

“In the Street There Will Only Be Black and White”: A Cultural Studies

Analysis of Gil Scott-Heron's *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox Avenue*

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Abstract: The 1970 album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox Avenue* contains a host of themes that would appear quite often throughout the artist's, Gil Scott-Heron, vast discography, such as structural racism, police brutality, economic disenfranchisement, and political corruption. At the same time, it also incorporates and transforms different musical cultures, such as jazz, blues, and spoken word poetry. In it, Scott-Heron creates a powerful narrative that still resonates with the lives and experiences of marginalized voices and communities today. The form of his work, the way he makes use of themes, tones, imagery, symbols, and styles, that mix through a provocative poetics, is interpreted vis-à-vis different domains of social formation, such as the political and cultural upheavals that happened throughout the sixties in the United States. Much like the socio-cultural atmospheres of the time, there is a sense and atmosphere of immediacy, rawness, and brutality in the album. Through his graphic imagery coupled with savvy and witty social commentary, he exposes American society and praises Black communities' resilience and resistance. This research paper explores some cultural and musical aspects of Gil Scott-Heron's seminal album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox Avenue*, through a critical perspective of cultural studies. It discusses Scott-Heron's usage of spoken word in the album as a form of cultural expression and resistance, as sonic fiction. The research highlights the interconnectedness of politics, culture, and identity in *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox Avenue* by analysing some of its songs. I discuss how Scott-Heron's lyrics reflect broader sociocultural and political critiques of the time. Finally, the analysis discusses the album's relevance to contemporary cultural discourse by analysing its significance for better understanding certain structures of contemporary cultural identity and social activism.

Keywords: Gil Scott-Heron; *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox Avenue*; Poetics of

Resistance; Sonic Fiction.

Introduction

Gil Scott-Heron was born in Chicago in 1949, but soon after went to live with his grandmother in Jackson, Tennessee until the age of 12, when she died. He then moved to New York, to live with his mother. According to his autobiography, *The Last Holiday*, during this period he was deeply influenced by the social and political atmospheres of the Civil Rights era, having experienced second-class citizenship and economic disenfranchisement in different places firsthand. Moreover, during the same period, he mentions being moved by the works of Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, as well as John Coltrane and Billie Holiday. By 21, he had published his first novel, *The Vulture*, and recorded his first album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*.

Chronologically, he is part of this 'stemming' of new black poets, whose seed had been planted in the 1920s and 30s, and whose initial sprouting was in the mid-60s. These 'new' poets were trying at all costs to approximate poetry (art), to life, to talk about things that the common person knew about, and in a manner which he or she could understand, in his or her language. This seemed to be the backbone of Scott-Heron's work: To be understood by people, not to be misinterpreted, not to be vague, not to be wordy or verbose, but objective and upfront. What mattered for him, what many of these new poets wanted, was to be heard or read by as many people as possible; to spread the word, and communicate. It must be underscored that many of these artists, Scott-Heron included, brought poetry to these people and places, that would otherwise have never known about the existence of this powerful communicational tool, and, above all, they delivered poetry to these people in a way they could understand it as a form of resistance, a weapon. The idea was not to make people awe-struck by the vastness of art, but rather to make people react to what was being exposed/said/sung; to capacitate people, pollinate their minds, and activate their spirits. Therefore, there was an underlying concern among many artists and intellectuals of the time with being understood, they wanted to be able to communicate with all people, not just a select

group of people. After all, if art (culture) was to be understood or interpreted as a form of participatory action, as an awakening tool, then, logically, the more people related to it, or interiorized and externalized it in some manner, the more chances there were of creating effective revolutions, or provoking collective and individual changes.

Scott-Heron's work interconnects music, poetry, and activism. Since the beginning of his career, he showcased a blend of spoken word, blues, jazz, funk, and soul, which he developed into a form of cultural expression and resistance. Beyond the musical innovations, discussed below, his outspoken critique of social, political, and economic disparities enriches the breadth and depth of his work.

His work continues to resonate deeply within the realms of music, literature, and activism. His pioneering fusion of spoken word and music laid the groundwork for the emergence of hip-hop as a potent form of cultural expression, inspiring subsequent generations of artists to use their voices as instruments of social change. Moreover, his incisive critiques of racism, inequality, and political corruption remain as relevant today as they were during his lifetime, serving as a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggles for justice and equality.

