

“Taking It Out!”: Jayne Cortez’s Collaborations with the Firespitters

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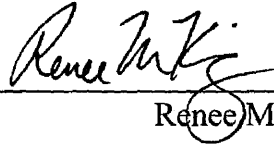
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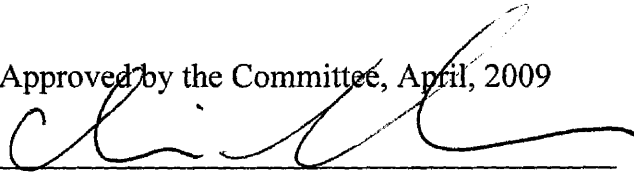
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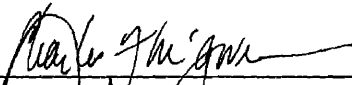
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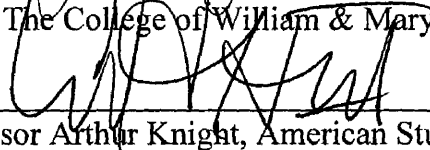


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ABSTRACT PAGE

Jayne Cortez is, foremost, an activist who wields her art to fight for justice on behalf of oppressed peoples. Since 1964, Cortez has been writing and performing collaborative jazz poetry rooted in the Black Arts aesthetic with the same collective of musicians. By incorporating free jazz elements, various forms of incremental repetition, surrealism, and improvisation in their work, Cortez and her musicians create a unique form of jazz poetry imbued with both aesthetic merit and a tangible sense of political and social activism. Building upon the ideals of collectivity and Pan Africanism that come to the forefront during the Black Arts movement, Cortez continues to develop her own brand of activist art that transcends the aims of the temporally bounded, short-lived Black Arts movement. Cortez and the Firespitters speak on behalf of oppressed people throughout the African Diaspora, addressing contemporary issues as they arise.

In this paper, I argue that Jayne Cortez's collaborations with the Firespitters exemplify the power of collaborative jazz poetry in effecting social change. Though she initially situated her work within the context of the Black Arts movement, I also argue that Cortez's work transcends the temporal boundaries of the movement, and remains a viable form of social activism in the twenty-first century. This paper provides the context necessary to analyze five of Cortez's poems, both musically and textually, with the goal of explaining the collectivity inherent in Cortez's creative process. By examining live and studio recordings of the same pieces, this paper considers many of the intricacies of jazz improvisation and the myriad choices collaborators instantaneously make in any given performance. Beginning with a brief overview of the scholarship dealing with Cortez's collaborations, this paper adds to the body of scholarship about jazz poetry by placing Cortez's recordings in conversation with different aspects of jazz activism, jazz poetry, the Black Arts movement, and free jazz. This paper also draws extensively on primary sources including several published interviews with Cortez and original interviews with two of Cortez's longtime collaborators.

I dedicate this paper to all those who revel in the knowledge that JAZZ IS GOOD.

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Thanks also to professors Charlie McGovern and Arthur Knight for graciously reading my work and offering their suggestions for improvement, and special thanks to readers Toni Rock and Eileen Kingan for their eagle eyes and skillful handling of minutiae. I also wish to thank Professor Gunnar Mossblad for providing most of my early jazz training and nearly all of my formal training in improvisation during my undergraduate study at JMU; Gunnar's inspirational teaching provided the spark that hooked me on jazz as both a scholarly pursuit and as a personal passion. Finally, I owe the greatest debt of gratitude to my parents who have always fostered my love of music, no matter where my path has taken me. Thanks for all of your support, Mom and Dad; I could not have written this without you.

INTRODUCTION

“I really like working with music. The attitude of the poet against the attitude of the musicians. The way we work is to sit down and talk about it. And when I’m reading, they’re simply responding to what I’m saying: they’re responding, they’re commenting, and they’re taking it out! You have several viewpoints on the same issue. You stop and start, elaborate and do variations.” -Jayne Cortez

Since Langston Hughes began exploring the world of music in his writing of the early 1920s, jazz musicians and poets have worked together to create a mode of expression that blends the improvisation of jazz music with dynamic poetic performance. Jazz poetry collaborations allow writers and musicians to explore each other’s spaces, enabling them to inhabit realms outside their own. Critical and academic discussions of these collaborations often fail to capture the simultaneously synthetic nature of this artistic endeavor. For example, many literary scholars discussing jazz poetry focus primarily on written text, sometimes providing a modicum of rudimentary information on the interplay of music and language. Musical scholars, on the other hand, tend to focus on jazz music in isolation, generally avoiding the middle ground of jazz poetry.

In this paper, I argue for the importance of this liminal space, first from an aesthetic standpoint, but more importantly from an intertextual standpoint. In other words, this essay explores some ways the Firespitters’ improvised collaborative music serves to enhance the meanings of Jayne Cortez’s poetry. I argue that the act of their free jazz collaboration fully actualizes Cortez’s activist messages in which she calls for freedom from various forms of oppression across the African Diaspora; this musical actualization is uniquely powerful in its ability to fuse music and poetry in a meaningful way that transcends decontextualized aesthetic analyses. Additionally, this paper examines Cortez’s inextricable connection to the Black Arts movement and the evolution of her poetic activist aesthetic as a continuation of the temporally bounded Black Arts ideology that remains as vital today as it was in the 1960s.

In addition to providing close readings of the jazz elements of different poems, this project contains the most in-depth explanation of Cortez's collaborative process, told both from her point of view, and, for the first time, from the points of view of some of her closest musical collaborators. By providing the musicians' insights, this project aims to better illuminate the metaphoric power of jazz music in not only enhancing but also providing the full realization of Cortez's poetic activism.¹ Additionally, this paper attempts to provide context for Cortez's work by explaining some historic collaborations, the use of jazz as a means of social activism, the elements and implications of free jazz, and the basic tenets of the Black Arts movement. The resulting document, then, is a brief exploration of the history of jazz poetry collaborations, a discussion of Jayne Cortez's relationship to the Black Arts movement, and an interdisciplinary analysis of the specific nature of her collaborations with the Firespitters in five selections from two studio recordings, one live recording, and two live performances.

Before discussing Cortez's poetry, however, it is important to briefly discuss the complex genre of jazz poetry and some of the poets who have worked in this mixed media. From a formal standpoint, there exist three basic types of jazz poetry: poetry about jazz, poetry that stylistically incorporates musical jazz elements, and poetry written and/or performed in collaboration with jazz musicians for different audiences. Early jazz poets and many who followed them wrote paeans to jazz that simply describe the lifestyle of musicians without breaking from standard poetic conventions in order to enact structural parallelism or replication; notable practitioners of this type of jazz poetry include Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Robert Hayden. Scholars credit the early twentieth-century rhythmic innovations of poets T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and E. E. Cummings as being some of the earliest attempts to incorporate jazz-like

¹ Jazz music has a long history of acting as both an overt and unintentional expression of Black American discontent with the inequalities inherent in a white male dominated capitalist culture. Since at least the 1920s, a host of writer-activists, like Amiri Baraka and Ralph Ellison, have appropriated jazz as a symbolic expression of black freedom from white oppression.

musical elements into written and spoken language. Black Poet pioneer Paul Lawrence Dunbar and later Harlem Renaissance poets Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown infused these elements into their poems about the jazz lifestyle in a way that managed to capture both the musical and social aspects of jazz on the written page. By combining thematic concerns with musical elements, these poets and many who followed them created poetry in which aesthetic considerations consciously supported the social messages in their work.

An additional permutation of jazz poetry creates a “third space” in which musicians and poets convey multilayered messages capable of reaching audiences on several different semiotic levels. By appropriating the stylistic considerations of early formal innovators like Sterling Brown, poets who collaborate and perform with musicians can deepen the connection among the words, the music, and the messages in their poems. The simultaneity inherent in such collaborations creates a crosspollination of ideas and expression that cannot exist in one mode or the other in isolation. I would argue that most of Jayne Cortez’s work with the Firespitters, unlike the work of many of her forbearers and contemporaries, exemplifies some of the most provocative possibilities for musicians and writers working together; the very nature of jazz improvisation brings a collectivity to their work that not only speaks to Cortez’s activist agenda, but also embodies that activism in a tangible, visceral way. This activism was at the core of the Black Arts aesthetic of the 1960s, and Cortez and the Firespitters continue to riff on the same jazz aesthetic as their work together continues to evolve.

Even though Langston Hughes and the Beat Poets were the first writers to work in this mixed genre, their recorded collaborations sound flat and disjointed in contrast with Cortez’s exuberant, highly interactive performances. Despite their intentions to the contrary, Kenneth Rexroth and Kenneth Patchen are just two of the Beat Poets whose recordings sound as if they are simply reading their work while jazz was happening rather than directly engaging with the

musicians sharing their bandstands. Even the recording of innovator Langston Hughes reading his poetry with both Leonard Feather and Charles Mingus falls short of creating the same dynamic interplay that makes Cortez's collaborations meaningfully congruent.² Though Hughes and the Beats made seminal contributions to the propagation of jazz poetry as a collaborative art form, their respective deliveries when reading their work in concert with live jazz, while not entirely monotonous, seem both lifeless and disjunct because they do not interact with one another. By failing to connect fully with each other, both the musicians and the poets fail to properly convey their love and appreciation of jazz as a vital art form capable of effecting social change. Since these early performances and recordings, later twentieth-century American poets like Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange, and Gil Scott-Heron have created extremely successful congruent jazz poetry collaborations that have had a far more powerful effect on listeners because of their acute realization of interactivity. As such, their work, like Cortez's, has been widely acclaimed for its capacity to both create an interactive collaborative space and to convey activist messages through both thematic and musical means.³ Cortez, however, is unique among this group in that none shares the same long-standing relationship with a group of musicians that she has with the Firespitters.

Coming of age as a multi-faceted artist in the 1950s, Cortez experienced the perpetuation of racial oppression and so collaborated with writers, artists, and activists in Los Angeles to found the Watts Repertory Theater Ensemble, a company that produced plays focusing on important anti-racist themes. At this time, Cortez also performed some of Langston Hughes's poems on

² Hughes finally recorded his collaborative work on *The Weary Blues*, though there is evidence of his collaborations as early as the 1930s. 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."

³ Gil Scott-Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," anthologized on the recording *Our Souls Have Grown Deep Like Rivers*, is an exemplary collaboration.

stage and developed a deep affinity for his jazz and blues-inflected verse. Her love affair with Hughes's work led Cortez to the surrealistic Négritude poems that would become a great source of inspiration for her; the stylistic freedom in their political work would become the catalyst for Cortez's unique brand of social activism. Combining her love of jazz and blues music with the poetic ideals she encountered through extensive reading, Cortez continued to shape her poems, finding her own voice in a mixture of stark images juxtaposed against one another in rapid staccato while incorporating several jazz and blues techniques.

Jayne Cortez published her first book of activist poetry in 1969 in the midst of the Black Arts movement in New York City, five years after she had begun reading her work with musicians while still in Los Angeles. Over the course of the next ten years, Cortez's close relationships with different jazz musicians yielded live performances with a number of other musical collaborators in both Los Angeles and New York City. After performing her poetry live with musicians for over ten years, Cortez recorded the LP *Celebrations and Solitudes* with bassist Richard Davis in 1974. The album's liner notes for this first recording describe it as a study in spontaneous collaboration; bassist Davis insisted that Cortez not share her poems with him until the date of the recording, so the two of them worked together in order to create music to fit within the framework of Cortez's written word (*Celebrations*). The result is a series of beautifully integrated duets between Cortez's voice and Davis's bass, that often eschew formal musical structure in favor of multi-timbral explorations of the different forms of injustice and oppression she addresses in her poetry.

Her next studio LP, 1980's *Unsubmissive Blues*, is Cortez's first recording with the musicians who now form the core of the Firespitters. One of Cortez's aims in her poetry is to expose multiple instances of injustice throughout the African Diaspora, and she often achieves this by adding different nonwestern timbres to the musical palates she selects for each iteration of

the Firespitters. In the case of *Unsubmissive Blues*, collaborators drummer Denardo Coleman and guitarist Bern Nix form the backbone of the group, with tuba player Joe Daley and nonwestern woodwind specialist Bill Cole forming the rest of the ensemble. Nix's blues and free-jazz inflected guitar and Daley's tuba create a provocative juxtaposition of two instruments not traditionally used side by side in a combo; Coleman's drumming is busily active, immediately setting the tone for *Unsubmissive Blues* as drivingly energetic, frenetic, and abrasive—a marked contrast to Cortez's first recording featuring simply her voice and Davis's solo string bass. In addition to the thick, rich texture the rhythm section provides, Cole's playing on the muzette and nagaswaram—both double-reed instruments—adds a tangible aural link between Non-Western cultures and two of Cortez's recorded poems.⁴ This LP also features two poems set to traditional twelve-bar blues, two duets between Cortez and her son Coleman, and two pieces replete with free jazz elements. Together, Cortez and the musicians listen to each other, creating a space in which all five voices contribute the overall effect and meaning of each piece.

Cortez's 1982 LP *There It Is* builds upon the relationships between Cortez and the musicians from *Unsubmissive Blues*. Cortez used the name "Firespitters" for the first time on this album and added two Latin percussionists, tenor saxophonist Charles Moffett, Jr., and bassist Jamaaladeen Tacuma to the group from the previous LP. Collaborations on this album follow the same basic shape as those on the previous recording; however, Cortez includes a band feature

⁴ Bill Cole specializes in Non-Western wind instruments, and Cortez's decision to incorporate the sounds, textures, and timbres of Cole's Middle Eastern double-reed instruments is an extension of the transnational flavor of her work. Additionally, reviewer Charlie Wilmoth makes the following observation of Cole's work on his album *Seasoning the Greens*: "It makes sense that improvisers like Cole would look to India, for example, for inspiration. I'm trying to avoid lumping together all music indigenous to the Far East, the Middle East, India and Africa, but in this case, it almost makes sense; not because those types of music are really all that similar, but because both free jazz and the types of nonwestern music listed share many of the same dissimilarities with regard to music indigenous to the West. Both contain plenty of improvisation, feature complex and ever-changing beat patterns, and strive for transcendence in a way that long ago became unpopular in most genres of Western music." (Wilmoth)

without her reading, giving the musicians a chance to stretch out and converse with one another on the free-jazz-inspired riff tune “Skin Diver.” Free jazz plays a prominent role on many pieces on this album, because most of the musicians also worked together with free jazz creator Ornette Coleman.

