflects Cortez’s community building aesthetic that privileged collectivity over domination.

Though her collaborators were skilled jazz practitioners, Cortez worked with them in different musical idioms to create relevant settings for her poetry that evolved with the postmodern world they inhabited. On the back cover of *Coagulations*, Gwendolyn Brooks proclaims, “Jayne Cortez is an energy, a nourishment, a Black Nation song.”52 At its core, Cortez’s poetry conveyed themes of suffering and empowerment to which she remained committed, despite social, political, and cultural changes that occurred during her lifetime. Cortez’s anti-war poetry suggests that she, along with ecofeminist theorists, regarded development itself as a type of war. Claude Alvares conceives of development as the Third World War: “A war waged in peace time, without comparison but involving the largest numbers of deaths and the largest numbers of soldiers without uniform.”53 When Cortez expanded her critique of human rights violations in developing nations during the last three decades of her career, she deployed the language of war in evolving chains of images. Again, by bearing witness

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52 Cortez, *Coagulations*.
53 Ryan, 199.
to quotidian struggles and larger atrocities across the African diaspora, Cortez enacted her own nuanced ecofeminist criticism of issues still rooted in the Black Aesthetic.

Like Cortez’s other anti-war poems, “Stockpiling” and “Push Back the Catastrophes” remain disquietingly relevant in 2018 when the United States continues to engage in diplomatic discussions and sanctions with Iran, North Korea, and other nations embroiled in stockpiling weapons. War in Syria and political unrest throughout Africa continue to displace and take the lives of millions of refugees. Likewise, natural disasters, like the earthquake and tsunami that disabled Japan’s Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant and hurricanes that continue to undermine Haiti’s unstable infrastructure have killed and displaced countless helpless people. Accordingly, Cortez’s recorded collaborations of these pieces will continue pushing back against the same forces she railed against in 1982 and throughout her career as a public activist-artist committed to building communities to fight oppressive forces.
Chapter 5
“My Hoodooistic Scream”: Signifying on Diasporic Rituals in “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna”

It is the LIVINGNESS in Art that makes it art. Form, style, structure, craftsmanship are of the highest degree of importance to the creative mind in man, for meaningful ideas have nothing to say to the man who has not mastered the tools of his trade. Nevertheless it is only when even superb craftsmanship has been successfully wedded to—and has become a channel for—a “Poetic Content” that adds new dimensions and insight, greater depth and clarity, to man’s awareness and understanding of himself in relation to a dynamic Universe of which he is an integral and indispensable unit, that we have Art in which there is that Livingness that makes it art.¹

– Fela Sowande

By the early 1990s, having published and recorded her poetry with a consistent base of musical collaborators for more than a decade, Cortez had become a poet of the African diaspora who combined elements of different cultural traditions into multi-genre performances that exemplified Sowande’s “Livingness.” The archive of her performed collaborative poetry shows experimentation resulting in Cortez’s mastery of an art form in which she and her colleagues created space to explore ancient traditions in vibrant conversations that challenged boundaries and crossed genres. As she traveled, wrote, and continued to collaborate with musicians and other artists, Cortez used her art as a catalyst for community building in her own “dynamic Universe” of Afro-diasporic activists. Cortez formalized this dynamism, in part, through her increasing use of repetition and surrealist imagery:

I use more repetition. I make use of more material from the subconscious, from dreams. I try to go to the other shore, or to let go of the other shore, and let whatever’s in the deep water come up to the surface. I use those hidden elements, those impulses to develop poems and surprise myself, and to keep on wanting to write poetry. The work has changed because I’ve changed.²

These changes are especially evident in multiple archived versions of Cortez’s poems like “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna” that enact syncretic African-based religious rituals. When she performed

² Cortez, qtd. in Sascha Feinstein, Ask Me Now: Conversations on Jazz & Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 50–51.
these pieces with musicians, the collaborators demonstrated their deep aural and spiritual connections to African and American ritual traditions that likewise expressed Cortez’s commitment to building community to resist oppressive forces across the African diaspora.

Cortez wrote “Make Ifa” to portray a West African Ifa divination ritual, and this poem is one of most dynamic examples of Cortez’s poetic recreations of ancient traditions. Both “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna” portray different diasporic traditions of Ifa and Caribbean spirit possession, and both poems weave together cultural customs in creative ways that exemplify the syncretic circum-Atlantic nature of Yoruba-inspired religious practices. By combining elements of West African Ifa, Brazilian candomblé, Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodou, American hoodoo, and other religious traditions around the African diaspora, Cortez shows her surrealist understanding of the “primitive” as a subversive force that enacts a circum-Atlantic dialogue in “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna.” This dialogue also invites audiences and performers to interact within Cortez’s portrayal of African and American spiritual elements of ritual performance through dance, music, and poetry. Cortez recorded “Make Ifa” with music in 1990 on Everywhere Drums and subsequently published it in her 1991 book Poetic Magnetic.³ A few years later, Cortez wrote “I’m Gonna” to embody a similarly kinetic ritual. Following a similar creation process, Cortez performed and recorded “I’m Gonna” on her 1994 CD Cheeful & Optimistic before she published it two years later in Somewhere In Advance of Nowhere.⁴ The publication history of these pieces suggests Cortez’s attention to the performative possibilities of poems like these that recreated and signified on Yoruba-inspired dance rituals with words in conjunction with music. Cortez recorded both poems before she published them; thus, the Firespitters likely had more creative input into the development of both pieces before Cortez produced them in print. Whereas Cortez regularly told

³ Cortez reprinted “Make Ifa” in Jazz Fan Looks Back (2002), and though she framed this collection as a tribute to the music and musicians, many pieces in the book also address human struggles against oppression around the African diaspora.

⁴ Cortez named the poem “I’m Gonna Shake” in a few printings. Cortez also uses the words “I’m gonna…” as refrains in different poems she combined for one section of Bill Cole’s Sixth Cycle. The first of which is “Tapping”, the second may be an early version of “Festival Fusions 81.” Bill Cole, The Sixth Cycle, Live Concert (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, August 8, 1981).
interviewers that she wrote her poems before bringing them into the studio or live performances, she sometimes brought working drafts to the musicians, and their collaborative rehearsal practices informed the shape of the text—both rhythmically and structurally—before she later published these poems in print collections. In conjunction with her participation in international conferences and festivals, these collective acts of revision model the dialogue at the heart of Cortez’s commitment to collaborative community building.

In addition to providing insight into this aspect of Cortez’s poetic production, these two poems also provide multiple points from which to examine Cortez’s live performance practices during the last two decades of her career. “Make Ifa” appears on Cortez’s final album in a live performance from either 2007 or 2009, providing archived, professionally edited evidence of the piece’s collaborative performative evolution after she recorded it in the studio with the Firespitters in 1990. Existing archives suggest “I’m Gonna” may be the most frequently recorded of Cortez’s collaborative work with musicians, and the versions she performed with slightly different iterations of the Firespitters share many consistencies while also allowing the performers room for improvisational interpretation. Cortez’s poems that recreate Yoruba-inspired religious practices were some of her most energetically performed pieces, and, like “I’m Gonna,” “Make Ifa” employed a regular rhythm and chains of surrealistic images that provide glimpses into these ritual practices to bring Cortez’s audience into the middle of a reimagined ritual. Cortez created visceral kinetic poems celebrating these customs and shared them with larger audiences, thereby helping them better understand these mysterious traditions.

While previous chapters have discussed the role of international travel in building Cortez’s diasporic awareness of a Pan-African community through participation in large-scale festivals and conferences, Cortez also took personal trips with her husband and son that provided more intimate interactions with cultural traditions in Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and other locations across the African continent. Cortez took her first trip to Africa with Denardo in 1967, and it was part of a larger trip to several continents through a Rockefeller grant she won during the time
between their move from Los Angeles to New York. Subsequent trips with husband Melvin Edwards put Cortez in close contact with revolutionary leaders and artists who worked to build security and justice in the rapidly changing landscape of post-colonial Africa. Through these voyages, Cortez and Edwards witnessed and took part in varied ancient ritual traditions including a durbar, an enstoolment, and Ifa divination. They also traveled to Benin City in 1985 to present one of Edwards’s sculptures to the local Ofa. During their time there, they attended a ceremony in Igun Eronwan in Benin City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site preserved to commemorate an ancient guild of bronze artists in Benin. As with experiences in FESTAC ’77 and War on War, Cortez recorded impressions in her notebook after this ceremony that closely recall images and actions she eventually published in “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna.” Cortez’s notes refer to possession, driving rhythms, sprinkled powder, kola nuts, gin, ashes, a chalk X, and iron stakes. Ceremonies like this in Benin and others Cortez attended in Cuba and Brazil contributed to her understanding of different Yoruba-derived religious rituals practiced across the African diaspora. Like other American Pan-Africanists, Cortez and Edwards better understood their roots as they continued to travel. As they traveled through Africa, they connected with a global network of artists whose work demonstrated pride, beauty, and disdain for exploitive European governments that instigated fractured warring native factions.

Cortez’s travels also fostered her surrealist impulse to incorporate primitive elements in her work, as she and Edwards witnessed and participated in ancient ritual traditions firsthand.

Especially in visual art, surrealists considered primitive objects as expressions of pure, unfiltered

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6 Jayne Cortez, Jayne Cortez Papers, New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Black Studies.

7 Kevin Meehan argues that Cortez writes poems that recreate Afro-diasporic rituals to express an “epistemic need to negate or cut through the frames available to her as a visitor from the United States in the hope that she can establish more authentic paradigms for articulating her experience of Cuba.” Kevin Meehan, People Get Ready: African American and Caribbean Cultural Exchange (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 120.
creation, devoid of the constraints of modern rational thinking. Edwards and Cortez’s artistic visions often intertwined and overlapped as they experienced ancient traditions and then blended them with their own twentieth and twenty-first century worldviews to indict various systems of inequality that continue around the African diaspora as residue of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and twentieth-century African colonialism. In her musical collaborations, Cortez sometimes featured primitive instrumentation, and master kora players, griots, traditional percussionists, and non-Western woodwind instruments all demonstrate ancient aural connections in Cortez’s diverse musical palette. Cortez’s combination of ancient and modern instruments, played in ancient and modern styles by practitioners with very different musical philosophies and approaches, blurs the boundaries between primitive and contemporary. Bill Cole’s approach to free improvisation in the jazz tradition on ancient eastern instruments is especially emblematic of the transformation Cortez fosters in various collaborative settings. Cortez’s words do the same. Her poems rarely remain fixed on a single time period or idea. Following the tradition of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s Signifyin(g), Cortez creates poetic representations of the ancient as a means of responding to, commenting on, and critiquing modernity. In keeping with her Pan-African, diasporic aesthetic, Cortez uses her words to excavate, to inquire, and to enact a formal inquisition into issues that affect people around the diaspora.

As such, primitive imagery pervades Cortez’s written and performed work, most notably in poems like “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna.” Cortez believed in ancient African rituals’ power to give life and energy to their participants. In her poems that replicate primitive diasporic rituals, Cortez’s speakers tap into the power of West African traditions and offer them, much like American black vernacular blues music traditions, as alternatives to suffering. These poems create possibilities for practitioners to have agency as they replicate and embody ritual traditions

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8 Edwards’s artwork in Cortez’s books likewise contains primitive elements, and his best-known sculpture series combines contemporary found objects into collages that resemble ancient masks comprised of dismembered body parts. In poems, Cortez connects him to Ogun, the Yoruba orisha who governs blacksmiths because Edwards has studied metalworking traditions in Benin and other regions of Africa.
of a few different purposes. Foremost, “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna” present ways seemingly antiquated custom both served and continues to serve as a cosmology and as an ontology for practitioners thereof. Practicing and reinforcing these ways of knowing built and strengthened communities of practitioners during times of crisis and disjuncture. Cortez’s poetic recreations of these rituals, then, can be seen as her extended metaphor for a subjugated practitioner taking control of a situation by reaching into her cultural heritage and searching for truth in the unity and connections the rituals bring. Whereas a group of subjugated people may feel powerless in the face of capitalist oppression or war of ethnic division precipitated by such oppression, poems like “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna” remind audiences of their power to make change; if not change, then catharsis through endorphins that lift a dancing or drumming participant higher and higher and higher. In their performed and printed versions, Cortez expresses her commitment to surrealist ideology that celebrates primitive cultural customs and Afro-diasporic community through incrementally repeated strings of images in “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna.”

Cortez’s various first-person encounters with Yoruba-inspired religious traditions as she traveled around the African diaspora informed her unique syncretic poetic and performative replications thereof. Brazilian candomblé and capoeira, Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería, and New Orleanian hoodoo are just a few African-based creole religions practiced in North and South America that share characteristics of West African religious traditions. Each honors a creator of the universe, along with a pantheon of deities called orishas or loas/lwas, who act as intermediaries between humans and the creator. These religions invest supernatural power in ordinary objects, and practitioners use these objects to contact deceased ancestors and other spirits for assistance. Accordingly, different rituals provide opportunities for contact in liminal spaces that mediate between the living and the spiritual world, and most of these rituals involve

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music and dance. In Haitian Vodou, for example, drummers both lead and follow the dancers’ pulse to create the energy that invites spirits to manifest themselves in the dancers’ bodies.\(^\text{10}\)

When Cortez wrote poems to capture these rituals, she necessarily included musical elements of rhythmic repetition she intensified in multiple performative collaborations with the Firespitters.

Cortez wrote “Make Ifa” about a Nigerian system of divination that was designed to offer possible solutions for people’s problems.\(^\text{11}\) Cortez wrote the poem for Bill Cole’s 1988 Dartmouth College Fela Sowande Festival, and she dedicated the piece to Sowande, a musician and ethnomusicologist from Nigeria who published extensively on Yoruba Ifa Divination.\(^\text{12}\)

Sowande came to Wesleyan University in 1972, where he met Bill Cole, Clifford Thornton, and other musicians who collaborated with Jayne Cortez at different points in her career. Sowande’s residency at Wesleyan gave him an opportunity to share his scholarship on ephemeral rituals that incorporated music to provide their energy, form, and structure. Through their work together, Bill Cole integrated Sowande’s musical and spiritual ideology into his own original free jazz collaborations that crossed transatlantic cultural boundaries to create space for new musical possibilities incorporating African and black American vernacular musical practices. When Cortez and Cole began their collaborative partnership in the 1970s, Sowande’s ideas informed their musical and poetic ideals, more firmly connecting their creative outputs to primitive aspects of West African culture.

\(^{10}\) Fernández Olmos, 9–11, 120.


\(^{12}\) Sowande mentored Bill Cole at Wesleyan, and Cole organized the festival a year after Sowande died to commemorate his teacher who composed in a variety of genres from jazz piano and popular highlife music to modernist art music that incorporated aspects of Pan-African folklore. Sowande biographer Bode Omojola asserts: “Sowande’s ‘nationalism’ thus exists as a supranational concept, which, rather than merely focus on the projection of one country, is designed as a holistic representative of African music.” The word “supranational” recalls Jean-Jacques Lebel’s depiction of the mission of UNESCO’s *War on War* in Chapter Four, and while Omojola’s description of a “holistic representative” of music that is singularly “African” may seem simplistic, Sowande’s music, like Cortez’s representation of Ifa divination in this poem, was supranational in its incorporation of different African cultural traditions. Bode Omojola, *Music of Fela Sowande: Encounters, African Identity, and Creative Ethnomusicology* (Point Richmond, CA: MRI Press, 2009), 1–5, 38–39, 53.
In his book about West African Ifa divination, Fela Sowande explains: “*Ifa*, through divination properly carried out, could and [does] reveal to man, the mind and the will of god, through god’s servants, the archetypes, who were living dynamic psychic forces, most intimately connected with humanity.” In Cortez’s poem “Make Ifa,” she accesses these dynamic forces and connects them to humanity through Signifyin(g) on an Ifa divination ritual. The word Ifa means both a series of sacred texts and the orisha associated with them. In Ifa, priests act as oracles seeking divine solutions to questions about quotidian problems. Male diviners called babalawo cast cowrie shells or palm nuts onto a tray and interpret the arrangement of the thrown items to answer questions about practical matters and about more abstract questions of destiny. The Ifa text consists of 256 verses that provide instructions people should follow if they wish to lead morally good lives, and they include chants, songs, proverbs, poems, narratives, and prescriptions. Verses that prescribe magic include ingredients for certain “medicines” that include leaves, incantations, and divining powder shaped into specific figures on these trays, and Cortez both names and alludes to some of these items and practices in her poem “Make Ifa.” Traditionally, babalawo “make Ifa” for or against someone when they follow these directions to prepare medicine: “Ifa says someone will be called out of town to make medicine or Ifa. You should be careful lest he meet an evil spirit where he is going.” Though sometimes cryptic,
these primary sources suggest possible interpretations for the surreal images of “sanctified chalk,” “silver painted soot,” and “my consultation pan” in Cortez’s poem “Make Ifa.”

In this poem, Cortez replicates divination practices by placing her speaker at the center of her own version of a ritual that captures the diasporic nature of multiple ritual traditions that evolved from this West African practice. As in the majority of her poems, in “Make Ifa” Cortez again creates a first person poetic speaker who gives voice to one or more diviners in an Ifa ritual. From a structural standpoint, Cortez uses anaphora to render “Make Ifa” one of her most regular poems through its repetitive meter. The first line becomes a refrain in the poem’s middle and end, and the line is metered into five syllabic accents organized into two big beats and three little beats. All other lines are arranged in pairs of shorter lines that emulate alternating accents of two and three, thus mirroring the meter of the first line and subsequent refrains. Each of the sixteen lines between refrains exhibits Cortez’s characteristic incremental repetition, and their consistent rhythm replicates percussion and dancing in many West African-derived religious traditions. In “Make Ifa,” even lines begin with “In,” and odd begin with “of my.” All the pairings exhibit parallel syntactical structure in prepositional phrases; within these phrases, parallel verb tenses, adjectives, and nouns all match to enhance the repetitive rhythm.

Grammatically, Cortez avoids hyphenating some compound adjectives. While this elision is a common feature of some of her poems, there is some evidence of hyphenation in the different versions of “Stockpiling” mentioned in in the previous chapter that suggests this was not a habitual stylistic practice for Cortez. This incongruity could represent a shift in Cortez’s writing for him.” William Russell Bascom, Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1969), 61, 110–11, 486, 509.  


18 Laura Hinton conceives of Cortez’s subject position in “Make Ifa” as fluid: “Speaker, performing players, and audience merge in the Ifa ‘ceremony,’ avoiding the possibilities of a gaze or totalizing body images…. This is a ceremonial language discursively non-readable…. The sound of ‘funk’ and ‘shakes’ that Ifa ‘makes’ triggers [Fred] Moten’s ‘second iconicity,’ and the function of improvisational but also highly significant sounds interlock with these strange visual ‘eye’ images. The abject and ecstatic body in ‘Make Ifa’ is performing, and it cannot be called by one name. It cannot be symbolically trapped or contained by vision.” Hinton, Feminist Superhero, 218.
style, or it could simply be a function of idiosyncratic editing through multiple versions of the poems printed in different sources. Cortez also deploys rhyme, slant rhyme, and assonance from line to line to create harmony, cohesion, and evolution as “Make Ifa” progresses through a chain of images that grows from Cortez’s inventive poetic portrayal of a diviner.

While many images in the poem convey tangible aspects of Ifa, candomblé, hoodoo, and vodoun practices, Cortez combines them in her signature surrealist fashion that conveys energy rather than portray discrete static images. Fiery kinetic words like “flare,” “flames,” “heat,” “smoke,” and “soot,” permeate the poem and act as connective tissue in evolving strings of ritual practices. Cortez also invokes literal images of Ifa rituals, but she blends them to represent the syncretic nature of several interrelated diasporic traditions: “In sanctified chalk / of my silver painted soot” refers to symbols painted on the ground and body decorations. When Cortez writes “brass masking bones,” she alludes to the divination practice of throwing bones to foretell future events, and this image also conjures brass trombones in New Orleans. “Zumbified flames” represent the part of many Yoruba-derived rituals during which practitioners conjure zombies or other spirits that inhabit dancers’ bodies and appear in ritual fires. “In sparkola flare / of my hoodoristic scream” conveys a similar image that connects Ifa to hoodoo in New Orleans by replicating the screeching sound possessed dancers make when spirits inhabit their entranced bodies.19 “In cyclonic slobber / of my consultation pan” refers to another aspect of Ifa divination in which a diviner tosses four cowrie shells into a pan or onto a mat after asking a specific question; the formation in which shells land determines the answer.20 By combining actual and imagined images from different ceremonies, Cortez signifies on making Ifa and poetically engages in a ritual practice through which her speaker divines answers to questions the ritual

19 Real Soda company’s Sparkola is made with cane sugar. In the context of the line, Cortez may not be referring specifically to soda; rather, “sparkola” may be an imaginative word Cortez created like “hoodoristic” to contribute to the poem’s perpetual dancing motion. Specialty Sodas, accessed January 22, 2016, www.specialtysodas.com.
participants ask. Though the poem provides no tangible answers, it provides redemption through music and movement in syncretic Yoruba-based religious traditions across the African diaspora.

Like Cortez’s anti-war poems “Push Back the Catastrophes” and “Stockpiling,” “Make Ifa” also presents ecofeminist imagery that compares the earth’s destruction to the destruction of a human body. The “bellified groan” in “Make Ifa” recalls the “tattooed holes in my belly” in “Push Back the Catastrophes”; likewise, “brass masking bones” recalls “sugar cane of the bones.”

As in much of her work, Cortez emphasizes similarities among cultural practices around the African diaspora by repeating and signifying on similar images in different contexts. In “Push Back the Catastrophes,” the belly holes are a visual representation of the audible moans in “Make Ifa.” The bones in each poem, however, represent different acts. The bones in “Push Back the Catastrophes” act as a structural element, as sugar cane constitutes the core of many Caribbean islands’ economies. By conflating sugar cane with a human body, Cortez indicts mercenaries drilling into human bone marrow through acts of war. Cortez expresses her ecofeminist ideology in fresh ways as she juxtaposes images in her later poems that bring together human bodies and the earth to illustrate their inextricable connections.

Cortez also weaves together musical imagery and onomatopoeia throughout “Make Ifa,” including “bass droning moans,” “hammer tap blow,” “bellow,” “screech,” “bellified groan,” “banjonistic thumb,” and “scarified gongs.” In addition to the earlier allusion to trombones, Cortez uses the banjo, an American instrument with African roots, to strengthen diasporic connections analogous to religious rituals. While they suggest black American vernacular music, these examples also capture sounds associated with an Ifa ritual. Some of these musical images also conjure images of metal-smithing and Ogun, the orisha Cortez used to represent her husband Melvin Edwards. “Bellow,” for instance, could be interpreted as the roaring cry of a possessed dancer, an onomatopoeic embodiment of blues musician, or a tool that blows air onto a fire.

Cortez continues to combine sound-related words with words that depict her speaker dancing through the poem’s final lines:
In punched out ijuba
of my fire catching groove
In fungified funk
of my sambafied shakes
In amplified dents
of my petrified honks
In ping-ponging bomba
of my scarified gongs

Cortez creatively changes parts of speech and invents words in a verbal improvisation that increases the poem’s dynamic movement. These improvisatory words also rhyme to create rhythmic cohesion throughout the piece, as Cortez masterfully “makes Ifa” through her speaker who poetically signifies on ritual practices.

As her speaker dances through the previous lines, Cortez names different dances derived from African cultures to draw additional connections among traditional Yoruba practices around the African diaspora. Ijuba or juba, for instance, is a North American dance with complicated footwork and vigorous movements like those Cortez captures in her surrealistic imagery that restlessly moves the reader from one idea to the next. Cortez also connects ijuba to samba and bomba in this section of “Make Ifa.” Bomba is a Puerto Rican dance incorporating the juba “Hambone” 3/2 clave rhythm that came to the Caribbean in the seventeenth century through the transatlantic slave trade. During centuries of enslavement, people used bomba music and dance

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21 In Trinidad and Tobago juba carnival sailor dances celebrate the orisha Ogun, and Trinidad also has an Ijuba Shrine, suggesting another reason Cortez chose to incorporate images of metalworking and weaponry into this poem. Allusions here to Trinidad, Tobago, and metalwork also evoke a steel pan orchestra, integral to ritual carnival traditions throughout the Caribbean. Falola, 295–98.
23 Later called the “Bo Diddley Beat,” this rhythm of three long beats, followed by two shorter beats constitutes the backbone of marching rhythms in various New Orleanian parade cultures. Steve Sullivan, Encyclopedia Of Great Popular Song Recordings (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 203, 607.
as an expressive means to convey frustration about their social condition. Singers, dancers, and musicians performed songs that encouraged rebellion through building community and fostering shared identity in movement. Though dance has no explicit role in Ifa divination, permutations of the juba rhythm permeate syncretic ritual traditions with Yoruba cultural roots. As such, Cortez names another popular Caribbean carnival tradition when she writes: “In compulsified conga / of my soca moka jumbi.” Soca is a Trinidadian party music genre derived from a fusion of soul and calypso music. “Moka” comes from a Central African word meaning healer, though it is more commonly used as a cognate for the English verb “to mock.” “Jumbie” means ghost or spirit. Like African Senufo Firespitters, when mocko jumbies performers dance on stilts in Caribbean carnival celebrations, they bring good luck and ward off evil spirits. Earlier in the poem, Cortez also mentions “punta,” a traditional Garifuna dance in Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala. Punta dancing, like juba, bomba, and samba, was first practiced during the centuries of enslavement, and it likewise constitutes a means of expressing both celebratory events and somber rites of passage. By linking related dance traditions that crossed the Atlantic and took root in the Americas, Cortez demonstrates further continuity across the African diaspora in expressive cultural customs that built communities for enslaved people. All of these references to related dance traditions augment “Make Ifa’s” danceable juba-inflected rhythmic backbone. Cortez further strengthens this foundation by creating a refrain from the first and eighteenth lines in the

printed poem: “Make Ifa Make Ifa Make Ifa Ifa Ifa”; she uses these lines as refrains in two different recorded versions of the poem.28

Starting with this simple repeated phrase, the 1990 studio recording of “Make Ifa” on Everywhere Drums begins with Cortez in lockstep with bassist Al MacDowell and drummer Denardo Coleman. Cortez sets the tempo for the musicians in her delivery of the first line in two measures of 4/4 time that set the tempo for the bass and guitar. In terms of musical rhythm when she reads, Cortez renders this line as half of a four-bar phrase with an eighth-note pick-up for the first “Make.” After Cortez delivers the refrain “Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa” three times, she moves to the first stanza of the poem that serves as the first verse of this musical setting. Each line has three accents that occupy one measure of 4/4 time. Coleman’s drumming is characteristically active along with Bern Nix’s guitar comping that echoes the rhythm of Cortez’s words. Al MacDowell’s bass line replicates a Latin jazz Tumbao, rocking back and forth in chromatic half steps. Once Cortez completes the first stanza, she extends her repetitive refrain, echoing the line six times before Bill Cole begins an active extended solo, his first contribution to the piece. At one point, Cole’s soloing echoes the exact rhythm of Cortez’s earlier refrain. Cole often uses this technique in his collaborative performance of “Stockpiling” and in original compositions based on the number of syllables in the texts he uses for musical inspiration.

After Cole solos for almost a minute, Cortez jumps in with another refrain, though she seems to do so in the middle of the musical phrase, effectively turning around the beat. In this instance, what might be perceived as a rhythmic error in straight-ahead jazz with a predetermined form is easily accommodated by free jazz practitioners. Since Cortez’s voice and words provide the piece’s foundation, the musicians adjust to her. Al MacDowell immediately alters his bass line to move toward Cortez’s new accentual pattern. Cole also joins them on this refrain, playing the “Make Ifa” pattern on his sona in the way he played a syllabic interpretation of “Stockpiling” in his Seventh Cycle, thereby solidifying and ultimately affirming Cortez’s interpretation of the

piece’s metric feel as being right in time, rather than one beat away from the meter the Firespitters established in the previous section. While “Make Ifa” displays very few elements of free jazz in its purest sense, these free jazz practitioners adjust their playing to meet their colleagues wherever they choose to take the melody, or in this case, the rhythm.