In 2003, the BBC hired musician/movie maker, Don Letts, to direct a documentary about Scott-Heron, called *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. In the opening sequence, in just less than two minutes, many artists, poets, and musicians sing a few lines of Scott-Heron's famous song from his debut album, which is also the title of the documentary. Among them are: Sarah Jones, the Tony and Obie award-winning playwright and performer, Richie Havens, musician/activist, Abiodun Oyewole, member of The Last Poets and hardline activist, Linton Kwesi Johnson, the Jamaican-born, UK-based dub poet and activist, and Chuck D, from Public Enemy. In this short sequence, we see such a vast array of people, covering diverse areas as literature, theatre, music, politics, and activism, that it gives us an awareness of the depth, scope, and importance of his work and life.

His debut studio album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (1970) displays a unique spoken word performance, where he tackled issues of racial injustice, poverty, and

systemic oppression. The cover of the album says a lot about the poet, his poetry, and poetics. It is a picture of Scott-Heron sitting in some dodgy alley; he stares directly at the camera. It is a black-and-white picture, which makes part of his bodily contours hover over the full darkness of the alley. Right above the image, a small description reads:

Gil Scott-Heron takes you Inside Black. Inside, where the anger burns against the Ones Who “broke my family tree.” Inside, where the black man sorts his miseries “while white man walk on stars.” He penetrates the core, where, blurred by the “plastic patterns” of a culture not his own, dulled by drugs, or held down by unrelenting poverty, the Black’s rage smolders, ready to flare into riot. In Small Talk at 125th and Lenox, Gil Scott-Heron, a twenty-year-old poet speaks for his people with an eloquence that has won him recognition as a major new talent. He is the voice of a new black man, rebellious and proud, demanding to be heard, announcing his destiny: “I AM COMING.”

Above his name, but written in a smaller font, reads: “A new black poet.” This heading, his name, and the name of the album are written in white capital letters. The choice of sudden and stark contrasts, as black and white, is in and by itself quite representative in terms of what the whole album is about: blacks and whites living in the same space, yet in completely different, or downright adverse circumstances. Beneath his leg, is a folded newspaper, perhaps suggesting that the narratives present in the newspaper are also part of the album. His long stare is embedded with the attitude and posture so characteristic of the intellectual/activist/militant of the time. Symbolically, 125th and Lenox refer to a place located in the heart of Harlem, or what Harlemites call Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (125th) and Malcolm X Boulevard (Lenox).

Throughout the album, certain words are loaded with significance and meaning. For instance, Heron mentions the brutal assassination of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. (“Evolution (and Flashback)”), the Black Panthers, Nat

Turner, and the Vietnam War (“Comment #1”), and Stockley Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, influential activists, (“Small Talk at 125th and Lenox”). Even his shorter songs are already full of information and images; a stanza can sum up a lifetime. For example, this is a 34-seconds-long song called “Paint It Black”:

Picture a man of nearly thirty
 Who seems twice as old with clothes torn and dirty
 Give him a job shining shoes
 Or cleaning out toilets with bus station crews
 Give him six children with nothing to eat
 Expose them to life on a ghetto street
 Tie an old rag around his wife’s head
 And have her pregnant and lying in bed
 Stuff them all in a Harlem house
 And then tell them how bad things are down South. (1-10)

In ten lines, he managed to cover thirty years, which seems more like sixty. It is as livid as it is vivid. As much as it sketches a picture of a man, very detailed and specific, or context-based, it also sketches a picture of many African Americans, who live under the same conditions, and have almost the same appearance; local, yet national, speaking to one and all. He mentions the type of menial jobs that are offered to African Americans and the kind of living conditions that blacks must endure in the ghettos. He creates this horrible reality, and to make it worse, as if downgrading all this harshness and brutality, which in many ways is exactly what the government and corporate media do, says that down South things are even worse. By doing that, the violence and degradation present in the depiction are normalized, and the people are dehumanized by making it seem like they are mere statistics, victims of the system.

Poetics of Resistance: A New Communicative System

Concerning the African-American History of the 20th Century, specifically the sounds and songs that helped compose it, it is argued that a lot of this input comes from the vinyl, the LP record. In an album like *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, there is a surplus of knowledge, wisdom, histories, and a crisscross of potentialities, cultural patterns, and techniques. Further, it is also a multi-medium artefact that contains sound codes, visual stimuli, tactual textures, a most peculiar smell of enveloped remembrance, as well as manifold layers of narratives: personal, communal, imaginative, and soulful.