The recording *Maintain Control* from 1986 features the same musical core of Firespitters— Coleman, MacDowell, Moffett, and Nix—and adds a new element of “electro” percussion to the Firespitters’ timbral palate. With his electronic drum kit, Coleman explores a variety of soundscapes that contribute to the interpretation of contemporary issues in Cortez’s poetry. While the group relies on its successful collaborative efforts of the past, the musicians also continue looking for new ways to react to and interact with Cortez’s voice. Subsequent studio recordings—1990’s *Everywhere Drums*, 1992’s *Cheerful & Optimistic*, 1996’s *Taking the Blues Back Home*, and 2002’s *Borders of Disorderly Time*—also continue to build upon the group’s prior collaborative efforts; each recording stands as a powerful call for freedom, framing the jazz combo as a medium for social change. 2007’s compilation *Find Your Own Voice* highlights some of Cortez’s favorite pieces from these previously released recordings, showcasing remastered versions of several tracks that had long been out of print, and thus out of circulation.

In addition to creating this body of recorded work, Cortez and the Firespitters have traveled throughout the world in order to perform their activist art at various festivals, concerts, conferences, and colleges. Their dynamic live performances continually evolve, showing both Cortez and the musicians’ improvisatory abilities. The pieces they perform live, like all improvised jazz, always differ from the recordings and from performance to performance. *Poetry and Music*, a live recording from a 1992 festival in Germany, yields vastly different renditions of the same poems Cortez and the group previously recorded in the studio. In a live concert I

attended on November 10, 2006 in Harrisonburg, Virginia, each player in the group soloed in almost every piece they performed, continuing to reinterpret and reshape their interactions with the text as Cortez read with them onstage. In addition to reshaping previously recorded pieces, Cortez and the Firespitters continue to create new collaborative pieces together. At the Slave Routes Conference at New York University on October 11, 2008, Cortez and the group debuted unrecorded pieces about Hurricane Katrina and the genocide in Darfur. These live, dynamic jazz performances are integral enactments of Cortez's activist art. By performing in a variety of venues, Cortez and the Firespitters can reach a wider audience, thereby increasing the potential for enacting real social change through their collaborative efforts.

In response to these efforts, critics and scholars alike have lauded the spirit of collectivity and interplay in Cortez's live performances and recordings with the Firespitters. In his review of their record *Unsubmissive Blues*, Warren Woessner wrote that Cortez's work with the Firespitters is:

more than a collaboration, more than a group of jazzmen backing a reading, but [it] represent[s] a true fusion of the poet's voice with the voices of the instruments. They sing together... the voice holds its own in cut after cut, riding high, soloing over strong, insistent backbeats and instrumental challenges from the band... Cortez proves she can go beyond the solitary craft and play with the tightest team... The sum of this collaboration is always greater than its individual pieces. (Woessner)

Similarly, in his review of the album *Cheerful & Optimistic*, critic Robert Iannopolo wrote that Cortez "understands how poetry and music can have a symbiotic relationship. Too often, the combination finds the music working at odds with the words in the mix. Here everything is clear with no one element dominating" (97). Interviewer D. H. Melham further elaborated on Iannopolo and Woessner's notions of collaboration. In one performance with the

Firespitters, Melham asserted, Cortez's voice: "functioned as the poetic instrument in her jazz ensemble. Her voice ranged from shimmering silk to steel... One was reminded of the democratic ambiance and group sense native to jazz that allowed each player alternately to star before an enthusiastic audience" (MELUS 75). Melham likened Cortez's voice to an instrument, recognizing the potential for true democracy and collectivity in a jazz combo in which every instrumentalist has many opportunities to solo and share their ideas with any given audience.⁵

Likewise, scholar Tony Bolden wrote that Cortez: "blurs the distinctions between poetry and song by literally using her voice as an instrument, often employing vocal techniques that replicate those of blues singers and/or instrumentalists" (Afro-blue 122). In 1970, newspaper reviewer John Wilson also deemed Cortez "a poet with the instincts of a jazz soloist... Miss Cortez read[s] with rhythmic twists and turns, with bursts of arrogant joy, with the structural sound that might go into an instrumental jazz solo" (36). Cortez's vocal flexibility, dynamic inflection, improvisation, and constant interaction with musicians beget many similar comparisons.

In an interview with poet and scholar D. H. Melham, Cortez discussed the way she uses her voice in the context of the jazz combo:

The part that is hard is stretching the human voice. Everybody else in the group has another kind of a voice, a musical instrument that's much louder than yours. That's the problem. How not to let the different pitch levels control your work. Most of the

⁵ Many writers speak to the "democratic" nature of jazz music, expounding on the premise that every player in a jazz combo has an equal opportunity to contribute to a musical conversation. However, it would be a mistake to ignore the particular politics of the jazz world, wherein there exists a distinct hierarchy of bandleaders and sidemen. Though these politics influence everything from who gets work to how long a certain player might solo in a session, there certainly exist moments of ideal democratic freedom in which all of the musicians in a group work together with equal importance. While Cortez clearly leads their collaborative efforts, she also affords each of the Firespitters an opportunity to participate in the acts of creation and performance in the context of their work together.

musicians who've played with me have all been musicians who play jazz. They are used to inventing off of different rhythm patterns and different sounds. So they relate to what I'm doing in the same way. They interject their own sound and attitudes. And I do the same thing. I listen to them and respond to their ideas and attitudes. I like working with music. It's a collective experiment. A collective composition... Working with the music has provided me with a lot of freedom. (Heroism 204)

Interviewer Val Wilmer reinforced this idea, writing that Cortez's "words are enhanced when musicians add their communal interpretation to ideas conceived in solitude. That she holds a special position in musicians' circles is evident from the list of people with whom she has shared the bandstand, doubly so when you learn that more often than not it is they who have requested the privilege" (16). Though the esteem in which these critics and scholars hold Cortez's work merits examination, mention of Cortez's work still remains difficult to find and repetitive in that critics either examine just the written text or the performative aspects of Cortez's vocal delivery in isolation from the music. Further scrutiny and attention are necessary in order to uncover the multilayered meanings and messages in Cortez's dynamic, collaborative delivery style.

In addition to being somewhat difficult to uncover, relatively little of the existing scholarship and criticism about Cortez's work directly engages the specific nature of her collaborations with the Firespitters. In part, the dearth of scholarship may be a result of Cortez's control of the distribution of her work.⁶ Cortez has published most of her work—both books and recordings—through her own company, Bola Press. Also, though Cortez has a busy schedule reading her

⁶ Like many writers coming out of the Black Arts movement Cortez's control over the production and distribution of her work certainly speaks to the important project of Black Nationalism, but this control also makes it difficult and costly to procure copies of out-of-print chapbooks and vinyl LPs which contain important samples of Cortez's work that have escaped her continual projects of anthologization over the years. This self-promotion and production also speaks as a possible explanation for why several of Cortez's contemporaries are far more well-known. It is, after all, much easier to write about work that is readily available to critics and scholars through mass-marketed popular presses.

work and taking part in various panels and conferences around the world, her collaborative performances with the Firespitters happen only a few times a year, so their exposure to live audiences is limited in number if not in geographical scope. In addition, as the Beats demonstrated with their Jazz-and-Poetry movement of the 1950s, jazz poetry is a hybrid genre, appealing to a specific aesthetic audience. Usually neither the pure jazz fan nor the pure poetry aficionado goes out of her way to seek obscure jazz poetry amalgamations. While some of Cortez's contemporaries, collaborators, and admirers receive a great deal of critical and scholarly attention, Cortez herself has remained a comparatively obscure figure despite her significant role during the Black Arts movement, and, more importantly, despite her continuing role as a poet-activist writing, performing, organizing conferences, and participating on panels to further several causes of social justice across the African Diaspora. Given Cortez's relentless longtime drive as a poet-activist, it seems unwarranted that she does not receive the same attention as contemporaries Sonya Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, and Gil Scott-Heron, among others.

Though some significant anthologies do not include mention of Cortez, a small percentage of Cortez's printed work appears in anthologies of Black American poetry; her most often anthologized poems appear to be "I See Chano Pozo," "If the Drum is a Woman," "For the Young Students of Soweto," "Lonely Woman," and "I Am New York City." There exist at least ten interviews of various lengths in print in which the interviewers ask Cortez questions on similar subjects; Cortez often speaks to her musical inspiration, her activism on behalf of Africans and Black Americans, and her participation in the Black Arts movement. The most recent published interview appears in Sascha Feinstein's 2007 *Ask Me Now: Conversations on Jazz & Literature*. Feinstein's work in the field of jazz poetry is significant in that he has co-edited two anthologies of jazz poetry, and he compiled the exhaustive *A Bibliographic Guide to Jazz Poetry* in 1998. Feinstein also wrote the history *Jazz Poetry: from 1920 to the Present*.

Feinstein's studies have put him in intimate contact with all of the important living jazz poets, and his insights in all of these books are well researched and supported. As such, he is certainly a preeminent scholar in the field.

To date, three scholars have each dedicated an entire book chapter to Cortez's connections with jazz and blues music, but they each engage only a small, very specific portion of the vast body of her work. T. J. Anderson's *Notes to Make the Sound Come Right: Four Innovators of Jazz Poetry* takes a chronological approach to Cortez's printed body of work, highlighting some of the salient features of each book. Anderson augments his close readings with quotes from interviews with Cortez, and he draws on other scholars and critics' interpretations of Cortez's poetics to supplement his own insightful analytic commentary. Anderson's chapter on Cortez is particularly significant because he directly engages with the jazz themes and ideas in Cortez's printed work. Anderson also draws on canonical musical reference sources to explain many of the jazz allusions in Cortez's work.

Tony Bolden's *Afro-blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture* interrogates the blues and surrealist elements of Cortez's work, engaging both her written and recorded work, calling Cortez a modern incarnation of the "secular priesthood" ideal Black Arts intellectuals promoted. Like Anderson, Bolden performs astute close readings, and his interpretation of Cortez's relationship to the Black Arts aesthetic is compelling. Bolden's focus on Cortez's link to blues music is an illuminating window into what Bolden aptly deems her "profound challenge to literary conventions" (141).

Aldon Nielsen's *Integral Music: Languages of African American Innovation*, like Bolden's *Afro-blue*, discusses both Cortez's written and recorded work, focusing again on exploring the different ways Black American music informs her work. Nielsen's poetic prose beautifully provides abundant context for Cortez's poem "I See Chano Pozo." Additionally,

Nielsen explains Cortez's relationship to the surrealist Négritude poets, placing her work in direct conversation with theirs. Anderson, Bolden, and Neilson's books provide the most significant analyses of Cortez's collaborative performances, and this project is my attempt to engage with Cortez's work with equal rigor and specificity.

Section One provides context for Cortez's collaborative work by exploring the roots of a politicized jazz aesthetic through the historical role of jazz music as an expression of emancipation and civil rights. After a brief discussion of racial politics and activism in jazz, the section moves into a short look at early jazz poetry collaborations of the Beat generation. Cortez's contemporary, poet Amiri Baraka, serves as a literal bridge between the Beats and the Black Arts movement. My overview of Black Nationalism in this section is an attempt to tease out the portable aspects of the Black Power movement that Cortez continues to use in even her most recent work. This overview segues into a breakdown of the technical elements of free jazz as a means of illuminating the important connotations Black Arts activists imposed upon free jazz. Many free jazz musicians took up Baraka's call-to-arms and became important artist-activists on the front lines of the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s, while others found themselves elevated to iconic status despite their lack of political agendas. The final part of this section contains primary source material in which Cortez explains her connection to the Black Arts movement; importantly, Cortez repeatedly tells multiple interviewers that while her work may have originated from a Black Arts aesthetic, she continues to evolve and grow as an artist, thereby emancipating her work from the controversial and temporally bounded movement. Exploring the artistic and ideological roots of Cortez's collaborations with the Firespitters is an integral part of my attempt to situate her work as a singular form of political and social activism.

Section Two contains information about Cortez's collaborative process told mostly through primary sources, including personal interviews with saxophonist T.K. Blue and guitarist

Bern Nix. After explaining their collaborative process, this section presents my analyses of the poems “Maintain Control,” “Expenditures Economic Love Song 1,” “Firespitters,” “Everybody Wants to be Somebody,” and “Maybe.” My analyses juxtapose the studio recording of each piece with the live version recorded on 1992’s *Poetry and Music* with the goals of illuminating specific collaborative moments and discussing the ways in which they work toward elevating the poems and advancing Cortez’s different messages of social activism. I picked these pieces because each displays a vital aspect of Cortez’s multilayered creative efforts, and none, to my knowledge, have received scholarly attention to date. I also chose these pieces because I have both live and studio recordings of each. Improvised jazz raises many questions and concerns involving recording, and, from my experiences seeing Cortez and the Firespitters collaborate in two different live performances, it is more than self-evident that the musicians and Cortez operate under a different set of parameters onstage than they do in the studio.⁷

Throughout Section Two, recurring themes of collectivism, incremental repetition, and freedom underscore the performative connections between Cortez’s work and some of the enduring ideals engendered by the Black Arts movement. By illuminating these elements, this paper argues that Cortez’s work is a tangible call for justice, strengthened both by its collectivity and by its visceral and structural musical connections. The appendix includes transcriptions of the poems from the original sources and from the different recordings utilized in this study.

⁷ I discussed some of these nuances with Cortez’s sound engineer Chris Agovino and saxophonist T.K. Blue, and both acknowledged experiencing a greater sense of freedom and energy when performing live in front of an audience. Philip Auslander’s *Liveness* also contains a thorough and thoughtful analysis of many of the different factors and processes inherent in live and recorded musical performances.

SECTION ONE: ROOTS OF A POLITICIZED JAZZ AESTHETIC

Jayne Cortez's use of jazz music as a medium for corroborating the impact of her activist poetry is significant because of jazz music's role in the propagation of Black American civil rights and the destruction of crippling "Jim Crow" laws that rendered true emancipation from enslavement impossible. From a cultural standpoint, jazz is a syncretic art form, an American amalgamation of both African and European musical conventions and cultural influences. Despite this obvious fact, many scholars and critics continue to hash out the complexities of the contested notion that jazz is a "universal language." While, on one hand, jazz clearly has both African and European antecedents, Black Arts activists and many other scholars argued that the aesthetic core of the music is its "swing flow" and its firm roots in the blues tradition.⁸ Thus, they argue that the most important facet of jazz, its defining feature in fact, is its genesis in a singularly Black American experience. In so doing, these scholar/activists have worked to elevate jazz as a particularly black art form and thereby prove to the dominant white culture in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century America that black artists were capable of creating original art that surpassed previous musical forms in aesthetic beauty and complexity. Taking this theory one step further, then, scholars and activists have long looked to jazz as a model for building and strengthening black communities across America.