To further lock in the new rhythm, Coleman also adds emphatic quarter note rimshot taps to his drumming, and by the time the group exits Cortez’s four-line refrain to begin the second stanza/verse, Cortez and MacDowell are nearly in lockstep again. Cortez hits her rhythmic stride by the middle of the stanza when she says the word “punched,” and while this was not likely a deliberate rhythmic decision, Cortez’s emphasis provides the listener with serendipitous spontaneity that makes this version of “Make Ifa” seem more like an organically recorded live piece than an overproduced edited studio recording. The idiosyncratic sense of “liveness,” hearkening both to Sowande in this chapter’s epigraph and to performance studies theorist PhilipAuslander, is an integral component to recorded jazz music, and, though this mistake might have been too costly to gloss over with another take in the studio, Cortez and the musicians may have chosen, rather, to keep this take that archives their spontaneous collaborative synergy.29 To further emphasize Cortez’s rhythm as she transitions into the final refrain, Bill Cole plays flourishes on his sona and then joins Cortez in mirroring her “Make Ifa” rhythm; he then turns around his beat in a contrapuntal call and response, beginning his musical ideas in the spaces between Cortez’s words. Cole’s deliberate rhythmic choice at the end of this lengthy refrain suggests that what initially sounded like a mistaken entrance on Cortez’s part was actually a conscious decision. The group ends with a longer refrain, during which Cortez trails off after several repetitions. Together with Cortez, Cole and the Firespitters recreate an ancient spiritual tradition through the flexible call and response between their words and music.

The live recording of “Make Ifa” from Cortez’s 2011 release *As If You Knew* sounds tighter and better-rehearsed than the 1990 studio recording. Over fifteen years elapsed between the both performances, so the musicians, the core Firespitters rhythm section once again playing with frequent collaborator Bill Cole, had likely performed the piece with Cortez in multiple live settings during the interceding years. To that end, Coleman begins this performance of “Make Ifa” with a simulated African drumming “break” using the same “Make Ifa” rhythmic pattern from the 1990 recording that sets the tempo for his mother and for the rest of the group. MacDowell’s bass ostinato is simpler, without the Latin jazz inflections of his earlier recording. When Cortez begins her first refrain after the musicians have established the metric feel for the piece, MacDowell carefully locks into her rhythm, again showing his close connection to Cortez’s vocal performance. This moment in their recorded oeuvre, like several in “No Simple Explanations,” displays MacDowell’s musical intuition in a call and response reflecting a deep musical affinity that grew through years of collaboration.

As Cortez transitions into the first stanza, Bern Nix’s guitar chords create a dissonant texture against MacDowell’s bass riffs, providing a more ominous undertone for this recording than the earlier studio recording. The only rhythmic discrepancy comes when Cortez delivers the irregular line “In compulsified conga / of my soca moko-jumbie,” but these lines lead immediately into the refrain, so she and MacDowell simultaneously lock into their original groove rather than turn the beat around to invert the metric feel. Cole also matches Cortez’s “Make Ifa” rhythm here before launching into a shorter improvised solo than the one he played in the studio; he signals the end of his solo with the same rhythm, and Cortez joins him on the refrain before she begins the second stanza/verse. The combination of Cole’s rhythm signaling the end of his solo and the beginning Cortez’s refrain here removes all possibility for turning the beat around, and the result is a solid second stanza in which Cortez adds more variety to her pitch and vocal inflection than she does on the studio recording. She lengthens, for instance, the “ah” sound at the end of each repeated “Ifa” in the final refrain, and the effect creates a playful tone,
despite the discordant minor musical setting; her words dance with the music, and this archived live performance feels more energetic and spontaneous than the studio rendition archived on *Everywhere Drums*. Cortez and the Firespitters, through multiple presentations of the same piece, signify on ephemeral live rituals through words and music that require the same kind of repetitive practice as the cultural traditions they represent. Cortez’s syncretic signification in “Make Ifa” demonstrates her first-person engagement with primitive traditions from which she, the musicians, and audiences derive strength in contemporary settings.

Four years after she recorded “Make Ifa” on *Everywhere Drums*, Cortez and the Firespitters created a similar poem, “I’m Gonna,” for her studio album *Cheerful & Optimistic*. 1994 was an active publishing year for Cortez when she released her only poetic collaboration written in response to her husband’s sculpture along with the first live recording of the Firespitters, described in Chapter Three. These three diverse publications not only provide audiences the first authorized archived recording of Cortez in live performance with the Firespitters, but they also demonstrate the range of Cortez’s diasporic aesthetic, her flexibility, and her penchant for perpetual motion in her performed work. During this stage of her career, Cortez frequently worked on concurrent projects in different genres as she traveled to promote her own work and to support her husband’s. Though this project focuses on her collaborations with musicians, Edwards and Cortez’s creative partnership shaped her artistic output, and there remains a wealth of unexamined evidence thereof that provides important depth to a more nuanced understanding of both their oeuvres. In November 1994 Edwards’s *Lynch Fragments* sculptures were displayed by UNESCO in Paris, and Cortez joined him on that trip. Cortez and

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30 In addition to her two self-published recordings of “Make Ifa,” less than a year after Cortez’s death, percussionist Francisco Mora-Catlett recorded a version of “Make Ifa” with his group AfroHORN on their album *Rare Metal*. Baritone saxophonist Alex Harding, a member of both AfroHORN and the Firespitters, is the featured soloist on this version of “Make Ifa.” Francisco M. Catlett, *Rare Metal* (New York: AACE, 2013).

31 On this trip, Cortez she visited UNESCO and spent time with Ted Joans and Edouard Glissant. This type of travel typified Cortez and Edwards’s international work, as they each scheduled meetings and
Edwards likely published *Fragments* for this event, and this collaboration contains the only printed version of the poem “Cheerful & Optimistic,” the title piece of that year’s studio release with the Firespitters.\(^3\) The poems in this collaboration, then, represent Cortez’s work in the first half of the nineties, including short personal pieces that bear witness to lynchings alongside more personal pieces that fuse sexual love and violence, all of which suggest her intimacy with her husband and his art, juxtaposed with violence at the core of his *Lynch Fragments* series. As in her musical collaborations, Cortez and Edwards built the book *Fragments* using a collage of multiple voices that reinforces her commitment to community dialogue.

In a different multivocal collage, Cortez’s studio album *Cheerful & Optimistic* brings together saxophonists James Carter and T. K. Blue with Frank Lowe as a dynamic trio with divergent playing styles. Cortez also invited African musicians Salieu Suso, Sarjo Kuyateh, and Abdoulaye Epizo Bangoura to aurally recreate the diasporic themes of community through multivocal dialogue on four tracks.\(^3\) The collaborations featuring the djembe and koras are a distinct departure from Cortez’s earlier recorded work with the Firespitters, and the trio of African musicians interact with Cortez and her regular collaborators in unusual ways, much more reminiscent of the performances in Bill Cole’s *Cycles*, that connect their West African musical performances that coincided with the other’s professional commitments. Cortez, Jayne Cortez Papers; Catherine Craft, *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades* (Dallas, TX: Nasher Sculpture Center, 2015), 32.

\(^3\) The year after they published *Fragments*, Cortez presented a reading of her work along with a slideshow of Edwards’s artwork in Arizona. *Fragments* may have been created with this event in mind, or it may have been a commemoration of Edwards’s Thirty Year Retrospective art show at SUNY Purchase. Some poems appear in later collections, though eleven of the book’s poems only appear here, a result suggesting Cortez wrote them solely in conversation with Edward’s sculptures. For example, “Clarification / 1984” only appears in *Fragments*, and Cortez presumably wrote it around the same time Edwards won an National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Sculpture in 1984. Conversely, “Comparative Literature” and “Marie Smith” both appear in *Intolerance* (2001), “Cultural Operations” is on *Taking the Blues Back Home* (1996), “States of Motion” is in *Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere* (1996), and “I Wake Up Early” is in *Jazz Fan Looks Back* (2002). Cortez also allowed *The Black Scholar* to publish “Comparative Literature” in 1987.

\(^3\) The album’s tracks consist of “Hello Everybody,” “Samba is Power,” “I Wonder Who,” “She Got He Got,” “War Devoted to War,” “Find Your Own Voice,” “Sacred Trees,” “I’m Gonna,” “Into this Time,” “I Got the Blues,” and “Cheerful & Optimistic.” The title piece is misprinted in the liner notes, though it is correct on the back cover. Minor errors like this exist throughout Cortez’s body of work, and some inevitably slipped her notice as she recreated evolving versions of a single poem in multiple settings. Some choices reflect deliberate revision, while others simply suggest hasty copyediting.
traditions to evolutionary transnational jazz, practiced by musicians experienced in the art of
listening, blending, and morphing these aurally disparate traditions.\textsuperscript{34} In the studio, Cortez built a
collage of voices that represents cultural blending and the circum-Atlantic dialogue at the heart of
her Pan-African, diasporic poetry. Like the African musicians on \textit{Cheerful & Optimistic},
American saxophonists Carter and Blue also bring new ideas and improvisational possibilities to
the Firespitters. Both musicians demonstrate a strong command of the bebop vocabulary that
connects the African rhythms in various tracks with black vernacular music of the 1930s and
forties. Blue has also worked with Pan-African jazz innovator Randy Weston for decades, and
Weston’s musical influence that blends the jazz of New York City with its ancestral African roots
is evident in Blue’s work with Cortez. Together with Frank Lowe’s established presence in the
Firespitters, the three saxophonists each make substantial contributions to \textit{Cheerful & Optimistic}
that provide exciting moments for collaborators and audiences alike.

In the multivocal studio environment Cortez created for recording \textit{Cheerful & Optimistic},
she and the Firespitters collaborated on “I’m Gonna,” a piece that replicates a ritual with similar
roots to the one they perform in “Make Ifa.” “I’m Gonna” is shorter than “Make Ifa,” and its
publication history, again released first on an album and later captured in print, suggests the
Firespitters may have had creative input regarding the text itself. From a structural standpoint,
“I’m Gonna” is one of Cortez’s most regular poems, which makes it an ideal choice for
performance in different settings. Each of the poem’s nineteen lines has four accents until the
final line, which has five. On the page the lines read evenly, but when Cortez performed “I’m
Gonna,” she gradually sped up her delivery of each line until she brought the poem to a frenetic
conclusion that ascends in a sort of ellipses, rather than an abrupt halt, fade out, or falling off. In
the final four lines, Cortez foregrounds the ending by repeating the last adverb and using an

\textsuperscript{34} Salieu Suso and Sarjo Kuyateh played with Cortez in a live performance at the 1995 \textit{Dankarafule} tribute
a9e8-0133-daa7-60f81dd2b63c.
ampersand. Here, internal repetition simplifies the last four lines and increases their pace. To create the feeling of dancing, Cortez uses active verbs, save for “sit” and “stand”; these contrasting strong, static images suggest safety in community as the speaker and other ritual practitioners stand united “like a wall of protection.”

Whereas many images in “Make Ifa” represent fire, Cortez uses water imagery to simulate dancing movement in “I’m Gonna”:

I’m gonna shake like a violent rainstorm
I’m gonna fill the night with splashing
I’m gonna sit like a zone of confluence
I’m gonna gallop in the inner basin

Cortez combines active verbs throughout this short piece with a variety of natural and human-made liquids such as “a violent rainstorm,” “splashing,” “a zone of confluence,” “inner basin,” “drink,” “palm oil,” “click my bottles together,” “rapids,” and “dive.” As with other evolving analogic images in her work, these water-based images offer audiences multiple possibilities for interpretation. For example, a zone of confluence is the place two rivers come together, in this case, the Niger River Delta. Alternately, in 1962, Cheikh Anta Diop used this term to describe syncretic cultural influences in Arabia, Western Asia, Mesopotamia, and Byzantium as a “zone of confluence” and posited this area is “characterized by a commingling of... cultural traits.” In a third possible interpretation, in meteorology, a confluent zone is an area where wind speed increases as a result of an inward airflow toward the general direction of flow. While the poem demonstrates a confluence of cultural practices, Cortez’s potential allusion to such a

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meteorological zone could have precipitated the rainstorm she names in line one. As with the 
music, dance, and ritual imagery in “Make Ifa,” these three interpretations of Cortez’s “zone of 
confluence” demonstrate her penchant for creating simple lines with multiple interpretations that 
invite audiences and collaborators into dialogic conversation with her text. Throughout the poem, 
natural water imagery brings rivers together to protect a basin, and Cortez uses these images to 
suggest harnessing natural forces as a means to gain strength and protection.

In addition to summoning natural forces, “I’m Gonna” also signifies on Yoruba-inspired 
rituals that honor Yemayá, as Cortez mentions molasses and palm oil, two symbolic offerings to 
this orisha. In Cuban Santería, Yemayá is the universal mother who gave birth to all orishas, and 
she is the deity of the sea. As the queen of the oceans, when Yemayá “takes possession of her 
children she swirls around quickly, swaying like the waves of the sea.”

Though there exist 
countless variants of these rituals, one common practice in Santería involves summoning different 
orishas through music and dance in which practitioners act as the horse a deity will mount or 
inhabit. Musical themes and dance movements correspond to the specific attributes of each 
orisha, and once the spirit possesses a worshipper, she appears to be in a hysterical state, but this 
supposed hysteria actually evokes a tightly controlled system that provides a structured space 
within which ecstasy has the potential to create a spiritual connection.

Spirit possession of this 
sort is also an integral part of Haitian Vodou rituals in which dancers become temporary 
receptacles for loa spirits through “a kind of double movement of attenuation and expansion… [in 
which] the possessed gives herself up to become an instrument in a social and collective 
drama.”

Drummers play an equally important role in vodou rituals, as they both control and 
follow the musical pace of the dancers. When Cortez and the Firespitters perform “I’m Gonna”

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39 Fernández Olmos, 43.
40 Fernández Olmos, 72–73.
42 Fernández Olmos, 120.
on *Cheerful & Optimistic*, Cortez’s speaker reenacts Haitian Vodou spirit possession, while the musicians drive the pace and intensity of the ritual.

Cortez strengthens the connection to vodou when she says her speaker is “gonna stuff my bones with charcoal,” “paint my body with arrows,” and “click my bottles together.” These actions allude to a dance intended to call Yemayá or another orisha who would protect Cortez’s speaker and all those involved in her recreated ritual. After undertaking these ritual actions, the speaker will transcend her corporeal, earthbound state; to enact this transformation, Cortez’s speaker is “gonna zigzag over and under,” “reach for the solar cycle,” and “swirl up through the rapids.” These images all lift the speaker upward, anticipating the poem’s final lines that juxtapose outward, upward motion with inward, downward motion:

I’m gonna push out further & further
I’m gonna press in closer & closer
I’m gonna dive down deeper & deeper
I’m gonna kick up higher & higher & higher

These lines suggest ritual actions simultaneously lift and ground the speaker by reaching toward her spiritual core. Cortez accomplishes this juxtaposition with simple, straightforward language that replicates rituals performed in clandestine spaces during centuries of enslavement to avoid overseers’ authoritarian scrutiny. Rather than explore the speaker’s spirituality in depth, Cortez places her speaker’s body in motion, actively spinning, diving, and kicking through a transformative ritual that represents community reclamation. The final repetition of the word “higher” suggests continuation past the bounds of printed words, as Cortez and the Firespitters lift her words off the page in various performed collaborations of “I’m Gonna.”

In their first archived performance of “I’m Gonna” on *Cheerful & Optimistic*, bassist Al MacDowell sets the pace for the ritual dance when he plays a melodic statement that matches Cortez’s lines syllable-for-syllable. The later printed version of the poem simplifies the form,
whereas in the performed version, Cortez rapidly repeats the entire text to set herself into dancing motion:

I’m gonna kick up higher & higher
I’m gonna dive down deeper & deeper
I’m gonna kick up higher & higher
I’m gonna dive down deeper & deeper
I’m gonna click my bottles together
I’m gonna zigzag over and under

When Cortez reaches this line the second time, she repeats the words “higher & higher” to signal the end of the first repeated stanza. In this version of “I’m Gonna,” bassist Al MacDowell goes beyond simple musical embellishment to show that he, too, is listening and responding to Cortez’s words. For instance, while Cortez reads “paint myself with arrows” the second time, MacDowell imitates a catcalling whistle on his bass that almost sounds like a human voice shouting “woo hoo.” Playful musical moments like this underscore the celebratory nature of the poem, as Cortez uses kinetic language that signifies on a high-energy Yoruba-inspired religious ritual. In another interactive moment during the second accelerando, MacDowell plays a descending chromatic line when Cortez repeats “dive down deeper & deeper.” As they continued to collaborate over more than thirty years, Cortez and MacDowell’s musical and poetic interactions in call and response with one another exemplified the collectivity and cooperation at the core of Cortez’s performed collaborations.

Saxophonists James Carter and Frank Lowe add to the excitement of the ritual when they play a short, explosive collective solo break after Cortez shouts her final “higher” of the first stanza. During their dueling improvisations, both saxophonists play frenzied multiphonics employing the overtones of their instruments, literally playing notes that go “higher & higher” to extend Cortez’s meaning. On the second time through the poem, Cortez omits “I’m” from the

beginnings of lines forty-four through fifty-three to stay in time with the musicians as they speed up. She finally breaks from the established rhythm as she repeatedly yells “higher & higher,” adding more rhythmic chaos to the already dense soundscape. At the end of the second accelerando, Cortez breaks from the rhythm sooner than the first, and her vocal facility is evident as she articulates each line, breathing like a singer or a musician. Textual variations of this type represent evolution and adaptation that typifies Cortez’s orality; her words are not bound to the page, and with poems such as “I’m Gonna,” she sometimes drafted and performed her work with the Firespitters before she fixed it in her printed publications.

In addition to recording the poem with the Firespitters band on *Cheerful & Optimistic*, Cortez also performed “I’m Gonna” in several different live settings, of which three are archived on video. Cortez’s preference for performing this piece underscores its danceable appeal to audience and its significance in her oeuvre as a public reenactment of primitive African cultural traditions that build community across the diaspora. These varied performances show further evidence of Cortez’s textual revision in performance and also provide visual and aural evidence of her spontaneous reciprocal interaction with the Firespitters. In 1995, Cortez performed the poem with Alex Harding, Al MacDowell, Bern Nix, and Denardo Coleman at the Dankarafule tribute to Papa Ladji Camara. Textually, this rendition is close to the version Cortez published the following year in *Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere*, save for the substitution of the word “myself” for “my body” in the clause “I’m gonna paint myself with arrows.” This change between the studio and printing suggests Cortez standardized the text to make it more uniform for print publication. The most noticeable textual difference in this performance is that Cortez skips lines nine through twelve from the *Cheerful and Optimistic* recording. Since she does the same in the text she printed in *Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere*, this performed version of the piece is closer to the version she later fixed in print. In 1998 again Cortez performed “I’m Gonna” at

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44 “Dankarafule.”
Badenya ’98 to honor Samory Touré. This video features three of the same Firespitters as the Dankarafule performance, with the exception of bassist Charnett Moffett, who provides a different musical foundation that stands out among the archived recordings of the piece. While the textual framework for this version of “I’m Gonna” is similar to the Dankarafule performance, the musical framework again shows Cortez and the Firespitters engaged in interplay that allows them to perform fluid call-and-response improvisations within this poem’s unique structure.

Eight years later, Cortez used “I’m Gonna” as her encore for a 2006 concert at James Madison University. This performance is contemporary with the version of “Make Ifa” Cortez archived on As if You Knew, and the continued performance of both pieces in various settings reiterates their significance in Cortez’s oeuvre. For this version of “I’m Gonna,” Cortez collaborated with the same Firespitters as the 1995 Dankarafule performance, with the exception of T. K. Blue on alto saxophone in the place of Alex Harding on the baritone sax. In my notes from this unrecorded performance, I acknowledged that the Firespitters fiddled around a little bit in the break prior to this piece, as if they were suggesting a different piece for their encore, but Cortez shook her head to negate their suggestions. The band’s immediate compliance with Cortez’s subtle gesture reaffirmed their complete respect for her leadership. This performance was the first time I heard Cortez interact with the Firespitters in a live setting, and given what I now know of their collaborations, this version of “I’m Gonna” was likely an on-the-spot decision. Like all professional musicians asked to change their plans on the spot, the Firespitters gave their best effort that improved with repetition. This un-archived interaction also affirms that the controlled studio setting often provided more polished renditions of Cortez’s collaborations with

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46 Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters, Live Concert, Jayne Cortez, T. K. Blue, Denardo Coleman, Al MacDowell, and Bern Nix (Wilson Hall, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, November 10, 2006).
the Firespitters, though Cortez and the musicians preferred the interactive exhilaration of live performance to the comparatively stifling studio environment.

Four years after the JMU concert, Cortez performed “I’m Gonna” in 2010 with Denardo Coleman for “A Dialogue Between Voice and Drums” at The Sanctuary for Independent Media in Troy, New York, and the video of this performance on YouTube appears to be the only archive of Cortez reading in this particular collaborative format.\(^\text{47}\) Depending on available resources and musicians’ schedules, sometimes Cortez only performed with her son, and though their work together without the rest of the band was stripped down in some ways, Coleman’s organic accompaniment to his mother’s dynamic reading maintains the intensity and integrity the poem had on the earlier studio recording.\(^\text{48}\) Coleman spent most of his life listening to and collaborating with his mother’s poetry, and she often told interviewers that he knew her work best. With just two performers, as on Cortez’s first collaborative album with bassist Richard Davis, they have more freedom to explore the possibilities for interacting. Thus, their duet performances in pared-down settings provided the clearest evidence of this connection, as they highlighted Coleman’s careful calls and responses with his mother’s vocal delivery.

In this setting, Coleman sometimes turns around the beat and modifies his playing to match and complement his mother’s spoken rhythm. In this intimate setting working as mother and son, Coleman can more easily take what may be seen as a mistake and transform it into


\(^{48}\) Cortez and Coleman again performed in concert as a duo at the College of William and Mary in February 2012. Though they did not perform “I’m Gonna” in this unrecorded concert, I was able to witness firsthand their intuitive connection as mother and son as a poet and musician who performed together for over forty years. Jodi Braxton shared her impressions of this final duet performance in her tribute to Cortez in The Black Scholar: “Jayne’s mouth was on fire as the rhythms charged through her body. Her mellifluous, lilting, chanting, soaring voice together with Denardo’s fiery one-man drum choir produced not merely an aesthetically and uplifting experience, but a sonic explosion of consciousness.” Jodi Braxton, “Adupé: The Last Performance,” The Black Scholar 43, nos. 1/2, (March 2013), 14–15. After the concert, Cortez and Coleman talked informally with a group of professors and guests over dinner. Mother and son were both soft-spoken and generous with their smiles, a marked difference from their vigorous onstage personas. In an email exchange shortly after his mother’s death ten months later, Denardo shared with Braxton that this was their last performance together, though some records indicate the Firespitters were scheduled to perform in New York that summer. Braxton, 15.
another possibility for intuitive interaction. When they end the first accelerando and Cortez returns to the first line to repeat the text, she begins without a cue from Coleman, and he picks up the new beat she establishes, immediately locking in with her to augment the regular rhythm of the first ten lines of “I’m Gonna.” When Coleman reaches his fastest tempo toward the end of the repeated second stanza, Cortez breaks from his pattern and adds to the rhythmic chaos as she modifies lines, dropping the word “gonna” and eventually distilling each line to its core verb, vigorously repeating their modifying adverbs an inconsistent number of times. This repetition evokes the way a dancer loses control of herself in a ritual when she is possessed by an orisha’s spirit. Cortez’s delivery in this pared down performance, then, while not as rhythmically precise as the version she recorded twenty-five years earlier on Cheerful & Optimistic, feels more thematically consistent with the ritual the poem recreates. Unlike different performed versions of the poem “Firespitters” explored in Chapter Three, the structure and text of “I’m Gonna” remain intact from performance to performance over three decades. As in “Make Ifa,” then, Cortez and the Firespitters’ repetitive performances reenact Yoruba-derived rituals that regularly bring practitioners together in communities that strengthen their cultural identities.

Archived performances of “I’m Gonna” and “Make Ifa” provide multiple opportunities to examine Jayne Cortez’s performative practices through two poems that signify on Afro-diasporic religious rituals. Few of Cortez’s other recorded collaborations fully embody syncretic religious traditions as effectively, and performing both pieces multiple times for different audiences provided wider exposure for the rituals upon which they signify. By this point in her career, Cortez demonstrated Fela Sowande’s assertion that when “superb craftsmanship has been successfully wedded to—and has become a channel for—a ‘Poetic Content’ [it] adds new dimensions and insight, greater depth and clarity, to man’s awareness.” As she continued to work with Denardo Coleman, Bill Cole, and the other Firespitters, Cortez honed her collaborative techniques and presented her poetry to wider audiences. These audiences constituted the wider

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49 Cole, John Coltrane, 29.
diasporic community Cortez continued to build by attending, performing at, and organizing
conferences and other events with artist-activists around the African diaspora. Her interactive
performances allowed audiences glimpses into primitive cultural customs that embodied Cortez’s
revolutionary poetics. Cortez’s earlier anti-war poems and elegiac praise songs also incorporated
elements of these ritual practices, showing them to be an important part of her diasporic thinking
from the beginning of her publishing career; however, poems that actively replicate these rituals
through music and dance demonstrate her deepening understanding of these traditions through
firsthand experiences in her growing global community. Unlike the early poems in Festivals and
Funerals and Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man’s Wares, Cortez proudly presented “Make
Ifa” and “I’m Gonna” in multiple settings over several decades that reaffirmed the repetitive ritual
significance of each collaborative piece. As she entered her final two decades, Cortez continued
to incorporate elements of these Yoruba traditions into more political pieces that interrogated
genocidal atrocities across the African continent.
In contemplating the costs of a humanitarian intervention, it is important to bear in mind that this is not a natural calamity, nor is it even a case of massive war-related “collateral damage.” The African tribal peoples of Darfur have been brought to this state by genocidal policies of destruction…. If the international community cannot find the will to intervene in Darfur, if we acquiesce in what is unmistakably genocide by other means, it can only mean that the real lesson of Rwanda is that there is no one ready to learn the lesson. – Eric Reeves

Jayne Cortez wrote and performed poems like “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna” to celebrate syncretic diasporic ritual practices and to demonstrate ways in which these practices disrupt colonial power structures. Intervention and disruption are central themes in these two poems, and Cortez framed many of her elegiac praise songs and ecofeminist anti-war poems as calls to action against postcolonial violence. As seen in previous chapters, throughout her career, Cortez used her poetry to bring attention to egregious human rights violations and to build international communities with the power to precipitate intervention. In 1992 Cortez told interviewer Fikisha Cumbo: “I talk about politics in my work… and sometimes when I read the political works to audiences, I get an immediate response from those audiences, and then we can have a dialogue about what was either said or what was left out or what was not said or about the world in general.” In last two decades of her career, Cortez wrote and performed poems about the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the 2004 genocide in Sudan, and when she interrogated these and other unimaginable acts of destruction in her poetic collaborations with musicians, Cortez worked to break cycles of violence that continue in Africa as vestiges of European colonial control.

Promoting awareness through multivocal collaborations of “I Have Been Searching” and “Janjaweed Militia” typified Cortez’s lifelong commitment to the Pan-African ideals she explored in her earliest work with musicians during the Black Arts Movement. These anti-genocide poems, central to Cortez’s performed oeuvre in her final decades, critique postcolonial violence by

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2 Jayne Cortez qtd. in Creative Artists Cultural Exchange International TV. Dir. Fikisha Cumbo. CACE International TV Studios, 1992. DVD.
bearing witness to each genocide from a first-person point of view, in the way a blues singer
confronts and converts grief through witnessing and testifying. By performing both pieces
publicly, both with and without musicians, and by including “I Have Been Searching” on her only
major-label recording, Cortez increased the visibility of these genocides by stimulating
conversations and by bringing poetic and musical images of mass murder and perpetual
unbalance to audiences around the world.

Situated between poems about jazz trumpeters on Cortez’s Verve release of “Poetry &
Music” called Taking the Blues Back Home, “I Have Been Searching” brings a horrifying chapter
Rwandan history to an audience of blues music fans who might not otherwise find the poem in
one of her elusive chapbooks, attend a collegiate poetry reading, or have any awareness of
international political violence. Likewise, when Cortez and the Firespitters performed “Janjaweed
Militia” at international conferences and major universities, they exposed audiences to
devastation that inspired a sweeping, but still largely ineffectual, “Save Darfur” movement. While
it would be naïve to claim Cortez’s poetic collaborations help prevent this type of violence from
recurring, her promulgation of these two genocidal atrocities continues to create awareness
whenever these poems are read or heard. As in other poems throughout Cortez’s performed body
of work, she remains focused on the postcolonial fallout she interrogated in early pieces like
“Festivals & Funerals” and “Firespitters.” Throughout her career, Cortez brought this focus to
contemporary conflicts as they arose, but her ideology remained grounded in her opposition to the
European domination of the African continent that continues to subjugate basic human rights
through intentionally constructed racial and ethnic boundaries formed when colonial powers
arbitrarily slashed Africa into self-serving territories for economic gain.³

Cortez first published and recorded “I Have Been Searching” about Rwanda in 1996’s
Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere and on Taking the Blues Back Home. In addition to exposing

³ Martin Meredith, The Fate of Africa: From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair: A History of
the poem to an eclectic audience, Cortez includes this piece on an album dedicated to the blues in keeping with her use of the blues idiom and its antecedents as means of coping with profound loss. Two years later, Cortez performed “I Have Been Searching” at Badenya ‘98 in a different musical setting, and, as with “I’m Gonna” and other poems she performed in multiple venues over several years, her performances with different musicians on multiple iterations of the same poem created fresh collaborative possibilities that refused fixity. Cortez published “Janjaweed Militia” about Sudan in 2007’s The Beautiful Book, and she released a live recording of the piece on 2011’s As If You Knew. Before she published “Janjaweed Militia,” she performed it in concert at James Madison University in October 2006 and later at her 2008 Slave Routes conference at New York University, and different recordings of this piece provide archived evidence of Cortez’s creative process at the end of her career. As one of Cortez’s last published poems, “Janjaweed Militia” represents the culmination of forty years of collaborative activist-art. Though these two poems deal with inextricably linked human tragedies that occurred less than a decade apart, as with other poems that present similar themes, Cortez takes different poetic and musical approaches to each—one rooted in Mandinka storytelling, and the other in free jazz interactions with the blues. Collaborative performances of these two poems archive Cortez and the Firespitters’ well rehearsed, musically syncretic dialogues about large-scale slaughter.