As will be discussed further on, Scott-Heron's album is but one example of a torrent of narratives that emerged throughout the 20th Century, as more and more African Americans began experimenting with this new medium, the vinyl. Especially after the 50s, as the technologies became more and more accessible, the record became a powerful means of resistance, as well as a way of spreading a whole culture and lifestyle for many African Americans. It is understood that African Americans transformed the LP record and the song into a fundamental chapter of the history of African Americans. Amiri Baraka has already made such a statement, that albums and songs are historical narratives, in his 1963 book *Blues People*. In it, Baraka argues that the study of the different stages and styles of *negro music*, and its development, presented excellent data, or primary sources, for a better understanding not only of African American history but also of the history of the United States. He saw music as one of the ethos of Black culture and argued that by analysing in-depth a music style linked almost exclusively to African Americans, such as the blues in the early 20th Century, one can have a clear picture of their overall living conditions and life experiences at the time. Music is a valid chronicle of African American history. He writes:

It seems possible to me that some kind of graph could be set up using samplings of Negro music proper to whatever moment of Negro's social history was selected, and that in each group of songs, a certain frequency of reference could pretty well

determine his social, economic, and psychological states at that particular period. (1965)

According to him, *negro music* displayed sophisticated communicative systems, or languages, as slave work songs, the blues, and jazz, each with specific techniques, vocabulary, and poetics. This research makes use of his ideas to analyse albums and songs as historical narratives. Following his argument, this research understands that a music album such as Gil Scott-Heron's *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (1970) is as important for a critical discussion of what it meant to be black in the United States during the 60s and 70s, as Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963).

Following this premise, certain parallels and correspondences can be traced between specific African American music styles and artists, and sociocultural movements of the 20th Century. For instance, some underlying tenets of the New Negro movement of the 20s and 30s, which was intensified by the Great Migration of African-Americans to northern cities, were: a sense of racial pride, cultural awareness, and self-determination. Similarly, during the same historical period, jazz music became each time more popular, as did musicians like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Billie Holliday, all of whom distinctly displayed a sense of racial pride, cultural awareness, and self-determination. Another example, is during the '60s and '70s, the decades of Civil Rights, and Black Power, when more and more people were becoming radicalized, politically engaged, and going to the streets, the same sort of poetics can be detected in music and certain artists of the time. For instance, Max Roach's *We Insist!* (1960), whose very cover is a direct reference to the sit-ins happening all over the US, in which blacks and whites would go into segregated restaurants and sit together; Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* (1971), which contains songs like "What's Going On" or "Inner City Blues (Makes Me Wanna Holler)", which directly mention the Vietnam War, political and economic disenfranchisement, as well as black on black violence; and Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions* (1973), which contains "Living for the City", a brutal chronicle of the day-to-day life of a black man born in Mississippi.

African American music of the 20th Century, therefore, is completely interweaved with the experience and condition of being black in the United States, or Black culture as a whole within the country. Anna Everett, in the introduction of her essay “The Revolution Will Be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Digital Public Sphere,” wrote about these manifold and deep connections between music, and what she defines as the “African-Diasporic Consciousness.” She wrote:

Despite the well-documented dehumanizing imperatives of the colonial encounter, the ethnically and nationally diverse Africans in the New World developed self-sustaining virtual communities through paralinguistic and transnational communicative systems and networks of song, dance, talking drums, and other musical instrumentations. The formation of these new African-inflected communications strategies enabled this heterogeneous mass of people somehow to overcome their profound dislocation, fragmentation, alienation, relocation, and ultimate commodification in the Western slavocracies of the modern world. (126)

She believes that music played a fundamental role in the lives of many African Americans because it not only preserved their ancestry, which had been usurped during the Middle Passage, or the forced trip of enslaved people across the Atlantic, but also functioned as a common ground for the establishment of new interpersonal relationships, new collectivities.

Throughout the 20th Century, black music and poetry were not only catalysts of change and transformation but also ‘thermometers’ of what was happening at the time. As Howard Zinn (2005) writes: “It was all there in the poetry, the prose, the music, sometimes masked, sometimes unmistakably clear – the signs of a people unbeaten, waiting, hot, coiled” (446). Through music and poetry, as in the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, or hip-hop culture, African Americans wrote significant chapters of their collective history by establishing important struggles of resistance against a racist and colonial system

of government.