Furthermore, the same scholars and activists argued that calling jazz a "universal" music undermined the Black American heart of the music, creating a "whitewash that allows white people to appropriate black cultural forms with impunity" (Monson Freedom 70). This appropriation forged a contentious relationship between black musicians and some white audiences; though, it is important to consider the difference between appreciation and

⁸ Simply put, the "swing feel" in a great deal of jazz music results from an organic change of the traditional strict eighth-note rhythm to a lilting, triplet-based rhythm that created a more laidback, less rigid, dance-like quality.

appropriation. In most cases, white audiences simply expressed their aesthetic appreciation for the emerging art form without intent to lay claim to jazz as belonging to a particular culture. Contrary to the separatist missions of scholars and activists operating out of the Black Arts movement, integrationist scholars like Ingrid Monson argue the jazz aesthetic transcends the particular constraints of any one culture, and they often posit a theory of “aesthetic agency” in which people of any culture can participate in various aesthetic traditions (Monson Freedom 74). Integrationists, then, praise jazz for its “distinctly American” transformative ability to bring together different traditions and create something more substantial than any of its formative parts.

Ideally, in this integrationist model, jazz should be a common ground where musicians, judged solely on the merit of their playing and without regard to race, class, gender, or ethnicity, can work together to create spontaneous compositions. In actuality, jazz has always been a contested space, causing violent rifts between musicians and audiences throughout much of the twentieth century. While some bands racially integrated in the late 1930s, long before the 1965 passing of the Civil Rights Amendment, many audiences refused to countenance black and white performers working together.⁹ Early jazz was designated either “hot” or “sweet,” essentially meaning “black” or “white,” and the recording and music promotion industries heavily marketed music as one or the other (Meadows 57). The white controllers of the music industry simultaneously suppressed and confined “hot” music to black audiences through segregated venues, studies of target audiences, and limited commercially sponsored radio engagements (Townsend 77–78).

⁹ Not surprisingly, musicians often looked past color boundaries, choosing musical collaborators by ability rather than color. Benny Goodman was one of the first white band leaders to employ black musicians like Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton. Later Artie Shaw and others would follow suit, sharing the stage with Billie Holiday, Roy Eldridge, and Lips Page, just to name a few (Townsend 79, 81).

As many white musicians migrated toward the “hot” sound, they began transgressing these strict boundaries in significant ways. Mezz Mezzrow was a white “hot” musician who preferred to play music rooted in the traditions of Chicago and New Orleans rather than “sweet” music other white jazz musicians favored at the time (Peretti 58). Similarly, Benny Goodman changed his band’s sound from “sweet” to “hot” with the help of black composer and arranger Fletcher Henderson. White artists like Mezzrow and Goodman forged a path for integration in the jazz world, though I would argue that their choices were often aesthetic rather than political. Both men favored one style of music over the other, and both were simply concerned with hiring the best musicians to make that music, regardless of their color.¹⁰ While white bandleaders began to cross the color lines, black bandleaders like Count Basie and Duke Ellington became extremely popular in urban centers like Kansas City and Harlem.¹¹ Ellington’s band regularly played in Harlem’s “black and tan” speakeasies—places black and white patrons could commingle while listening and dancing to live jazz (Peretti 42).

As “hot” and “sweet” dance bands became more popular among white mainstream audiences in the 1930s and 1940s, bebop emerged as a new form of jazz. Virtuoso black

¹⁰ Eventually, many people began to regard “hot” jazz as a more “authentic” cultural expression than “sweet” jazz, and white jazz musicians frequently had to prove themselves to other musicians and audiences as equal to their black contemporaries, causing a distinct shift in the paradigm established by the overarching social structures in America left over from the lingering trappings of African enslavement (Monson *Freedom* 171). This shift both fueled and was fueled by Black Nationalist ideology, and it led to some of the aforementioned separatist rhetoric regarding the importance of jazz as a uniquely “black” cultural expression.

¹¹ Unlike some of his contemporaries who were merely interested in the aesthetics of jazz, Ellington was among the musicians who thought of the music as an important expression of race and culture. He once said: “...[m]y men and my race are the inspiration of my work. I try to catch the character and mood and feeling of my people. The music of my race is something more than the American idiom. It is the result of our transplantation to the American soil, and it was our reaction to plantation days, to the life we lived. What we could not say openly we expressed in music. The characteristic, melancholic music of my race has been forged from the very white heat of our sorrow and from our gropings” (qtd. in Hersch 98).

musicians created this highly technical form of jazz intended for listening rather than dancing, and in so doing, they lost some of the mainstream audience for swing music because bebop was too chaotic and complex for most dancers. Some social historians now look at the evolution of bebop as a vital political statement against the white appropriation of black culture, but few of the original creators of bebop had overtly political aims. The bebop movement was certainly a musical rebellion against restraint and mediocrity that came because of the work of white big band leaders, and this rebellious voice became the music of the generation of young Black Americans coming of age after World War II (Baskerville 58). Young people particularly latched onto spoken bebop vernacular musicians often employed in order to remain aloof from cooptation by white audiences (Meadows 80).

Scholar Jon Panish wrote that this rebellion was more of an “artistic reaction to the ‘anxiety of influence’” than a part of a specific political agenda (12). Like scholars Scott DeVeaux and Eric Porter, Panish discusses the emergence of bebop as an evolutionary musical step in which young musicians simply responded to the economic strictures the white-controlled music industry imposed. One specific manifestation of this rebellion came in the form of musicians like Charlie Parker rewriting the heads of tunes in order to avoid having to pay ASCAP fees to white business executives who reaped the financial benefits of black musicians’ creative output (Panish 12).¹² Bebop musician Dizzy Gillespie once discussed most musicians’ lack of an overt political agenda by saying: “We didn’t go out and make speeches or say, ‘Let’s play eight bars of protest.’ We just played our music and let it go at that. The music proclaimed our identity; it made every statement we truly wanted to make” (Porter 426). Though, as Gillespie suggests, most bebop musicians were not consciously operating as social activists, most were acutely aware of the significant musical revolution they spawned. Bebop music would set the

¹² By using established popular chord structures as the bases for their “new” songs, black bebop musicians were appropriating music often written by white composers.

paradigm for jazz improvisation for the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. The unprecedented technical proficiency of black bebop musicians like Gillespie and saxophonist Charlie Parker garnered thunderous accolades from erudite black and white audiences; accordingly, many black intellectuals and social activists criticized the fact that the new music attracted growing numbers of the young white intelligentsia. The rebellious spirit of bebop music began to inform the language of a white counterculture during the 1950s when several Beat Poets started composing poems to perform with jazz musicians.

Energized by the heady creativity of bebop musicians, in the 1950s a group of white poets, mostly based in San Francisco, began to write work in response to and in concert with jazz music. These Beat Poets wrote pieces that spoke to the social issues of their time: the Cold War, generational isolation, racial discord, and a growing feeling of disaffection with mainstream American culture. Though many Beats had no particular political agenda, they expressed a strong kinship with the historically subversive nature and the performative expressiveness of jazz music. Through their work with musicians, Beat Poets hoped to connect to rebellious bebop music in a way that reinforced their marginalized status as artists working against mainstream white culture (Salfen 32). Saxophonist Bruce Lippincott called these early attempts at congruent jazz poetry collaborations a sort of “ally response” in which a: “different approach to jazz... responding—not only in a preordained way—but in a kind of question and answer—sort of a relative pitch way. The music becomes visual and broader... it has a new dimension” (Rolontz 119). Pioneering Beat poet Kenneth Patchen concurred when he said: “I think this technique presents the possibilities of an entirely new medium of expression—a combination of jazz and poetry that would take nothing away from either form, but would create something entirely new” (McCarthy 10).

Despite the Beats' enthusiasm for the creative possibilities of jazz poetry collaborations, their contemporary critics writing about the earliest jazz poetry collaborations during the 1950s generally reacted harshly to the synthesis of words and music. Arguably, many poets experimenting with this new form were trying different methods of collaboration in order to achieve specific results. Some experiments were more successful in achieving a sense of synergy than others, and critical responses often differed drastically. Poets and musicians faced many preconceived notions about both art forms, and, from one experiment to the next, critics and audiences alike were often outspoken in their disdain for this cultural novelty.¹³ While many objections simply dealt with logistics and audibility, others stemmed from concerns about sincerity and seriousness of approach; conversely, less prevalent positive criticism surrounding collaborative readings lauded players and readers who interacted with one another while not upstaging one voice at any given moment.

Thus, despite a barrage of negative criticism, many jazz poetry collaborations achieved great popularity. In fact, one of the first articles written about the burgeoning Poetry-and-Jazz movement of the late 1950s described the following paradox inherent in the fact that these purportedly countercultural readings drew large numbers of hipsters and members of San Francisco's "beard-and-sandal set." While many criticized the quality of both the music and poetry, the cultural cachet created by this new cross-pollination served as a strong draw to increasingly large audiences ("Cool" 71). In this dissonant environment, Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti began reading with a jazz combo at The Cellar in San Francisco in 1957, and, due to the overwhelming popularity of the readings, they produced an LP that would become

¹³ For examples of contemporary criticism, see: John Ciardi's "Kenneth Patchen: Poetry, and Poetry with Jazz" from the May 14, 1960 Saturday Review; Charles Fox's "Jazz and Poetry—A Concert Report" from the February, 1962 Jazz Monthly; Bob Rolontz's 1960 "Whatever Became of Jazz and Poetry?" in The Jazz Word; and Jeremy Salfen's 2000 thesis, Voices and Visions: Poetry, Performance, and the San Francisco Renaissance.

the focus of diverse critical attention spanning over fifty years. Rexroth and Ferlinghetti also inspired readings at the Blackhawk in San Francisco and at the Five Spot, the Village Vanguard, and other venues in New York City (Feinstein Jazz 67).

Afraid this attention would weaken his ability to express cultural dissent, Rexroth “regretted” the popularity of these poetry readings in New York and “consistently resisted the commercialization of poetry readings. Although poetry readings as a mass cultural fad were popular only for a few years, the poets’ performance aesthetic became deeply integrated into mainstream American culture” (Salfen 64). Ironically, the critics and magazines that venerated white jazz musicians in the mass media also lauded the countercultural efforts of the Beats, effectively promoting the propagation of jazz music in mainstream white America.

One potential result of this propagation caused Kenneth Rexroth to speak out about his own aesthetic principles. According to Sascha Feinstein: “Rexroth feared, and rightfully so, that his performance would be cast off as being careless, undignified, and trite. He demanded structure. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Rexroth at least appreciated the fact that improvisation did not mean spilling notes in a frenzy of wishful thinking” (Jazz 68). Rexroth’s desire for order was, perhaps, contradictory to the intended countercultural aims of the Poetry-and-Jazz movement; however, Rexroth positioned the content of his art above its appeal to consumers of hip. To further assert his legitimacy as a serious artist, Rexroth wrote the following in an essay simply entitled “Jazz Poetry”:

What is jazz poetry? ... It is the reciting of suitable poetry with the music of a jazz band, usually small and comparatively quiet. Most emphatically, it is not recitation with “background” music. The voice is integrally wedded to the music and, although it does not sing notes, it is treated as another instrument, with its own solos and ensemble passages, and with solo and ensemble work by the band alone. (69)

By establishing his personal criteria, Rexroth attempted to explain his art to audiences and critics alike.

Iconic Beat novelist Jack Kerouac also performed poetry with jazz music. Critics Fred and Gloria McDarrah named Kerouac's reading at the Brata Gallery in 1959 as the "first jazz and poetry event in Greenwich Village," and they criticized Kerouac's inability to meaningfully connect with pianist Steve Allen during this particular performance (81). Despite this perceived failure, Kerouac later recorded with tenor saxophone legends Zoot Sims and Al Cohn. Though Kerouac continues to provoke contradictory critical reception, his work with Allen, Cohn, and Sims marks another milestone in the history of the collaboration between poets and jazz musicians in that they managed, on at least one collaborative effort, to form a more successful connection between words and music.

In addition to these white poets, three important black Beat Poets were an integral part of the Beat Generation; Amiri Baraka (then Leroi Jones), Ted Joans, and Bob Kaufman all made significant poetic contributions during this period.¹⁴ Baraka wrote of his affiliation:

I took up with the Beats because that's what I saw taking off and flying somewhere resembling myself. The open and implied rebellion—of form and content. Aesthetic as well as social and political. But I saw most of it as Art, and the social statement as merely our lives as dropouts from the mainstream. I could see the young white boys and girls in their pronouncements of disillusion with and "removal" from society as related to the black experience. That made us colleagues of the spirit. (qtd. in Lee 163)

¹⁴ Leroi Jones, and many other members of the Black Power movement took on African names in the 1960s and 1970s to free themselves from their given names, ultimately derived from white European slave owners. This act of Afrocentrism marked their separation from their white Beat contemporaries and became a highly visible statement of autonomy during the Black Power movement.

As Baraka and other black Beats became more politically active, they formed a tight-knit group of artists and intellectuals living in New York City during the 1960s and initiated the Black Arts movement as the artistic wing of the Black Power movement. Black Nationalism, Black Power, and Black Aesthetics, despite their competing methodologies, all worked toward the ideal of an America completely free from the hegemonic trappings of enslavement.

To that end, in the midst of the 1960s, writer-activist Larry Neal wrote that the Black Arts movement:

...envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics. Recently, these two movements have begun to merge: the political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, and novelists. A main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for black people to define the world in their own terms. The black artist has made the same point in the context of aesthetics. The two movements postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas: one black, one white. (272)

Neal was at the forefront of these converging movements, and he was able to articulate their aspirations with clarity and force.