Journalists and scholars who write about Rwanda and Darfur often compare the way the international community failed to prevent these mass-murders: “…the global powers-that-be are capable of almost infinite callousness and indifference to human suffering if geopolitical or political interests are not at stake. Calls for forceful intervention based strictly on humanitarian grounds, as we have learned the hard way once again in Darfur, are simply irrelevant to those with the means to intervene.”4 Cortez fought indifference to others’ anguish every time she performed poems that brought human suffering to the attention of different audiences—from

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participants at international academic conferences, to jazz festival audiences, to college undergraduates attending a reading as part of a course requirement. Building awareness prompts action that threatens international superpowers mired in bureaucratic cycles of inaction that allow ethnic cleansing to recur across the African continent. Less than ten years after the defeat of the Hutu Power movement in Rwanda, however, a humanitarian crisis in Sudan quickly devolved into a conflict journalists and historians deemed the world’s “next Rwanda,” begging for international intervention that came too slowly. As with the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, humanitarian organizations cite lack of international funding and military support as facilitating the deaths of almost a half-million people in Sudan.  

While these crises were developing in Rwanda and Sudan, Cortez was compiling new poems into a longer book and was preparing to record another collaboration with the Firespitters. In addition to allowing Taking the Blues Back Home to receive greater circulation through the Verve record label, Cortez also used publisher High Risk Books, the American counterpart of England’s Serpent’s Tail Press, to print Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere. This book and CD were Cortez’s most widely-available collections at the time, and they introduced more readers and listeners to her work and further secured her place in the American literary canon as a poet and community builder who confronted oppressive forces and brought together like-minded artists in her unique musical collaborations, in her public performances in academic and community venues, and in her international festival and conference participation. Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere was her longest book at the time, containing more than sixty new poems that show Cortez’s subject matter growing in scope to include pieces that portray her interactions with political activists in locations including Cuba and Brazil. Cortez’s 1981, 1984, and 1991 trips to Cuba included meetings with revolutionary artists and activists who opposed Western capitalism,  

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5 Grzyb, 35.
and Cuba’s strained relationship with the United States informed Cortez’s revolutionary politics in several poems that honor Cuban artists and political activists.6

Poems in this book also portray Cortez’s experiences in Mexico and Morocco, set among several pieces rooted in Cortez’s familiar terrain of New York City. Other pieces confront both general and specific acts of violence around the African diaspora, including Cortez’s first-person poetic encounter with the Rwandan genocide, “I Have Been Searching.” Cortez’s poems from this period incorporated more locations affected by the aftermath of European colonial devastation around the African diaspora, and the book’s praise songs honor a mixture of Caribbean and American artists like Babs Gonzales, Aimé Césaire, Nicholás Guillén, Miles Davis, Big Momma Thornton, and Ana Mendieta. Her elegiac pieces in Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere continue to show Cortez’s emphasis on strength in community and the connections among different cultures that draw on similar ancient traditions and customs. The book’s penultimate piece, the kinetic “States of Motion,” pays tribute to almost forty of Cortez’s friends and heroes, imagining their individual journeys of transition to the other side. The final poem, “Find Your Own Voice,” became an anthemic refrain for the remainder of Cortez’s career. In this piece she later performed and recorded with the Firespitters, she urges audiences to “Find your own voice and use it / use your own voice and find it.” Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere is a collection of poetry that presents Cortez’s unique voice and her ongoing commitment to use her poetic voice to fight injustice. At this stage in her career, Cortez demonstrated to growing audiences that her voice was a catalyst for multivocal collaborations with musicians and other artists who addressed global issues that threatened lives across the African diaspora.

6 “In early January 1985, Toni Cade Bambara, Rosa Guy, Vertamae Grosvenor, Audre Lorde, Gloria Josephs, Mildred Walters, Mari Evans, Alexis DeVeaux, and I arrived a Jose Marti airport in Havana, Cuba. Poet Nancy Morejon and members of the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC) met at the delegation. This was the Black Women Writers Cultural Tour to Cuba arranged by Black Scholar Magazine” Jayne Cortez qtd. in Linda Janet Holmes, and Cheryl A. Wall, Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 113.
The CD *Taking the Blues Back Home* likewise showcases Cortez’s singular voice in dialogue with the Firespitters and other musicians. The album’s title also represents Cortez’s personal journey that began in an early love of blues music and led her to build lasting relationships with American and African artists that would eventually manifest in her building a home in Senegal. In addition to bringing back most of the personnel from her previous CD *Cheerful & Optimistic*, *Taking the Blues Back Home* also features guest appearances from Mandinka singer Nakoyo Suso and American blues veterans Billy Branch and Carl Weathersby. Weathersby and Bern Nix anchor most of the tracks in the familiar idiom of blues guitar with their powerful presence on this well-produced album, arguably one of Cortez’s strongest because of its high production values and the interactivity of its collaborative performances. Most of the album’s tracks are grounded in this blues aesthetic, though sometimes, as on *Cheerful & Optimistic*, Cortez and the musicians present polyrhythmic West African antecedents of the blues that are less familiar to some listeners. These juxtapositions embody the album’s title *Taking the Blues Back Home*, as Cortez and her cohorts evoke the syncretic past, present, and future of blues music that morphs and blends in conversational collaborative musical environments across the African diaspora. In one interview, Cortez explained: “The blues has so many codes I wanted to investigate them. The musicians may be playing a twelve-bar blues, but I’m talking about the

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7 This album presents “Taking the Blues Back Home,” “Bumblebee, You Saw Big Mama,” “Mojo 96,” “Cultural Operations,” “The Guitars I Used to Know,” “Talk to Me,” “I Have Been Searching,” “Global Inequalities,” “Blues Bop for Diz,” “You Can Be,” “Endangered Species List Blues,” and “Nobody Knows a Thing.” In the liner notes Cortez shares: “I would like to express my thanks to the Firespitters: Denardo Coleman, Whose flexibility, knowledge of the material, choice of tempos and drum skills held everything together. The power base of Al MacDowell forever paving the way with his electrophonic interpretations. Bern Nix and Carl Weathersby who increased the authority of the guitar. Billy Branch making the harmonica sound like train whistles and space ships. Nakoyo Suso’s voice and use of the Mandinka language created interesting variations on the theme, and with kora players Sarjo Kuyateh, Salieu Suso of Gambia and percussionist Abdoulaye Epizo Bangoura of Guinea, gave us the other part of our story and provided a permanent African environment. Frank Lowe, one of the leading avant-garde tenor saxophonist[s], is always thinking, extending, and coming up with something unusual, and that something is balanced by bebop structured alto saxophonist Talib Kibwe whose great enthusiasm and high spirits make you feel real good and feel like creating.”
An album review suggests this juxtaposition demonstrates the range of the West African jali storyteller’s “cultural production and the circulation of jalis in a diasporic imagination…. The structure of feeling… produces a kind of double voicing that is created between the desires of those in diaspora for reconnection and jalis who are willing to go along with these projects.” Sometimes compared to a contemporary storytelling griot or jali, Cortez’s vocal performance on Taking the Blues Back Home showcases oral and aural connections that define her global diasporic aesthetic of building community through reciprocal dialogue. In addition connecting her collaborations through diverse communities of musicians, Cortez also worked behind the scenes to organize larger communities of artists and activists committed to social and political justice on a global scale.

In the years immediately following these widely-circulated publications, Cortez focused her attention toward two major conference series, Slave Routes and Yari Yari, that showed her dedication not only as an active participant but also as an organizer of artists and intellectuals from around the African diaspora who dedicated their lives to advocating for basic human rights. Cortez was a founding coordinator for three Yari Yari conferences with the Organization of Women Writers of Africa. In her “Statement of Welcome” to the second conference, she told the assembled writers: “Black women writers from around the globe have been struggling against poverty, racism, exploitation, gender oppression, censorship and other human rights violations. What we want is to participate in global decisions concerning survival and the future of humanity…. We need access to the progress of globalization.”

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8 Jayne Cortez qtd. in Sascha Feinstein, Ask Me Now: Conversations on Jazz & Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 54.
10 Cortez’s papers at the Schomburg contain festival documents, including OWWA meeting minutes and correspondence with many conference participants. As with her collaborations and travels with Melvin Edwards, Cortez’s work with Yari Yari and Slave Routes are prodigious subjects worthy of considerable examination in another study. Jayne Cortez, “Statement of Welcome” (unpublished manuscript, Yari Yari Pamberi Conference, New York University, October 2004, Jayne Cortez Papers, New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Black Studies), typed.
conferences and festivals like FESTAC ’77 and War on War for over three decades, Cortez took a leading role in coordinating Yari Yari and Slave Routes conferences. In addition to organizing these major events during her final decade, Cortez published three more books, recorded a studio album, released a live album, and remastered a compilation of selected studio recordings with the Firespitters. The first decade of the twenty-first century also marked Cortez and Edwards taking up permanent residence in Africa for part of every year, and that residence allowed Cortez to deepen her spiritual connection to her African roots more tangibly, as she immersed herself in writing about daily life in Dakar. In addition to these poems about everyday subjects, Cortez’s poetry from her last decade more clearly articulates her global dialogues with people who live in places still devastated by European colonialism.

Written just before and during her final decade while she was working to organize Slave Routes and Yari Yari conferences, both “I Have Been Searching” and “Janjaweed Militia” confront the horrors of genocide by representing personal encounters by survivors who witnessed unimaginable destruction and displacement. During its 1948 Genocide Convention, the United Nations established criteria for classifying repeated acts of violence against a specific group of people as a “genocide”: “killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, forcibly transferring children of the group to another group, deliberately

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11 While she became more deeply involved as an organizer, Cortez compiled the short collection Intolerance between the larger releases of Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere and Jazz Fan Looks Back. Contents include “Amadou’s Blues,” “I Got the Blue-Ooze 93,” “Melanin,” “Rape,” “I Have been Searching,” “Global Inequalities,” “Give Me the Red on the Black of the Bullet,” “Marie Smith,” “Comparative Literature,” “What’s Your Take,” and “There It Is.” “Amadou’s Blues” and “Melanin” (renamed “In Jasper, Texas”) are the only two she had not previously published, and, both poems appear again in The Beautiful Book. Four of these poems also appear in Cortez’s final collection, On the Imperial Highway. At just twelve poems, this book was a limited special edition that Cortez put together for a singular event like receiving CUNY’s 2001 Langston Hughes Medal. The book reads as a portfolio including some of her “greatest hits” that spanned much of her career, though most of these poems were written after the 1970s. The copy of Intolerance in Cortez’s papers at the Schomburg appears to have been photocopied, and Bob Hershon confirmed he did not publish this book at The Print Center. The book cover contains a screened reproduction of one of Melvin Edward’s spray-painted works, reminiscent of his 1974 Lines for John Coltrane and Other Creative People, for which he placed chains, barbed wire, and other metal hardware atop newsprint, then spray-painted the surface to leave negative shadows of the metal on the paper. Edwards also used this medium on the cover artwork of the second British printing of Coagulations and in various images throughout the body of Scarifications.
inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction, and imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group.”\textsuperscript{12} The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Sudan and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda both claimed millions of lives and displaced even more people who continue to flee inexorable violence that has become normalized for countless Africans who suffer fallout from European colonial withdrawal. By bringing attention to these and other humanitarian disasters in her poetry, Cortez strove to break cycles of violence through exposing audiences to genocidal images resulting from the insidious aftermath of colonial domination. Like other activists invested in curtail future violence, Cortez’s collaborative poetry embodies the belief that solving the root causes of genocide is a decades-long commitment.

As Cortez began her writing career in the 1960s, the roots of later genocides in Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi resulted from failure to curtail violence as it arose. In the twenty-first century, semi-annual genocides claim millions of lives in the African Great Lakes region, and violence between different factions continues because of government inability to maintain peace.\textsuperscript{13} Because of this failure, in 1994 militant Hutu rebels in Rwanda systematically murdered approximately 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus over just 100 days.\textsuperscript{14} Ironically, outside of social status, the two groups traditionally recognized few differences between themselves; the Tutsis, consisting of no more than fifteen percent of the population, were more affluent cattle herders, while the much larger, poorer, Hutu majority were farmers. As members of both groups intermarried and lived alongside one another in the same region for centuries, intermarriage and occupational changes where people moved from one group to another further eroded distinctions between Hutus and Tutsis.\textsuperscript{15} The differences were clearly delineated, however, during the period

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\textsuperscript{12} Agnes van Ardenne-van der Hoeven, Mohamed Abdel Rahim M, Salih, Nick Grono, and Juan E, Mén dez, \textit{Explaining Darfur: Four Lectures On the Ongoing Genocide} (Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA, 2006), 38.
\textsuperscript{13} Grzyb, 56.
\textsuperscript{14} Julius Adekunle, \textit{Culture and Customs of Rwanda} (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 22.
\textsuperscript{15} Meredith, 157–58.
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of colonial rule following World War I, when Belgium institutionalized Tutsi authority over the Hutus and indigenous Twa pygmies by denying them higher education and other means to attain political and social agency. In addition to giving Tutsis power and privilege, Belgians also fabricated stronger racial and ethnic divisions based on physical characteristics like height and nose shape that increased tensions among groups who later committed egregious human rights violations based on these divisions.\(^{16}\) Cortez interrogated these fabricated divisions among groups like the Tutsis, Hutus, and Twa when she exposed corrupt power structures in poems like “I Have Been Searching” that interrogate postcolonial violence.

When Cortez put her thoughts about the Rwandan tragedy on paper, rather than focus on the 100 days of killing, she chose to replicate the perpetual motion of a survivor who continues to look for someone who disappeared during the chaos. During the years following independence, ruling Hutus forced Tutsis to emigrate to neighboring countries to escape violence fueled by growing hatred between factions.\(^ {17}\) In the three decades leading up the 100-day massacre, thousands of Tutsis had already fled the country in search of peace. Cortez shows her audience the far-reaching aftermath of the attacks that force survivors to live with consequences of violence like displacement, destitution, and death long after the premeditated killing has ended. Like her other global poems about war and violence, such as “Push Back the Catastrophes” and “Stockpiling,” this poem has a “supranational” quality that transcends time and place. The images Cortez portrays could represent any location from which one group of people is forced to flee at the behest of another. To reflect this global quality, when Cortez recorded “I Have Been Searching” on the studio album *Taking the Blues Back Home*, there is no mention of Rwanda—

\(^{16}\) These new lines of demarcation between Hutus and Tutsis led to compulsory identification cards that outlined Rwandan ethnic affiliations in undisputable terms. During the end of Belgian colonial rule, the Hutu majority started to push back against the Tutsi ruling class, erupting into a violent revolution in 1959. Thus, when Rwanda gained its independence from Belgium in 1962, Hutus assumed full political power, while Tutsis lost the privilege they had enjoyed during the colonial period (Adekunle, 16–19).

\(^{17}\) Fred Grünfeld and Anke Huijboom, *The Failure To Prevent Genocide In Rwanda: The Role of Bystanders* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 2007), 34.
either in the body of the poem, in its subtitle, or in the liner notes. As with her earlier anti-war poem “Push Back the Catastrophes,” this omission reflects Cortez’s conscious decision to allow audiences to relate this specific atrocity to a growing number of postcolonial conflicts like the contemporary crisis in Bosnia and twenty-first-century crises in Syria and Iraq by omitting references to a specific time or place.

Within the body of the poem, “I have been searching / and searching and searching” acts as the predominant refrain, and Cortez deploys this refrain liberally to recreate continuation without end. The present perfect progressive verb tense captures the emotion involved in a search that began in the past, continues, and will certainly go on in the future. By 1990, approximately 500,000 Tutsis inhabited refugee camps in neighboring countries, often causing friction with local populations that added to their instability. As Tutsis continued to flee their homes into the 1990s, organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch published reports of “serious human rights violations” against the Tutsi minority, but these warnings resulted in little more than largely ineffectual United Nations Peacekeeping forces stationed in Rwanda. The poem’s speaker is embroiled in the devastating result of these ineffectual interventions; she has been engaged in searching “since the day they said / you were tossed into a ditch by / a bulldozer,” and she continues her search because “I cannot find you anywhere.” Cortez, through her speaker, witnesses atrocities such as “a million human bones,” “twenty thousand bandaged skulls,” “fifty thousand jagged wounds,” “sky all smoky with skin,” and “bloody footprints.” While earlier poems like “Firespitters” likewise engage in surrealist hyperbolic juxtaposition, these staggering statistics represent actual numbers Cortez wants her audiences to experience through the eyes of her speaker. In addition to the poem’s refrain, Cortez

18 Besides omitting the subtitle on the album, Cortez made a few very minor structural changes in the body of the poem for the album liner notes, mostly involving changing the placement of some “ands” from the ends to beginnings of lines and replacing them with ampersands when they start lines.
20 Meredith, 491.
21 Grünfeld, 70.
uses the clause “I have been searching” as a form of incremental repetition at the beginnings of several lines in the first stanza while the speaker uncovers each horrific sight. In her customary fashion, Cortez deploys a poetic speaker who has an intimate connection with a singular and plural “you” who has and have suffered at the hands of an oppressive force. Cortez disrupts subject/object relations by using the subject’s perpetual absence as a vehicle to describe a brutal landscape, the remnants of genocide.

The speaker intensifies the connection between herself and the subject when she laments, “and oh my friend / I have found nothing but….” The subject of the search is not a nameless, faceless “you” to the poem’s speaker; rather, the speaker holds this person dear as a lost friend. In the final months leading up to the most violent attacks, the UN received frequent, increasingly dire requests for support that the international community largely ignored; therefore, when an April 6, 1994 attack took down the plane carrying both the Rwandan and Burundian presidents, shockwaves of violence escalated into full-scale genocide against Rwandan Tutsis. 22 By July 18, 1994, nearly three-quarters of the Tutsi population were murdered more rapidly than victims of any other mass killing in recorded history. Almost 2 million people became refugees, and Tutsi survivors came out of hiding in forests, in caves, in swamps, under sheds, and inside cupboards. Ditches were filled with rotting bodies, and the entire country had been decimated. 23 Rather than allow her poetic subject to go unnoticed among these staggering statistics, Cortez’s speaker commemorates her lost friend. After acknowledging this loss, Cortez repeats the lines “the song of dying / and the song of not knowing” to summarize the horrific sights she has found during her fruitless search. Every image she recounts in the poem captures uncertainty and the struggle for life that ultimately consumes many people who survive the initial trauma of genocidal attacks. Cortez deploys a musical metaphor here to bring her audience closer to the devastation as she evokes sounds of human suffering. When she repeats both lines, she emphasizes the ineffectual

22 Grünfeld, 139, 153.
23 Meredith, 523.
nature of the speaker’s search for her friend, and that ineffectuality suggests the failure of memory and narrative in the face of trauma. Nevertheless, “I Have Been Searching” engages with Joseph Roach’s circum-Atlantic process of surrogation through which “the unspeakable cannot be rendered forever inexpressible.” In bearing witness to jarring violent images, Cortez, like a blues singer, creates a dialogic space in which communal remembering and acknowledging violence can disrupt dominant power structures.

To further establish a “counterpublicity to the dominant discourses of the nationstate,” Cortez often uses third person plural pronouns to represent an oppressive outside force, removed from the more intimate first and second person relationships she creates within the piece; however, in “I Have Been Searching,” “they” could either represent survivors of the attacks or bystanders who were largely unaffected. The second stanza shifts perspective to focus more on the impressions of the “they” Cortez first mentions in line three. The speaker has to rely on what “…they said / they saw…” to visualize, along with the audience, the moment at which “…you didn’t have a chance to hide / you didn’t have time to run.” In this way, “I Have Been Searching” forces the audience to experience the search through the speaker’s eyes, and Cortez removes the audience one step further, forcing them to rely upon a secondhand account of what may have happened to the speaker’s friend.

Cortez uses this specific search as representative of a larger conversation addressing genocidal violence on the African continent that originated in colonialism. Cortez names the Hutu rebel perpetrators indirectly, calling them “the assassins” who “came in” to the area her speaker continues to search. The word “assassins” serves different purposes: it implies the killings were intentional, skillful, and methodical; it also allows the audience the possibility to interpret this poem in the context of other genocides in other places. Her use of “assassins” also creates a

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fourth entity: an outside force that has exerted its power against the other figures she has already established in “I Have Been Searching.” Cortez also recognizes “the factions within factions of factions of / factions of factions” that blur the lines among her “I,” “you,” “they,” and “the assassins.” Here, Cortez’s poetic repetition economically describes one impetus of the Rwandan genocide through perpetual and reflexive subjugation of one formerly fluid identity group by another. A group of so-called Hutus within a much larger population of mixed racial and ethnic distinctions attempted to eliminate all Rwandans who were, sometimes arbitrarily, designated as “other.” Cortez, her other anti-war poems, builds a community of surviving witnesses that disrupts dominant power structures by examining the roots of their destructive powers in an act akin to Judith Butler’s assertions about naming bodies in order to control them.

When Cortez, the Firespitters, and West African guest musicians created different mixed-genre collaborative settings for the text, they built a larger community by combining distinctive diasporic musical traditions and evoking different locations that are subject to similar postcolonial violence. Adding West African music to the poem serves to aurally locate it in Africa, while further obscuring the East African setting of the original piece from the audience. The 1996 recording of “I Have Been Searching” on Taking the Blues Back Home begins with master musicians Salieu Suso and Sarjo Kuyateh playing two koras, Nakoyo Suso singing in Mandinguo, and Abdoulaye Epizo Bangoura playing the djembe. The kora is a twenty-one-stringed West African harp instrument, and jelis, often called griots by French colonizers, are storytelling poets who play the kora while singing traditional songs and tales. The djembe, one of the most popularly played African musical exports, also has its roots in West Africa. On this recording,

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26 Though the liner notes say the language is Mandinka, but one source suggests it is actually Mandinguo, a similar language also mostly spoken in Gambia. Charlotte Blake Alston, Personal Communication, August 21, 2017.

27 Djembes can vary in size and shape, but all are carved from a single piece of wood that is shaped into two distinct parts: a wider top and a narrower base. The drum’s characteristic sound comes from goatskin stretched by three different rings that can be adjusted to increase tension. Eric S. Charr, Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 90–92, 110, 213–15.
guest musicians Nakoyo Suso and the two kora players work as a trio to assume the role of a single *jeli* storyteller while Bangoura drums, creating a rich backdrop with which Cortez and the Firespitters interact. This choice of musical accompaniment is significant, in that Rwandan music has different characteristic timbres and tonalities produced by different instruments; however, this choice also points to Cortez’s diasporic aesthetic that combined different African cultural practices into a syncretic African American signification on these traditions. Cortez’s collaborative signification with musicians draws together disparate cultures and affirms strength in multivocal community dialogues.

The instrumentation for this version of “I Have Been Searching” also represents genocides in other regions in Africa. In Rwanda, *ibitekerezo* are stories and poems sung with musical accompaniment, including songs about cows, praise songs, and poems about Tutsi warrior traditions. *Ibitekerezo* singers often accompany themselves on the *inanga*, a harp instrument with between six and eight pentatonically-tuned strings stretched across a decorated sound box. In Rwanda, drums were an integral part of royal culture before 1961, and large drums called *ingoma* are still used to accompany songs and dances.28 Thus, in the tradition of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s literary Signifyin(g), Cortez’s choice of a West African harp instrument and a popular African drum recall these traditions without replicating them exactly. Cortez and her musical coconspirators signify upon the traditions of the people about whom she is writing with their own syncretic musical interpretation of East African cultural practices in a multivocal environment that facilitates diasporic community building. Rather than strive to create historically and/or culturally precise renderings of the musical traditions upon which they signify, they use their own instruments to create fresh interpretations that draw on African, American, and European musical cultures. As such, koras, a djembe, and singing in Mandinguo represent African traditions that bring a North American audience aurally closer to Africa. Including this track on her album *Taking the Blues Back Home* locates “I Have Been Searching” within a much

28 Adekunle, 135–38.
larger framework of “African” antecedents of blues music. In choosing this musical framework, Cortez and the musicians imply connections among violence resulting from colonial control, African storytelling, and blues music as creative means of building coalitions to cope with and ultimately resist that violence.

On the recording, after playing a brief introduction, the koras establish a four-measure phrase, and singer Nakoyo Suso joins them to establish a circular ostinato that complements Cortez’s progressive verb tense by enacting a circular search across time and space. Bangoura’s percussive role on the djembe supports the rhythm the two kora players maintain throughout the piece. After a longer than usual introduction for one of her collaborative pieces, when Cortez begins reading, Firespitters MacDowell, Nix, Coleman, and Blue slowly begin to add their European instruments in conversation with Suso, Kuyateh, and Banguora’s West African instruments, blending their twentieth-century American free-jazz aesthetic with ancient African storytelling traditions. Bern Nix mimics fragments of the kora riffs on his electric guitar. Al MacDowell plays a repeated A-flat pedal tone on his bass to firmly underscore the already-established key center for the piece. MacDowell’s choice to play just one note might be a nod to the Rwandan umuduri or musical bow common in traditional music from several African cultures. At first, he uses his bass like a musical bow as more of a rhythmic than a harmonic element in the growing soundscape; later in the recording, he embellishes by adding notes that complement the harmony. Musical choices of this nature further demonstrate Cortez and the musicians’ use of multiple media to enact diasporic syncretism that brings together different voices in community to resist violent oppression.

In a further blending of ancient and modern musical traditions, T. K. Blue uses his saxophone to directly interact with Cortez’s imagery, improvising lines that both fit within the song’s simple harmonic framework and complement Cortez’s vocal delivery. Blue repeatedly bends notes in the low register of his saxophone that sound like human cries of agony, and then

29 Adekunle, 138.
he alternates between this low note and a higher four-note pattern as Cortez’s speaker continues her search. Blue pauses when Cortez repeats “the song of dying / and the song of not knowing,” and then singer Suso briefly resumes her four-measure phrase while Cortez breaks between stanzas. During this break, guitarist Bern Nix takes a more prominent role and plays notes that match the singer’s melodic line. Nix demonstrates his free-jazz aptitude for replicating sounds he hears around him, and his playing supports both the singer’s melody and the harmony the koras established at the beginning of the piece. At the same time, Nix also adds a layer of dissonance with notes that clash with the koras’ tonality; this dissonance aurally implies disquieting unrest in the scenes Cortez’s speaker witnesses.

Cortez’s change in vocalization throughout the piece increases the dissonance and intensity in this performed version of “I Have Been Searching.” When singer Suso sings quietly underneath Cortez’s spoken words, drummer Denardo Coleman increases his percussive accompaniment by playing more frequent cymbal crashes and tom-tom flourishes. Unlike his more energetically emotional playing on some other pieces, Coleman maintains a steady tempo throughout “I Have Been Searching” that creates an almost meditative state to support his mother’s choice of verb tense. Cortez changes one key line in the recorded version of the poem’s second stanza; instead of “they said they thought they saw / you standing there,” she says, “they said you were standing there when / the assassins struck.” This small change in language connotes that people witnessed the friend’s murder, and, therefore, the speaker is no longer searching for a living person; rather, she is searching for the remains of her friend who inevitably died at the hands of “the assassins.” During this stanza, as in the first, after Suso stops singing, T. K. Blue increases his activity and sustains a climactic high E-flat when Cortez repeats “factions of factions.” Blue’s high note reaches the heart of the Rwandan conflict as Cortez’s speaker circles in a fruitless search for her friend. Blue also captures the repetitive nature of the search by

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consciously limiting the phrases he plays through the piece, and while he elaborates on each in myriad subtle ways, he returns to similar ideas in his own playing to mirror Cortez’s refrain. Musically and poetically, within this open-ended framework, Blue and Cortez suggest the work of fighting injustice across the African diaspora is never-ending.