It is argued that during the 20th Century, African American music and poetry blended into a new communicative system, which developed new expressions, words, concepts, codes, and signs, as well as attitudes, sounds, techniques, and aesthetics. This new art is similar to what Wynton Marsalis calls ‘existence music,’ or the kind of music which:

Does not take you out of the world, it puts you in the world. It makes you deal with it. It’s not religiosity like ‘thou must,’ it says ‘this is.’ It deals with the present. It is the range of humanity that is in this music. (*Jazz*)

It is a form of communication that shares correspondences with what composer and theorist George E. Lewis (2004) termed ‘improvised music,’ or:

[A] social location inhabited by a considerable number of present-day musicians, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds and musical practices, who have chosen to make improvisation a central part of their musical discourse. ... [An] intercultural establishment of techniques, styles, aesthetic attitudes, antecedents, and networks of cultural and social practice. (280)

Overall, it is a communicative system embedded in Blackness and the Black Experience, similar to what Stephen Henderson (1973) terms ‘new black poetry’ or poetry “that speaks directly to Black people about themselves to move them toward self-knowledge and collective freedom” (16).

To paraphrase what Lewis says about improvised music, that its composition is more performer-supplied rather than composer-specific, and also that it is a transnational, transcultural improvisatory musical activity, this research argues that this new art has become a transnational and transcultural improvisatory communicative system focused on domain-specific contexts/performances; where intersubjective exchanges of knowledge and information happen. Therefore, in a sense, more than something racial, it is a set of attitudes, feelings, rhythms, verses,

and sounds that seems to always affirm the necessity of having self-determination of one's own life, as well as self-agency of situations and things in life.

This research aims to discuss the ways Gil Scott-Heron's album managed to contribute to this vast database of knowledge and information. His poetry and music are interpreted as counter-narratives. Counter in the sense of being completely different from official and hegemonic narratives fabricated by oppressive systems of control, as in the song "Enough", which begins as follows:

Had a poem here somewhere called "Enough" / That I'd like to
do / Because every once in a while / A brother gets shot
somewhere for no reason / A brother gets his head kicked in for
no reason / And you wonder just exactly what in the hell is
enough. (1-6)

Counter because he openly supports certain people, ideas, and organizations, which are understood to be dangerous elements within American society, according to the establishment, for instance, in the song "Small Talk at 125th and Lenox", in which he sings: "Who cares if LBJ is in town? / Up with Stockley and H. Rap Brown / I don't know if the riots is wrong [sic] / But whitey's been kicking my ass for too long" (16-19). Counter because he recollects the past that many official historical chronicles prefer to omit, as with "Evolution (and Flashback)", in which he sings:

Until 1600 I was a darkie / Until 1865 a slave / In 1900 I was a
nigger / Or at least that was my name / In 1960 I was a negro /
And then brother Malcolm came along / And the some nigger shot
Malcolm down / But the bitter truth lives on. (6-13)

Counter because he uncovers certain day-to-day stories and tragedies, which the State tries to keep veiled. Counter because he calls for immediate action, as with "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised", when he sings "The revolution will not be televised / Will not be televised / Not be televised / The revolution will be no re-run, brothers / The revolution will be live!" (57-61); or in "Enough", which he finishes saying "Look over your shoulder, motherfucker, I am coming!" (55).

This research also discusses Scott-Heron's work in terms of the poetics of the immediate. Immediate because the living conditions of African Americans were deteriorating faster and faster. Immediate because police brutality was increasing, but the States seemed each time more silent about it. Immediate because he wanted to provoke revolutions in people's minds, where the first revolutions happen, as he said many times throughout his career. Immediate because he sang like many revolutionary political activists of his time.

Sonic Fiction

Theorist and filmmaker, Kodwo Eshun, writes at the beginning of his book, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, (1999) that music must be experienced before it is analyzed. He argues that instead of resorting to different theories to discuss and explain music, we should choose instead to try to make sense of it by understanding which ways it affects, changes, and transforms us and our environments (7). As he writes:

In CultStud, TechnoTheory and CyberCulture, those painfully archaic regimes, theory always comes to Music's rescue. The organization of sound is interpreted historically, politically, socially. Like a headmaster, theory teaches today's music a thing or 2 about life. It subdues music's ambition, reigns it in, restores it to its proper place, reconciles it to its naturally belated fate. (3)

However, he thinks that the opposite should happen and that music should be “encouraged in its despotic drive to crumple chronology like an empty bag of crisps, to eclipse reality in its willful exorbitance, to put out the sun” (3). The way he sees it, music is already a theory, a political act, a world view: music in and by itself already offers more than enough data for a critical and theoretical discussion of our social, cultural, political, and economic surroundings. He writes a lot about black music creating counter-memories, which function like alternative histories, or new beginnings, in that they operate from within the fissures and gaps of ‘official’ narratives and history. Black music, therefore, can create cracks in certain

systems of power and control. In the realm of music, for instance, black people had way fewer impediments and restrictions when compared to their history of social, political, and economic limitations created by a racist and diffused power structure.