Neal and other writers of the time—most notably Amiri Baraka, Donald Lee (now Haki Madhubuti), and Ron Karenga (now Maulana Karenga)—worked together with political leaders

in order to shape a nation of Black Americans that was separate from white America. Only by separating from the rest of the country, they insisted, could Black Americans break free from America's deeply imbedded racially hegemonic structures. A strong urging for Black Americans to bond together to form a cohesive community was also inherent in this call for separation. This urge toward communalism became one form of opposition to the competitive individualism that kept Black Americans from uniting to fight their white oppressors; above all, community formation required cohesion, cooperation, and a desire for transcendence on both spiritual and pragmatic levels (Austin 100). Maulana Karenga established the Us Organization in 1965 and created a system of conduct for Black Americans in the hope that a concrete set of principles would foster greater communalism within a fragmented subaltern black population.

Karenga created the *Nguzo Saba* as a positive code promoting the seven principles of unity, self-determination, collective responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith.¹⁵ Writer-activists became the most important conduits of these principles as they worked to unite Black Americans through an imagined collective African past and through the promotion of separatist rhetoric (I. Anderson 95, 97). On a functional level, these principles served a few key purposes. Primarily, Karenga sought to organize intrapersonal relationships in order to foster stronger black communities, and Karenga's principles were concrete priorities, standards, and commitments that articulated a strong sense of possibility. Karenga's use of Swahili and other African cultural referents also created an imagined community with the ideal of reconstructing a unified historical memory that became the basis for a new Afrocentric cultural legacy that would serve to give Black Americans common cultural context. Ultimately, Karenga's creation and implementation of the *Nguzo Saba* codified his desire to form a new black

¹⁵ Karenga chose to write the principles in Swahili in a move to create an imagined African communal past. Though Karenga did not invent Pan-Africanism or Afrocentrist thinking, he was and still is one of the strongest proponents of these ideologies.

man, woman, and child who would thoughtfully begin the ethical project of reshaping a history around which they could build stronger black communities (Hayes 76).

Furthermore, on the subject of the artist-activist's role in the project of communalism, Karenga asserted that black art must be "functional, collective, and committing." Specifically, Karenga wrote that all art needed to have a social purpose to inform, instruct, and inspire Black Americans to access their African roots and to continue their struggles for liberation. Karenga also championed collectivity when he emphasized that black art needed to have everyday relevance and should be "rooted in a life-based language and imagery." Finally, Karenga wrote that black art must:

...demand and urge willing and conscious involvement in struggle and building of a new world and new men, women and children to inhabit it. And it must move beyond protest and teach possibilities, beyond victimization and teach Blacks to dare victory. The best of the Black aesthetic teaches that art, then, must commit the people to what they can become and are becoming and inspire them to dare the positive in a world often defined and deformed by the negative. (Karenga "Us" 112–113)

The *Nguzo Saba* provided a tangible, instructive method for living and producing art within the black communities of the 1960s and 1970s, and these principles became an enduring legacy of Black Nationalism and the Black Power movement.

During this time, Amiri Baraka pulled away from his white Beat contemporaries and emerged as one of the Black Arts movement's most outspoken writer-activists; though he would openly change his ideological approach to activism several times over the decades after the Black Arts movement, his contributions to the movement helped shape the project of Black Nationalism for years to come. Today, Baraka's books of musical theory and criticism still stand as some of the most powerful records of Black Arts ideology. When Baraka first published *Blues People*:

Negro Music in White America in 1963, he was one of the first scholars to enact this approach to writing about black music.¹⁶ In this book, Baraka advocated for the importance of music as a tool for social examination; in *Blues People*, Baraka used music as a vehicle to trace the different stages in the painful evolution of black people from African to American. While Baraka's tone was confrontational, and his argument—reminiscent of a manifesto—was clearly essentialist in many ways, it was a product of the rhetoric of separation that drove the emerging Black Arts movement. Also in keeping with the rhetoric of the movement, Baraka's various writings always stressed the necessity for collaboration among different black artists; Baraka befriended and collaborated with many members of the jazz vanguard of the 1950s and 1960s, creating strong ties through their collective endeavors.

Through these endeavors, Baraka met saxophonist Ornette Coleman and more politically minded members of the free jazz vanguard who provided a tangible metaphor for Baraka's separatist mission. Baraka and other activists elevated Coleman to an iconic status because they felt his music distinctly rejected European notions of form and structure, theoretically liberating free jazz from all hegemonic constraints.¹⁷ Though Coleman himself was not particularly inclined toward political or social rhetoric, his new music became the paragon of emancipated Black American music in the 1960s (I. Anderson 98, 100). Guitarist Bern Nix joined Ornette Coleman's Prime Time band in the early 1970s, and he affirmed, ironically, that Coleman was never really involved in the politics of the Black Arts movement: "He doesn't deal with the thing that way... He's just dealing with music and sounds" (Nix). Like many of his predecessors,

¹⁶ Published under the name Leroi Jones.

¹⁷ Paradoxically, Baraka's creation of Coleman's iconic status was a political move without much grounding in fact, as many European and Euro-American composers were creating "aleatory" music they based on similar concepts of freedom and liberation. Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, and John Cage were three composers whose music closely resembled the purportedly black music Coleman and his Black American contemporaries were creating in the 1960s (Whittall).

Coleman was solely involved with musical evolution; Baraka and other artist-activists were responsible for politicizing Coleman's free jazz. In "The Black Aesthetic Imperative," Ron Wellburn explains politicization: "It must be understood that the music did not take this [separatist] position on its own; because of its inherent essentials, it did not need to; it was forced to become harmonically, melodically, rhythmically, and spontaneously liberated from restricting European musical structures" (134). Wellburn, Baraka, and other writer-activists politicized and lionized free jazz artists, giving them the power to enable their audiences to envision their liberation. Some free jazz musicians willingly took on the roles of prophets and revolutionary leaders, actively participating in the cause of black freedom (Monson Freedom 262).

Despite Amiri Baraka's wish that free jazz stand as a symbol of freedom for all Black Americans, many audiences found the music to be too dense, abrasive, and, in many regards, narcissistic. Part of audiences' difficulty with the music stemmed from the fact that free jazz, by definition, is the: "absence of tonality and predetermined chord sequences; the abandonment of the jazz chorus structure and its replacement by loose designs in which collective improvisation takes place around predefined signals; and the suspension of standard timekeeping patterns for a free rubato." Ornette Coleman, in his creation of free jazz, set out to examine and undermine the paradigms of traditional jazz structure by removing the privilege of form over feeling and by replacing rigid timekeeping with floating, fluid rhythmic texturizing (Robinson).¹⁸ This type of non-linear melodic development broke from the traditional narrative European framework for

¹⁸ Coleman exposed and interrogated inherent strictures in the existing system of jazz improvisation, but rather than negate them entirely, he chose to acknowledge and build upon them; his roots as a bebop and R&B musician came across in even his most free compositions. As is often the case with many paradigm shifts in different art forms, Coleman worked to create a new variation on those structures that answered his need to take jazz music beyond the work of his contemporaries (Westendorf 12). While sometimes challenging to listen to, most free jazz is not entirely without organization; in fact, Coleman based most of his free jazz forays around melodic ideas that created a loose, though distinct, sense of form and structure.

music, because, as Coleman once said: “music with a beginning, middle, and end imposes the structure of fiction on the passage of life” (Litweiler 39). Free jazz created a literal sense of emancipation, giving musicians a greater sense of agency in creating and exploring vast soundscapes together. Free jazz practitioners also rendered European instruments more “voice-like” by pioneering new ways of playing them. Similarly, rather than keep strict time as they might in more traditional combo settings, free jazz drummers created different timbres and textures with their drums (Robinson). With these principles guiding Coleman’s musical endeavors, Baraka and other activists saw the metaphoric links between free jazz and the Black Nationalist ideology they fervently espoused and propagated.

While Coleman revolutionized jazz, it is important, again, to emphasize his apolitical vision. Several of Coleman’s contemporaries, however, created and conveyed consciously political messages through their music. Saxophonist and poet Archie Shepp was an outspoken, militant proponent of the Black Power movement (Peretti 142). The Art Ensemble of Chicago explicitly “re-invented modernism through meditations and reflections on the meanings of freedom” in their approach to Ornette Coleman’s free jazz (Kelley “Dig” 24). In his efforts to promote equality for Black Americans, hard bop musician Horace Silver once said of his music: “We’re going to be playing tunes that white people can’t play— not so it’ll sound authentic. Anyway, they won’t be comfortable with this music. We’re going to play with the beat and the sounds of where we grew up—in black churches, in black neighborhoods” (Henry 59).¹⁹ During the same time, Afrocentric jazz musicians like Randy Weston wrote music steeped in pervasive Pan African themes of place, leadership, nature, history, and liberation (Weinstein 16–17). In

¹⁹ Hard bop was a response to bebop and cool jazz. When Miles Davis recorded *Birth of the Cool* in 1949, he took a step back from the challenging music of the bebop era, bringing improvised jazz to a white audience eager for easily digestible music. Hard bop, in contrast, was more emotional than cool jazz and less technical than bebop. Practitioners like Art Blakey and Horace Silver consciously strove to bring jazz back to its “black roots” (Henry 64–65).

nearly every style and genre of jazz, musicians made significant recordings with overt political themes during the 1950s and 1960s, including Max Roach's *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, Charles Mingus's "Fables of Faubus," Sonny Rollins's *Freedom Suite*, and Jackie McLean's *Let Freedom Ring* (Peretti 136).²⁰ Additionally, Charles Mingus helped organize the 1961 Newport Jazz Counterfestival that was a widely publicized critical response to the hegemonic white music industry's appropriation and subjugation of black music.²¹ Despite many jazz musicians' reticence toward political action in the 1930s and 1940s, musicians of the 1950s and 1960s often created activist art that helped advance the cause of Civil Rights for Black Americans.

Jayne Cortez's original collaborative work emerged in 1974, at the height of the Black Arts movement, during this time that she and so many other black artists looked to different expressions of Black American art and music as a means of demanding social justice and equality. Like her musical idols, Cortez wove a message of discontent with her current conditions into a rich tapestry including her words and the free-jazz inflected music of her contemporaries. Because of this work, many scholars now consider the Black Arts movement the harbinger of several different movements for equality among underrepresented peoples. The Black Nationalism driving the movement actually shaped a growing trend toward radical multiculturalism and different "rainbow nationalisms" that continue to shape thought and social activism in the evolving global community of the twenty-first century. By incorporating aspects of Marxist and Popular Front ideology, the writer-activists of the Black Arts movement created

²⁰ Orval Faubus was the Arkansas Governor who opposed the Supreme Court mandate to integrate Little Rock Central High School. Faubus was one of many targets of Mingus's activist art.

²¹ Burton Peretti's *Jazz in American Culture*, Benjamin Park Anderson's thesis *Blue Notes and Brown Skin*, and Ingrid Monson's *Freedom Sounds* all contain excellent information about Mingus's work and that of other politically active jazz musicians in the 1960s.

the notion of a popular avant-garde, mixing high and lowbrow cultures, helping to create new artistic possibilities at a volatile point in the middle of the twentieth century (Smethurst 371).

Though the Black Arts movement ended just prior to the 1977 emergence of hip-hop and urban renewal, many of the ideals, goals, and institutions artist-activists implemented during the period continue to grow and disseminate through all regions of the African Diaspora. Most notably, the Marxist leanings of many writers promoted an Afrocentric worldview that led writer-activists to look beyond internal issues of American racial politics to broader issues of hegemony, discrimination, corruption and genocide wherever the engines of enslavement continue to affect subaltern populations. Additionally, Maulana Karenga's *Nguzo Saba* and Kwanzaa—first celebrated in 1966—gained in popularity, creating a strong imagined community with ideologically firm roots in an invented tradition that promotes unity and collectivism throughout the Diaspora.

Over the years, when Jayne Cortez has reflected on the activist poetry of the Black Arts movement, she has always discussed its fundamental themes and ideals: “The poems were militant. They reflected the desire for more freedom and liberation. They questioned the American dream. The poems explored African roots. The poems called for an end to exploitation, domination, and oppression” (Feinstein *Ask* 53). In another interview, Cortez said: “Our struggles are always changing as appropriate to the dynamics or situation of the era. We were interested in exploring African languages, forms, and cultures. We wanted to change the system, secure the future, and move forward” (Ruffin “Freedom” 27). For Cortez, part of this change depended upon addressing issues of current import to people of color throughout the world. Two of her most recent poems deal with the genocide in Darfur and the devastation of

Hurricane Katrina.²² Both of these new pieces are rooted in the Black Arts call to end, as she said to Sascha Feinstein, “exploitation, domination, and oppression.”

While her work from the 1960s and 1970s speaks to the Black Arts aesthetic, Cortez prefers to conceptualize the movement as a progression:

There was a Black Arts movement; there still is a Black Arts movement as long as you are moving your work. Being in the Black Arts movement meant that you were more outspoken. You were becoming freer with the word and freer to really experiment, and we did a lot of experimenting in the 1960s and seventies... To carry that experiment and continue it and to try to take it all to different levels, and as you’re having more experiences, to bring all of that together... That just means a continuation of what you were doing in the 1960s... I don’t see any of that stopping. To say today we have a Black Arts movement or whatever you were doing is Black Arts and right now we’re not doin’ that no more because we don’t wear our hair that way... Well, that’s not true.

(Gabbin Interview)

Many of the living writer-activists of the Black Arts movement continue the political and social work they began in the 1960s. To claim that their twenty-first-century activist art no longer has roots in the movement would be to grossly undervalue the lasting impact of Karenga, Baraka, and the many writer-activists who continue to rage against global inequality.

This impact is a direct result of the evolutionary nature of all political and social activist movements. As one idea moves from being the exception to the norm, other issues come to the forefront. Though the state of racial inequality in the United States has improved measurably since 1975, anyone who looks at the current state of our nation and says all Americans are equal is more than a little delusional. For the last forty years, Cortez has often answered interviewers’

²² “Talking About New Orleans” and “Janjaweed Militia” both appear in 2007’s *The Beautiful Book*.

questions about the evolution of her activist poetry from the 1960s to the present. In the 1980s, she told interviewer D. H. Melham:

... the government is more reactionary. We are waiting in the wings of a false democracy. People are inflamed. We have a growing community of homeless people. The wealthy are getting wealthier and more toxic-wasteful. Friends are dying. Folks are in a state of stagnation, a state of passivity, a state of frenzy... I'm opposed to those policies that promote death of people, death of land, death of a culture. I reject the notion that might is white, right, and supreme. I'm for peace and international understanding.