To further highlight this unending work, Cortez amplifies the refrain on the studio recording of “I Have Been Searching” by repeating part of the first stanza as a new ending for this version of the poem. When she worked with musicians, Cortez often repeated lines in this way to make the poem conform to a particular musical structure, and this refrain further emphasizes the numbing repetition of her speaker’s search. To aurally augment her choice to repeat this significant portion of the poem, Chris Agovino engineers a studio fade to end the recording. Agovino’s postproduction in the studio adds another voice to the conversation, and he ends the piece by repeating Cortez’s new last line—“not knowing”—three times after she reads it, reducing its volume each time to make her voice more distant with each repetition. After Cortez’s final echo, the volume gradually fades though all the musicians continue playing repeated motifs with the same intensity. The amended ending of this studio recording, even more than the printed version of the piece, offers no resolution to the search. This subtle musical choice reflects Cortez’s larger critique of Rwanda’s colonial legacy that resulted in failed peacekeeping efforts and delayed international responses that enabled, exacerbated, and prolonged the Rwandan conflict in 1994. Cortez’s speaker will continue searching until she finds an end to violence across the African diaspora. No musical cadence can provide resolution for the audience at the end of the piece.

Cortez presented a very different musical collaboration of “I Have Been Searching” two years after the studio recording at her live performance during the Badenya ’98 festival to honor
Samory Touré. This performance directly connects the poem to black vernacular American music genres, in a Western interpretation that more abstractly signifies on its African musical roots. This interpretation comes from different instrumentation, featuring the Firespitters without West African guest musicians. The Badenya version of “I Have Been Searching” is slower than the version on Taking the Blues Back Home, at just over eighty beats per minute. As a result of the slower tempo, bassist Charnett Moffett engages in more active bass playing in this performance; whereas, on the studio recording, Al MacDowell lays down sparse pedal tones underneath the koras. At Badenya, in lieu of the active kora ostinato, Moffett has a greater space to in which to play. Drummer Denardo Coleman matches Moffett’s bass line on his kick drum, and the line is reminiscent of Marvin Gaye’s “Let’s Get it On.” Moffett rocks back and forth in the key of A-flat major, the same as the studio recording. The studio version on Taking the Blues Back Home was likely recorded in this key because of the koras’ tuning, and the Firespitters chose to honor that key despite the absence of koras in this performance, though A-flat is not a typical key for bass and guitar music. With their choice to play in the same key as the now absent koras rather than change to a standard key for Western string instruments, the Firespitters maintain a direct aural connection to an ancient tradition as a result of their earlier cultural conversation that influenced this particular musical decision.

With fewer musicians interacting with Cortez in this version of “I Have Been Searching,” the other Firespitters also take more active roles in their call-and-response interactions with Cortez’s dynamic delivery of the text. Bern Nix plays major chords on his guitar throughout the piece, adding dissonance through minor-second intervals that magnify Cortez’s uncomfortable imagery. When Cortez repeats “song of dying and song of not knowing,” Nix amplifies her use of repetition through his own repeated phrase. Cortez modifies the text slightly from the printed and recorded versions of “I Have Been Searching.” Like another later version of the poem, she inserts

“through the ruins of Rwanda” around line twenty-three. Unlike the other versions of the piece, Cortez creates an additional refrain to add to the perpetual motion at the end of the piece. There are two solos in this version, and Alex Harding’s bass clarinet solo follows Moffett’s bass solo after Cortez’s first repetition of “not knowing.” Denardo Coleman’s drumming underscores the music until it links directly with Cortez’s words when she repeats the word “factions” near the end of the piece. Coleman breaks from his 4/4 rhumba feel, creating a rhythmically disruptive hemiola in 3/4 time that dissolves and then comes back to steady 4/4 time for the last few lines of the piece. As always, Coleman shows a keen understanding of his mother’s text, and his rhythmic accents support her words. Accordingly, all four Firespitters interact with each other and with Cortez in thoughtful ways that aurally represent discord, loss, and an ongoing search to the end of postcolonial violence in Africa.

Cortez models this ongoing search through her evolving performance practices, both with and without musicians. The year after Badenya ’98, Cortez performed “I Have Been Searching” in a solo reading at Texas State University. Without musicians, she returned to her original printed format of the poem, removing the refrain she added for the recording on Taking the Blues Back Home. The only significant structural change from the printed version in this reading involved her adding “through the ruins of Rwanda” after the second line of each stanza.32 This phrase both specifically locates the poem and limits possible interpretations from continental to local. Small revisions over repeated readings and recordings of the same poem indicate Cortez’s active engagement in an evolutionary poetics that grows and changes in conversation with specific audiences to address pertinent current events. Cortez’s adaptability in different settings shows her participation in dialogic conversations that make space for multiple interpretations of a central text. In this live solo reading, Cortez varies her inflection and rate of speed more than she does on the studio recording. In contrast, the well-produced version on Taking the Blues Back

Home controls Cortez’s voice through various post-production processes that combine and balance it with the many different musical voices on this track, and thereby limit some of the flexibility and control Cortez has over her vocal delivery in an unmediated live setting. In this performance without musicians, Cortez’s vocal variations feed off energy from the audience as they, in turn, respond to her changes in tone, pace, and content.

Outside minor variations in pitch and timbre, Cortez’s vocalizations in these three archived performances of “I Have Been Searching” are remarkably consistent. Of course, by the time Cortez gave the reading at Texas State, she already had the recording in her memory, and she had performed the piece with musicians in at least one live setting. One of the more pronounced differences among the versions, however, comes in the second stanza. On the studio recording, Cortez raises her pitch at the end of the lines: “they said you didn’t have a chance to hide / you don’t have time to run.” These changes of pitch are characteristic of her delivery when she worked with musicians who bent and changed their own pitches to meet her or to provide an answer to the many questions her words provoke. Rather than represent a musical call and response at the 1999 Texas State reading, Cortez’s changes in pitch and tone engage the audience and invite dialogue in which they might answer her call to action. While there are many other small variations among the three performances of “I Have Been Searching,” Cortez’s personal delivery on each is strikingly similar. While Cortez, the Firespitters, and other musical collaborators conduct reciprocal interactions in versions of “I Have Been Searching” that place the poem into direct conversation with African and American musical traditions, she also demonstrates the consistency of a seasoned performer with decades of experience adapting her work in various settings. Cortez’s consistency and adaptability grew from her dedication to the call and response at the core of community building to promote social justice across the African diaspora.

Cortez further demonstrated her commitment to social justice a few years later when she began performing “Janjaweed Militia,” a poem she had yet to publish in response to developing
genocidal violence in Sudan. Like the Rwandan genocide, the conflict in Darfur that came to international attention in 2004 grew out of a civil war that resulted from the end of colonial rule in the 1970s; the ravages of the Sudanese civil war following independence from British rule created an unstable central government that would eventually displace roughly three million people and kill at least 450,000. As in “I Have Been Searching,” Cortez brings attention to this crisis through a biting critique of postcolonial violence wrought against human bodies, especially those of women. Like the Biafran War Cortez interrogated when she wrote “Kai Kai” in the 1970s, this conflict in Sudan was precipitated by the withdrawal of a European colonial government. The Darfur region on the western border of Sudan with Chad has suffered effects of climate change in the Sahelian zone. Ongoing drought precipitated land skirmishes between indigenous tribes of farmers and nomadic herders. As the resources necessary to sustain livestock diminished, herders encroached on established farming communities, and internal tensions escalated.  

While environmental factors laid some of the groundwork for this violence, the Sudanese government escalated tensions significantly when it armed Arab militias the indigenous peoples of Darfur called Janjaweed, meaning “devils on horseback.” In the 1980s the government enabled the Janjaweed to displace ethnic Dinka people in cargo trains and even burn them alive. When this government-backed military force shifted its focus and began to target the Fur, Masali, and Zaghawa people in Darfur, they exacerbated a volatile environmental situation with the goal of entirely destroying the indigenous African population of the region.

While violence in Sudan continued to unfold, Cortez wrote “Janjaweed Militia” and published it in 2007’s The Beautiful Book to recognize international inability to prevent the systematic massacre of the indigenous people of Darfur. A substantial portion of The Beautiful Book was the final book Cortez published using her own Bola Press, and its publication coincided with the closing of The Print Center, where she printed other Bola Press books. The book’s first and second sections, “Poetic Encounters” and “Embarcadero,” contain just a few poems Cortez released in

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33 Ardenne-van der Hoeven, 10–12.
34 Grzyb, 9.
35 Ardenne-van der Hoeven, 13.
36 The Beautiful Book was the final book Cortez published using her own Bola Press, and its publication coincided with the closing of The Print Center, where she printed other Bola Press books. The book’s first and second sections, “Poetic Encounters” and “Embarcadero,” contain just a few poems Cortez released in
“Book” represents Cortez’s poetic musings from when she and Melvin Edwards began living in Dakar, Senegal in 2001. The book’s third section, “Touring Dakar With Bakary,” features short poems that are subtly political, showing Cortez’s penchant for combining quotidian observations of the seemingly mundane with the experiences of people who inhabit that terrain. Other pieces in The Beautiful Book are much more explicit in their political intent, akin to “I Have Been Searching” and Cortez’s earlier anti-war poems that call communities into action against global atrocities. The “Embarcadero” section of The Beautiful Book contains the first printing of “Janjaweed Militia,” and, like “I Have Been Searching,” this anti-genocide poem represents her continuing commitment to write and perform collaborative pieces that interrogated contemporary atrocities as they occurred throughout her lifetime.

According to a 2009 United Nations report, the Janjaweed operated on a deep-seated Arab racist ideology that flourished prior to their attacks on the Dinka in the early 1980s. Proponents of this racism promulgated radio messages, recordings, and literature that proclaimed, “the zurga had ruled Darfur long enough and it was time for Arabs to have their turn.” Though the Janjaweed seemed to act on clear-cut ethnic boundaries between themselves and their victims, the derogatory term “Zurga” is equivalent to the epithet “nigger.” Samuel Totten, “The UN International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur: New and Disturbing Findings,” Genocide Studies and Prevention 4, no. 3 (2009), 363.
these divisions resemble slippery boundaries dividing Rwandan Hutus and Tutsis. All the people of Darfur are Muslims, and years of intermarriage blurred the racial demarcations between Arab and African ethnic groups. Traditionally, there was little animosity between the groups, though the famine of 1984 led to increased territorial disputes over water and land. Despite these minor differences, the Janjaweed destroyed over 700 “non-Arab” tribal villages in Darfur, often attacking the same locations more than once to ensure they were completely destroyed. Their widespread systematic assaults involved airstrikes, sexual violence, and decimation of life-sustaining infrastructure such as crops, livestock, water sources, flourmills, oil presses, and household utensils. Like the Nigerian army in the Biafran War forty years earlier, Janjaweed also targeted educated men and tribal leaders and killed refugees after they had taken up residence in camps for internally displaced persons. Decades after their publication and performances, Cortez’s archived recordings and printed poems from early in her career similarly advocate for those who were silenced in these and other conflicts rooted in European colonial control in Africa. Later poems like “Janjaweed Militia” continue the work of early pieces with Cortez’s familiar first-person poetic speakers who expose shocking images to call larger audiences to action against violent regimes empowered by postcolonial upheaval.

In Darfur, Rwanda, and many of the places Cortez wrote about starting in the 1960s, this fight for power is inextricably linked with identity through constructed divisions of race and ethnicity. In “Janjaweed Militia,” Cortez names the motivation for sexual violence in Darfur as “the threat of racial violence spreading / like a force of wild thunderous winds.” Here, Cortez compares an impending Janjaweed attack to an unavoidable natural force that plagues the arid African Sahelian region. In the liner notes of her live recording As If You Knew, Cortez indicates the poem is about “Governmental fear of the loss of domination in Sudan.” This broader

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40 Reeves, 21.
41 Totten, 355–56.
African political theme, as seen in her early poem “Festivals & Funerals,” permeates “Janjaweed Militia” as, a few lines later, the poem’s speaker “can hear the frantic ruling party’s / racial slurs pushing through the air.” Cortez’s speaker witnesses the Sudanese government’s fortification of the European colonial tactic of reinforcing racial and ethnic boundaries to secure their stranglehold on power. Cortez again likens the Janjaweed’s violent actions to an invisible force that oppresses all in its path; she describes this force more specifically when she elaborates on “organized calamities / & inter-factional fighting” and “the attempted Arabization process / In the ethnic cleansing of Black African skin.” As Cortez moves through the poem, she presents more specific images that point to exact causes for this genocide. Cortez’s first-person accounts from the perspective of the “bardic ‘I’” of a blues singer indict unyielding political powers and constitute the core of several poems from late in her career that reflect a mature, collaborative critique of postcolonial violence that urges solidarity through awareness.

These first-person accounts draw their strength from Cortez’s poetic speakers and her creative interpretations their experiences. At the beginning of the printed version of “Janjaweed Militia,” for example, Cortez affects her familiar first-person point of view and adopts the stance of an outsider observing different acts of violence committed against helpless victims. Cortez’s speaker in this poem is akin to the “bardic ‘I’” in blues music, and Cortez dons this poetic persona here as she does in many poems to bear witness and create community through shared experience. Cortez also uses formal poetic elements to support the subject’s theme; she arranges lines into couplets with few exceptions, and some couplets exhibit end rhyme that also carries through from stanza to stanza as Cortez repeats end words. Couplets early in the poem have an almost iambic lilt with five accents per line, despite slight variations in the number of syllables. The overall effect of this uncharacteristic regularity replicates the Janjaweed’s inexorable forward march as they close in on their victims. Cortez underscores this regularity with a few single lines that link specific violent acts directly to their perpetrators, the Janjaweed. In a larger sense,

44 See Chapter One for more on the “bardic ‘I.’”
Cortez’s poetic repetition in “Janjaweed Militia” strengthens her critique of the frequency with which genocidal atrocities continue to occur across the African continent.

Like “I Have Been Searching,” “Janjaweed Militia” invokes Joseph Roach and David Román’s disruption of dominant power structures through which “the unspeakable cannot be rendered forever inexpressible” as Cortez focuses her poetic lens on the postcolonial government that facilitated massacres in Darfur. At the beginning of the poem, Cortez implicates the Sudanese government in their support of the Janjaweed. With her presentation of horrific imagery of “Heads cut off by the militia known as Janjaweed,” Cortez names the perpetrators. She employs a similar tactic in later lines of the poem that directly implicate these murderers: “Bodies hacked by Janjaweed,” “…life left in shambles by jackals known as Janjaweed,” and “Flesh on teeth of thrill-seeking Janjaweed.” Cortez dehumanizes the militia’s actions by comparing them to predatory animals, deploying bloodthirsty imagery to show their lack of regard for human life. Here, as in “I Have Been Searching,” Cortez speaks the unnamable so it no longer remains ineffable. In addition to naming those responsible for these murderous actions, Cortez describes savage sexual violence against women. Rather than list statistics about the number of Sudanese people who were killed or forced to emigrate from their homes, she writes: “I saw these women being raped & gutted / To the point of really wishing they were dead.” Cortez maintains her focus on women throughout the poem as she describes: “Young girls abducted, abused, sexually wounded / & buried between thighs of gang-raping men” and the results of this violence that become visible “when the female stomachs swell / & the blood mixes & the water breaks.” Here, Cortez points out the hypocrisy of men engaged in ethnic cleansing, while raping women who then bear their offspring. Through ecofeminist metaphors that conflate women’s bodies with the earth and through more direct representations of violence, Cortez consistently put women at the forefront of her work, especially in the later part of her career. She suggests here that murder may

45 Roach, 4.
not be the most savage act of violence in the Sudanese genocide; hundreds of thousands of women are forced to relive their brutal attacks while they raise their rapists’ children.

In these images, Cortez portrays the Janjaweed as animals through their perpetration of violence against female bodies. She also brings specific images into the larger conversation that permeates her work: “It’s the domination scheme of keeping power / making people fight each other every hour.” This couplet acts as a refrain that links the plight of women in Darfur to the plight of all humans subjected to global power struggles. Cortez further expands these global diasporic connections when she lists this conflict’s roots in shared struggles that apply to other African countries that continue to languish in the half-century aftermath of independence from European colonial rule:

the holding on to land & identity
& the need for peace & solidarity
will remain the major issues in the depths of
the deepness of the blackness of the struggle
in the oil fields of Sudan

Here, Cortez links ethnic genocide in Sudan to capitalism and superpower cooptation of oil resources in other African nations like Nigeria, Angola, and Algeria. Throughout her body of work, Cortez links social issues related to identity to outsider oil interests. Though Cortez locates this poem in Sudan, “Janjaweed Militia” speaks to issues throughout Africa in multiple countries that continue to wrestle over control of their natural resources. Cortez laments that this “need for peace and solidarity” is “beyond the thinking / of those calling themselves Janjaweed.” While violence of this magnitude is beyond the comprehension of Westerners living in First World countries, Cortez inverts this simplistic assertion to suggest those who perpetrate such violence cannot imagine a world without it.

In this sophisticated critique of violence wielded by postcolonial capitalist regimes, Cortez deploys poetic elements that show her development as a more formal poet writing with
attention to rhythm and potential musical accompaniment. After writing about the Sudanese “need for peace & solidarity” Cortez performed “Janjaweed Militia” live with the Firespitters before she published it in print and before she released a recording of it. Like the poems “Make Ifa” and “I’m Gonna,” Cortez brought a nascent poem to a musical collaboration that gave it further form and shape. At an unrecorded 2006 performance at James Madison University, Cortez started the piece by saying “Things are very bad in Darfur,” and these words acted either as an introduction or as a line that did not become part of the version she printed in The Beautiful Book. The musical accompaniment to this early version of the piece had a free structure, gradually establishing a tonal center near its end. In this regard, this early version of “Janjaweed Militia” was likely a harmolodic improvisation that evolved as the musicians engaged in conversation with Cortez’s strong imagery. During the performance, T. K. Blue played strident, screaming multiphonics on his alto saxophone to represent violence Cortez’s narrator witnesses in the poem. At one point, Blue played a half-step melody reminiscent of the Jaws theme that worked with Cortez’s voice to bolster her musical intensity. At the end of the piece, drummer Denardo Coleman abruptly stopped time when Cortez spoke its last word: “Janjaweed.” With its harsh imagery and abrupt ending, this performed version of “Janjaweed Militia” evolved into the version Cortez and the Firespitters released on 2011’s live album As If You Knew.

Regarding this evolutionary process, after the 1999 poetry reading at Texas State University at which she read “I Have Been Searching,” Cortez told the audience:

…you must remember, when we’re in the recording studio, we may have been in concert with this piece for five or six times. We’ve probably done it. You know, nothing is done for the recording…. Now, when we did the [Taking the] Blues [Back Home] project, then there were things that were done for that recording session, but some things… we have… already practiced. …every performance is like we are practicing… and we’ve done this

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Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters, Live Concert, Jayne Cortez, T. K. Blue, Denardo Coleman, Al MacDowell, and Bern Nix (Wilson Hall, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, November 10, 2006).
over and over again, and, therefore, by the time we come to the recording session, we
already have an idea on what’s going on, and we know the piece.\textsuperscript{47}

As a result, when the group performed “Janjaweed Militia” after the JMU concert at the 2008
Slave Routes Conference at New York University, their presentation of the piece had evolved
from the earlier version.\textsuperscript{48} The piece was organized around a more evident structure, with guitarist
Bern Nix comping chords that mirrored the lines T. K. Blue and LaKecia Benjamin played on
their alto saxophones. Nix and bass player Al MacDowell also played musical lines together,
reminiscent of their work on their 1992 live recording of “Firespitters,” because drummer
Denardo Coleman composed the core melody and harmony of the musical accompaniment for
both poems. Thus, the short video clip of “Janjaweed Militia” from the Slave Routes conference
video contains many musical similarities to the later live performance Cortez included on \textit{As If
You Knew}.\textsuperscript{49} The similarities between the archived collaborative versions of the piece suggest
Cortez and the musicians had established a musical road map through the piece that provided
freedom to improvise within a fixed structure. When Cortez began regularly collaborating with
the Firespitters, especially once Denardo officially became her music director, this practice of
fixing the form and basic musical motifs removed their collaborations further from their roots in
free jazz and harmolodic improvisation; nevertheless, as with earlier poems like “Stockpiling,”
instances of free jazz improvisation still permeate these more structured performances and allow

\textsuperscript{47} Jayne Cortez, “Jayne Cortez Q&A at Texas State, 3/31/1999.” \textit{Front Porch}, last modified March 31,
\textsuperscript{48} Manthia Diawara, and Jayne Cortez, \textit{Slave Routes: Resistance, Abolition & Creative Progress} (New
York: Third World Newsreel, 2009).
\textsuperscript{49} Cortez released \textit{As If You Knew} in 2011, and this is Cortez’s only self-produced live album. \textit{As If You
Knew} contains selections from performances at the 2007 and 2010 Vision Festivals in New York City and a
2009 performance at Syracuse University, organized by Bill Cole. In addition to providing vibrant live
renditions of the previously released “Out of Control,” “Opening Act,” “Make Ifa,” “The Guitars I Used to
Know,” and “Taking the Blues Back Home,” \textit{As If You Knew} contains her only recordings of “Free Time
Friction,” “As If You Knew,” “Haiti 2004,” “Oil,” “Talking About New Orleans 2005,” and “Janjaweed
Militia” with musicians. The album’s personnel include Denardo Coleman, Al MacDowell, Bern Nix, T. K.
Blue, Alex Harding, and Bill Cole. An important archive of Cortez’s late work, this album currently
languishes in obscurity.
the musicians and Cortez to interact with each other and to highlight significant words and images that give the poems new possibilities for interpretation.

The version archived on *As If You Knew*, like the Slave Routes performance of “Janjaweed Militia,” begins with a rubato bass and guitar duet in which Nix and MacDowell establish Denardo Coleman’s “bluesy” chord structure for the piece that does not exactly follow a traditional twelve-bar blues pattern.⁵⁰ Chromatic substitutions and an initially loose rhythmic framework create a slippery texture that allows the musicians to slide between different harmonic ideas, never staying in one key center for more than three measures at a time. In a symbolic sense, this repeated chord progression reflects the repeatedly inadequate international responses to genocides in Rwanda and Darfur. As Cortez’s speaker keeps searching through similar terrain, the musicians continue cycling through the same musical pattern. This structure also amplifies Cortez’s critique of the inadequate international response to tragedy in Darfur in the same way the rolling, circular patterns the musicians play in “I Have Been Searching” underscore perpetual violence in countries attempting to establish autonomous governments following the end of European colonial control.

This musical setting for “Janjaweed Militia” is subdued in contrast to the violent images Cortez recounts. She begins reading after the Firespitters complete one cycle through the chord changes, and she measures her reading to fit the music. Her single-line stanza, “Heads cut off by the militia known as Janjaweed,” comes near the end of the second cycle of musical chord changes and Cortez pauses for the Firespitters to finish the form.⁵¹ Cortez follows the musicians carefully in this archived example of her adjusting her reading pace to match the form of the song the band plays, rather than the other way around. Though the musicians most often followed Cortez’s lead, as evident in earlier analyses of “Firespitters” and “I’m Gonna,” their reciprocal

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⁵⁰ Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters, Live Concert, Jayne Cortez, LaKecia Benjamin, T.K, Blue, Denardo Coleman, Al MacDowell, and Bern Nix (Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, New York University, NY, October 11, 2008).
relationship shows Cortez as a flexible participant in a musical-poetic dialogue. T. K. Blue plays an alto sax solo during the fourth chord cycle that begins after Cortez finishes the single-line stanza: “Bodies hacked up by Janjeweed.” This conversation among instruments and voice stresses the poem’s resistance to erasure through Cortez’s commitment to proposing alternative viewpoints to “dominant discourses of the nationstate.” The dialogue intensifies as Blue plays his saxophone solo incorporating the piece’s melodic theme. Bern Nix plays a guitar solo after Cortez reads the single-line stanza: “Flesh on teeth of thrill-seeking Janjaweed.” Through his solo, Nix and Denardo Coleman engage in animated musical interplay, during which Coleman’s drumming becomes more interactive and less structural. This musical commotion leads Cortez to interrupt the form with the assertion: “There are organized calamities / & inter-factional fighting.” Here, the musicians have prepared the audience for Cortez’s next image, working together in call and response with her text.

Denardo Coleman again uses his drum kit to interact with his mother’s words when she underscores “…the major issues in the depths of / the deepness of the blackness of the struggle / in the oil fields of Sudan.” Coleman’s attention to detail here demonstrates Cortez’s sentiment: “I like for him to be my drummer because… he could take my place. He knows the work word for word, so, in that sense, I’m working with a person who can play everything that I say.” This moment in “Janjaweed Militia” clearly demonstrates Coleman’s intimate knowledge of his mother’s words. His sensitivity to the increased intensity of her delivery comes across clearly in the climax of this performance. As Cortez reads the final two lines of the poem, the entire band recapitulates the main melody, and Al MacDowell closes with a cadence on his bass. Though this harmonic line provides a definitive ending for this performance of “Janjaweed Militia,” it also implies a musical turnaround and suggests an ongoing struggle similar to the Rwandan genocide Cortez and the Firespitters commemorate in “I Have Been Searching.” Musically and poetically,

52 Román, 269.
53 Cortez, “Jayne Cortez Q&A at Texas State.”
these two pieces draw continued attention to genocidal acts in order to precipitate conversations and support sweeping changes that will end interfactional slaughter.

In “Janjaweed Militia” and “I Have Been Searching,” Cortez presents alternatively forceful and introspective responses to recurring acts of mass murder to stimulate dialogue that continues to bring greater attention to these atrocities. Like “Stockpiling,” “Push Back the Catastrophes,” and other anti-war poems she wrote in the 1980s, Cortez uses graphic language and uncomfortable images of devastated human bodies to provoke an audience response. By performing these pieces at multiple events for different audiences, Cortez used both as calls to action to curtail further violence. As Cortez wrote and performed in her final decade, her global focus continued to expand, and her collaborations with the Firespitters strengthened their resolve to promote social and political change. Ron Sakolsky describes the importance of Cortez’s continued association with the same group of musicians: “In terms of the poet’s relationship to the music, as Cortez herself sees it, ‘the poet becomes the band.’ In this sense, she herself embodies the ‘Firespitter’ persona.”54 In their reciprocal dialogic collaborations, Cortez and the Firespitters addressed postcolonial violence in multivocal performances that drive away evil in the tradition of the Senufo funeral ritual from which she drew the band’s name.

Through her writing, collaborative activism, and eventual “return” to Africa as her residence and then final resting place, Cortez embodied the Pan-African ideal of repatriating to her ancestral home through sustained interactions in vibrant communities. From her early elegiac tributes to her poems exposing the horrors of twenty-first century massacres, Cortez urges her contemporaries to become engaged global citizens who work together for human rights. Cortez drew inspiration from artists and activists who fought for equality before her, and she used that inspiration to become an active participant in the Black Arts Movement. Her subsequent work over nearly half a century remained focused on promoting her Pan-African values of multivocal

collaboration and community building necessary to enact real, lasting social change. Writers and musicians collaborating across the African diaspora today find inspiration in Cortez’s fierce, independent, fire-spitting spirit that lives on in the archive of her work and in the creative activism that continues in communities she fostered and sustained.
Conclusion

“And Push Straight Ahead”
Points of Departure

I could say
Life is the inarguable referent
what you know is merely a point
of departure. So let’s move. — Keorapetse Kgositsile

My journey into Jayne Cortez’s life has become an adventure of unexpected revelations, invitations, and calls to action I could not have predicted. Since 2006, this voyage has evolved from a Master’s thesis into a number of boundless projects that will constitute the rest of my life’s work. “Project” is, perhaps, too limiting a word to describe what more than a decade of writing about Cortez has done for my worldview. Through the act of decoding dense imagery in her poems situated at various points in time and space across the African diaspora, I have begun to receive a profound education in the languages, histories, and cultures that constituted her life’s studies. At the close of twenty-five years of my own applied study at three universities, I have only begun my exploration of the colorful world Cortez inhabited. Her poems provide endless points of departure, and each time I delve into Cortez’s personal notebooks, I uncover fresh insights that take on new meaning every time I revisit her published and performed poems. There remains much to discover within the nuances of Cortez’s imagination and powerful observations—especially in collaboration with musicians. As such, my work has never revolved around an intellectual argument as much as it has a mission: to unpack Cortez’s creative collaborative process with the Firespitters and to bring more critical attention to their multivocal reciprocal interactions that model Pan-African community building.