He understands music as a communicational tool and suggests that blacks have managed to reinterpret the album, as well as the song, in such a manner, that they have been inventing all sorts of new technologies with these reinterpretations, such as sampling and scratching. Eshun's study focuses on enhancing the possibilities and pluralities found in music. It is dedicated to the *newest mutants* and musicians who have used technology/electronics to prosthetically enhance and extend their art. For instance, he argues that some of these *mutants/aliens* have learned to intensify their music's sensory traits, a form of enhancement, by electronically engineering its content and form, in search of fluidity, spontaneity, and trance-inducing mind states (4).

Throughout the book, Eshun analyses some albums and songs as part of the massive database of black/alien music; sounds which he interprets not only as valid and insightful narratives of our times but also as a necessary means for dealing with the pains and effects of living in alienation in an alien nation. He writes that these counter-memories of black/alien music are sonic fiction (SF): a crossbred combination of sleeve notes from albums, photographs, and drawings seen in albums, lyrics from songs, sound patterns and instrumentations in songs with no lyrics, samples/samplings which crisscross time and space, and much more. SF, thus, is the sum of all parts of a record or song, the stories, and possibilities that such totality pours out.

Small Talk at 125th and Lenox: Scott-Heron's Poetics of Resistance Through Sonic Fiction

Small Talk at 125th and Lenox is a quick glimpse into the mind of a man whose career would cover more than four decades. In it, we can notice his ability to disrobe the US of its portentousness and self-proclaimed virtues. He sees through and beyond the necessary illusions that had been fabricated to maintain systems and spheres of power and control. For example, in the song "The Revolution Will

Not Be Televised”, he discusses how corporate media tries to create illusions through television ads and programs to divert people’s attention from the real world, where revolutions happen. As he sings:

You will not be able to stay home, brother / You will not be able
to plug in, turn on, and cop out / You will not be able to lose
yourself on skag / And skip out for beer during commercials /
Because the revolution will not be televised. (1-5)

The tone of his voice is intimidating and assertive, and as the intensity of the lyric rises, so too does the tempo of the song, with a strong percussive element. He also does not accept many of the delusions he sees. For example, the song “Whitey on the Moon,” refers to the landing on the moon as if it were a part of the delusions of grandeur of people in power, and that even though America had sent some white folks to the moon, within the US many people were still striving to survive. Its imagery is repugnant at first, then contrastive and impactful. As he sings:

A rat done bit my sister Nell / With whitey on the moon / Her face
and arms began to swell / And whitey’s on the moon / I can’t pay
no doctor bills / But whitey on the moon / Ten years from now,
I’ll be paying still / While whitey’s on the moon. (1-8)

There are also some songs that discuss the absurdities and inconsistencies happening within the black communities. For instance, the song “Brother” refers to certain African Americans who insist that they are part of the Black struggle, that they are revolutionaries, yet they also see themselves as ‘blacker’ than most African Americans (blacker than thou reasoning) just because they have an afro hair or wear a dashiki. He expresses his opinion and criticism of this type of person, by pointing out that these so-called ‘brothers’ run away at the first sign of real danger: “But you’re never around when your B.A. is in danger. / I mean your Black Ass” (25-26).

Overall, the album shows his ability to cut deep into different practices and discourses of the US. His lyrics/poems reveal to us a man who fathoms America’s

racism, prejudice, and historical blunders, as well as the unconstitutionality of many day-to-day things and situations. For instance, in the song “Enough,” he expresses anger and frustration over what blacks have had to endure throughout history, and still endured at present of the song. He says things like it was not enough that Blacks were brought to this world as property, and shackled; now they continue to be treated inhumanely. The way he sees it, all the talk about integration that had been happening in the country represented something different than what the government and the establishment were doing: “Somehow I cannot believe that it would be enough / For me to melt with you and integrate without the thoughts of rape and murder” (24-25). It is extremely explicit and threatening, and as discussed above, ends in an extremely violent manner.