(Heroism 210)

Around the same time, Cortez told interviewer Norman Richmond: "You must remember that we people have never stopped what we were doing. What we did in the Sixties and what we're doing now is just a continuation of that struggle and that resistance, that creativity" (72).

More recently, Cortez still speaks of her mission in similar terms: "You know, you just continue to deepen and develop. That was a very electrifying time. A great moment in history. More people became politically aware and we took that awareness to another level in the '70s and the '80s and '90s. We are in a better position to confront contradiction, and keep creativity alive. Evolution may be slow, but we do keep evolving" (Feinstein Ask 56). Cortez's evolution has involved a move toward inclusivity because, as she once told Val Wilmer:

Black life is complete life. Everything in life is important to us. I mean, today we're talking about the survival of the earth, about nuclear waste, nuclear catastrophe, and Black poets are writing about those issues. Black people are very concerned about the earth, about the future. Poetry in general is less valid when it's trivial and passive, when it lacks a certain amount of imagination, poetic information and experience. (19)

In her musical collaborations, then, Cortez continues to create art that draws on the original Black Arts aesthetic, whereby she attempts to speak for underrepresented peoples, regardless of their cultural heritage (Bolden Afro 136). The long-evolving historical precedent for the politicization of the jazz aesthetic made music a natural partner for Cortez's revolutionary activist poetry. By combining the ideals of many politically active jazz musicians during the Black Arts movement as her ideological springboard, Jayne Cortez has remained a productive, performing writer-activist for the last forty years. Since her first musical collaborations in the 1960s, Cortez has assembled around her a like-minded collective of musicians with whom she continues to create a unique brand of jazz poetry, important in its own right from an aesthetic standpoint, but far more important for its commitment to experimentation, activism, and a far-reaching call for freedom. Together, Cortez and these musicians carry on the work of so many of their forbearers, continuing to defend human rights by creating art that speaks against hegemonic forces across the African Diaspora.

SECTION TWO: COLLABORATIVE ACTIVISM

In a 1990 interview with Val Wilmer, Cortez explained her philosophy on the convergence of music and writing in her work:

[Music is] a part of the language; African tonal languages are very musical. And in the Afro-American communities, like other African communities, talking to each other can sometimes be a mini-musical event... Some of that music is the music of the mixture of languages, of words, the language of Black English, Standard English and other languages. It's my attitude and the way I've chosen to combine those mixtures... It's like hollering, crying, cussing, whispering, joking, confessing, protesting and laughing in different voices at the same time. (18)

Cortez's blending of Black American vernacular with other languages and dialects is crucial to the efficacy of her work; universal pieces addressing social injustice must incorporate several traditions, as America is a country of diverse cultures. When Maulana Karenga created the *Nguzo Saba*, he knew that his imagined African heritage would provide a core around which a diverse array of cultures could come together.

Similarly, conversation and the blending of languages are integral facets of jazz music, and Jayne Cortez has an extensive musical understanding with an appreciation for its place in the Black American tradition. In the same interview with Val Wilmer, Cortez lists some of her many musical influences:

I heard a lot of live performances of urban blues bands. When I went to dances, one of the bands we would dance to would be the Johnny Otis band with those great blues singers, Big Mama Thornton and Little Esther Phillips. We also danced to the music of Big Jay McNeely and to some Latin groups. I heard a lot of rhythm-and-blues and jazz in the parks, the theatres, at the Elks Hall, at jam sessions in people's garages, in parades

and on trucks when new businesses were opening. I also went to the Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts and heard Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Brown, Lester Young, etc., and had the pleasure of hearing Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstine, Dinah Washington, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, the Dizzy Gillespie big band with Chano Pozo and the bands of Lionel Hampton, Count Basie and Duke Ellington in person. I listened to Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker, Ray Charles, Charles Brown, the Orioles, the Ravens and others on records or the radio. My parents had a nice collection of records so I was exposed to a lot of music. (18–19)

Besides listening to a wide array of jazz, blues, and other popular black music of the 1940s and 50s, Cortez pursued formal musical training at Los Angeles's Manual Arts High School where she took piano lessons, played the bass and cello, and studied music theory (Heroism 198). After high school, Cortez was married to up-and-coming saxophonist Ornette Coleman from 1954 to 1964—a decade when Coleman provoked controversy in the jazz community with his free jazz music that influenced many avant-garde jazz musicians in the 1960s and beyond. Through her personal experiences with music, and through the company she chose to keep, music took on a central role in Cortez's writing. In her own words, Cortez likened her process to that of her idol Langston Hughes: "I started writing poetry about my relationship to Black music, talking about the rhythms or what I liked about it, and of course, talking about the musicians who play the music... When I started reading my poetry in public, I thought I would sound good with music. And I had a lot of musician friends at the time, and it seemed like an interesting idea" (Heroism 203). Cortez's interesting idea has turned into a longstanding relationship with the collective of musicians she calls the Firespitters.

The name "Firespitter" is the English translation of *kponyungo*, a Senufo funerary mask from the Ivory Coast of Africa. *Kponyungo* means "head of the one who died," and Senufo men

wear the masks to ward off evil spirits in different ceremonies that require an aggressive attitude (“*Kponyungo*”). These zoomorphic helmet masks represent creatures that both spit and walk through fire. In a direct link to the Pan Africanism coming out of the Black Arts movement, Cortez named her 1982 collection of poems *Firespitter*, and she wrote the book’s eponymous poem to commemorate a Diasporic arts conference in Africa. When asked why she chose to use this name for the band, Cortez quickly explained the origin of the word, and then quipped that “it just kind of made sense” to name the band after fierce creatures who played with fire (Personal Communication). Cortez’s Firespitters create aggressively energetic music that grabs their audiences and makes them take notice. Critic Ron Sakolsky affirmed: “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” (“Firespitter”). Sakolsky’s inclusion of Cortez as a member of the group is appropriate, because she collaborates with the musicians, trusting them implicitly to bring their music to her words.

Jayne Cortez honors this relationship by giving musicians equal recognition on most of her recordings. In the liner notes to 2002’s *Borders of Disorderly Time*, Cortez wrote: “This CD is a collective of collaborations between my poetry, my voice, and various contemporary jazz musicians and their concepts, compositions, and performances.” Similarly, the liner notes to 1990’s *Everywhere Drums* state: “All music collectively composed with the exception of ‘Firespitters’, which was composed by Denardo Coleman.” Importantly, Cortez refuses to create a hierarchy in her description of her relationship with the same core of musicians over the last few decades. Cortez further elaborated these sentiments in her liner notes for 1979’s

Unsubmissive Blues:

For the past five years I have worked with Bill Cole, Joe Daley, and other musicians... 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.

Cortez clearly has a close working relationship with these musicians, and her inclusion of this recognition in her liner notes exemplifies the truly collaborative nature of their creative efforts.

In the liner notes to 1996's *Taking the Blues Back Home*, Cortez writes her most poignant acknowledgement to the group who would become the enduring core of the Firespitters:

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... 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.

*(Taking)*²³

This level of respect is an essential ingredient in Cortez's collaborative efforts; I would argue that this sort of collectivism exemplifies Maulana Karenga's *Nguzo Saba*, as Cortez and her co-conspirators work together to forge unified, cohesive musical-poetic compositions.

Jayne Cortez's son Denardo Coleman, born in 1956, is the main drummer and musical director for the Firespitters, and he plays a key role in creating the free jazz feel at the heart of many of the Firespitters' performances with Cortez. Coleman began his professional career

²³ *Taking the Blues Back Home* is their only CD released on a major label—PolyGram—and their most highly acclaimed recording to date.

playing drums at age ten with his father Ornette: “without style or more than rudimentary technique, but with a welcome spontaneity, a further step in the direction of indeterminacy” (Litweiler 51). This indeterminacy fueled his father’s collective improvisations, and though young Denardo was not a skilled drummer at age ten, he would mature as a musician under the tutelage of the most well-known practitioners of free jazz, most notably learning from and following in the stylistic footsteps of drummer Ed Blackwell.²⁴

Denardo Coleman’s appropriation of Ed Blackwell’s free jazz approach to drumming intersects with the typical role of the drummer in a bebop jazz combo, as he shares the responsibility for shaping melody, harmony, and timbre of every piece along with the tonal instrumentalists in the group. Jazz scholar Ingrid Monson emphasizes the importance of this role: “Many mistakenly assume that the drummer just plays rhythm and therefore doesn’t participate in the melodic and harmonic flow of the music. From an interactive perspective, however, the drum set represents a microcosm of all the interactive processes... including harmonic and melodic sensitivity” (*Saying* 51, 62). In his work with the Firespitters, Denardo Coleman provides a rhythmic backbone for the group, but, far more importantly, his fluid, sometimes idiosyncratic, timekeeping focuses more on timbre and interactivity than it does on keeping rigid time. Cortez speaks of her son thusly: “I think all experiences and memories carry different rhythms, different conflicts, and are conflictive rhythms. Drumbeats accent and support various pitches, phrases. Denardo can follow me, converse with me, and play what I say on his drums. That makes the encounter rhythmically exciting” (Feinstein *Ask* 53).

²⁴ Blackwell was honored for his contributions to jazz through a posthumous induction to the *Downbeat* Jazz Hall of Fame in 1993. As a result of his work with Blackwell and other jazz drummers, Denardo has become a strong performer. In addition to his duties as a Firespitter, Denardo produced and played on his father’s 2007 Pulitzer-Prize winning recording *Sound Grammar*, and he currently tours with that band.

Saxophonist T.K. Blue speaks in similar terms about his work with Coleman, Cortez, and the other Firespitters:

It's beautiful because we really feed off of each other. The rhythm becomes very elastic. You know, Denardo has a very hip and very distinguished style of playing. And it gives you a lot of freedom as a horn player to play with him because, you know, you're not locked in. Some drummers will play very rigid, and you're kind of locked into the rhythm and the pulse that they've established, but Denardo's free. And it's nice because it gives you an opportunity to play some different things. I wind up playing a lot different—they bring a lot of things out of me that I don't normally play—when I play with Denardo and Jayne which is great. That's why I always look forward to performing with them. (Blue)

Guitarist Bern Nix, also a veteran of Ornette Coleman's Primetime Band with Denardo, mentioned the same benefits to playing with the younger Coleman. He spoke of Denardo Coleman practicing his father's conception of biological rhythm. Nix employed the following analogy: "When you walk down the street, sometimes you slow down, speed up, but it's still organized... It's a more natural way of playing. It can expand and contract" (Nix). This fluid approach to timekeeping requires musicians to pay close attention to one another as they work through free jazz improvisations. If anyone in the group fails to pay attention, their work will lose cohesion, and will not progress along the lines of Ornette Coleman's motivic chain associations.

Scholar Tony Bolden also noted the importance of the fluidity inherent in the Firespitters' collaborations: "Cortez has been able to rehearse with her own band, which allows her to fine-tune her use of tonal semantics in her interactions with band members. The Firespitters have a distinct sound, yet it is clear to listeners that the band has been structured around her voice and

the rhythms of her poetry” (“All” 64). Bolden implied a causal relationship between the words and the music, indicating the musicians’ primary function of supporting Cortez’s reading. In terms of explaining this causal relationship, Cortez said: “Music is a part of the dynamics of sound and emotional expression that combine with language in my work. Sometimes the music is separate and functions as accompaniment; sometimes it’s within my use of language; and, sometimes the music develops by word-sound. In any case, words come first and often lead to an interaction with musicians” (qtd. in “Freedom”). For Cortez and the Firespitters, words and music are inextricable units that work reciprocally to emphasize and highlight each other.

Though Cortez often writes the text of a piece before she shares it with the musicians, like other practitioners of jazz improvisation, she is not bound to a specific creative formula. In her own words: “...sometimes the text is already on the page and I’m just deciding to read the text with music. At other times in rehearsal an idea will come up and we’ll work on it right there. And in performance I improvise on the piece that I’ve already written so you get an extension of what I’ve written” (qtd. Ruffin “Dispatch” 17–18). She further elaborated on the group’s creative process in simpler terms to Sascha Feinstein in a recent interview: “At rehearsals, we talk about the subject, about what the images suggest in musical terms. I read, they play. We make up things. We listen to each other” (*Ask* 53).

T.K. Blue spoke also eloquently of his work with Cortez, reiterating the collective nature of their collaborations:

Working with her musically is very organic. She’ll have a theme. You listen to the poetry first and you hear the words. Then you put together the message of what it is, and then that becomes your theme. And then you kind of work around—for example, she just recently put out a very new book of poetry, and there’s a poem in there on Langston Hughes. And I had mentioned to her that I work with Randy Weston, and Langston

Hughes was very close with Randy Weston. So close that Langston had in his will when he died he wanted Randy Weston to play “Do Nothing Till You Hear from Me”—one of his favorite songs—the Duke Ellington piece. And I mentioned that to Jayne, so when we do this poem, that’s the song I play. And that kind of ties in. (Blue)²⁵

Blue often plays musical quotes from various jazz standards in the midst of his improvisations as they apply to the themes and subjects of various poems. In this way, some of the Firespitters’ work with Cortez functions on a literal level, connecting listeners to the artists Cortez celebrates, such as Dizzy Gillespie, Chano Pozo, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Charlie Parker, just to name a few. When they invoke these canonical figures aurally, Cortez and the Firespitters draw both from their aesthetic traditions and from their important deliberate and implied contributions to social and political activism.

On a more esoteric level, Blue and the other Firespitters also make emotional connections to Cortez’s poetry, when they: “...try to paint visual pictures with the music to correspond with her message and her energy.” Blue specifically cites poems about the genocide in Rwanda and subjugation of repressed Nigerians as examples of the places in which the Firespitters can enhance the meaning of Cortez’s work with their music.²⁶ Screaming saxophones, frantic drumming, and laughing guitars all serve to reinforce the emotional content of these activist-poems (Blue). As Amiri Baraka originally envisioned during the Black Arts movement, Cortez and the Firespitters take poetry and render it with visceral and emotional intensity to enhance its meaning and move it forward as an important form of social activism.

²⁵ The first stanza of “Conversation with Langston Hughes” from *The Beautiful Book* reads: “Someone told TK / And TK told me that / Langston Hughes told them / That he wanted Randy Weston / To play at his funeral the Duke Ellington tune / ‘Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me.’”