I had already completed my thesis on Cortez’s musical collaborations when I met Everett Hoagland in 2010, and he graciously offered me a poem he wrote for her in 1970. Hoagland came of age with Cortez during the Black Arts Movement, and his encouragement buoyed me at a

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crucial juncture in my work. Hoagland wrote “For Jayne Cortez Before She’s Dead Too” as a comrade in arms who watched his—and Cortez’s—contemporaries endure death threats that too often became assassinations during the volatile movements for equality of the 1960s. Hoagland’s praise song alludes to Cortez’s first chapbook, *Pisstained Stairs and the Monkey Man’s Wares* and riffs on the book’s title and on the titles of poems that have become some of Cortez’s best-known works. From the beginning of the piece, Hoagland situates Cortez upon Langston Hughes’s crystal stairs in Duke Ellington’s Harlem, where she writes about John Coltrane and channels the strength of the Egyptian sun god. In addition to placing Cortez upon these and other giants’ shoulders, Hoagland places her among a vanguard of strong female writers “staring at stars through white ceilings / sisters never saw beyond before.”

To Hoagland, young Cortez was an oracle with prescient vision and the ability to bring truth to contemporaries whom they both regarded as brothers and sisters who used art to fight oppression in white America and, by extension, across the African diaspora. Cortez’s work, both on and off the page, in the following decades did not disappoint.

The day after I spoke with Hoagland, I had a similar encounter with perennial Poet Laureate of East Saint Louis, Eugene Redmond. Like Hoagland, Redmond stressed the importance of scholarly attention for his fierce friend Jayne. Since our initial exchange, Redmond has appeared unexpectedly at events and in my research while I have worked to assemble a more complete portrait of Cortez’s work. As I revisited his 1976 critical history *Drumvoices* and his millennial celebration *Drumvoices Revue*, Redmond’s efforts to recognize and provide critical frameworks for understanding his contemporaries have proven particularly useful in my analyses of Cortez’s work. Likewise, Redmond’s literary stewardship of Henry Dumas’s legacy provided scaffolding for my reading of “Kai Kai” in Chapter Two. Redmond’s ability to look forward and

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backward over fifty years has substantiated the legacy he explored in *Drumvoices*, and my project expands on ideas about Cortez’s work he published four decades ago, in the year I was born. In many ways, Redmond’s work embodies the spirit of Amiri Baraka’s “The Changing Same,” and though many artists who found their revolutionary voices in the Black Arts Movement, including Cortez herself, underwent necessary evolutionary changes in their ideologies and in their approaches to writing during the last forty years, the core aesthetic informing what they did and continue to do remains the same.

Like Redmond and Hoagland, poets working “in the tradition” with Cortez praise her kindness and incisive vision along with her creativity and musicality. Musicians who worked with her praise Cortez’s understanding of music and of the social influences that shape artistic expression to give it deeper meaning. Through musical collaborations, building communities of likeminded activists, and extensive travel, Cortez advocated for human rights across the African diaspora. Her independence and strong messages remain an inspiration for contemporary generations of artist-activists working to improve life for all humans. Cortez and the Firespitters’ work together remains a testament to a Black Aesthetic that continues to affect real social change through awareness, consciousness, and action. Cortez’s work incorporated these themes and grew to include messages of hope through the possibility of rebuilding lost community. Throughout her career as an organic public intellectual, Cortez was a “supranational” genre-bending artist who used her poetic collaborations to fight oppression by increasing awareness of unjust acts.\(^4\) Cortez collaborated with Denardo and a steady core of musicians in her Firespitters band to create a symbiotic reciprocal relationship between her words and their music that demonstrated Cortez’s “unsubmissive” commitment to coalition building and fighting global injustice. The format of a jazz combo was an ideal platform for Cortez to convey powerful political verse made stronger

through the close listening required of collective—sometimes free—jazz improvisation. Cortez’s musical collaborations still transcend nation, skin color, and time.

Just as she looked to her ancestors for inspiration, Cortez’s collaborations provide a model for her contemporaries and those who follow in her musical-poetic footsteps. These collaborations brought together voices from across the African diaspora to form a pantheon united against oppression. Cortez’s collaborative poems brought together jazz musicians, revolutionary leaders, visual artists, and unnamed casualties of genocide to illustrate the tapestry of human need that binds together people around the world. Archived recordings of Cortez’s work with Bill Cole and with the Firespitters show her development in multivocal collaborative dialogues that stand alone as evolving iterations of decades-long mixed-genre presentations of music and poetry in which no voice overpowers another. Less than a decade after Cortez and her colleagues first found their voices in the Black Arts Movement, Ntozake Shange, Yusef Komunyakaa, Nathaniel Mackey, and Michael Harper worked with musicians in equally creative ways that produced new forms of poetic collaboration, including Shange’s creation of the hybrid choreopoem. Meanwhile, Gil Scott-Heron, Amiri Baraka, and Ishmael Reed performed in their own bands that set their poetry to music, while musicians Cecil Taylor and Archie Shepp wrote their own poetry, and David Murray, John Tchicai, Paul Austerlitz, and Roswell Rudd were just a few of the musicians who regularly collaborated with various poets. Cortez’s collaborations with the musicians, though not the only ones of their kind, remain singular in their longevity and in their consistent commitment to diasporic community building on an international scale.

Music also pervades the work of Rita Dove, Brenda Marie Osbey, Natasha Trethewey, Elizabeth Alexander, and other poets of history and memory who take more academic and formal approaches to their work. Their poetry reconstructs their own histories through biographical and anthropological explorations that often begin in archives and result in award-winning, internationally recognized publications. Some of these acclaimed names in contemporary black American poetry found their voices in groups like the Dark Room Collective and Cave Canem,
and they have fostered vibrant communities of poets and critics like Meta DuEwa Jones, Evie Shockley, and Thomas Sayers Ellis, whose writing continues to add invaluable contributions to the field of jazz poetry criticism. Their academic work, along with their contemporaries’ musical collaborations, inspires younger poets who have taken up the mantle of the slam poetry movement in a dynamic mixture of poetry, hip-hop, and performance poetics that gained acclaim through venues like Bob Holman’s Nuyorican Poets Cafe and Russell Simmons’s Def Poetry franchise.

Working among this chorus of dynamic voices, Cortez began in 1996 to anthologize and reprint earlier poems within collections of her recent work. In the last ten years of her career, when she was tackling the atrocities in Darfur along with Hurricane Katrina and earthquakes in Haiti, Cortez released a remixed compilation CD that drew from most of her previous studio recordings except Celebrations & Solitudes and Unsubmissive Blues. In the album notes, Cortez dubs Find Your Own Voice: Poetry and Music, 1982–2003 a “retrospective [that] serves as a reminder that the issues examined within this poetry are still alive today.” In addition to providing remastered recordings from albums that are all out of print, Find Your Own Voice self-anthologizes Cortez’s work in much the same way she reprinted poems throughout her career. In so doing, Cortez maintained tight control on the circulation of her work and also restricted public exposure to her almost ninety authorized recorded poems. Though Cortez sold copies of this album at various public appearances in the last years of her life along with copies of The Beautiful Book, neither appears to have been made available for sale to the public through any other vendors. Despite her vocal participation within the communities she inspired and fostered, Cortez’s retrospective recording, like The Beautiful Book, remains uncharacteristically silent.

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After releasing *Find Your Own Voice* and *The Beautiful Book*, Cortez released her final book, *On the Imperial Highway*. This collection contains selected reprints reaching back to 1973 along with a section of eighteen new poems, some of which Cortez developed when she earned a Rockefeller Foundation Grant for a residency at the Bellagio Center in 2006. By publishing this retrospective book through Hanging Loose Press, Cortez secured continued circulation for some of her best-known works, including: “I Am New York City,” “For the Poets,” “If the Drum Is a Woman,” “Rape,” “Stockpiling,” “Adupe,” and “Sacred Trees.” Cortez’s newer short poems, under the section heading “What a Mouthfull,” consist of fruit and vegetable poems like those in *The Beautiful Book* that read as snapshots and subtly political musings in a Senegalese market.

The longer poems in this section, like “Tell It To Me,” presage the unpublished piece Cortez performed with Randy Weston just prior to her death three years later. The section’s eponymous poem “What a Mouthfull,” uses playful typography to deliver another scathing critique of capitalism. “States of Motion 2” celebrates the lives of more of Cortez’s friends and heroes, alongside the unnamed dead like “the storyteller from Dakar,” “the sergeant from Arkansas,” and “the gambler from Los Angeles.”

*On the Imperial Highway*, stands as the final printed archive of Cortez’s mature poetry that demonstrates her lifelong commitment to Pan-African collaboration and freedom from oppression.

In the five years since Cortez’s death, tributes to her memory have taken the shape of readings in her honor, recordings, radio broadcasts, and new works by poets continuing to write, publish, and perform in her honor. In addition to Ama Ata Aidoo and the Organization of Women Writers of Africa, Cortez’s direct literary descendants include LaTasha Nevada Diggs, Karma Mayet Johnson, and Rosamond King. Cortez’s musical legacy lives on in the work of Bill Cole, Randy Weston, Francisco Moya Catlett, and, most importantly, Denardo Coleman, who now

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7 Cortez read some of the short poems in the book’s final section, *What a Mouthfull*, when she visited Joanne Braxton’s class at William and Mary in February 2012.

wears his mother’s bronze Ashanti mask necklace when he performs. The Black Scholar and Black Renaissance Noire have published substantial tributes to her honor, and friends and colleagues have organized events like the July 2013 tribute at the George Padmore Institute in London, the November 2013 event to honor her and Amiri Baraka at Cooper Union, the April 2016 reading at Poets House, and the February 2017 book event honoring her and Adrienne Rich at CUNY.

These tributes stand as a testament to Cortez’s life and poetry that demonstrated a Pan-African aesthetic and constituted her personal response to a call to explore her origins. Cortez answered that call more deeply when she and Melvin Edwards took up part-time residence in Senegal in 2001. Cortez’s final wish to have her ashes laid to rest both in Benin City and near Dakar confirms that she felt most at home in Africa, and her literal return represents the culmination of a life spent working toward a deeper connection with her roots. Cortez conceived of Africa as part of her ancestral core, and as she told writer Rosamund King: “Traveling is very important…. Now I spend most of my time in New York and in Senegal, West Africa. Both places are a part of my identity. Both have been a resource for my poetry. I have family, extended family, friends and continuity in both places.”9 That continuity inevitably led to Cortez’s final collaboration with pianist Randy Weston, a longtime friend whom critics, scholars, and aficionados regard as one of the strongest voices in twentieth century Pan-African jazz music.

Cortez’s live collaboration with Weston was released at the end of 2016, and this unprinted collaborative poem stands as a final testament to the poetic ideals evident in the pieces I have explored throughout this dissertation. This recorded performance is one of over ninety collaborative pieces Cortez created with musicians. Though her work with the Firespitters and in Bill Cole’s Cycles evinces more demonstrative interplay, Cortez and Randy Weston connect in conscientious and meaningful ways at several critical junctures throughout the piece. In this

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poem, titled “The Woman,” Cortez performs her extended meditation on Ardi, a female hominid skeleton that inspired Weston’s 2012 live collaborative African Nubian Suite. “The Woman” twists through the central themes Cortez explored in her body of work, ultimately spanning nearly five decades of performances and publications. Just as Cortez’s poetry embodies perpetual movement, her final collaborative performance exemplifies this becoming and the core around which Cortez built her life’s work. In true dialogic fashion, it begins, “So to have a conversation…”

Though Cortez and Randy Weston were friends who often performed at the same events and in similar venues, Weston’s African Nubian Suite appears to be the only archive of Cortez reading her work in collaboration with his playing. I first heard Weston at Cortez’s 2008 Slave Routes concert I attended to hear Cortez perform with the Firespitters, and Weston’s solo playing at that event overwhelmed my senses with its muscularity, complexity, and perpetual motion. His two separate tributes to Cortez at her 2013 Celebration of Life similarly evoked her strength and emotion, and his respect for her pervaded his playing. In their collaborative performance of “The Woman,” Weston introduces a twelve-bar blues while Cortez enact her familiar “bardic ‘I,'” calling the blues by name through direct connections to Dahomey and Nubia in the second stanza. Weston, in his hallmark style, walks an easy blues bass line in his left hand and plays several choruses following this pattern in subdued accompaniment as Cortez reads the first half of the piece. Weston periodically interjects musical ideas while Cortez intermittently pauses among her chains of images. The blues, of course, remain an overt and allusive analogy to Cortez’s poetic mission, as she traveled the African diaspora writing about hope and strength amidst horrific instances of profound loss.

As I bring this substantial portion of my ongoing project to a necessary close, I invite others to join me and scholars like Aldon Nielsen, Laura Hinton, and Jennifer Ryan Bryant who continue to follow Cortez’s call deep into the African diaspora: into the archive of her papers at

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the Schomburg Center, into the ongoing reciprocal conversation she and Melvin Edwards shared through their art, into the collaborative possibilities of creating our own art that transcends genres, into OWWA and the Yari Yari conferences, further into her collaborations with the Firespitters, into exploring the possibility of bringing greater attention to Cortez’s work through republication with the permission of Edwards and Denardo…. Because, in Cortez’s words,

… a woman is

  deep water
  deep earth
  deep language
  deep time…

& when you see me coming

in my Firespitter mask

pull down the shade

& when you hear the music flying

into its upper lower African Nubian highfly

open up your ears

& when you walk out tonight

think about the meaning of Ardi

& the life of Trayvon Martin

& push straight ahead\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) Weston.
FESTIVALS & FUNERALS
as printed in Festivals and Funerals (1971)

They winged his spirit &
wounded his tongue
but death was slow coming

They winged his spirit
& wounded his tongue
but death was slow coming?

Flash:

I lost a good friend & i
loved him
I lost a good friend & i loved
him

C.O.D.

collect on death
collect on death
collect on death

thorns on his casket
thorns on his casket

Roses red as my eyes
red red red?

Red as the blackman’s blood consumed by vultures
red red red?

Red like the open head of a panther
red red red red red

Who killed Lumumba
What killed Malcolm
Who killed Lumumba
What killed Malcolm

There are no tears
we have no friends
this is the word

There are no tears
we have no friends
this is the word

before creation and after destruction
the word
winding through poverty and
bleeding into lips of the blues
screaming under oil fields
stretching across swamp fields &
laughing outside mine fields
the word
murmuring through veins of gold
crying inside the crumbled crushed bones of
Chaney
against navels of beaten flesh
walking the streets of Harlem on
the rusty rims of a needle
the word
coming through like axes
a million year lesson book on solitude
we are alone

There are no tears
we have no friends
this is the word

Who killed Lumumba
Who killed Malcolm

There are no tears
we have no friends
that is the word

festivals & funerals
festivals & funerals
festivals & funerals & festivals & funerals
In bebop livers of love
so hurt in wailing hearts of fear so sad
the word
back when burgundy tongues of oppression
became creators of masculinity & legends of
love sitting on milk crates
the word
back when poets screamed
“kill run kill walk kill crawl nigguhs
give me your money anything” shame
the word shame
enemy to revolutions that lesbian conspiracy
back when cultural vaginas rushed through
streets urging men to die for shame
dashikis in the wind
we knew the novelty of death
cadillacs & cocaine in every hole stuffed in
our heads pain
the word was
Love offerings from night time men to
bleed time women reeking
factories of blood time steel cut fingers
weeping our skills cannot laugh but
our flesh is united
Flesh
Our flesh of a flesh
in our mouths on the head of our souls
from the skin on his eyes up
the breath in our lungs
backing the beat of our brains was the
speech of his thoughts & the death of
our fear through the dark of his meat
sits the flesh of Patrice
our flesh of a flesh is Lumumba our flesh Lumumba
flesh

There are no tears
we have no friends
that is the word

the vanguard of precision
the virgin of communications
the erotic improvisation of uprooted
perfection the Blues
FESTIVALS & FUNERALS
as recorded on *Communications Network* (1972)

They winged his spirit &
wounded his tongue
but death was slow coming

They winged his spirit
& wounded his tongue
but death was slow coming?

Flash:

I lost a good friend & i
loved him
I lost a good friend & i loved
him

C.O.D.

collect on death
collect on death
collect on death

thorns on his casket
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our flesh

There are no tears
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the vanguard of precision
the virgin of communications
the erotic improvisation of uprooted
perfection the Blues
FESTIVALS & FUNERALS
as recorded on Celebrations and Solitudes (1974)

They winged his spirit &
wounded his tongue
but death was slow coming

They winged his spirit
& wounded his tongue
but death was slow coming?

Flash:

I lost a good friend & i
loved him
I lost a good friend & i loved
him

C.O.D.

collect on death
collect on death
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our fear through the dark of his meat
sits the flesh of Patrice
our flesh of a flesh is Lumumba our flesh Lumumba flesh

There are no tears
we have no friends
that is the word

the vanguard of precision
the virgin of communications
the erotic improvisation of uprooted
perfection the Blues
FOR THE POETS
(Christopher Okigbo & Henry Dumas)
as printed in *Mouth on Paper* (1977) and
as printed in the liner notes for and performed on *Poets Read Their Poetry* (1980)

I need kai kai  ah
a glass of akpetesie  ah
from torn arm of Bessie Smith  ah

I need the smell of Nsukka  ah
the body sweat of a durbar  ah
five tap dancers  ah
and those fleshy blues kingdoms from deep south  ah
to belly-roll forward praise for Christopher Okigbo  ah

I need a canefield of superstitious women  a
fumes and feathers from port of Lobito  a
skull of a white mercenary  a
ashes from a texas lynching  a
the midnight snakes of Damballah  a
liquid from the eyeballs of a leopard  a
sweet oil from the ears of an elder  a
to make a delta praise for the poets  a

On this day approaching me like a mystic number  oh?
in this time slot on death row  oh
in this flesh picking sahelian zone  oh
in this dynamite dust and dragon blood and liver cut  oh

I need cockroaches  ah
congo square  ah
a can of skokian  ah
from flaming mouth of a howling wolf  ah

I need the smell of Harlem  ah
spirits from the birthplace of Basuto  ah
mysteries from an Arkansas pyramid  ah
shark teeth  ah
buffalo  ah
guerrillas in the rainy season  ah
to boogie forward ju ju praise for Henry Dumas  ah
In this day of one hundred surging zanzibars oh?
in this day of bongo clubs moon cafes and paradise lounges oh
in this day’s pounded torso of burgundy mush oh
in this steel cube in this domino in this dry period oh

I need tongues like coiling pythons ah
spearheads gushing from gulf of Guinea ah
the broken ankles of a B.J. Vorster ah
to light up this red velvet jungle ah
I need pink spots from the lips of trumpet players ah
the abdominal scars of seven head hunters ah
a gunslit for electric watermelon seeds ah
to flash a delta praise for the poets ah

Because they’ll try and shoot us
like they shot Henry Dumas [uh-]huh¹
because we massacre each other
and Christopher Okigbo is dead uh-huh
because i can’t make the best of it uh-hun
because i’m not a bystander uh-hun
because mugging is not my profession uh-uhn

I need one more piss-ass night to make a hurricane ah
I need one more hate mouth racist
sucking the other end of another gas pipe to make flames ah
I need one more good funky blood pact
to shake forward a delta praise for the poets ah

On this day of living dead Dumas
on this day of living dead Okigbo

I need kai kai ah i need durbars ah i need torn arms ah
i need cane fields ah i need feathers ah i need skulls ah
i need ashes ah i need snakes ah i need eyeballs ah
i need cockroaches ah i need sharkteeth ah i need buffalo ah
i need spirits ah i need ankles ah i need hurricanes ah
i need gas pipes ah i need blood pacts ah i need ah
to make a delta praise for the poets ah

¹ only difference in performed version on Poets Read Their Poetry
KAI KAI
as performed in *The Fifth Cycle* (1980)

I need kai kai  ah
a glass of akpetesie  ah
from torn arm of Bessie Smith  ah

I need the smell of Nsukka  ah
the body sweat of a durbar  ah
five tap dancers  ah
and those fleshy blues kingdoms from deep south  ah
to belly-roll forward praise for Christopher Okigbo  ah

I need a canefield of superstitious women  a
fumes and feathers from port of Lobito  a
skull of a mercenary  a
ashes from a texas lynching  a
the midnight snakes of Damballah  a
liquid from the eyeballs of a leopard  a
sweet oil from the ears of an elder  a
to make a delta praise for the poets  a

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in this time slot on death row  oh
in this flesh picking sahelian zone  oh
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shark teeth  ah
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guerrillas in the rainy season  ah
to boogie forward ju ju praise for Henry Dumas  ah

In this day of one hundred surging zanzibars  oh?
in this day of bongo clubs moon cafes and paradise lounges  oh
in this day’s pounded torso of burgundy mush  oh
in this steel cube in this domino  in this dry period  oh
I need tongues like coiling pythons ah
spearheads gushing from gulf of Guinea ah
the broken ankles of a B.J. Vorster ah
to light up this red velvet jungle ah
I need pink spots from the lips of trumpet players ah
the abdominal scars of seven head hunters ah
a gunslit for electric watermelon seeds ah
to flash a delta praise for the poets ah

Because they’ll try and shoot us
like they shot Henry Dumas uh-huh
because we massacre each other
and Christopher Okigbo is dead uh-huh
because i can’t make the best of it uh-hun
because i’m not a bystander uh-hun
because mugging is not my profession uh-uhn

I need one more piss-ass night to make a hurricane ah
i need one more hate mouth racist
sucking the other end of another gas pipe to make flames ah
i need one more good funky blood pact
to shake forward a delta praise for the poets ah

On this day of living dead Dumas
on this day of living dead Okigbo

I need kai kai ah i need durbars ah i need torn arms ah
i need cane fields ah i need feathers ah i need skulls ah
i need ashes ah i need snakes ah i need eyeballs ah
i need cockroaches ah i need sharkteeth ah i need buffalo ah
i need spirits ah i need ankles ah i need hurricanes ah
i need gas pipes ah i need blood pacts ah i need ah
to make a delta praise for the poets ah
KAI KAI
(For the Poets)
as performed on Maintain Control (1986)

ah ah ah ah
ah ah ah ah ah

I need kai kai ah
akpetesie ah
smell of N- [audio cut] sweat of a durbar ah
five tap dancers ah
blues kingdoms from deep south ah
to belly-roll forward praise
for Christopher Okigbo ah

I need a cane field of superstitious women ah
fumes and feathers from port of Lobito ah
skull of a mercenary ah
ashes from a Texas lynching ah
the midnight snakes of Damballah ah
liquid from the eyeballs of a leopard ah
sweet oil from the ears of an elder ah
to make a delta praise for the poets ah

In this day approaching me like a mystic number yo
in this time slot on death row yo
in this flesh picking Sahelian zone yo
in this dynamite dust and dragon blood and liver cut yo

I need cockroaches ah
congo square ah
a can of skokian ah
flaming mouth of a howling wolf ah
mysteries from the Arkansas pyramids ah
spirits ah
shark teeth ah
buffalo ah
a rainy season ah
to boogie forward ju ju praise for Henry Dumas ah

In this day of one hundred surging zanzi bars ya-ya
In this day of bongo clubs moon cafes and paradise lounges ya-ya
In this day’s pounded torso of burgundy mush ya-ya
In this steel cube oh
in this domino oh
in this dry period oh
I need tongues like coiling pythons  ah
spearheads gushing from gulf of Guinea  ah
to light up this red velvet jungle  ah
i need pink spots from the lips of trumpet players  ah
the abdominal scars of seven head hunters  ah
a gunslit for electric watermelon seeds  ah
to flash a delta praise for the poets  ah

Because they’ll try and shoot us
like they shot Henry Dumas  yo
because we massacre each other
and Christopher Okigbo is gone  yo
because i can’t make the best of it  yo yo yo yo yo yo yo yo
because i’m not a bystander  yo yo yo yo yo yo yo yo
because mugging is not my profession  yo yo yo yo yo yo yo yo yo yo

I need one more piss-ass night to make a hurricane  a
i need one more hate mouth racist
sucking the other end of [studio echo effect] another gas pipe to make flames  a
i need one more funky blood pact
to shake forward a delta praise for the poets  a

In this day of living dead Dumas  yo
in this day of living dead Okigbo  yo

I need kai kai  ah [studio echo]  i need durbars  ah  i need torn arms  ah
i need cane [studio cut] -thers  ah  i need skulls  ah
i need ashes  ah  i need snakes  ah  i need eyeballs  ah
i need cockroaches  ah  i need sharkteeth  ah  i need buffalo  ah
i need spirits  ah  i need hurricanes  ah
i need gas pipes  ah  i need blood pacts  ah
i need  ah to make a delta praise for the poets  ah  ah  ah
ah ah ah ah
I need kai kai ah
a glass of akpetesie ah
from torn arm of Bessie Smith ah

I need the smell of Nsukka ah
the body sweat of a durbar ah
five tap dancers ah
and those fleshy blues kingdoms from deep south ah
to belly-roll forward praise
for Christopher Okigbo ah

I need a cane field of superstitious women a
fumes and feathers from port of Lobito a
skull of a mercenary a
ashes from a Texas lynching a
the midnight snakes of Damballah a
liquid from the eyeballs of a leopard a
sweet oil from the ears of an elder a
to make a delta praise for the poets a

On this day approaching me like a mystic number oh
in this time slot on death row oh
in this flesh picking Sahelian zone oh
in this dynamite dust and dragon blood and liver cut oh

I need cockroaches ah
congo square ah
a can of skokian ah
from flaming mouth of a howling wolf ah
I need smell of Harlem  ah
spirits from the birthplace of Basuto  ah
mysteries from an Arkansas pyramid  ah
shark teeth  ah
buffalo  ah
guerrillas in the rainy season  ah
to boogie forward ju ju praise for Henry Dumas  ah

In this day of one hundred surging zanzi bars  oh
In this day of bongo clubs moon cafes and paradise
lounges  oh
In this day’s pounded torso of burgundy mush  oh
In this steel cube in this domino in this dry
period  oh

I need tongues like coiling pythons  ah
spearheads gushing from gulf of Guinea  ah
the broken ankles of a B.J. Vorster  ah
to light up this red velvet jungle  ah
i need pink spots from the lips of trumpet
players  ah
the abdominal scars of seven head hunters  ah
a gunslit for electric watermelon seeds  ah
to flash a delta praise for the poets  ah

Because they’ll try and shoot us
like they shot Henry Dumas  huh
because we massacre each other
and Christopher Okigbo is dead  uh-huh
because i can’t make the best of it  uh-hun
because i’m not a bystander  uh-hun
because mugging is not my profession  uh-uhn
I need one more piss-ass night to make a hurricane
i need one more hate mouth racist
sucking the other end of another gas pipe to make flames
i need one more good funky blood pact
to shake forward a delta praise for the poets

On this day of living dead Dumas
on this day of living dead Okigbo

I need kai kai ah i need durbars ah i need torn arms ah
i need cane fields ah i need feathers ah i need skulls ah
i need ashes ah i need snakes ah i need eyeballs ah
i need cockroaches ah i need sharkteeth ah
i need buffalo ah
i need spirits ah i need ankles ah i need hurricanes ah
i need gas pipes ah i need blood pacts ah
i need ah
to make a delta praise for the poets ah
FIRESPITTERS  
(FESTAC 77)  
as printed in *Firespitter* (1982)

Firespitters  
spitting across the desert  
into feverdust rituals on Badagery road  
a sanctified road full of ghost writers  
gin drinkers  
lips spreading like  
stripes and medals from the chest of my father  
knife swallowers  
wine tappers  
torches gleaming like  
the gold tooth of my mother  
Firespitters  
spitting across syncopating roaches into  
sunsets falling like orange tams  
on the heads of sweating soldiers  
tangerine spit balls  
going down into sewers of dark stout  
a loud baritone night entering us between  
pine streaked thighs of big city funk  
a festival of firespitters in a mucus of brass bands  
Lagos  
in your beautiful nasty self shake everything  
we’re here  
moving through the red fog like a giant defense plant  
we open our boot tops and bones like nightsticks  
themselves into maneuvering shadows  
we stand on the blunt wings of steel bees  
a unit of bent fingers and torsos bending forward  
like sharknives  
we have jet propellered tongues  
ten fifths of lightning  
battle stars  
chlorophyllled plungers  
horizontal jaws  
painted skins  
swiveling pupils  
gut blasting moans and  
the super sonic sound of invisible orchestras  
sweet spirits of Nupe  
listen to the Firespitters
a caravan of firespitters
spitting into the river of asbestos
into the trade wind of coral snakes
into marrows of guinea fowl
into a meridian of rice
one hundred and ninety spits in
a village libating like niagara falls
we drink this three thousand and seventy five proof down-pour
spitting through chains of acrobatic fingers in green caps
going up into the chalk eyed smell of wintertime
a slurring soprano dawn entering us
on outskirts of big city dumps
Lagos
dark puree of flesh in a mask of spinning mirrors
shake everything in your beautiful nasty self
we’re here
FIRESPITTERS
(FESTAC 77)
as printed in *Coagulations* (1984)