²⁶ “U.S./Nigerian Relations” originally appeared on *There it Is*, and “I Have Been Searching” is a poem about Rwanda printed in *Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere* and recorded on *Taking the Blues Back Home*.

A critical part of the process of creating this activist-art involves Cortez's willingness to be open to all musical possibilities in conversation with her work. Despite her limited musical training in comparison to the men with whom she works, Cortez has a profound contextual and historical knowledge of jazz and blues idioms. Part of this stems from her involvement with Ornette Coleman's inner circle as he developed his free jazz ideology, but she has also spent all of her adult life embroiled in struggles for human rights across the Diaspora. The very nature of her lifelong education has imbued Cortez with an impeccable aesthetic sensibility that contributes to what Blue called her excellent sense of appropriate tone and mood in the music and poetry:

...the great thing about it is she'll know when it's right, and she knows when it's not right. You know, it's experimentation. We might be rehearsing, and we might play something and she'll say, "No, that... no." She's not feeling that. Now, she might not be able to tell you, "Okay, you need to play an A-flat instead of an A." But she'll say, "No. That's not the feeling." You know, or she might say to me, "Maybe don't play so much here," and then, "But play more here." And then a lot of times things happen like we're organic. We'll get into a call and response thing. She'll be saying different lines over and over, and I'm kind of answering her and things like that (Blue).

Guitarist Bern Nix discussed their work in similar terms. In the studio, the Firespitters tape everything they play, and Cortez listens to the tapes to decide what does and does not work. Nix affirmed that she listens to everything, considering their work a truly collaborative effort in which everyone has a voice. Concerning his personal contributions and his musical decisions, Nix noted: "We're always mindful of the fact that it's supposed to enhance what she's doing... Somebody might play something. Anybody might play something. We'll try different things. She listens to everything." Nix also says that Cortez will often let the band perform a piece without her at their live performances—often one he, Blue, or Denardo Coleman has written. Nix

called Cortez an open, generous bandleader: “She’s really charitable... She always tries to give everyone enough room to express themselves... You don’t just feel like a cog or a sideman.”

Again, this spirit of collectivism in keeping with the *Nguzo Saba* strengthens every collaborative effort and brings it into a space neither poetry nor music can inhabit in isolation.

After a live performance in November of 2006, bass player Al MacDowell echoed Blue and Nix’s sentiments. MacDowell also has been playing with the Firespitters since the early 1980s, and he loves working with Cortez. Clearly, a strong sense of family in the group goes beyond actual family ties. MacDowell said Cortez “runs the ship,” and he sometimes gets in trouble for being a practical joker, though he smiled, implying that it is the good kind of trouble (Personal Communication). His playing with the group often reflects his close intuitive musical connection from many years of playing with Nix and Coleman; the three musicians connect with each other in a constant musical conversation that extends to support Cortez’s aggressive reading style, always mindful of the importance of the mission of the poetry.

When T.K. Blue first joined Coleman, Nix, and MacDowell as a Firespitter in the early 1990s, he came to them with a traditional background playing straight-ahead jazz in the bebop tradition. As he developed his musical relationship with these free jazz veterans, Blue began to incorporate more free jazz elements into his musical vocabulary. Blue told me he enjoys working with them because they always add new ideas to his musical repertoire:

They make me play in different ways, different angles, different conceptions than I would normally think... Yeah, so that’s the kind of thing that I try to do when I play with Jayne and Denardo and Al and Bern is I just try to forget all of the stuff that I studied and just play... It’s almost like a collective improvisation, so to speak. You know, like, when you might set some type of a theme—even like with Jayne. We have these different poems, with certain themes we’ve already worked out for a lot of her work. So we’ll have poems

and some of them may have a specific kind of bass line, and then there'll be a kind of rhythm vibe that Denardo sets up. And Bern will have a certain kind of thing, the way that he voices his chords. So there is some structure, and, I mean, there might be a certain line that I have to play, you know. But then, inside, after the line, then we're free to create and feed off of each other and feed off of each others' energy. And also feed off the message of what, you know, of what she's talking about (Blue).

In addition to her long-term associations with Denardo Coleman, MacDowell, Blue, and Nix, Cortez has also collaborated with Sun Ra; Ornette Coleman; Frank Lowe; Charles Moffett, Jr.; Ed Blackwell; Don Cherry; and several African folk musicians.²⁷ When Cortez lived in Los Angeles, she forged lasting relationships with the jazz vanguard of the 1960s, and their continued influence on her work is far-reaching. As she became more than just a bystander or jazz enthusiast, Cortez has taken her art and the art of the musicians in her fold to a level that transcends their work in isolated genres.

As Cortez and the Firespitters work together, then, they forge their certain brand of collectivism using several key musical elements and ideas. Repetition is crucial to Cortez's poetry, and her use of incremental repetition—repetition with slight variations—is a direct link to riffing in jazz, in which instrumentalists repeat a melodic idea and modify it slightly over the course of several repetitions. Cortez also uses repetition to create a percussive effect through her nonstandard elimination of punctuation. By omitting the punctuation in most of her poems, Cortez frees herself to modify, riff, and enjamb her lines in response to the Firespitters' playing. Just as a jazz musician modifies a musical phrase, so Cortez modifies her spoken lines and stanzas. Another form of variation comes through Cortez's manipulation of inflection through changes in pitch and timbre, especially on repeated words and phrases. As Cortez varies her pitch

²⁷ Abraham Adzenyah, Abdoulaye Epizo Bangoura, Salieu Suso, and Sarjo Kuyateh have all recorded with Cortez as Firespitters.

and timbre, the Firespitters often engage her in a kind of call and response; similarly, Cortez often takes her cues from the musicians' timbral variations. Cortez's connections to both free jazz and surrealist Négritude poetry fuel this indeterminacy and variation in both style and texture. Finally, Cortez allows for different forms of improvisation in her work with the Firespitters. Different pieces contain moments of both individual and group improvisation during which the musicians function in a variety of ways, depending on the content and the context of the piece. In a piece about chaos and inequality, the musicians will have extended collective free jazz solos during which they listen intently to one another, creating long motivic chain associations. In a tribute piece to a canonical jazz musician, they play more straight-ahead solos with a proscribed form that speaks to the subject of the poem. Primarily using these forms of improvisational variation, Cortez and the Firespitters exhibit a high level of collectivity and continuity from piece to piece from year to year.

In his review of a live performance in 1991, Jon Pareles wrote that Cortez "has hooked her poetry to Ornette Coleman's kind of funk—a bristling, prismatic, harmonically unconstrained surge of riffs and propulsion... Meanwhile, the music is both urgent and danceable" (C14). Likewise, scholar Aldon Lynn Nielsen wrote: "The music is already there. By the time the ear falls prey to the groove, the music is already multiplying, leveling monuments to expectation and erecting new castles in the air; a layering with open work areas dangerously unguarded" (*Integral* 174). Groove, rather than harmonic form is at the core of most of the Firespitters collaborations with Jayne Cortez. In the majority of the pieces Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters played at their concert at JMU in 2006, one or two of the musicians would lay out a groove, using a simple riff or repeated musical idea, and then Cortez and the other musicians would layer their contributions atop his foundation.

Both the live and studio recordings of “Maintain Control” follow this basic formula, and while both recordings establish the groove a little differently from one another at the outset of each version, the overall effect is quite similar.²⁸ During the introduction of the 1986 studio cut on the album *Maintain Control*, drummer Denardo Coleman sets the rhythmic motif for the piece, and guitarist Bern Nix begins a simple guitar riff three bars later. Cortez and bassist Al MacDowell enter two bars later, with Cortez’s refrain: “Where are you going / Where have you been” repeated four times (1–4). With each repetition, Cortez changes her inflection, choosing to emphasize different words each time. While the guitar and bass maintain a consistent pattern with little variation, the drummer adds small accents to support Cortez’s changes in pitch. MacDowell begins to embellish upon and fill out his bass riff as Cortez segues into the first verse, while Coleman’s drumming becomes more active to underscore a stanza talking about the monotony and futility of a dead-end job that pays for “corruption” without paying for a “pension,” “pay cut,” or “strike fund” (lines 8, 10, 11, 12). The simple, repetitive riff and driving drums are reminiscent of the sounds of a mechanized production line, underscoring the monotonous nature of the life Cortez describes with forceful repetition.

On the second refrain, Coleman adds colorful accents from his electric drum kit, driving the piece forward. In the second verse, MacDowell plays a more active bass line with increasing funk inflections as the subject of the poem literally dances through the stanza as a means of forgetting his meaningless existence. This—and every verse in “Maintain Control”—is an excellent example of Cortez’s use of parallel syntax and its rhythmic effect on the piece: “When you throw down your coat / & kick off your shoes / & drink down your booze / & turn on the beat / & strike up a groove / to wear out your feet / & wear out the drummer / trying to wonder /

²⁸Transcriptions of both versions of “Maintain Control” are on page 64.

what is the number to Maintain Control” (18–26). Every short line takes up four beats of music, each constituting a measure in this piece, and Cortez’s carefully measured lists mirror the poem’s central theme of cataloguing daily routines as a means of maintaining control of one’s life. The repeated riff in the bass continues to underscore the parallelism, and Cortez listens to him closely and keeps time with him as she performs every line of this piece.

In the third refrain, Cortez raises her pitch, driving forward more persistently the question: “Where are you going / Where have you been,” and the third verse increases in intensity through the layering of more complex musical ideas. In this verse, MacDowell’s bass takes the musical focus away from the other musicians, and Coleman supports him with periodic accents on the electric drums. In this stanza, time, though always moving forward, is fluid, giving the piece a sense of disorder, as if begging for a sense of control. In this stanza, Cortez also uses vernacular language to maintain the beat she and the bass player have established. Again, this incorporation of vernacular language stems from Cortez’s roots in the Black Arts movement when writers venerated everyday black language as a means of giving value to black culture: “When you eat of the eats / & drink up the drinks / & smoke up the smokes / & crack up the crack / & blot out your visions / & blot out your values / but find no solution / to your pollution / to Maintain Control” (36–44). Specifically, the substitution of “smokes” for cigarettes in line thirty-eight provides important rhythmic continuity, again matching the riff undergirding Cortez’s words. Besides its cultural significance, Cortez also employs vernacular language in this manner as another means of propelling her work, imbuing it with energy and forward momentum. Additionally, Cortez’s level of diction always matches the subject of her poem; in a poem about a blue-collar worker’s struggle to make meaning out of repetition, elevated diction would be inauthentic and condescending. Cortez argues for the dignity of the Black American experience through her refusal to compromise in her choice of language.

During the fourth verse, Coleman lays out a simple pattern of downbeats on the bass drum and allows MacDowell, once again, to drive the rhythmic action of the stanza about the subject's attempts to "numb down [his/her] pain" with various drugs (49). As Cortez segues into a different incremental repetition hinging on the phrase "and push out your violence," both Coleman and guitarist Nix increase their activity to replicate the different types of violence Cortez enumerates. In the final stanzas of the piece, Coleman's drumming becomes more chaotic, syncopated, and polyrhythmic while Nix and MacDowell maintain a sense of order. At the end of the piece, all four of them speed up slightly, but decrescendo as a means of creating a "studio fade," as if to suggest there is no clear-cut ending to the self-perpetuating cycle of destructive behavior in which the subject of the poem seems to be trapped.

The live recording of the same poem from 1992's *Poetry & Music* begins with only Nix's guitar, and the drums take a less prominent role during the introduction and first stanza. When Cortez breaks into the first verse, Coleman's drumming and MacDowell's bass take on a fast 4/4 swing feel as Nix mirrors Cortez's voice almost word for word. This recording is just one example of the way in which a jazz combo that works together over the course of many years will often spontaneously create new arrangements of older pieces. In this version of "Maintain Control," the musicians take a much more aggressive musical approach, driving the meaning of the poem forward with an uncomfortable urgency that builds as Cortez pushes forward through the story of the subject's cycle of deleterious behaviors. To further enhance this effect, the musicians speed up as Cortez reads the second verse. This *accelerando* is an example of Coleman's free-jazz-inflected fluid drumming, concerned more with contextually appropriate emotional impact than strict time keeping.

Nix also takes more liberties with his guitar riffs throughout the live recording of "Maintain Control," as he varies his "comping" from stanza to stanza, often raising his pitch by

changing to a different inversion of the same chord each time he changes rhythmic idea.²⁹ Before the fourth verse about substance abuse, MacDowell takes an active bass solo full of sixteenth-note runs, and Coleman supports him by changing to a fast disco-rock groove, sometimes coloring it with agogo bells. MacDowell and Coleman signal the end of the solo by returning to the initial groove, and Cortez shortly joins in with another refrain of “Where are you going / Where have you been.” As they move into subsequent stanzas, the musicians and Cortez again speed up and increase the activity of their playing in order to drive the piece until its sudden, anticlimactic end, again symbolizing the most likely outcome of the poetic subject’s bleak existence. This spontaneous tempo fluctuation is only possible in a tightly knit group that listens closely to each member’s contribution to the overall conception of time.

In his 1991 review of *Everywhere Drums*, critic Herb Boyd specifically notes this musical and performative energy: “Compressed to the page her words are boundless enough, but to hear them in staccato bursts, weaving in and around her band’s furious charge is to experience the full sensory clout of her art” (41). In this way, it is conceivable that the band’s contribution to Cortez’s performed words brings the text to its utmost potential, fully engaging the audience’s senses. Short, blasting staccato phrases, especially in repeated lines, are a hallmark of Cortez’s writing and reading style. Many of her poems incorporate this sort of repetition in which Cortez begs her audience to pay attention to the harsh realities of injustice in several aspects of black life; Cortez also engages the Firespitters with these lines, challenging them to match the percussive intensity of her attack on various forms of oppression.

²⁹ Comping is the method by which a pianist or guitarist uses different voicings of chords to accompany a soloist; oftentimes, he will substitute appropriate chords and vary both the rhythm and the frequency both to support the soloist and also to provide variety from chorus to chorus in a solo. In a traditional combo, the bassist and the drummer also take on a similar function during solos (Hersch 102).

An excellent example of Cortez's use of terse, detached syllables comes in "Expenditures Economic Love Song 1" both on the original studio album *Maintain Control* and on the live recording of the same piece on *Poetry & Music*.³⁰ In both recordings, Cortez performs the line "Military Spending Huge Profits & Death" approximately fifty times, her voice acting as a percussive instrument, both complementing and connecting with Denardo Coleman's drumming on acoustic and electric drum kits. Cortez, Coleman, and the other musicians emphasize this repetition while adding periodic embellishments that change with the timbre of her repeated words; in this way, all members of the group have agency in creating variety and pushing the music forward.