Firespitters
spitting across the desert
into feverdust rituals on Badagry road
a sanctified road full of ghostwriters
gin drinkers
lips spreading like
stripes and medals from the chest of my father
knife swallowers
wine tappers
torches gleaming like
the gold tooth of my mother
Firespitters
spitting across syncopating roaches into
sunsets falling like orange tams
on the heads of sweating soldiers
tangerine spit balls
going down into sewers of dark stout
a loud baritone night entering us between
pine streaked thighs of big city funk
a festival of firespitters in a mucus of brass bands
Lagos
in your beautiful nasty self shake everything
we’re here
moving through the red fog like a giant defense plant
we open our boot tops and bones like nightsticks
throw
themselves into maneuvering shadows
we stand on the blunt wings of steel bees
a unit of bent fingers and torsos bending forward
like sharknives
we have jet propellered tongues
ten fifths of lightning
battle star chlorophyll ed plungers horizontal jaws
painted skins swiveling pupils gut blasting moans and
the super sonic sound of invisible orchestras
sweet spirits of Nupe
listen to the Firespitters
a caravan of
Firespitters
spitting into the river of asbestos
into the trade wind of coral snakes
into marrows of guinea fowl
into a meridian of rice
one hundred and ninety spits in
a village libating like niagara falls
we drink this three thousand and seventy five proof
down-pour
spitting through chains of acrobatic fingers
in green caps
going up into the chalk eyed smell of wintertime
a slurring soprano dawn entering us
on outskirts of big city dumps
Lagos
dark puree of flesh in a mask of spinning mirrors
shake everything in your beautiful nasty self
we’re here
FIRESPLITTERS
(FESTAC 77)
as printed in Poetic Magnetic (1991)

Firespitters
spitting across the desert
into feverdust rituals on Badagery road
a sanctified road full of ghost writers
gin drinkers
lips spreading like
stripes and medals from the chest of my father
knife swallowers
wine tappers
torches gleaming like
the gold tooth of my mother
Firespitters
spitting across syncopating roaches into
sunsets falling like orange tams
on the heads of sweating soldiers
tangerine spit balls
going down into sewers of dark stout
a loud baritone night entering us between
pine streaked thighs of big city funk
a festival of firespitters in a mucus of brass bands
Lagos
in your beautiful nasty self shake everything
we’re here
moving through the red fog like a giant defense plant
we open our boot tops and bones like nightsticks
throw
themselves into maneuvering shadows
we stand on the blunt wings of steel bees
a unit of bent fingers and torsos bending forward
like sharknives
we have jet propellered tongues
ten fifths of lightning
battle star chlorophyll'd plungers horizontal jaws
painted skins swiveling pupils gut blasting moans and
the super sonic sound of invisible orchestras
sweet spirits of Nupe
listen to the Firespitters
a caravan of
Firespitters
spitting into the river of asbestos
into the trade wind of coral snakes
into marrows of guinea fowl
into a meridian of rice
one hundred and ninety spits in
a village libating like Niagara Falls
we drink this three thousand and seventy five proof
down-pour
spitting through chains of acrobatic fingers
in green caps
going up into the chalk eyed smell of wintertime
a slurring soprano dawn entering us
on outskirts of big city dumps
Lagos
dark puree of flesh in a mask of spinning mirrors
shake everything in your beautiful nasty self
we’re here
FIRESPITTERS
as recorded on *Everywhere Drums* (1990)

Firespitters
talkin’ about the Firespitters
Firespitters

Firespitters
spitting across deserts
into feverdust rituals on Badagery road
a sanctified road full of ghost writers
gin drinkers
lips spreading like
stripes and medals from the chest of my father
knife swallowers
wine tappers
torches gleaming like
the gold tooth of my mother

Firespitters
listen to the Firespitters
a festival of Firespitters

Firespitters
spitting across roaches into
sunsets falling like orange tams
on the heads of sweating soldiers
tangerine spit balls
going down into sewers of dark stout
a loud baritone night entering us between
pine streaked thighs of big city funk

Firespitters
look at the Firespitters
a festival of Firespitters
Firespitters
I’m talkin’ about the Firespitters
Firespitters

Firespitters
moving through the red fog like a giant defense plant
we open our boot tops and bones like nightsticks throw
themselves into maneuvering shadows
we stand on blunt wings of steel bees
a unit of bent fingers and torsos bending forward
like sharknives

Firespitters
I’m talkin’ about the Firespitters
Firespitters
Firespitters

Firespitters
we have jet propellered tongues
ten fifths of lightning
battle stars chlorophyllled plungers horizontal jaws
painted skins swiveling pupils gut blasting moans and
super sonic sounds of invisible orchestras
sweet spirits of Nupe

listen to those Firespitters
Firespitters
a caravan of Firespitters
Firespitters
Firespitters
I’m talkin’ about the Firespitters
Firespitters

Firespitters
spitting into a river of asbestos
into the trade wind of coral snakes
into marrows of guinea fowl
into a meridian of rice
one hundred and ninety spits in
a village libating like Niagara falls

Firespitters
a village full of Firespitters
Firespitters
Firespitters
Firespitters

Firespitters
we drink that three thousand and seventy five proof down-pour
spitting through chains of acrobatic fingers in green caps
going up into the chalk eyed smells of wintertime
a slurring soprano dawn entering us
on outskirts of big city dumps

Firespitters
talkin’ about the Firespitters
the Firespitters
a caravan of Firespitters
Firespitters
FIRESPITTERS
as recorded on Poetry & Music: Women in (E)Motion Festival (1994)

Firespitters
Firespitters

Firespitters
I’m talkin’ about the Firespitters
and that Firespitter spitting across rivers
spitting across cities
spitting with the African American thunder of the tenor saxophone
that wonderful wonderful saxophone firespitting player
Charles Moffett, Jr.

Firespitters
Firespitters
I’m talking about the Firespitter spitting fire and funk
from the bass into this night
that expressive creative Firespitter
Al MacDowell

Firespitters
I’m talkin’ about the Firespitters

Firespitters
I’m talkin’ about the Firespitter
spitting with gut-blasting moans of the blues
sweet spirits of Nupe
that fantastic guitar-playing Firespitter
Bern Nix

Firespitters
I’m talkin’ about the Firespitters

Firespitters
talkin’ about the Firespitter
moving through the red fog like a giant defense plant
spinning in all directions
the dynamic drum-tapping Firespitter
Denardo Coleman

Firespitters
I’m talkin’ about the Firespitters
a caravan of Firespitters
a festival of Firespitters
COMMITMENT
(For Paul Robeson)
as printed in Mouth on Paper (1977)

You stood out in your passport

a committee of one

and I like that

a committee of one who

covered a lot of territory

the territory of dedication

a dedication to the freedom of your people

I knew you in that way

as an example

the example of a prominent artist

complete with talent and revolutionary gestures

and I like that

making connections

being progressive

the story of struggle instead of the story of success
I knew you in that way
in the way of the spirituals I loved
even though you didn’t sing in the style of my choice
but what does style have to do with commitment
after all contributions go beyond songs
and I like that
the fact that you interpreted
the symbol that your photograph had become
a powerful force significant to masses of people
I understood you in that way
as a person complete with confidence and political intent
never holding back
never selling out
the story of dignity instead of the story of fame
I knew you in those ways and I like that
COMMITMENT 2
as recorded on *Maintain Control* (1986) and
as printed in *Poetic Magnetic* (1991)

Paul Robeson stood out in his passport
a committee of one
a committee of one who covered
   a lot of territory
the territory of dedication
a dedication to the freedom of his people
I knew him in that way
as a prominent artist
complete with talent with democratic ideas
   and revolutionary gestures
Never never holding back
Never never backing down
Never never selling out
   Projecting the story of dignity and love
   instead of the story of greed and corruption

And I want to be warm like him
funloving like him   creative like him
unselfish like him
with his kind of awareness
his kind of generosity his
kind of critical understanding
kind of strength   kind of vision kind of energy
kind of power kind of spirit kind of courage
kind of sensitivity yes²
   Never never never holding back
   never never never backing down
   never never never selling out
Always projecting the story of dignity & love
instead of the story of greed and corruption

I knew him in that way
in the way of the spirituals I love
even though he didn’t sing in the style
   of my choice

² “yes” omitted on *Maintain Control*
but what does style have to do with commitment
After all contributions go beyond songs
& I liked his baritone bass speaking and
booming out in artistic brilliance
A protest against hatred and fascism
A protest against racism and oppression
A protest against terror and fear
His song was an intense song of ancestral memories
His song was a song of faith and resistance
His song was a song of hope and creativity
Always making connections
Always being progressive
Always trying to live the life of struggle & determination
instead of the life of glitter and degradation
and I like that
the fact he could interpret the symbol
that his photograph had become
A powerful force significant to masses of people
I understood him in that way
as a person complete with confidence
and political intent
Never holding back
never backing down
never selling out
Projecting the story of dignity and love instead of
the story of fame and corruption
I knew him in those ways
and I like that
Never never holding back
never never backing down
never never selling out
NO SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS
   (To the memory of Larry Neal)
as printed in *Firespitter* (1982)

There are no simple explanations
not for the excesses
not for the accumulations
not for the lips of magnetic lava
not for the liver of explosive slits
not for the heart
    ready to shoot off like a volcano
There are no simple explanations

The altar will not fit another skull
and there are no more volunteers
no mixture of eyelashes and drops of blood
    in the circle
no alliances drinking together
    in a night of dead events
no bulletproof faces in the air
no mask of erosion fermenting in slobber
no fetish trunk of sacrifices in disguise

Only the space of exasperation left by the advance
only juice from heat of its possession
the injunction of shadows
collectivity of ants
tongue of deified soot
flesh of incarcerated bones
but no simple explanations

Not for madness
reproducing itself through the uterus in the throat
not for sharks
having feeding frenzies in the middle of foreheads
not for
sentimental pass words of vomit splattering pages
No simple explanations
Let the index finger
take responsibility
for its smell
let the chickens protrude from drums
let the lagoon the boat the ancestors
enter pores of a poet of pretty smiles

This piece is passing up the motif of sorrow
let it pass
let the words split and erupt and dry
into snake pulsations

Spit three times
into ruby dust of your own snot
and paste it
on callous of your self-conscious itch

I say lung fire of mouth-piece tremble
still warm and metal stone
conjuration and syntax
inverted stump under solitary root
of erratic falcons
weed of pain of rupture of panic
let it go down
like body and soul
in the horn of Coleman Hawkins

Sink into the insurrection of red shanks
into the high pitch voltage of mosquito hums
into liquified ankh of Egyptian flames
sparrow house bubble of quiver
let your divination fall
like body and soul
in the horn of Coleman Hawkins

Ritual fart
and navel of rebellious stink
urination and energetic repulsion
poetic orgasm and gutteral belch of erotic storm
let your dynamism grunt
I say
make it shake forward like shimmering tumors of okra stew
shake forward on a speckled canvas of menstrual bandages
shake into sucking tubes of midnight flies
into the sub–dominant tilt of flinching eyeballs
into the intrinsic elasticity of violent impulses
Conform to evolution of your own syllables
to revolution of your own stanzas
because
suddenly it will be too soon
suddenly it will be too late
suddenly it will be too sudden
and there’ll be no tuning forks left
in palm of a poet on a cold morning
no deposits of fat left
on neck of a blues at the crossroads
no spell of inspiration waiting
at foot of a cocaine pyramid
no ju ju leaves hidden
in the center of the whirlwind

Only abusive forces in absolute opposition to revolts
only burial grounds of radioactive mud
only bellies of unfinished poems
and time dismantling itself between invisible sticks
but no simple explanations

Not for the flesh of incarcerated bones
not for the tongue of deified soot
not for the womb of hoodoo hollerin’ bebop ghosts

No simple explanations
NO SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS
as performed in *The Seventh Cycle* (1982)

There are no simple explanations
not for the excesses
not for the accumulations
not for the lips of magnetic lava
not for the liver of explosive slits
not for the heart
    ready to shoot off like a volcano
There are no simple explanations

The altar will not fit another skull
and there are no more volunteers
no mixture of eyelashes and drops of blood
    in the circle
no alliances drinking together
    in a night of dead events
no bulletproof faces in the air
no mask of erosion fermenting in slobber
no fetish trunk of sacrifices in disguise
no simple explanations

Only the space of exasperation left by the advance
only juice from heat of its possession
the injunction of shadows
the collectivity of ants
tongue of deified soot
flesh of incarcerated bones
but no simple explanations

Not for madness
reproducing itself through the uterus in the throat
not for sharks
having feeding frenzies in the middle of foreheads
not for
sentimental passwords of vomit
There are no simple explanations
Let the index finger
   take responsibility
       for its smell
let the chickens protrude from drums
let the lagoon the boat the ancestors
       enter pores of a poet of pretty smiles

This piece is passing up the motif of sorrow
       let it pass
let the words split and erupt and dry
       into snake pulsations
Spit three times
       into ruby dust of your own snot
and paste it
       on callous of your self-conscious itch

I say lung fire of mouth-piece tremble
still warm and metal stone
conjuration and syntax
inverted stump under solitary root
       of erratic falcons
weed of pain of rupture of panic
let it go down
       like body and soul
       in the horn of Coleman Hawkins
I say sink into the insurrection of red shanks
into the high pitch voltage of mosquito hums
into liquefied ankh of egyptian flames
sparrow house bubble of quiver
let your divination fall
       like body and soul
       in the horn of Coleman Hawkins

Ritual fart
and navel of rebellious stink
urination and energetic repulsion
poetic orgasm and guttural belch of erotic storm
let your dynamism grunt
I say
make it shake forward like shimmering tumors of okra stew
shake forward on a speckled canvas of menstrual bandages
shake into sucking tubes of midnight flies
into subdominant tilt of flinching eyeballs
into intrinsic elasticity of violent impulses
Conform to evolution of your own syllables
to the revolution of your own stanzas
because
suddenly it will be too soon
suddenly it will be too late
suddenly it will be too sudden
and there’ll be no tuning forks left
in palm of a poet on a cold morning
no deposits of fat left
on neck of a blues at the crossroads
no spell of inspiration waiting
at the foot of a cocaine pyramid
no ju ju leaves hidden
in the center of the whirlwind

Only abusive forces in absolute opposition to revolts
only burial grounds of radioactive mud
only bellies of unfinished poems
and time dismantling itself between invisible sticks
but no simple explanations

Not for the flesh of incarcerated bones
not for the tongue of deified soot
not for the womb of hoodoo hollerin’ bebop ghosts

No simple explanations
There are no simple explanations
No simple explanations
NO SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS
(To the memory of Larry Neal)
as printed in Coagulations (1984)

There are no simple explanations
not for the excesses
not for the accumulations
not for the lips of magnetic lava
not for the liver of explosive slits
not for the heart
ready to shoot off like a volcano
There are no simple explanations

The altar will not fit another skull
and there are no more volunteers
no mixture of eyelashes and drops of blood
in the circle
no alliances drinking together
in a night of dead events
no bulletproof faces in the air
no mask of erosion fermenting in slobber
no fetish trunk of sacrifices in disguise

Only the space of exasperation left by the advance
only juice from heat of its possession
the injunction of shadows
collectivity of ants
tongue of deified soot
flesh of incarcerated bones
but no simple explanations

Not for madness
reproducing itself through the uterus in the throat
not for sharks
having feeding frenzies in the middle of foreheads
not for
sentimental pass words of vomit splattering pages
No simple explanations

Let the index finger
    take responsibility
    for its smell
let the chickens protrude from drums
let the lagoon     the boat     the ancestors
    enter pores of a poet of pretty smiles

This piece is passing up the motif of sorrow
    let it pass
let the words split and erupt and dry
    into snake pulsations
Spit three times
    into ruby dust of your own snot
and paste it
    on callous of your self-conscious itch

I say lung  fire  of mouth-piece tremble
still warm and metal stone
conjuration and syntax
inverted stump under solitary root
    of erratic falcons
weed of pain     of rupture     of panic
let it go down
    like body and soul
    in the horn of Coleman Hawkins
Sink into the insurrection of red shanks
into the high pitch voltage of mosquito hums
into liquified ankh of egyptian flames
sparrow house bubble of quiver
let your divination fall
    like body and soul
    in the horn of Coleman Hawkins
Ritual fart
and navel of rebellious stink
urination and energetic repulsion
poetic orgasm and gutteral belch of erotic storm
let your dynamism grunt

I say
make it shake forward like shimmering tumors of
okra stew
shake forward on a speckled canvas of menstrual
bandages
shake into sucking tubes of midnight flies
into sub-dominant tilt of flinching eyeballs
into the intrinsic elasticity of violent impulses
Conform to evolution of your own syllables
to revolution of your own stanzas
because
suddenly it will be too soon
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and there’ll be no tuning forks left
in palm of a poet on a cold morning
no deposits of fat left
on neck of a blues at the crossroads
no spell of inspiration waiting
at foot of a cocaine pyramid
no ju ju leaves hidden
in the center of the whirlwind

Only abusive forces in absolute opposition to revolts
only burial grounds of radioactive mud
only bellies of unfinished poems
and time dismantling itself between invisible sticks
but no simple explanations
Not for the flesh of incarcerated bones
not for the tongue of deified soot
not for the womb of hoodoo hollerin’ bebop ghosts

No simple explanations
NO SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS
as performed on Maintain Control (1996) and
as rereleased on Find Your Own Voice (2006)

There are no simple explanations
not for the excesses
not for the accumulations
not for the lips of magnetic lava
not for the liver of explosive slits
not for the heart
ready to shoot off like a volcano
There are no simple explanations

and the altar will not fit another skull
and there are no more volunteers
no mixture of eyelashes and drops of blood
in the circle
no alliances drinking together
in a night of dead events
no bulletproof faces in the air
no mask of erosion fermenting in slobber
no fetish trunk of sacrifices in disguise

Only the space of exasperation left by the advance
only juice from heat of its possession
the injunction of shadows
collectivity of ants
tongue of deified soot
flesh of incarcerated bones
but no simple explanations

Not for madness
reproducing itself through the uterus in the throat
not for sharks
having feeding frenzies in the middle of foreheads
not for
sentimental pass words of vomit splattering pages
No simple explanations
Let the index finger
take responsibility
for its smell
let the chickens protrude from drums
let the lagoon the boat the ancestors
enter pores of a poet of pretty smiles

This piece is passing up the motif of sorrow
let it pass
let the words split and erupt and dry
into snake pulsations
Spit three times
into ruby dust of your own snot
and paste it
on callus of your self-conscious itch

I say lung fire of mouthpiece tremble
still warm and metal stone
conjuration and syntax
inverted stump under solitary root
of erratic falcons
weed of pain of rupture of panic
let it go down
like body and soul
in the horn of Coleman Hawkins
Sink into the insurrection of red shanks
into the high-pitched voltage of mosquito hums
into liquefied ankh of Egyptian flames
sparrow house bubble of quiver
let your divination fall
like body and soul
in the horn of Coleman Hawkins

Ritual fart
and navel of rebellious stink
urination and energetic repulsion
poetic orgasm and guttural belch of erotic storm
let your dynamism grunt
I say
make it shake forward like shimmering tumors of okra stew
shake forward on a speckled canvas of menstrual bandages
shake into sucking tubes of midnight flies
into sub-dominant tilt of flinching eyeballs
into the intrinsic elasticity of violent impulses
Conform to the evolution of your own syllables
to the revolution of your own stanzas
because
suddenly it will be too soon
suddenly it will be too late
suddenly it will be too sudden
and there’ll be no tuning forks left
in palm of a poet on a cold morning
no deposits of fat left
on neck of a blues at the crossroads
no spell of inspiration waiting
at foot of a cocaine pyramid
no ju ju leaves hidden
in the center of the whirlwind

Only abusive forces in absolute oppositions to revolts
only burial grounds of radioactive mud
only bellies of unfinished compositions
and time dismantling itself between invisible sticks
but no simple explanations

Not for the flesh of incarcerated bones
not for the tongue of deified soot
not for the womb of “hoodoo hollerin’ bebop ghosts”

No simple explanations
No simple explanations
NO SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS
(To the memory of Larry Neal)
as printed in Jazz Fan Looks Back (2002)

There are no simple explanations
not for the excesses
not for the accumulations
not for the lips of magnetic lava
not for the liver of explosive slits
not for the heart
    ready to shoot off like a volcano
There are no simple explanations

The altar will not fit another skull
and there are no more volunteers
no mixture of eyelashes and drops of blood
    in the circle
no alliances drinking together
    in a night of dead events
no bulletproof faces in the air
no mask of erosion fermenting in slobber
no fetish trunk of sacrifices in disguise

Only the space of exasperation left by the advance
only juice from heat of its possession
the injunction of shadows
collectivity of ants
tongue of deified soot
flesh of incarcerated bones
but no simple explanations

Not for madness
reproducing itself through the uterus in the throat
not for sharks
having feeding frenzies in the middle of foreheads
not for
sentimental pass words of vomit splattering pages
No simple explanations
Let the index finger
take responsibility
for its smell
let the chickens protrude from drums
let the lagoon the boat the ancestors
enter pores of a poet of pretty smiles

This piece is passing up the motif of sorrow
let it pass
let the words split and erupt and dry
into snake pulsations
Spit three times
into ruby dust of your own snot
and paste it
on callus of your self-conscious itch

I say lung fire of mouthpiece tremble
still warm and metal stone
conjuration and syntax
inverted stump under solitary root
of erratic falcons
weed of pain of rupture of panic
let it go down
like body and soul
in the horn of Coleman Hawkins
Sink into the insurrection of red shanks
into the high-pitched voltage of mosquito hums
into liquefied ankh of Egyptian flames
sparrow house bubble of quiver
let your divination fall
like body and soul
in the horn of Coleman Hawkins

Ritual fart
and navel of rebellious stink
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make it shake forward like shimmering tumors of okra stew
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Conform to evolution of your own syllables
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suddenly it will be too soon
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at foot of a cocaine pyramid
no ju ju leaves hidden
in the center of the whirlwind

Only abusive forces in absolute opposition to revolts
only burial grounds of radioactive mud
only bellies of unfinished poems
and time dismantling itself between invisible sticks
but no simple explanations

Not for the flesh of incarcerated bones
not for the tongue of deified soot
not for the womb of “hoodoo hollerin’ bebop ghosts”

No simple explanations
STOCKPILING
as performed in *The Seventh Cycle* (1982)

Stockpiling

The stockpiling of frozen trees
    in the deep freeze of the earth
The stockpiling of dead animals
    in the exhaust pipes of supersonic rockets
The stockpiling of desiccated plants
    on the death root of an abscessed tooth
The stockpiling of defoliants
    in the pine forest of the skull
The stockpiling of aerosols
    in the pink smoke of a human corpse

Stockpiling

Stockpiles
    of agent orange agent blue agent white acids
    burning like the hot hoof of a race horse on
    the tongue

Stockpiling

Look at it
    through the anti-bodies in the body
    through the multiple vaccines belching in the
    veins
    through the cross-infection of viruses
    stockpiled
    in the mouth

Look at it
    through the benzene vapors shooting
    into the muscles of the
    stars
    through the gaseous bowels of military
    fantasies
    through the white radiation of delirious
    dreams
Look
    this stockpile marries that stockpile
to mix and release a double stockpile of
    fissions
exploding
    into the shadows of disappearing space
Global incapacitations
Zero and zero
    and boom
This is the nuclear bleach of reality
the inflated thigh of edema
the filthy dampness in the scientific pants
    of a peace prize
the final stockpile of flesh dancing in
the terrible whooping cough of the wind
And even if you think you have a shelter
that can survive this stockpiling
    of communal graves
tell me

Where are you going
with that sucked liver of mustard flint
a split breath of hydrogen fumes
a navel pit of invisible clams
a biological lung of human fleas
a carcinogenic bladder of sponges
lips made of keloid scars
memory in the numb section of the chromosomes
    Just where do you think you’re going
with that stockpile of
    contaminated stink
Listen
When I think of the tactical missiles plunging
into the rancid goiters of the sun
And the artillery shells of wiretapping snakes hissing and
and vomiting
into depths of a colorless sky
And the accumulation of fried phosphoric pus graffitied
on the fragile fierceness of the moon
And the pesterings of death-wings stockpiling
feathers upon feathers
in the brain
And the mass media’s larval of lies stockpiled
in the plasma of the ears
And the stockpiling of foreign sap in fluxes
of the blood
And the stockpiling of shattered spines
in chromium suits
under
polyurethane sheets

I look at this stockpiling
at this rotting rotting vegetation
and I make myself understand the target
That’s why I say I’m into life
preservation of life now
revolutionary change now
before the choking
before the panic
before the penetration
of apathy
rises up
and spits fire
into the toxic tears
of this stockpile
STOCKPILING
as printed in Coagulations (1984)

The stockpiling of frozen trees
   in the deep freeze of the earth
The stockpiling of dead animals
   in the exhaust pipes of supersonic rockets
The stockpiling of desiccated plants
   on the death root of an abcessed tooth
The stockpiling of defoliants
   in the pine forest of the skull
The stockpiling of aerosols
   in the pink smoke of a human corpse
Stockpiles
   of agent orange blue agent white acids
   burning like the hot hoof of a race horse on
   the tongue

Look at it
through the anti-bodies in the body
through the multiple vaccines belching in the veins
through the cross-infection of viruses
stockpiled
in the mouth
through the benzine vapors shooting
     into the muscles of the stars
through the gaseous bowels of military
   fantasies
through the white radiation of delirious dreams

Look
this stockpile marries that stockpile
to mix and release a double stockpile of fissions
exploding
    into the shadows of disappearing space
Global incapacitations
Zero
    and boom
This is the nuclear bleach of reality
the inflated thigh of edema
the filthy dampness in the scientific pants
    of a peace prize
the final stockpile of flesh dancing in
the terrible whooping cough of the wind
And even if you think you have a shelter
that can survive this stockpiling
    of communal graves
tell me

Where are you going
with the sucked liver of mustard flint
the split breath of hydrogen fumes
the navel pit of invisible clams
the biological lung of human fleas
the carcinogenic bladder of sponges
lips made of keloid scars
poems in the numb section of the chromosomes
    Just where do you think you’re going
    with that stockpile of
contaminated stink

Listen
When I think of the tactical missiles plunging
    into the rancid goiters of the sun
The artillery shells of wiretapping snakes hissing and
    vomiting
    into depths of a colorless sky
The accumulation of fried phosphoric pus graffitied
on fragile fierceness of the moon
The pestering warheads of death-wings stockpiling
feathers upon feathers
in the brain
And the mass media’s larval of lies stockpiled
in plasma of the ears
And the stockpiling of foreign sap in the fluxes
of the blood
And the stockpiling of shattered spines
in chromium suits
under
polyurethane sheets

I look at this stockpiling
at this rotting vegetation
and I make myself understand the target
That’s why I say I’m into life
preservation of life now
revolutionary change now
before the choking
before the panic
before the penetration
of apathy
rises up
and spits fire
into the toxic tears
of this stockpile
STOCKPILING
as recorded on *Everywhere Drums* (1990)

Stockpiling
Stockpiling

The stockpiling of frozen trees
   in deep freeze of the earth
The stockpiling of dead animals
   in exhaust pipes of supersonic rockets
The stockpiling of desiccated plants
   on death root of an abscessed tooth
The stockpiling of defoliants
   in pine forest of the skull
The stockpiling of aerosols
   in pink smoke of a human corpse

Stockpiling
Stockpiling
Stockpiling

Look at it
   through the anti-bodies in the body
   through multiple vaccines belching in the veins
   through cross-infection of viruses
      stockpiled in the mouth
   through benzene vapors shooting
      into the muscles of the stars
   through gaseous bowels of military fantasies
   through white radiation of delirious dreams

Look
   this stockpile marries that stockpile
to mix and release a double stockpile of fissions
exploding
   into shadows of disappearing space
Global incapacitations
Zero
   and boom
This is the nuclear bleach of reality
the inflated thigh of edema
the filthy dampness in scientific pants
of a peace prize
the final stockpile of flesh dancing in
terrible whooping cough of the wind
And even if you think you have a shelter
that can survive this stockpiling
of communal graves
Where are you going
with the sucked liver of mustard flint
the split breath of hydrogen fumes
the navel pit of invisible clams
the biological lung of human fleas
the carcinogenic bladder of sponges
lips made of keloid scars
memory in numb section of the chromosomes
    Just where do you think you’re going
with that stockpile of
contaminated stink

When I think of the tactical missiles plunging
into rancid goiters of the sun
The artillery shells of wiretapping snakes hissing and
vomiting
    into depths of a colorless sky
The accumulation of fried phosphoric pus graffitied
on fragile fierceness of the moon
The pestering warheads of death-wings stockpiling
    feathers upon feathers
in the brain
The mass media’s larval of lies stockpiled
    in plasma of the ears
The stockpiling of foreign sap in fluxes
    of the blood
The stockpiling of shattered spines
    in chromium suits
        under
polyurethane
    sheets