In this piece, Cortez manages to vary her inflection on the word "Death" at the end of every one of the repeated fifty lines. Specifically, when the tonal center shifts from A-flat minor to E-major on the musical bridges, Cortez drastically raises her pitch on the word "death," changing the focus of the line for eight bars at a time (18–25; 38–45). The resulting effect is almost one of incremental repetition in which Cortez takes the same idea and varies it slightly from restatement to restatement, as if Cortez's change in inflection changes the meaning of each repetition. In both recordings of "Maintain Control," every time Cortez repeats words in her poetry, she does something a little different with her timbre in order to produce fine shades of meaning for the listener and for the other musicians. Not surprisingly, many jazz musicians use their instruments in the same way to create different inflections that affect the mood of a piece. Scholar Ekkehard Jost wrote about "what Ornette Coleman means when he speaks of the 'human quality' of his intonation, of 'human pitch' or 'vocalisation of the sound.' A sound is vocalized not by intoning it higher or lower, but by playing it *differently*" (53). In other words, Coleman treats an F in a melancholy song differently than an F he plays in a less somber song, giving his

³⁰ Pages 67 and 68 contain the transcriptions of "Expenditures Economic Love Song 1."

notes meaning through inflection in the same way Cortez uses vocal inflection to alter the meaning of repeated words and phrases.

On the studio recording of “Expenditures Economic Love Song 1,” Cortez states the first line plainly: “Military Spending Huge Profits & Death,” and Al MacDowell answers her with a funky slap-bass solo, setting the tone for the piece. After the short bass solo, Denardo Coleman comes in on electric drum kit and launches his mother’s frenzied, insistent repetition of her take on the worldwide problems endemic to multi-billion-dollar military-industrial complexes. The bass, drums, and tenor sax organize every two lines of the poem into a two-measure musical phrase with each musician playing his own riff. Coleman’s drumming includes chromatic horn hits on the electric drum kit that serve to enhance the energetic repetitions in the bass and saxophone lines. The musicians change tonal center for eight measures on the seventeenth line of the poem, and then they return to their home key for another twelve repetitions. During the second musical bridge of eight bars, Cortez increases her pitch and volume to match the activity in the musicians’ lines, and, as in every piece they play together, the connection among these performers is unmistakable. As they move back to the home key for another six repetitions, everyone decrescendos gradually, decreasing the activity of their lines to match the intensity of Cortez’s voice. Suddenly, Cortez shouts the final line of the poem, accompanied by the horn hits on the drums.

The live recording launches into musical repetitions immediately after Cortez’s initial proclamation without the introductory bass solo. Bern Nix plays a prominent guitar riff, not present in the studio version of “Expenditures Economic Love Song 1,” and he does not change key centers when MacDowell shifts to the bridge. After the twenty-fourth repetition, the instrumentalists break into a collective solo section in which Nix and MacDowell feed each other melodic ideas based on their original riffs. As they both trade ideas and play simultaneously,

Coleman supports them by playing variations of their rhythmic motifs. In the spirit of free jazz, rhythmic ideas become looser and less structured as the musicians continue to play. Finally, when the quartet decides it has reached the end of the piece, Coleman plays a four-beat drum fill, and they all hit a decisive last note together. All told, “Expenditures Economic Love Song 1” is a musical and verbal expression of one seemingly universal form of injustice. Working to support Cortez’s insistent message, the musicians interact according to the tone of the piece.

“Firespitters” is another poem that resulted from Cortez’s call to activism; she wrote the original version after attending the Festival of African Culture in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977 (Everywhere).³¹ The Nigerian government allocated money from the country’s oil boom in the 1970s to organize a multinational festival with the goal of producing a unified expression of Pan African and black Diasporic cultures. While the conference was certainly successful in bringing together artists, scholars, and activists from over sixty countries, many critics point out the incongruities between the amount of money the government spent for the festival and the inadequate infrastructure of Lagos, one of the largest and most overpopulated cities in Africa. Scholars Andrew Apter and Daniel Smith both discuss FESTAC as a metaphor for the overwhelming corruption in the Nigerian government; fundamentally, both scholars call FESTAC a ruse in which the government was solely interested in making itself look better in the eyes of the world while disregarding the basic needs of its citizens (Smith). Cortez’s participation in the event, as she presents it in the poem “Firespitter,” acknowledges the aggressively positive energy of this transnational artistic collaboration juxtaposed against a rapid-fire collage of squalid imagery, a prominent indication of Cortez’s affinity for the work of the surrealistic Négritude poets.

³¹ Page 69 contains the printed text of “Firespitters” from the chapbook *Firespitter*.

Cortez's pull to surrealism has important aural and social connotations. Cortez's evolution of the Black Arts aesthetic is similar to the Surrealistic poets in that they work toward creating:

...a truly free society in which the age-old contradictions between dream and action, reason and imagination, subjectivity and objectivity, have been resolved... That the African-American improvisational music called jazz should find a linkage in surrealism's emphasis on pure psychic automatism and its longstanding embrace of the international movement for Black Liberation—from Négritude to Black Power—should come as no surprise. One of the factors distinguishing surrealism from all other 'avant-garde' cultural movements of European origin is its multiracial character. (Sakolsky "Surrealist" 5, 33)

Scholar Robin Kelley also noted Cortez's use of surrealism and called it: "...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 (which plays all manner of Afrodiasporic music) a vibrant poetic imagery drawn from the deep well of the blues" (*Freedom* 187–188). Likewise, Tony Bolden asserted: "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" (*Afro* 121).

The original version of "Firespitters" in the 1982 collection *Firespitter* describes the activist work of the artists who attended FESTAC, likening them to warriors with "torches gleaming like / the gold tooth of my mother" (11–12). Cortez tempers every potentially valiant reference in the poem with stark images, grounding her feelings of heroism in the face of the unseemly organization of the Nigerian government. On the page, the poem has a single refrain

that highlights the duality of the endeavor: “Lagos / in your beautiful nasty self shake everything / we’re here” (22–24, 50–53). Cortez riffs on the phrase “we’re here” and continues to present the artists as warriors against corruption and inhumanity, constantly faced with the reality of life for the majority of Nigeria’s citizens.

When Cortez recorded “Firespitters” with the band on the 1990 studio album *Everywhere Drums*, she modified the text to remove the specific references to Lagos.³² She also made her musicians the subject of the poem rather than the participants of FESTAC ’77, though I would argue that the connection between the work of the Firespitters is analogous to the work of Cortez and the other artists who attended FESTAC. Cortez added multiple variations of a simple refrain throughout the recorded piece, and the musicians underscore these variations with the same four-measure musical motif each time she says: “Firespitters / talkin’ about Firespitters” (1–2). The collaboration between Cortez and the musicians is unmistakable in this recording, as she sometimes jumps to a refrain in the middle of the standard blues form the musicians follow throughout most of the piece. Every time Cortez yells: “Firespitters,” Bern Nix launches into the “Firespitters” melody, and the other members of the band quickly follow him. After they repeat the four-bar motif, the band begins a traditional twelve-bar blues form. As both Charles Moffett, Jr. and Bern Nix solo, steadfastly following the blues form, they show their cognizance of Cortez as she signals the end of their solos with another pronouncement of the “Firespitters” refrain. At the end of Moffett’s solo, Cortez jumps to the refrain prior to the end of the form—around the eighth bar of the twelve-bar blues format; the other musicians, participating in this active communal listening endeavor, quickly respond to Cortez’s call to follow her to the “Firespitters” melody.

³² Page 71 contains a transcription of the studio recording of “Firespitters.”

Since the original 1990 recording, the poem “Firespitters” has continued to expand as the band’s theme song and a vehicle for Cortez to introduce the individual musicians toward the end of each live performance. In these instances, Cortez uses only the essence of her original poem and improvises introductions for each band member in order to allow them to solo for the audience. In live renditions of “Firespitters,” Cortez loosely constructs each introduction around one line of the original poem, but, for the most part, she improvises laudatory introductions for each band member on the spot. The introductions for the band members at the 2006 JMU concert spent more time recounting each player’s credentials than the introductions on the 1992 recording of a concert in Germany, *Poetry & Music*. In a truly improvisatory moment at the JMU concert, Cortez modified her introduction of Denardo Coleman mid-sentence, thereby increasing the spontaneity of the piece; thinking on the spot is an essential element of jazz improvisation, and Cortez gracefully corrected herself with a smile, barely missing a beat of her son’s introduction.

On the 1992 live recording of “Firespitters” on *Poetry & Music*, each soloist plays a free solo with no collaboration with the rhythm section.³³ When they discussed their collaborative work with Cortez, both T.K. Blue and Bern Nix cheerfully acknowledged her graciousness as a bandleader in this regard; both musicians relate that Cortez always gives them a chance to stretch out and solo without constraints in live performances. During these long solo breaks, temporal and tonal centers shift as musicians create free-form compositions of varying lengths to exhibit their talents. While each musician starts in the original key center—as is the case with Charles Moffett, Jr. on this recording—most make their way into virtuosic displays of technical proficiency, reminiscent of cadenzas in traditional forms of European music. Unlike many traditional cadenzas, however, the Firespitters are not bound to follow a progression of chords leading to a particular cadence; their solos tend to be in the free jazz idiom, so each player has

³³ Page 73 contains a transcription of the live recording of “Firespitters.”

time and space to express himself. At the end of his solo, the soloist signals the beginning of the refrain, aurally and visually showing all of the band members and Cortez he is finished; Moffett, in this case, hits and sustains a high E after a flurry of broken arpeggios ending his forty-three-second solo. Cortez and the band jump in with another refrain of the “Firespitter” melody, setting up the introduction for bassist Al MacDowell.

On this recording, MacDowell begins his extensive solo slowly playing chords like a guitarist, following a chord progression with elements combining the downward motion in the jazz standard “Round Midnight” with the upward motion in “My One and Only Love.” Over a minute later, he segues into a fiercely technical show of sixteenth notes with a brief return to his original harmonic motif. MacDowell ends his two-and-a-half-minute solo with funk-inflected slap-bass, and by the time MacDowell plays the “Firespitter” melody to kick off another refrain with the whole ensemble, he has traversed three different genres and time feels that diverge completely from the twelve-bar blues structure of the poem’s main theme.

In his solo, guitarist Bern Nix begins by playing a propulsive melody that often returns to the same note as an anchor, and then he segues into playing open, free-floating chords before transitioning into a different blues-inflected melody in the tradition of a standard blues guitar solo. As he traverses the different sections of his solo, Nix uses the harmolodic theory he learned from Ornette Coleman to guide him from one melodic idea to another, essentially avoiding a sense of traditional harmonic structure.³⁴ By incorporating Coleman’s harmolodic theory in his solo, Nix subconsciously draws on a rich history of activism that served to promote the cause of Black American civil rights during the Black Arts movement. Near the end of his solo, however,

³⁴ Ornette Coleman synthesized the term “harmolodics” to reflect the sense of unity he strove to achieve through a fusion of harmony, motion, and melody (Jenkins 170–171). Coleman’s concept involved “the simultaneous sounding, in different tonalities and at different pitches (determined by, for example, a notional change of clef) but in otherwise unchanged form, of a single melodic or thematic line; the procedure produces a type of simple heterophony” (Kernfeld).

Nix quotes a similar downward chromatic line to the one MacDowell played in the first harmonic motif in his solo, demonstrating a thoughtful jazz musician's penchant for active listening and engagement with his colleagues' ideas. Like MacDowell, Nix signals the end of his ninety-second solo by playing the "Firespitter" melody.

Following Nix, Denardo Coleman's drum solo shows off his active, idiosyncratic style, as he creates multiple rhythmic textures rather than setting down a specific groove. As Coleman moves around his kit, he plays several polyrhythmic ideas, and, in lieu of creating one unified musical statement, he chooses to showcase the many timbres and textures he can evoke from his drums. Coleman's style is indicative of his work under the tutelage of Ed Blackwell, and at the end of Coleman's nearly ninety-second solo, he plays a short cadence and pauses, allowing for Cortez's energetic interjection of the beginning of the final refrain of the piece.

In addition to careful listening, 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. Furthermore, Cortez's lack of punctuation also provides her the flexibility to improvise when she reads with her combo. Though she often observes her line breaks in the way many other poets use punctuation, Cortez varies her rhythmic pauses and breathing in different performances of the same piece. In a heavily improvised piece like "Firespitters," Jayne Cortez's lack of punctuation often causes her to deliver enjambed lines, giving her the flexibility to engage with and to allow for improvisatory moments. "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” (Nielsen *Black* 223–224).³⁵ In the case of the continually evolving live performances of this poem, Cortez always improvises on stage.

According to Jayne Cortez, improvisation in her work functions in different ways: “There are phrases or words that were not written but were added during the performance... The work sounded new and improvised because the approach to the new music was new. And of course the work is improvisational before it is written on paper” (*Heroism* 204). These concepts are evident in two recordings of “Everybody Wants to Be Somebody” in which Cortez reads the same text in different variations, repeating and omitting certain words and phrases in the same way a musician would vary the melody to a song when playing a jazz standard; the core of the main idea of the piece remains, while the color of it changes depending on specific note choices and embellishments the musician chooses to add. “Everybody Wants to be Somebody” does not appear in any of Cortez’s printed books of poetry. As such, it is an improvisation she and the musicians likely created together in the rehearsals prior to the recording of *Everywhere Drums*.

Several specific examples of Cortez’s vocal improvisation occur on the live recording of this poem on *Poetry & Music*; at one point in the piece, Cortez says “in the world today” instead of repeating “in the USA” (8).³⁶ Cortez also varies the number of times she repeats phrases like “nobody needs it” and “Everybody wants to be famous” throughout both this live recording and the studio recording on *Everywhere Drums*.³⁷ As a means of explanation for this kind of

³⁵ Signifyin(g) is a literary term Henry Louis Gates, Jr. coined in *The Signifyin(g) Monkey* to describe the incorporation of the traditional Black American children’s game of “Playing the Dozens” in black literature. Jazz musicians continually signify on other musicians’ ideas, also alluding to this ubiquitous cultural practice. Nielsen’s use of this term imbues it with historical importance and a variety of underlying meanings.