Stockpiling
I look at this stockpiling
at this rotting vegetation
and I make myself understand the target
That’s why I say I’m into life
  preservation of life now
  revolutionary change now
before the choking
  before the panic
    before the penetration
      of apathy
      rises up
    and spits fire
into toxic tears
  of this stockpile
STOCKPILING
as printed in Poetic Magnetic (1991)

The stockpiling of frozen trees
in the deep freeze of the earth
The stockpiling of dead animals
in the exhaust pipes of supersonic rockets
The stockpiling of desiccated plants
on the death root of an abcessed [sic] tooth
The stockpiling of defoliants
in the pine forest of the skull
The stockpiling of aerosols
in the pink smoke of a human corpse
Stockpiles
of agent orange agent blue agent white acids
burning like the hot hoof of a race horse on
the tongue
Look at it
through the anti-bodies in the body
through the multiple vaccines belching in the
veins
through the cross-infection of viruses
stockpiled
in the mouth
through the benzine vapors shooting
into the muscles of the
stars
through the gaseous bowels of military
fantasies
through the white radiation of delirious
dreams
Look
this stockpile marries that stockpile
to mix and release a double stockpile of
fissions
exploding
    into the shadows of disappearing space
Global incapacitations
Zero
    and boom
This is the nuclear bleach of reality
the inflated thigh of edema
the filthy dampness in the scientific pants
    of a peace prize
the final stockpile of flesh dancing in
the terrible whooping cough of the wind
And even if you think you have a shelter
that can survive this stockpiling
    of communal graves
tell me
Where are you going
with that sucked liver of mustard flint
the split breath of hydrogen fumes
the navel pit of invisible clams
the biological lung of human fleas
the carcinogenic bladder of sponges
lips made of keloid scars
poems in the numb section of the chromosomes
    Just where do you think you’re going
with that stockpile of
contaminated stink

Listen
When I think of the tactical missiles plunging
    into the rancid goiters of the sun
The artillery shells of wiretapping snakes hissing and
vomiting
    into depths of a colorless sky
The accumulation of fried phosphoric pus graffitied
on fragile fierceness of the moon
The pestering warheads of death-wings stockpiling
feathers upon feathers
in the brain
And the mass media’s larval of lies stockpiled
in plasma of the ears
And the stockpiling of foreign sap in fluxes
of the blood
And the stockpiling of shattered spines
in chromium suits
under
polyurethane
sheets

I look at this stockpiling
at this rotting vegetation
and I make myself understand the target
That’s why I say I’m into life
preservation of life now
revolutionary change now
before the choking
before the panic

before the penetration
of apathy
rises up
and spits fire
into the toxic tears
of this stockpile
STOCKPILING

as printed in On the Imperial Highway (2009)

stockpiling of frozen trees
    in deep freeze of the earth
stockpiling of dead animals
    in exhaust pipes of supersonic rockets
stockpiling of desiccated plants
    on death root of an abscessed tooth
stockpiling of defoliants
    in pine forest of the skull
stockpiling of aerosols
    in the pink smoke of a human corpse
stockpiling
    of agent orange agent blue agent white acids
    burning like the hot hoof of a racehorse on
    the tongue
    stockpiling

Look at it
    through antibodies in the body
    through multiple vaccines belching in the
    veins
    through cross-infections of viruses
    stockpiled
    in the mouth
    through benzene vapors shooting
    into the muscles of the
    stars
    through gaseous bowels of military
    fantasies
    through white radiation of delirious
    dreams

Look
    this stockpile marries that stockpile
    to mix and release a double stockpile of
    fissions
    exploding
    into shadows of disappearing space
Global incapacitations
Zero
   and boom
This is the nuclear bleach of reality
the inflated thigh of edema
the filthy dampness in scientific pants
   of a peace prize
the final stockpile of flesh dancing in
terrible whooping cough of the wind
And even if you think you have a shelter
that can survive this stockpiling
   of communal graves
tell me

Where are you going
with that sucked liver of mustard flint
the split breath of hydrogen fumes
the navel pit of invisible clams
the biological lung of human fleas
the carcinogenic bladder of sponges
lips made of keloid scars
memory in numb section of the chromosomes
   Just where do you think you’re going
   with that stockpile of
   contaminated stink

Listen
When I think of tactical missiles plunging
   into rancid goiters of the sun
The artillery shells of wiretapping snakes hissing and
   vomiting
   into depths of a colorless sky
The accumulation of fried phosphoric pus graffitied
   on fragile fierceness of the moon
The pestering warheads of death-wings stockpiling
feathers upon feathers
in the brain
And the mass media’s larvae of lies stockpiled
in plasma of the ears
And the stockpiling of foreign sap in fluxes
of the blood
And the stockpiling of shattered spines
in chromium suits
under
polyurethane
sheets

I look at this stockpiling
at this rotting vegetation
and I make myself understand the target
That’s why I say I’m into life
preservation of life now
revolutionary change now
before the choking
before the panic
before the penetration
of apathy
rises up
and spits fire
into toxic tears
of this stockpile
PUSH BACK THE CATASTROPHES
as printed in *Coagulations* (1984) and
as printed in *Poetic Magnetic* (1991)

I don’t want a drought to feed on itself
through the tattooed holes in my belly
I don’t want a spectacular desert of
charred stems and rabbit hairs
in my throat of accumulated matter
I don’t want to burn and cut through the forest
like a greedy mercenary drilling into
the sugar cane of the bones

Push back the advancing sands
the polluted sewage
the dust demons the dying timber
the upper atmosphere of nitrogen
push back the catastrophes

Enough of the missiles
the submarines
the aircraft carriers
the biological weapons
No more sickness sadness poverty
exploitation destabilization
illiteracy and bombing
Let’s move toward peace
toward equality and justice
that’s what I want

To breathe clean air
to drink pure water to plant new crops
to soak up the rain to wash off the stink
to hold this body and soul together in peace
that’s it
Push back the catastrophes
PUSH BACK THE CATASTROPHES
as recorded on Everywhere Drums (1990)

I don’t want no drought to feed on itself through the tattooed holes in my belly
I don’t want no spectacular desert of charred stems and rabbit hairs
in my throat of accumulated matter
I don’t want a catastrophe
I don’t want a catastrophe
I don’t want to burn and cut through the forest like some greedy mercenary drilling into sugar cane of the bones

I don’t want no advancing sands
no polluted sewage
no dust demons no dying timber
no upper atmosphere of nitrogen
I don’t want a catastrophe

I don’t want no more missiles
no more plutonium
no more reactors
no more biological weapons
blowing in my face no more
I don’t want no sickness
no malnutrition
no sadness no poverty
no exploitation destabilization starvation in my life no more
I don’t want a catastrophe

I don’t want another catastrophe

I want to breathe clean air
drink pure water plant new crops
soak up the rain wash off the stink
hold this body and soul together in peace
that’s it
I don’t want a catastrophe
I don’t want a catastrophe
I said I don’t want another catastrophe
I don’t want a catastrophe
MAKE IFA
as printed in Poetic Magnetic (1991)

Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa Ifa

In sanctified chalk
of my silver painted soot
In criss-crossing whelps
of my black belching smoke
In brass masking bones
of my bass droning moans
In hub cap bellow
of my hammer tap blow
In steel stance screech
of my zumbified flames
In electrified mouth
of my citified fumes
In bellified groan
of my countrified pound
In compulsified conga
of my soca moka jumbi
MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA IFA IFA
In eye popping punta
of my heat sucking sap
In cyclonic slobber
of my consultation pan
In snap jam combustion
of my banjonistic thumb
In sparkola flare
of my hoodooistic scream
In punched out ijuba
of my fire catching groove
In fungified funk
of my sambafied shakes
In amplified dents
of my petrified honks
In ping-ponging bomba
of my scarified gongs
MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA IFA IFA
MAKE IFA
as printed in Jazz Fan Looks Back (2002)

Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa

In sanctified chalk
of my silver painted soot
In crisscrossing whelps
of my black belching smoke
In brass masking bones
of my bass droning moans
In hub cap bellow
of my hammer tap blow
In steel stance screech
of my zumbified flames
In electrified mouth
of my citified fumes
In bellified groan
of my countrified pound
In compulsified conga
of my soca moko-jumbie
MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA IFA IFA
In eye popping punta
of my heat sucking sap
In cyclonic slobber
of my consultation pan
In snap jam combustion
of my banjonistic thumb
In sparkola flare
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In punched out ijuba
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In fungified funk
of my sambafied shakes
In amplified dents
of my petrified honks
In ping-ponging bomba
of my scarified gongs
MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA IFA IFA
MAKE IFA
as recorded on Everywhere Drums (1990)

Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa Ifa

In sanctified chalk
of my silver painted soot
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In brass masking bones
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In bellified groan
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In compulsified conga
of my soca moko-jumbie

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Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa

In eye popping punta
of my heat sucking sap
In cyclonic slobber
of my consultation pan
In snap jam combustion
of my banjonistic thumb
In sparkola flare
of my hoodooistic scream
In punched out ijuba
of my fire catching groove
In fungified funk
of my sambafied shakes
In amplified dents
of my petrified honks
In ping-ponging bomba
of my scarified gongs

MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA IFA IFA
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MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA IFA IFA
MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA IFA IFA
MAKEMAKE IFA MAKE IFA [fades]
MAKE IFA
as recorded on As if You Knew (2011)

Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa

In sanctified chalk
of my silver painted soot
In crisscrossing whelps
of my black belching smoke
In brass masking bones
of my bass droning moans
In hub cap bellow
of my hammer tap blow
In steel stance screech
of my zumbified flames
In electrified mouth
of my citified fumes
In bellified groan
of my countrified pound
In compulsified conga
of my soca moko-jumbie

MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA Ifa Ifa
MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA Ifa Ifa
MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA Ifa Ifa
MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa
Make Ifa make Ifa make Ifa Ifa Ifa

In eye popping punta
of my heat sucking sap
In cyclonic slobber
of my consultation pan
In snap jam combustion
of my banjonistic thumb
In sparkola flare
of my hoodooistic scream
In punched out ijuba
of my fire catching groove
In fungified funk
of my sambafied shakes
In amplified dents
of my petrified honks
In ping-ponging bomba
of my scarified gongs

MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA IFA IFA
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MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA IFA IFA
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MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA IFA IFA
MAKE IFA MAKE IFA MAKE IFA IFA IFA
I’M GONNA SHAKE
as recorded on *Cheerful & Optimistic* (1994)

I’m gonna shake like a violent rainstorm
I’m gonna fill the night with splashing
I’m gonna sit like a zone of confluence
I’m gonna gallop in the inner basin
I’m gonna drink from the new molasses
I’m gonna rub my body with palm oil
I’m gonna stuff my bones of charcoal
I’m gonna paint myself with arrows
I’m gonna kick up higher & higher
I’m gonna dive down deeper & deeper
I’m gonna kick up higher & higher
I’m gonna dive down deeper & deeper
I’m gonna click my bottles together
I’m gonna zigzag over and under
gonna reach for the solar cycle
gonna swirl up through the rapids
gonna wail & point the wailings
gonna stand like a wall of protection
gonna move like a desert darkness
gonna push out further & further
gonna press in closer & closer
gonna dive down deeper & deeper
gonna kick up higher & higher
gonna kick up higher & higher
higher higher higher
higher & higher higher & higher
higher higher higher higher
I’m gonna shake like a violent rainstorm
I’m gonna fill the night with splashing
I’m gonna sit like a zone of confluence
I’m gonna gallop in the inner basin
I’m gonna drink from the new molasses
I’m gonna rub my body with palm oil
I’m gonna stuff my bones of charcoal
I’m gonna paint myself with arrows
I’m gonna kick up higher & higher
I’m gonna dive down deeper & deeper
I’m gonna kick up higher & higher
I’m gonna dive down deeper & deeper
I’m gonna click my bottles together
I’m gonna zigzag over and under
gonna reach for the solar cycle
gonna swirl up through the rapids
gonna wail & point the wailings
gonna stand like a wall of protection
gonna move like a desert darkness
gonna push out further & further
gonna press in closer & closer
gonna dive down deeper & deeper
gonna kick up higher & higher
gonna kick up higher & higher
higher & higher higher & higher
higher higher higher higher higher
I’M GONNA
as printed in *Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere* (1996)

I’m gonna shake like a violent rainstorm
I’m gonna fill the night with splashing
I’m gonna sit like a zone of confluence
I’m gonna gallop in the inner basin
I’m gonna drink from the new molasses
I’m gonna rub my body with palm oil
I’m gonna stuff my bones with charcoal
I’m gonna paint myself with arrows
I’m gonna click my bottles together
I’m gonna zigzag over & under
I’m gonna reach for the solar cycle
I’m gonna swirl up through the rapids
I’m gonna wail & point the wailings
I’m gonna stand like a wall of protection
I’m gonna move like a desert darkness
I’m gonna push out further & further
I’m gonna press in closer & closer
I’m gonna dive down deeper & deeper
I’m gonna kick up higher & higher & higher
I'M GONNA SHAKE
as performed in “A Dialogue Between Voice and Drums” (2010)

I’m gonna shake like a violent rainstorm
I’m gonna fill the night with splashing
I’m gonna sit like a zone of confluence
I’m gonna gallop in the inner basin
I’m gonna drink from the new molasses
I’m gonna rub my body with palm oil
I’m gonna stuff my bones with charcoal
I’m gonna paint myself with arrows
I’m gonna click my bottles together
I’m gonna zigzag over and under
I’m gonna reach for the solar cycle
gonna swirl up through the rapids
gonna wail & [edited video cut]
higher higher higher higher

I’m gonna shake like a violent rainstorm
I’m gonna fill the night with splashing
I’m gonna sit like a zone of confluence
I’m gonna gallop in the inner basin
I’m gonna drink from the new molasses
I’m gonna rub my body with palm oil
gonna stuff my bones with charcoal
gonna paint myself with arrows
gonna click my bottles together
gonna zigzag over and under
reach for the solar cycle
swirl up through the rapids
wail & point the wailings
stand like a wall of protection
move like a desert darkness
push out further & further & further & further &
press in closer & closer &
dive down deeper & deeper & deeper & deeper
then kick up higher higher higher
I HAVE BEEN SEARCHING
(Rwanda Conflict)
as printed in Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere (1996) and
as printed in Intolerance (2001)

I have been searching
and searching and searching
since the day they said
you were tossed into a ditch by
a bulldozer
I have been searching all the ditches
trying to find you beneath
a million human bones
I have been searching between
twenty thousand bandaged skulls
I have been searching in a town of
fifty thousand jagged wounds
I have been searching in the ashes and
searching in the bloody footprints
and oh my friend
I have found nothing but
the song of dying
and the song of not knowing
the song of dying
and the song of not knowing

I have been searching and
searching and searching
since the day they said
they saw you standing there when
the assassins came in
they said you didn’t have a chance to hide
you didn’t have time to run
they said they thought they saw
you standing there
and I have been searching
and searching and searching
and oh my friend
I have found nothing but
the sky all smoky with skin
the bulldozer of bones
the bloody footprints
and the factions within factions of factions of
factions of factions and
I have been searching but
I cannot find you anywhere
I have been searching and
searching and searching
I HAVE BEEN SEARCHING
as printed in liner notes for Taking the Blues Back Home (1996)

I have been searching
& searching & searching
since the day they said
you were tossed into a ditch by
a bulldozer
I have been searching all the ditches
trying to find you beneath
a million human bones
I have been searching between
twenty thousand bandaged skulls
I have been searching
in a town of
fifty thousand jagged wounds
I have been searching in the ashes
& searching in the bloody footprints
Oh my friend I have found nothing but
the song of dying and
the song of not knowing
the song of dying and
the song of not knowing

I have been searching
& searching & searching
since the day they said
they saw you standing there when
the assassins came in
they said you didn’t have a chance to hide
you didn’t have a chance to run
they said you were standing there when
the assassins struck
they said they thought
they saw you standing there
& I have been searching
& searching & searching
& oh my friend I have found nothing but
the sky all smoky with skin
the bulldozer of bones
the bloody footprints
& the factions within factions of factions of
factions of factions &
I cannot find you anywhere
I have been searching
& searching & searching

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I HAVE BEEN SEARCHING
as recorded on *Taking the Blues Back Home* (1996)

I have been searching
& searching & searching
since the day they said
you were tossed into a ditch by
 a bulldozer
I have been searching
I have been searching
all the ditches
trying to find you beneath
 a million human bones
I have been searching between
twenty thousand bandaged skulls
I have been searching in a town of
fifty thousand jagged wounds
I have been searching in the ashes
I have been searching in the bloody footprints
 & oh my friend
I have found nothing but
the song of dying
 & the song of not knowing
the song of dying
 & the song of not knowing

I have been searching &
searching & searching
since the day they said
they saw you standing there when
the assassins came in
they said you didn’t have a chance to hide
you didn’t have time to run
they said you were standing there
when they assassins struck
they said you were standing there
you were just standing there
 & oh my friend
I have been searching
 & searching & searching
 & I have found nothing but
the sky all smoky with skin
the bulldozers of bones
the bloody footprints
 & the factions within factions of factions of
factions of factions
I can find nothing
I cannot find you anywhere
I have been searching
all the ditches
I have been searching under
   a million human bones
I have been searching between
twenty thousand bandaged skulls
I have been searching in a town of
fifty thousand jagged wounds
I have been searching in the ashes
I have been searching in the bloody footprints
& all I have found nothing but
the song of dying
& the song of not knowing
the song of dying
& the song of not knowing
[studio echo effect]
not knowing
not knowing
not knowing
I HAVE BEEN SEARCHING
as performed at Texas State University (1999)

Searching
I have been searching
and searching and searching
through the ruins of Rwanda
since the day they said
you were tossed into a ditch by
a bulldozer
I have been searching all the ditches
trying to find you beneath
a million human bones
I have been searching between
twenty thousand bandaged skulls
I have been searching in a town of
fifty thousand jagged wounds
I have been searching in the ashes and
searching in the bloody footprints
and oh my friend
I have found nothing but
the song of dying
and the song of not knowing
the song of dying
and the song of not knowing
I have been searching and
searching and searching
through the ruins of Rwanda
since the day they said
they saw you standing there when
the assassins came in
they said you didn’t have a chance to hide
you didn’t have time to run
they said they thought they saw
you standing there
when the assassins struck
and I have been searching
and searching and searching
and oh my friend
I have found nothing but
the sky all smoky with skin
the bulldozer of bones
the bloody footprints
and the factions within factions of factions of
factions of factions
I have been searching but
I cannot find you anywhere
I have been searching and
searching and searching and searching
JANJAWEED MILITIA
as printed in The Beautiful Book (2007)

I saw the people being killed & wounded
By Sudanese Government’s militia men

I saw these women being raped & gutted
To the point of really wishing they were dead

It’s the domination scheme of keeping power
making people fight each other every hour

Heads cut off by the militia known as Janjaweed

I saw the look of desperation in the eyes of
popular police & bandits

Young girls abducted, abused, sexually wounded & buried between thighs of gang-rape men

It’s the threat of racial violence spreading
like a force of wild thunderous winds

Bodies hacked up by Janjaweed

There are the distant hidden names & disappearing boys

There are tattooed body parts & civilian casualties in the sand

There are tribal conflicts made into inter-tribal conflicts & life left in shambles by jackals known as Janjaweed

I can hear the frantic ruling party’s racial slurs pushing through the air

It’s the destruction of villages & uprooting of farmers
In a part of Darfur that we see

Flesh on teeth of thrill-seeking Janjaweed

There are organized calamities
& inter-factional fighting

there’s the attempted Arabization process
In the ethnic cleansing of Black African skin

But even when these female stomachs swell
& the blood mixes & the water breaks

the holding on to land & identity
& the need for peace & solidarity
will remain the major issues in the depths of
the deepness of the blackness of the struggle
in the oil fields of Sudan

& this is beyond the thinking
of those calling themselves Janjaweed
JANJAWEED MILITIA
as recorded on *As if You Knew* (2011)

I saw the people being killed & wounded
By Sudanese Government’s militia men

I saw these women being raped & gutted
To the point of really wishing they were dead

It’s the domination scheme of keeping power
making people fight each other every hour

Heads cut off by the militia known as Janjaweed

I saw the look of desperation in the eyes of
popular police & bandits

Young girls abducted, abused, sexually wounded
& buried between thighs of gang-raping men

It’s the threat of racial violence spreading
like a force of wild thunderous winds

Bodies hacked up by Janjaweed

There are the distant hidden names
& disappearing boys

There are tattooed body parts
& civilian casualties in the sand

There are tribal clashes made into inter-tribal conflicts
& life left in shambles by those known as Janjaweed

I can hear the frantic ruling party’s
racial slurs pushing through the air

It’s the destruction of villages & uprooting of farmers
In a part of Darfur that we see

Flesh on teeth of thrill-seeking Janjaweed
There are organized calamities & inter-factional fighting

there’s the attempted Arabization process
In the ethnic cleansing of Black African skin

But even when those female stomachs swell & the blood mixes & the water breaks

the holding on to land & identity & the need for peace & solidarity will remain the major issues in the depths of the deepness of the blackness of the struggle in the oil fields of Sudan

& this is beyond the thinking of those calling themselves Janjaweed
Appendix B
Publication History and Anecdotal Biographical Timeline (In Progress)

This dissertation is not, at its core, a biographical project; nonetheless, to better understand Cortez’s inspiration for writing certain pieces at particular moments, I have compiled the following evolving anecdotal timeline. While some of the early dates are slippery, most events here are documented in a variety of sources, including newspaper notices, interviews, journal articles, and Cortez’s collected ephemera at the Schomburg Center. This is by no means an exhaustive, completely substantiated, properly cited timeline. Details in this document will change as I continue my research, but I have included its current iteration so that it may provide useful points of entry for further analysis and clarification.

1934 Jayne Cortez was born Sallie Jayne Richardson on May 10, in Fort Huachuca, Arizona, though many sources erroneously cite her birth year as 1936. According to her friend and colleague Bob Hershon, Cortez is responsible for propagating this frequent error, though I have not pinpointed her precise motivation for doing so. “Cortez” was her maternal grandmother’s maiden name. Though it contains several typographical errors, the obituary in Jazzed contains useful background. It states Cortez was “born to Rance [misprinted as ‘Ranee’] Richardson, a career military person, and Ada Kiser Richardson, a ‘housewife’ (later a secretary)…. Her father was stationed at the Ft. Huachuca, Arizona Army Base. The Richardson family moved to Los Angeles, California in 1942. Jayne, her sister Jewell (Shawn), and her brother Rance [also printed incorrectly] grew up in the South Central Los Angeles community of Watts.”

1942/3 Cortez moved to West Los Angeles. I am not certain the year, as a few sources, including D. H. Melhem’s pioneering interview and analyses in Heroism in the New Black Poetry, states “age 7.” The year is listed as 1944 in Val Wilmer’s interview in CODA, which comports with the 1936 birth year error. In a statement she wrote for Watts: Art and Social Change in Los Angeles art exhibition catalogue, Cortez noted the year was 1943.

1946 Cortez’s family moved to 115th Street in Watts. This was likely their second home in Los Angeles.

1947 In different interviews, Cortez anecdotally recalled that she was “exposed to bebop” in this year, around age thirteen.

1950 Cortez anecdotally recalled that she met Ornette Coleman at a Pee Wee Crayton jam session in Los Angeles. She was around sixteen years old. Crayton was a blues and R&B singer and guitarist who, like Ornette, moved from Texas to Los Angeles in the 1930s.

1951 Cortez studied drawing, painting, design, piano, bass, cello, and music theory at Manual Arts High School. I’m not sure the exact years Cortez attended, though she likely graduated in 1951 or 1952. D. H. Melhem’s interview refers to Cortez’s interests and training in multiple musical genres, and though she did not continue her formal instrumental training past this point, she dabbled in visual arts, like printmaking, for the rest of her life. Her voracious appetite for listening to jazz and blues, in conjunction with her musical training, helped Cortez understand and communicate with musicians with whom she would collaborate throughout her writing career. Anecdotally, Cortez recalled that she bought the Charlie Parker with Strings LP and shared it with Ornette in 1951. This bears mentioning insofar as different sources credit Cortez for introducing Ornette to his lifelong colleague, trumpeter Don Cherry. As such, Cortez’s taste in music and her understanding of jazz certainly shaped legendary saxophonist Ornette Coleman’s
emerging aesthetic that would revolutionize jazz music in the years to come. A 2007 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* provides more insight into their relationship.

1953 Cortez attended Compton Junior College, but did not finish because of financial concerns. I am uncertain as to the exact year she stopped her formal education, but this point is salient, in that Cortez continued her lifelong education among the artistic and activist giants of her generation, and she held academic posts from time to time, despite her lack of formal degree. Significantly, the inside packaging for Randy Weston’s 2012 *African Nubian Suite* bears a dedication to “Cheikh Anta Diop and Dr. Jayne Cortez.”

1954 Cortez married Ornette Coleman. At the time they married, he was a Jehovah’s Witness, and I note this as a point of interest, in that Cortez later expressed distrust of formal religions in her personal notebooks. Ornette’s unique orthodox spirituality of his own making, expressed in different sources including the movie *Made in America*, suggests other factors that may have led to their divorce ten years later.

1955 Cortez and Coleman moved from Watts back to West Los Angeles. Though they had not yet met, Cortez’s future husband of almost forty years, Melvin Edwards, moved to Los Angeles for junior college, where he eventually graduated from USC.

1956 Denardo Ornette Coleman was born to Cortez and Ornette Coleman on April 19. At the time Denardo was born, Cortez was becoming involved with movements for equality. She attended rallies and speeches by Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Foreman in the “late 50s and early 60s.”

1959 Cortez took her first trip to New York City in the same year Ornette Coleman moved to New York. This move may have signaled a shift in their relationship, though most sources suggest Ornette moved to a place where his experimental music might flourish.

1960 Cortez came into possession of the Hughes/Bontemps anthology of Negro poetry she cites in different interviews as the root of her affinity for Négrière ideology that would permeate her own body of work.

1963 In different interviews, Cortez cites the summer she worked with Fannie Lou Hamer and SNCC in Greenwood, Mississippi as the year she became fully politically aware. When she returned to Los Angeles, Cortez sponsored a fundraiser that involved reading poetry with music to support voting rights struggles in Mississippi. Several accounts also suggest Cortez spent the summer of 1964 in Greenwood. Upon returning to California, Cortez cofounded a Friends of SNCC chapter with artist Bob Rogers.

1964 Cortez regularly cited this as the year she started reading her poetry with music, resulting in her performing a one-woman show with saxophonist Curtis Amy’s band, which included pianist Horace Tapscott, with whom she continued to work through 1966. That year she and Ornette Coleman divorced, and some accounts point to finances as the root of the their separation. Cortez also founded the Watts Repertory Theatre as an offshoot of Studio Watts. At Studio Watts, Bob Rogers taught design, Carmencita Romero taught dance, Guy Miller oversaw visual arts, and Jim Woods served as director. When Cortez was at Bob Roger’s studio, she met future husband Melvin Edwards who remembers seeing Cortez there maybe two or three times over the next four years.

1965 Cortez anecdotally recalled meeting Langston Hughes.

1966 Cortez anecdotally recalled meeting Duke Ellington.

1967 Cortez left Studio Watts over disagreements with director Jim Woods. Cortez and Edwards (who had earned a Whitney Fellowship) moved to New York separately, and
she and Edwards would become “reacquainted” once they both settled in the city. Before settling in New York, however, Cortez took Denardo on their first trip to Africa (Ethiopia, Sudan, Ghana, Nigeria), Asia, and Europe on a private grant: “…the two of them took a trip around the world that let them literally end in New York.” Bob Rogers also moved to New York City that year.

1968 Cortez returned to Los Angeles for summer performances at Studio Watts.

1969 Cortez published her first chapbook, *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man’s Wares*. Mutual friend Bob Rogers suggested Melvin Edwards illustrate the book. In the catalogue for his fifty-year retrospective exhibition in 2016, Edwards recalled their first artistic collaboration. “It’s your book, and I’m happy that I did the drawings for you.’ and somewhere, probably, there are the ones she didn’t use. Because every book that we did things like that, she may have used five, or eight drawings, and then there may have been twenty more. She didn’t throw stuff away, but she didn’t give them back to me, either. That was our agreement.”

1970 In June, Cortez performed with Clifford Thornton at Carnegie Hall. Edwards’s Whitney Exhibition included a piece based on “Love” in *Pissstained Stairs* that included Cortez’s text: “look through minds mirror distance and measure time.” Cortez (on a Rockefeller Foundation Grant) and Edwards took a six-week trip to Africa (his first; to Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Dahomey/Benin, Niger) through Educators to Africa, sponsored by the University of Connecticut, Howard University, and the African American Institute. The Schomburg archive has a personal photo of Cortez pictured with Edwards in Ibadan, wearing her hair as it appears on the cover of her LP *Celebrations and Solitudes*. On this trip, they attended the enstoolment of Asantehene Opokoware.

1971 Cortez founded her independent Bola Press (also cited as 1972) and released her second chapbook, *Festivals and Funerals*. In March she attended the New York Public Library New Black Poets in America Festival at the Countee Cullen branch in Harlem and the Woodie King Poetry Festival at the Apollo Theater. Her poems were published in *Black Aesthetic* and in *Black World*. She traveled to Lagos, Accra, and Ibadan with Edwards.

1972 Cortez read her work at Sacramento State College in January and participated in the Howard Symposium on Creative Expression in April. Cortez performed again with Clifford Thornton at Wesleyan in April, and he released his LP *Communications Network* that featured one of their performances together. She participated in “Soul at the Center” in Alice Tully Hall in August. Cortez also performed with Richard Davis at Martinson Hall in New York. Her work was published in *New Black Voices*. Cortez also published an article about Edwards’s *Extensions* art show in City College of New York’s *Continuities*. She participated in the California State Pan African Cultural Expo in April and read her work at the New York Public Library’s “Poetry from Black America: Exposing Lies and Building Dreams” in November.
1975 Cortez married Melvin Edwards. Her work was published in *Giant Talk*, and she gave a lecture at the Southern University Fourth Annual Melvin Butler Black Poetry Festival “Environment in the Processes of Poetry” in Baton Rouge. She read her work at the New York Public Library Countee Cullen branch.

1976 Cortez participated in “200 Years of Creativity and Struggle Through Black Literature” at the New Museum in Brooklyn, and she read with Quincy Troupe at the Academy of American Poets “Poetry in the Parks” in Washington Square. Cortez taught “The History of Jazz” at the College of New Rochelle and participated in the nineteenth reading of Ascension Poetry Series DC Folger with Ishmael Reed; around the same time, Reed published a tribute to Cortez in *Yardbird Reader*. She also read at the Afrikan Functional Theater reading and participated on a panel for the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines. Cortez performed with Bill Cole, Sam Rivers, Warren Smith, and Vishnu Wood at the Dartmouth “A Tribute to John Coltrane.” She read unpublished works at the University of North Carolina and read from *Scarifications* at Howard University. She also presented a reading and her “Thoughts on Avant Garde Music” lecture at New York University, and she presented “The History of African and Afro-American Literature” lecture at Bronx Community College. Her work was also published in *Womansong*.

1977 Cortez published her fourth book, *Mouth on Paper*. Cortez began her tenure as a Rutgers lecturer that would end in 1983. She taught courses that included “Black Literature and Black Music,” “Black and Third World Poetry,” “Modern Black Writers,” “Advanced Creative Writing.” She and Edwards attended FESTAC ’77, where she sat for an interview Theo Vincent would later publish. Cortez performed in Bill Cole’s *The Third Cycle* in May and performed sixteen of her poems with musicians in November at Dartmouth. She read with Vertamae Grosvenor and Quincy Troupe at the Academy of American Poets “Continuing Renaissance” and at “An Afternoon of Textures and Poetry.” She presented “The Black Writer and the Nation” lecture at Tufts and read her work at Oberlin. Cortez appeared in a television interview on NBC’s *Positively Black* and began her tenure on the New York State Council of the Arts that lasted until 1980. That year, Cortez was also involved with the New York CETA Program.

1978 Cortez participated in several readings, at locations including the Frank Frazier art opening at the Roosevelt New York Public Library; the Damas Tribute reading New York Countee Cullen Public Library; the International Women’s Poetry Festival in New York City; and the Martin Luther King Public Library in Washington, DC. Cortez also traveled to Mexico City and performed with musicians in Bill Cole’s *The Fourth Cycle* at Dartmouth. Cortez’s work was published in *Essence* and *Mother Jones*. She also read at Leon Gontran Damas’s funeral, where Melvin Edwards presented a sculpture in Damas’s honor.

1979 Cortez released her LP *Unsubmissive Blues*, and she and Richard Davis opened for Peter Tosh on his Midwest tour dates. Cortez won a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, and she performed at several readings in locations including Detroit’s Paul Robeson Memorial Gallery, Aimé Césaire’s Festival Des Arts Et Culture in Martinique, the Amiri Baraka Defense Committee “Benefit Evening,” and the New York Public Library Countee Cullen branch Tribute to Southern Africa where she read and Edwards showed his art. Cortez’s work was published in *Mother Jones* and *Heresies*.

1980 Cortez won a Before Columbus American Book Award and participated in the reading documented on the LP *Poets Read Their Contemporary Poetry*. She also performed “Kai Kai” in Bill Cole’s *Fifth Cycle*. Cortez won an award and read her work in conjunction with the City College of New York Spring Poetry Festival, and she participated in an
Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle panel and reading. Cortez traveled with Edwards to the Eighth Annual Cultural Festival in Martinique, followed by a trip to Egypt. Her work was published in *Essence*.

1981 Cortez traveled to Cuba on a trip organized by Ana Mendieta. She also took her first trip to Senegal with Edwards; she also traveled to Mexico City. Cortez helped organize the Larry Neal tribute in Harlem, and she earned a second CAPS grant. Cortez performed with musicians in Bill Cole’s *Sixth Cycle*. She participated in the Third International Festival of Poets in Rome along with A Forum on the Politics of Writing panel. She performed with the Firespitters at New Jazz at the Public Theater and at the Toronto Festival of Poets reading. The Toronto performance was released on the LP *Life is a Killer*, and a video of it is part of Ron Mann’s film *Poetry in Motion*. The Firespitters performed again at Wholly Communion: A Gathering of Poets, also featuring Amiri Baraka. Cortez also participated in the Fourth InterAmerican Congress of Women Writers in Mexico City, and her work was published in *Black Literature*, *Ashanti* magazine, *Soho News*, and *Figaro*. Cortez also agreed to serve as a National Endowment for the Arts judge.

1982 Cortez published her fourth book, *Firespitter*, and her first album with the Firespitters, *There It Is*. Her performance on *Life is a Killer* and *Poetry in Motion* were also released this year, along with her collaborative book with Ted Joans, *Merveilleux Coup de Foudre*. In the spring, Cortez read at The Accent is Literary: New York Small Press Book Fair, and later took another trip to Dakar. Cortez performed with the Firespitters at the Real Art Ways Jazz Festival, and she participated in Bill Cole’s *Seventh Cycle* at New York City’s Town Hall. She performed again with the Firespitters at a reception for *There It Is* at the Alternative Museum, and then traveled to Paris for the UNESCO *War on War* conference. Cortez and other conference participants gave a reading in Milan the following week, and a few weeks later, she read her work in Accra. Her poems were published in *Free Spirits*, the surrealist journal she edited with Franklin and Penelope Rosemont.

1983 Cortez participated in the Soundscape Reading and the City University of New York’s Langston Hughes Festival. She performed with the Firespitters at Just Buffalo in the spring and at Poets Salute Larry Neal in the summer. Cortez traveled to Mexico and later to Melkweg, Amsterdam for the One World Poetry Festival. At the end of the year, she participated in the City College of New York Graduate Center’s “Minority Strategies: Comparative Perspectives” conference.

1984 Cortez published *Coagulations* with Thunder’s Mouth Press in the United States. Cortez took part in a trip to Cuba organized for a group of women writers. She also traveled to Nicaragua, Paris, and Amsterdam. Cortez performed in Hartford with the Firespitters, and she participated in Artists Against Apartheid concert with Rene McLean. She read at Herb’s Restaurant in Washington, DC. On her trip to Paris, she met with Ted Joans and Edouard Glissant, and Melvin Edwards’s *Lynch Fragments* were shown. Her work was reviewed in *Greenfield Review* and published in *In a Stream of Ink*.

1985 Cortez published *Coagulations* with Pluto Press in the United Kingdom. She and Denardo appeared in the film *Ornette: Made in America*. Cortez performed in a festival in London and at Cornell University with Bill Cole. She performed with the Firespitters at the Artists Collective Inc. in Hartford. She also performed at the Black Roots Festival. She read at the Schomburg with Troupe and Morejón. Her local activism continued in her participation in the Graham Court Tenants Association fundraiser. Internationally, Cortez and Edwards made their first return to Nigeria since FESTAC ’77, where they visited the
Ofa of Benin and participated in the Iggun Street ceremony. On the same trip, they traveled to Cote d’Ivoire and Morocco. She gave another reading with Troupe for the New York City New Writers Collective, and read in Harvard Yard for the New England Poetry Club. She also read at the Queensboro correctional facility. Her poems were published in *The Black Scholar* and *The City Sun*. Cortez notes that she met Nicolas Guillen in Havana. She also joined the governing board of the Poetry Society of America and remained on the board until 1988.

1986 Cortez published *Maintain Control*. She participated in the City University of New York Medgar Evers First National Black Writers Conference. She traveled to London in March, and performed with Denardo, Trevor Watts, Paul Rogers, Nana Tisboe (archived in print by Graham Lock). She also talked about her work at ICA. She traveled to Bremen to perform. She visited Toronto for the Poetry Against Apartheid reading. She also read her work at Cambridge and participated in the Tribute to Mike Smith at Columbia. She served on Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines board of directors and as judge for Editor’s Grants until 1988. She visited Zimbabwe with Edwards, stopping in Senegal en route to Gabon. She won a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. Her poems were published in *The Race Today Review*.

1987 Cortez won her second Before Columbus Foundation Award along with a New York Foundation for the Arts Award. She performed several times with the Firespitters, in Schenectady, Buffalo, and Detroit. She served as a workshop instructor at the Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Center, and she attended the *Perfil da Literatura* conference in Brazil. She also read her work at Passaic Community College and Poets House.

1988 Cortez visited Trinidad and Cuba, where she saw Fidel Castro at the UNEAC congress and performed with an unnamed Cuban saxophonist. Cortez read with Louis Rivera at the State University of New York Stony Brook. Cortez also traveled with Denardo and performed with the Firespitters in Italy prior to attending the Prime Time “Skies of America” premier in London. She also participated in the Political Commitment in International Writing Conference at Fairleigh Dickinson with Carolyn Forché and Wole Soyinka. Cortez joined the advisory board of Poets House and participated in their reading to honor Nicholas Guillén. She joined Edwards on his Fulbright trip to Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa. Her poems were published in *Black American Literature Forum*.

1989 Cortez took part in a benefit reading with Kurt Vonnegut and others at the Cooper Union Great Hall. She also took part in the CETA Artist’s Project “Poets in the Bars” Round Robin reading with Troupe and the Art and The Political Crisis: A Pan African Writers’ Conference at the State University of New York Stony Brook; she also served as a Schomburg panelist. She read her work with musicians at Dartmouth for Bill Cole’s *Yoruba Proverbs* performance and for a summer performance with the Firespitters in Central Park. She returned to Zimbabwe and South Africa for a conference, read her work in Detroit, attended the P.E.N. World Congress Toronto Reading, and joined Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez for the MLA Convention “Black Poets on the Line” reading, organized by D. H. Melhem. She also read her work at the Pomander Bookshop.

1990 Cortez released *Everywhere Drums*. She participated in the London Jazz and Poetry Festival, including a performance with Annie Whitehead and an all-female band. She attended the Women of Words reading at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. She returned to London for the International Book Fair of Radical and Third World Books reading, and she read at Louisiana State University with Glissant and Derek Walcott. She participated in the Poetry of Black Liberation Schomburg Forum on South Africa, and she later
performed with music at the New School. Later in the summer, she performed at Alice Tully Hall. She took part in the “Writers-in-Performance” panel at the Bumbershoot Book Fair in Seattle, and she performed with the Firespitters at the Just Buffalo Literary Center. Cortez returned to England in the fall for an *Everywhere Drums* tour with the Firespitters that included performances at the YAA Asantewaa Arts Center and Dingwalls in Camden Town. During the trip, Cortez also performed in Belfast at the Old Museum Arts Centre, at the Liverpool Library, at the Shepherd’s Bush Library, in the Celebration of Black Women’s Poetry at the Lilian Baylis Theatre, at Inworks Bristol, in Oxford, and in Norwich. The Camden performance included Bukky Leo, Jonathan Gee, Gary Crosby, Cheryl Alleyne, and she also performed with Jean Toussaint. Cortez and Edwards both participated in events at the University of Iowa, and she participated in the Poets House Achebe Tribute to raise money for his recovery from an automobile accident. She also participated in the Seattle Arts Festival and the Harlem School of the Arts Sterling Brown Tribute reading with Baraka. Her work was published in *Coda Magazine*.

1991 Cortez published *Poetic Magnetic* and produced the “Mandela is Coming” video to honor his visit to New York. Cortez also founded the Organization of Women Writers of Africa. She performed with musicians including Gail Thompson at the London Black Radical Book Fair. She participated in a symposium in Pullman, Washington. She performed with the Firespitters at S.O.B.’s in New York, and performed alone at the Nuyorican Cafe. She attended a United Nations reading in South Africa and traveled to Caracas, Venezuela shortly thereafter. In the summer, Cortez performed in San Francisco and at Women of Words in Oakland with drummer Anthony Brown and bassist Herbie Lewis. Cortez participated in the Poetry Circus in Taos, New Mexico. Cortez also participated in the New Music Nights Festival at the Village Gate along with KRS-One, though her handwritten notes suggest she may have canceled this appearance. She participated in workshops in Maine, and gave readings in Woodstock and at Poets House. She performed with Bill Cole in Sullivan County and read her work at Syracuse University’s Raymond Carver Reading Series. She also attended the Havana art biennial, where she took part in a Santería ritual. Cortez read her work at The Writer’s Voice with James Wilcox. She participated in a conference honoring Malcolm X and served as the Writer in Residence at The Writers’ Community in New York. Her work was published in * Pulse Magazine*.

1992 Cortez traveled to Paris for the African Americans and Europe Conference at the Sorbonne, and she participated in readings without music in London. She participated in a Before Columbus reading, an Anti-Apartheid reading in Toronto, the New World Poets series in Houston, and the Unterberg Poetry Center Martin Luther King Day Celebration. Cortez performed with the Firespitters at S.O.B.’s and at the Hartford Aquarium for the Hartford Artists Collective. Cortez and the Firespitters performed at the Utrecht MEP festival, and they also performed in Zurich, Munich, and Bremen. She also performed with John Giorno at the Grazer Congress. She performed with the Firespitters at New Music Across America in Toronto. Cortez also performed in Bill Cole’s *Proverbs* concert. Cortez participated in the posthumous tribute to Miles Davis, directed by Max Roach, at Saint John the Divine. She attended the Skowhegan, Maine School of Painting and Sculpture. Her work was published in *Eye Weekly*.

1993 “I Am New York City” was featured in the television series *Tribeca*. Cortez gave a reading with music for King, Poetry, and Jazz at the 92nd Street YMCA, and she performed with the Firespitters at Mount Sinai Hospital. She read at Action Poetry ’94 in Banff, Canada and for the Poetry Society of America in New York. She showed her
monoprints at Long Island University. Cortez performed Bill Cole’s *Yoruba Proverbs* in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She and Edwards traveled to Manila to see her family, followed by a trip to Japan to install one of Edward’s sculptures and to read poetry with trumpeter Leo Smith in Hiroshima and Kyoto. Cortez participated in a tribute to Césaire in Sarasota. She performed with the Firespitters at the Miami World Sound Festival. Her work was published in *YSB* and in the *Carry It On* Peace Calendar.

1994 Cortez released her first CD, *Cheerful & Optimistic*. She and Edwards also published their only collaborative book that foregrounds his work, *Fragments*. She participated in the Afrikan Poetry Theater tribute with the Firespitters and won an award; she also earned the Fannie Lou Hamer Award. She read at Poetry International in London, at Artists on the Cutting Edge II in San Diego, and at Black Shorts in New York. Cortez also performed with the Firespitters at the Atlanta National Black Arts Festival, at the New School, in Berlin, and at the Columbus Jazz and Rib Fest in Ohio. She read “Jazz Fan Looks Back” on NPR. She traveled to Amsterdam and Paris. Her work was published in *Ocean Drive*.

1995 Cortez traveled to Guadalajara. She also coordinated a reading of her poetry with a slideshow of Edward’s work in Arizona along with “Mojo: An Evening of Poetry and Jazz in Response to the Sculpture of Melvin Edwards” in San Antonio. She traveled to Korea and China for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, where she read and played her recording of “Sacred Trees.” She performed with the Firespitters at Symphony Space in New York for *Dankaraful*, and at the Langston Hughes Auditorium, sharing the bill with Odetta. She read with Amiri Baraka at a Celebration of Langston Hughes’s Birthday in New York.

1996 Cortez released her CD *Taking the Blues Back Home* on Harmolodic/Verve. She published *Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere* through High Risk and Serpent’s Tail. She participated in Bill Cole’s *Struggles of Fannie Lou Hamer*. She performed with the Firespitters in South Africa at the Arts Alive Festival; while there, she attended a Sangora ceremony of conjuring. She participated in the Rendezvous Reading at the Earshot Jazz Festival in Seattle, the Modern Times reading in San Francisco, the Midnight Special reading in Santa Monica, a reading in San Diego, a reading at Robin’s Books in Philadelphia, a reading for the Notable Poets and Writers Series in New Jersey, a reading at Barnes and Noble in Union Square, and a reading at Borders Books in Boston. Cortez also performed with the Firespitters in France, in Rome, and at Tongues on Fire in Washington, DC. She won an International African Festival Award and an Arts International Award. Cortez and Edwards were guests at the White House to present his sculpture *Gate of Osun*. She read her work with Haki Madhubuti at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Her work was published in *Bomb*.

1997 Cortez and the Firespitters performed in France, and she also travelled to London and performed at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow. Cortez traveled to Dakar and Goree. Cortez and Edwards were considering an inexpensive home in Ghana and Souleymane Keita instead helped them purchase seven hectares of farmland in Mermoz. Cortez met with Ama Ata Aidoo in Accra in June to plan the first Yari Yari conference that took place in October—Yari Yari: Black Women Writers and the Future. Cortez also traveled to French Guiana for the Damas Symposium and to Guadeloupe for UNESCO’s “La Route De L’Esclave”/“Between Two Banks of History and Memory: The Slave Route” conference. Her work was published in *Liberation* and *Options* magazines.

1998 Cortez performed with the Firespitters in Paris with Warren Smith and at *Badenya* in New York; she performed again with the Firespitters in June. She performed *Freedom*.
1863, *A Fable* with Bill Cole’s Untempered Ensemble at Baylor University. She read her work at the Dia Center for the Arts. Cortez traveled with Edwards to Dakar and Goree, because he was awarded an NEA grant for his first print workshop there. She participated in a “Political Concerns” panel at the Calabash Poets Workshop in New York, and read at the Long Island University and at Brooklyn College’s Day of the Poet.

1999 Cortez released her *Yari Yari* documentary film. She attended a Texas State University performance and interview, which are both archived on video. She participated in a memorial reading of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” in New York. She read her work at the Detroit Festival of the Arts, at the Detroit Public Library, and in San Francisco with Ted Joans and Robert Chrisman. She attended the Slave Routes conference and the Congress of Women/Women’s National Organization sponsored by Aidoo in Luanda, Angola. Edwards completed his *Route des esclave* sculpture, and Cortez earned an International African Festival Award. She and Edwards visited Dakar and Goree, where they purchased unfinished construction next to Souleymane Keita’s workshop.

2000 Cortez appeared in the film *Women in Jazz*. She attended the UN Millennium Summit. Cortez acted as the African American Artist in Residence at NYU while Manthia Diawara was on leave. While there, she performed with the Firespitters and collaborated with Fred Ho. Cortez performed in Brussels and Antwerp with Firespitters Charmett Moffett and Denardo Coleman, and she later performed with the Firespitters in Bogota, Colombia. She traveled with Denardo to Goree. Cortez also read her work in Maine and at the Havana Biennial. She earned Gwendolyn Brooks’s Henry Blakely Award.

2001 Cortez printed the chapbook *Intolerance*. She and Edwards traveled to Dakar in January to see their almost completed house, and they returned in late June to see workers finishing details. She and Edwards also purchased land in Accord, New York. Cortez performed with Bill Cole at the University of Virginia and with the Firespitters at the Mellon Jazz Festival in Pittsburgh and at the Vision Festival in New York. She and the Firespitters also performed with Habib Koite in New York. Cortez and the Firespitters also performed at Border Voices Poetry & Music Fair at San Diego State University. She read her work in Detroit and in New York at the Poetry Gathering. Cortez traveled to South Africa. She earned the City College of New York Langston Hughes Medal and attended the NYU “The Black Aesthetic 2001” symposium.

2002 Cortez published *Jazz Fan Looks Back* with Hanging Loose Press. She spoke at the Bouki Blues Festival, in St. Louis, Senegal. She gave a keynote speech and performed with the Firespitters at the University of Missouri. She read her work in Maine at the Bates College “Diaspora in My Art: Artistic Perspectives on Africa in the Americas” and sat for an interview with Kimberly Ruffin. She read her work at the East Orange Library in New Jersey, at Grolier Poetry Bookshop in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and at the Langston Hughes Poetry Festival at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She also gave a keynote speech at the Sandhills Writers Conference in Augusta, Georgia. She performed with musicians at the Vision Festival.

2003 Cortez released her CD *Borders of Disorderly Time*. She attended the Socialist Scholars Conference “War Without End” in New York City. She also served as the Eastern Michigan University McAndless Distinguished Visitor, where she taught Literature of Black Liberation, led biweekly workshops, and performed at special events (one of which included the Firespitters) during the fall semester. She also performed with the Firespitters at the Detroit Festival of the Arts. She performed at the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, and she read her work and screened her “Yari Yari” documentary at a
Just Buffalo poetry event at the Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center. She also participated in “Exile, Writing and Cultural Freedom” in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

2004 Cortez read her work at Long Island University in Brooklyn and read with Amiri Baraka at Weequahic High School as part of the Rutgers Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience’s “Newark Reads Poetry 2004: Voices of the City” series. She read at Shaman Drum in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She performed with Denardo in Paris. She returned to Santa Fe to participate again in Readings and Conversations: Exile, Writing, and Cultural Freedom for North American Network of Cities of Asylum. She organized Yari Yari Pamberi: Black Women Writers Dissecting Globalisation, her second Yari Yari conference.

2005 Cortez participated in the University of Nebraska Omaha Malcolm X Festival reading. She performed with the Firespitters at the University of Minnesota and at the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Drumvoices Festival of Black Arts.

2006 Cortez released a collection of remastered recordings on the CD Find Your Own Voice. She gave the Martin Luther King Public Affairs Lecture at Syracuse University. She performed with musicians in honor of Edouard Glissant. She performed with the Firespitters at James Madison University in Virginia. She received the Bellagio Residency Award from the Rockefeller Foundation at the Bellagio Conference Center in Italy.

2007 Cortez published her final book through Bola Press, The Beautiful Book. She performed with the Firespitters at the Visions Festival and released a few of the pieces from this performance on As if You Knew. She performed in London with Denardo at a posthumous tribute concert for John LaRose. She performed with the Firespitters in San Francisco, the day after they performed with Ornette at the San Francisco Jazz Festival. She delivered the keynote “The New Ghana: Championing Excellence in Pan-Africanism and Humanity” at Syracuse University; she also performed with Bill Cole’s Untempered Ensemble at Syracuse. She participated in the South Bank Centre’s London Literary Festival. She also participated in L’Institute du Tout-Monde teleconference from the Schomburg Library to Paris.

2008 Cortez read her work at the Brooklyn Public Library and at the Georgetown University Let Freedom Ring conference. She participated in the University of Maine Poetry of the 1970s conference and organized the second Slave Routes conference at NYU that resulted in a video clip of her performance with the Firespitters. She attended Amiri Baraka’s seventy-fifth birthday celebration. She received the Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center International Cross-Cultural Black Women’s Studies Institute “Outstanding Humanitarian” Award.

2009 Cortez released her final book, On the Imperial Highway, through Hanging Loose Press. She read her work with Amiri Baraka at an event at the Schomburg Center curated by Quincy Troupe. She attended the Medellin, Colombia “Festival Internacional de Poesia.” She performed with the Firespitters at the Syracuse University “The Artists’ Response to the Symbolism of the Election of Barack Obama” Festival. She participated in a book signing at a Los Angeles bookstore.

2010 Cortez performed with the Firespitters at “Brooklyn For Haiti—A Benefit Concert.” She gave a lecture at the University of California Santa Barbara. She attended the Dak’Art festival in Dakar and the South Africa “Women’s Voices Unite” Literary Symposium. She also performed with the Firespitters at the Visions Festival, and released a few of
these pieces on As If You Knew. She also performed with Denardo at the Sanctuary for Independent Media, a performance archived on YouTube.

2011 Cortez released her final album, the live compilation As If You Knew. She participated in “Find Your Own Voice, A Poetic Excursion through Language and Music” at Bakersfield College in California. She was also honored by the Arizona Daily Star among “The Best of Arizona: Poets.”

2012 Cortez performed with Denardo at The College of William and Mary in Virginia; this may have been her final performance in public with her son. She also performed in Randy Weston’s African Nubian Suite at New York University; this has been documented as her last public performance. That summer, however, a newspaper advertisement suggests Cortez performed with the Firespitters at the New York Central Park Band Shell as part of “Talking Books.” After unexpectedly contracting a virus, Cortez died of heart failure on December 28. Following her death, she and Edwards became honorary citizens of Saint-Louis, Senegal.

2013 Cortez’s Celebration of Life was held at the Cooper Union Great Hall in New York City on February 6. In a Bomb interview, Edwards shared, “...she requested her ashes to be put in both Benin City, Nigeria, and Dakar, Senegal, which was granted. From 1969 to 2013 relationships with universal African culture was an essential part to our approach to life and aesthetics in general. Collaboration is an important word here as we came to a lot of ideas together from our own experience.” In April, the Oba Eriadiuwa of Benin performed her burial rites, and an article in Africa News provides more information about this event. Yari Yari Ntoaso: Continuing the Dialogue, the third Yari Yari conference Cortez worked to organize took place in Accra in May.
Appendix C: Selected Other Publications

Like the timeline in Appendix B, this list is an incomplete work in progress I will continue to rectify as I unearth more archived references to Cortez’s work. Publications are arranged chronologically, then alphabetically by category.

Anthologies and Periodicals Containing Cortez’s Work


“I Am a Worker.” American Dialog 7, no. 1 (1972).


“For the Brave Young Students in Soweto.” *AfricAsia*, no. 13 (January 1985): 89.


“Push Back the Catastrophes,” “The Red Pepper Poet,” “I See Chano Pozo,” “You Know,”


“If the Drum is a Woman,” “Rose Solitude.” *The Drumming Between Us: Black Love & Erotic Poetry* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 1, 3.

“Consultation,” “Feathers,” “In the Line of Duty,” “Make Ifa,” “Say It,” “When I Look at Wifredo Lam’s Paintings,” “Bumblebee, You Saw Big Mama,” “Sacred Trees.”


“After Hours,” “Betty,” “Billie,” “Find Your Own Voice,” “Global Inequalities,” “I Am New York City,” “If the Drum is a Woman,” “Jazz Fan Looks Back,” “Kai Kai,” “Keys to the


“This Much I Know,” “Moreover.” *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 9, no. 2–3 (Fall/Winter 2009): 48–49.


Reviews, Tributes, and Scholarly Criticism of Cortez’s Work


Cheatwood, K. T. H. “Poet Writes With Fierce Power” [undated review of *Coagulations*, *publication unknown, photocopies in Jayne Cortez Papers*].

Ho, Fred Wei-han. “New Poetry from Jayne Cortez: If the Drum is a Woman” [undated review of *Coagulations*, *publication unknown, photocopies in Jayne Cortez Papers*].


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VITA

Renee Michelle Kingan was born in southern New Jersey in 1976. She earned a BA in English with minors in Music and Secondary Education from James Madison University in 1997. She earned an MA in English from George Mason University in 2002 and an MA in American Studies from The College of William & Mary in 2009. Currently, she teaches at the York County School of the Arts in Williamsburg, Virginia and works as a freelance musician specializing in woodwinds. Publication credits include “‘Dip It in the Sauce’: My Gratitude for Jayne Cortez” in The Black Scholar; the chapter “‘Taking It Out!’: Jayne Cortez’s Collaborations with the Firespitters” in Black Music, Black Poetry: Blues and Jazz’s Impact on African American Versification; and the chapter “Superheroic Subversion through Music and Movement in Cortez’s ‘Samba is Power’” in Feminist Superhero: Voice, Vision, Politics, and Performance in the Poetics of Adrienne Rich and Jayne Cortez.