³⁶ Page 74 contains a transcription of the live recording of “Everybody Wants to be Somebody.”

³⁷ Page 76 contains a transcription of the studio recording of “Everybody Wants to be Somebody.”

improvisation in her work, Cortez says: “We like to intensify whatever it is we’re doing, to amplify it, to try and bring out all the situations within the work itself... We have no expectations and try to be as spontaneous as possible” (qtd. in Woods). This spontaneity comes across in the studio version of “Everybody Wants to be Somebody” when Cortez repeats the words “but,” “nobody,” and “it” in the middle of the poem (21–22).

Cortez also uses incremental repetition throughout both versions of “Everybody Wants to be Somebody,” where the way she uses words is especially reminiscent of a free jazz motivic chain association: “but nobody wants to struggle / to be somebody / Nobody wants to suffer / to be somebody / Everybody wants to be somebody / if somebody is some one / but nobody wants to be no one / if no one is no body / because in the USA in the USA / Everybody wants to be famous / famous” (10–20).³⁸ Each line builds on the core of the line before, and this stanza evolves in increments from the notion that “nobody wants to struggle / to be somebody” to the contradictory idea that “everybody wants to be famous” (10, 20). This incremental transition underscores the message of the poem, showing the circuitous, flawed logic of the lazy cultural ethos Cortez interrogates in the piece.

Even more interestingly in this stanza, Cortez and the musicians share some particularly keen collaborative moments. Because the song is essentially a hip-hop-inflected jam on an E pedal point, the musicians have a great deal of freedom to interact. First, Denardo Coleman hits two loud rimshots on his snare drum in response to the word “struggle” in line ten.³⁹ Meanwhile, in the groove they have established, Charles Moffett, Jr., Bern Nix, and Al MacDowell all work together, answering each other’s riffs in a tightly interwoven texture that drives Cortez’s reading.

³⁸ Lynette Westendorf’s dissertation *Analyzing Free Jazz* contains several illustrative transcriptions of different elements of free jazz improvisation such as motivic chain associations.

³⁹ A pedal point is a sustained note in the bass voice of a piece of music.

In lines sixteen and seventeen, Cortez spaces her words so she is reading exactly in time with the musicians. Coleman interjects a few more snare shots in time, both of them driving Cortez's message persistently forward. At the end of the stanza, when Cortez repeats the word "famous," Bern Nix responds to her when he mirrors her pitch and inflection by moving from a G to an E twice on his guitar.

In the next large stanza, Coleman adds more electric hits from his drum kit, and Nix begins playing an E minor sixth chord with varying rhythmic textures. Moffett begins playing higher notes in increasing intervals on his saxophone, and through these changes, the combo effectively heightens the intensity of the poem. The gradual evolution of all the riffs the different musicians put together is seamless, and each musician engages in a simple form of collective improvisation in which no one person, Cortez included, has any more influence than another does. This recording of "Everybody Wants to be Somebody," then, exhibits a clear-cut example of collective improvisation at work.

The musicians employ this form of interplay even more actively on the 1992 live recording of "Everybody Wants to be Somebody" on *Poetry & Music*. While Coleman lays down a funk groove, MacDowell, Nix, and Moffett interact with increasing vigor as Cortez reads. They also include Cortez in the conversation, this time with MacDowell responding to the repetition of the word "famous" in a different manner than Nix did on the studio recording. In the middle of this recording, the musicians also improvise collectively while Cortez breaks from reading. While Moffett seems to take the lead first, each musician offers different melodic and rhythmic ideas that culminate in Nix's descending chromatic pattern leading toward Cortez's next stanza. At the piece's conclusion, Moffett responds to the repetition of the word "famous" with playful altissimo notes on his saxophone, and the group ends the piece with a final chord played in time with Cortez's last "needs / it."

While “Everybody Wants to be Somebody” displays a type of collective improvisation, both the studio and live recordings of “Maybe” are some of the purest examples of free jazz in Cortez’s recorded repertoire.⁴⁰ Cortez and eight musicians spontaneously composed the poem at the 1990 recording session for *Everywhere Drums*; rather than plan out riffs, a key center, or a groove to shape the piece like they do with most of the poems, the musicians began a freewheeling improvisation featuring two drum sets, hand percussion, two tenor saxophones, Korean hojok, and guitar.⁴¹ The make-up of this combo reflects Ornette Coleman’s early predilection for the double quartets that would become the hallmark of his sound during the 1960s; Cortez’s choice of instrumentation for this piece also encompasses the musical traditions of four continents, implying the global impact of injustice. The poem and collective improvisation center on the contention that there exists no “liberty justice [or] equality” in this, presumably American, democracy (1). As Cortez ruminates on the possibility of these concepts being a reality elsewhere, the musicians carefully craft a chaotic soundscape to illustrate the turmoil inherent in Cortez’s strong accusations. This feeling of chaos is the result of intent listening in a highly collaborative atmosphere. Free jazz veterans Frank Lowe and Ed Blackwell join the core group of Firespitters along with Bill Cole and percussionist Abraham Adzinyah to create a dense string of intertwined motivic chain associations.

After Cortez’s first declaration, the core rhythm section begins together on a C-sharp, and the rest of the musicians layer on from there. Immediately, the woodwinds play chaotic runs that more closely match the rhythms of the drummers than the notes offered by Nix and MacDowell on guitar and bass. As many of these musicians worked on various sessions with Ornette Coleman, they deftly navigate different harmolodic ideas together, undergirding the

⁴⁰ Page 77 contains a transcription of both versions of “Maybe.”

⁴¹ A hojok is one of Bill Cole’s nonwestern woodwind instruments that produces a sound similar to an oboe.

indeterminacy the text of the poem interrogates. Nix and MacDowell listen to each other acutely, following each other's chromatic meanderings, sometimes note for note. While they pursue each other, the three woodwind players key in on certain notes and phrases as they continue their ferocious attack. When Cortez reads, the woodwinds reduce their dynamics and sheer number of notes, but they come back a little stronger every time she pauses for a musical break. Ironically, the piece ends with a single major chord on Nix's guitar, implying that Cortez's insistent wish for "liberty justice and equality" could be plausible.

The live recording of "Maybe" on *Poetry & Music* begins with Bern Nix's anthropomorphic guitar-scratching laughter that engages in a call-and-response with Cortez's insistent repetition of the word "maybe" (5). This concert features only four musicians, so it is much easier to listen for the interaction among them as they negotiate the harmolodic indeterminacy of the piece. One particularly strong example of musical interaction occurs during the second free break on this live recording when the MacDowell and Nix again strike up a conversation, beautifully illustrating this apt analogy for collectivity in jazz. With fewer percussionists, it is also easier to hear moments in which Coleman directly interacts with the other three musicians. When four jazz musicians know each other this intimately, they have more freedom to explore the musical possibilities of any given moment. As such, this recording of "Maybe" stands as an exemplar of Cortez's free jazz collaborations with the Firespitters.

CONCLUSION

“Maybe” is just one example of the dozens of pieces Cortez has both performed and recorded with the Firespitters since they began working together in 1979. Using free jazz elements, various forms of incremental repetition, lack of punctuation, careful listening, and years of collaboration, Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters create mixed genre jazz poetry that carries a strong message of social justice. Following the lead of Black American activists in the realms of jazz music, literature, and politics, Cortez and her collective of musicians convey their call for equality by creating a collaborative environment in which all members have vital input. Following Maulana Karenga’s seven principles of the *Nguzo Saba* along with other aspects of the Black Arts movement, Cortez continues to participate in worldwide discussions about human rights across the African Diaspora. Though her contributions to the body of jazz poetry are not as well documented as some of her contemporaries, Cortez’s contributions have been no less vital or effective.

In these and all of their collaborations, Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters work together to add complex layers of meaning to her poems. Through a process of experimentation, conversation, and improvisation, they create jazz-inflected compositions that evolve as the musicians do. Though the core members of the group have been playing together since the 1980s, their work continues to grow and change, as they all bring the spirit of innovation and the quest for freedom to the endeavor. The influence of free jazz and the Black Arts movement on their work is unmistakable, and Cortez and her musicians continually search for new ways to reshape these ideals and move their work forward. In this way, Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters create a singular form of jazz poetry that speaks to the concerns of oppressed peoples across the African Diaspora, always interrogating hegemonic power structures with the goal of achieving a greater sense of freedom.

APPENDIX: Transcriptions of Poems

MAINTAIN CONTROL (text virtually the same in all versions)

Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been

When you rush to the job
 & time clock the card
 then step up production
 to pay for corruption
 but have no deductions
 to pay for your pension
 pay for your pay cut
 pay for your strike fund
 to Maintain Control Maintain Control Maintain Control

Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been

When you throw down your coat
 & kick off your shoes
 & drink down your booze
 & turn on the beat
 & strike up a groove
 to wear out your feet
 & wear out the drummer
 trying to wonder
 what is that number to Maintain Control
 Maintain Control Maintain Control

Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been

Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been
Where are you going	Where have you been

When you eat up the eats
 & drink up the drinks

to maintain control of what's in control

to maintain control

Maintain Control Maintain Control

Maintain Control Maintain Control Maintain Control

Maintain Control Maintain Control Maintain Control

Maintain Control Maintain Control Maintain Control

Maintain Control Maintain Control Maintain Control

EXPENDITURES ECONOMIC LOVE SONG 1 (studio recording from *Maintain Control*)

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

(bass solo)

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

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Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

(bridge)

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

(return to home key)

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

(bridge)

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

(return to home key)

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

(decrescendo)

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

(shouted)

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

EXPENDITURES ECONOMIC LOVE SONG 1 (live recording from *Poetry & Music*)

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death
Military Spending Huge Profits & Death
Military Spending Huge Profits & Death
Military Spending Huge Profits & Death
Military Spending Huge Profits & Death
Military Spending Huge Profits & Death
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Military Spending Huge Profits & Death
Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

(bridge)

Military Spending Huge Profits & Death
Military Spending Huge Profits & Death
Military Spending Huge Profits & Death
Military Spending Huge Profits & Death

(extended instrumental section becomes gradually rhythmically looser to end)

FIRESPITTERS (FESTAC 77)

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 swallows
 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 propelled tongues
 ten fifths of lightning
 battle stars chlorophylled 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

FIRESPIITTERS (studio recording on *Everywhere Drums*)

[8-bar intro]

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 swallows
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 [*tenor sax solo – 3 choruses plus 7 measures*]

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 chlorophylled plungers horizzonal 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 [*guitar solo – 2 choruses*]

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

FIRESPIITTERS (live recording on *Poetry & Music*)

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. [*sax solo*]

Firespitters

Firespitters

I'm talking about the Firespitter spitting funk
from the bass into this night
that expressive creative Firespitter
Al MacDowell [*bass solo*]

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 [*guitar solo*]

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 [*drum solo*]

Firespitters

I'm talkin' about the Firespitters
a caravan of Firespitters
a festival of Firespitters

EVERYBODY WANTS TO BE SOMEBODY (live recording from *Poetry & Music*)

You know, everybody wants to be somebody
 Yeah, everybody wants to be somebody
 but on a magazine cover on a magazine cover

Everybody wants to be somebody on television television

Everybody wants to be somebody
 in the mouth of someone someday
 in the USA and in the world today

but nobody wants to struggle
 to be somebody
 Nobody wants to suffer
 to be somebody
 Everybody wants to be somebody
 if somebody is someone
 but nobody wants to be no one
 if no one is no body

because in the world today
 Everybody wants to famous famous
 Everybody wants to be somebody famous

But but nobody needs it
 nobody needs it

Everybody wants it
 & everybody should be recognized as something
 Everybody has the right to be something something
 but nobody wants to just be something something something
 Everything wants to be something something famous famous
 but nobody needs it

(instrumental break)

Everybody wants to be somebody on a magazine cover
 Everybody wants to be somebody on television
 Everybody wants to be somebody
 in the mouth of someone some day
 some way in the world today

But nobody wants to struggle to be somebody
 nobody wants to suffer to be somebody
 Everybody wants to be somebody if somebody is someone
 But nobody wants to be no one if no one is nobody
 Not in the USA not in the world today

Aw everybody wants to be famous
You know everybody wants to be famous

But nobody needs it
Nobody needs it
But everybody wants it
Everybody wants
Everybody wants
Everybody wants
Nobody needs it
Nobody needs it

And Everybody everybody should be recognized as something
Everybody has the right to be something something something
But nobody wants to just be something something something
Everybody wants to be something something something famous
Famous
Famous
But nobody needs it
Nobody needs it
Nobody
Needs
It

EVERYBODY WANTS TO BE SOMEBODY (studio recording from *Everywhere Drums*)

Everybody wants to be somebody
 I said, everybody wants to be somebody
 Everybody wants to be an image on a magazine cover on magazine cover

Everybody wants to be on television television

Everybody wants to be somebody
 in the mouth of someone
 someday someday
 in the USA in the USA in the USA

but nobody wants to struggle
 to be somebody
 Nobody wants to suffer
 to be somebody
 Everybody wants to be somebody
 if somebody is some one
 but nobody wants to be no one
 if no one is no body
 because in the USA in the USA
 Everybody wants to famous famous

But but but but nobody nobody nobody nobody needs it
 needs it it it it it

Everybody wants to be somebody
 & everybody should be recognized as something
 Everybody has the right to be something something
 but nobody wants to just be something something something
 Everything wants to be famous famous
 but nobody needs it
 nobody needs it
 Everybody wants it
 But nobody needs it
 Everybody wants Everybody wants Everybody wants
 Everybody wants Everybody wants Everybody wants it
 But nobody needs it

Somebody Everybody Somebody Everybody
 Somebody Everybody Somebody Everybody

Everybody wants to be somebody
 Everybody wants to be somebody
 Everybody wants to be somebody

(instrumental fade out)

MAYBE (text virtually the same in both versions)

Liberty, justice, equality
maybe in the 21st century

maybe on another planet
maybe in outer space
maybe maybe maybe maybe
maybe maybe maybe maybe

no equality, no justice, [no liberty] (omitted in studio version)
what kind of democracy is this

Liberty, justice, equality
maybe in the 21st century

maybe on another planet
maybe in outer space
maybe maybe maybe maybe
maybe maybe maybe maybe

Liberty, justice, equality
maybe in the 21st century

maybe on another planet
maybe in outer space
maybe maybe maybe maybe
maybe maybe maybe maybe

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