Another example of his ability to analyze the manifold layers and hierarchies of the United States can be found in the song “Evolution (and Flashback),” which, as the title suggests, reports a different history, one told by African Americans. In it, as was briefly mentioned above, he uses different names African Americans have been given by white people, such as darkie, slave, n-word, and negro, to make parallels with different moments in history. There is a moment where he says: “We are tired of praying, and marching, and thinking, and learning/Brothers wanna start cutting, and shooting, and stealing, and burning” (27-28). It is as though the song stretches back to the banned part of John Lewis’ speech at the March on Washington, which said that the changes and improvements happening all over were ‘too little, too late.’

The album reaches back to the fear and anger of watching another lynching, hanging, quartering, or burning, and turns that to gunpowder. It mentions the frustration and hopelessness that jolts through the body and mind when one learns that most social problems happening in impoverished areas are political creations, nothing more than man-made decisions, and demand immediate reparations. Furthermore, the album also displays Scott-Heron’s distinctive blend of jazz, blues, and spoken word. For instance, songs like “The Vulture” or “Who’ll Pay Reparations on My Soul”, in terms of form, are blues numbers. Nonetheless, they are transformed through his distinct use of spoken word, and the way he performs

them into a confrontational tool. Other songs, like “Comment #1” or “Whitey on the Moon” display polyrhythmic beats, with complex dialogues between percussive elements, tones, and timbres, which give them a jazzy effect.

Overall, it is evident that for him, the US, its history, its political and economic system, and its establishment of joint ventures, corporate capitalism, offshores, and outsourcings, was founded on and maintained by an extremely racist, oppressive, and aggressive system. From its most basic cultural and discursive practices, all the way up to its institutions, productive forces, ideologies, and values. As he sings in the song “Enough”, at the end of the day it does not matter if you are a Republican or Democrat, a Liberal or Moderate, or “any of the rest of that shit you have used to make me forget to hate,” because “in the street there will only be black and white.” However, the album is less about suggesting any type of solution for all this, than it is about people being out on the streets starting the revolutions, demanding immediate change.

Conclusion

All this is part of Scott-Heron’s immediacy poetics. His songs engage people with ideas, things, feelings, and situations. There is urgency in his rhetoric, in his style, which brings the listener closer to him. His music stands miles away from entertainment music and is extremely close to direct action, involvement, commitment, and taking sides. His poetics gravitate towards the social function of the poet/musician, it is about being conscious of the struggles of people who have been marginalized, excluded, and written out of history. It is about recognizing these people and their plights and transforming these historical conflicts into present-day wars. It is about pointing out who is part of the establishment, explaining why there is an establishment, and denouncing how the establishment works. By doing this, Scott-Heron manages to redefine the technology of record-making, by transforming the album into a tool of resistance. Far from being a mass-oriented cultural product, the record becomes a form of remembrance and a call for action.

He talks about macro-level relationships and social orders, such as the country's history, race and racism, in a manner that places the listener right in the middle of it all. He brings to the forefront what has been omitted from the media, forgotten by the government, and denied by official history. His poetry interweaves individuals into collective spheres, past struggles to present ones, macro relationships to micro relationships.

This is another characteristic trait of his work: He uses the pronoun 'we' quite often in his songs as if always placing himself within something greater, and always in an affirmative manner, asserting himself, never as a passive participant, always proactive. Therefore, there is the idea that this is the plight of a group, it is part of a movement. A good example of this can be seen in the first song of his first album, which starts like this: "Good evening, my name is Gil Scott-Heron, my accomplices are ..." ("Introduction / The revolution Will Not Be Televised"). This was his way of introducing himself in his first album. It sounds like a testimony, he is giving his statement to the court, addressing the jury, and he begins by admitting he is guilty by using the term accomplice. In a country in which structural racism dictates day-to-day life, he will always be guilty, from the get go.

Words had quite an appeal to Scott-Heron. The first chapter of his memoir, *The Last Holiday* (2000), begins like this: "Words have been important to me for as long as I can remember. Their sound, their construction, their origins" (7). He was controversial and subversive, but also extremely conscious of many worldwide struggles for dignity and equality. His biggest concerns, however, always seemed to be grounded back home, in the US. He wrote a lot about the problems which black people and immigrants faced within the US, and also about the problems which many workers were going through. In an interview he gave to Jamie Byng, for *The Guardian*, there is a moment where he says: "If someone comes to you and asks for help, and you can help them, you're supposed to help them. You have been put in the position somehow to be able to help this person" (Byng 2011). Byng comments on this passage by saying that Scott-Heron was always helping those around him, that he:

Lived by this creed throughout a magnificent musical career, he helped people again and again, with his willingness and ability to articulate deep truths, through his eloquent attacks on injustices and his enormous compassion for people's pain. (Ibidem)

Like few other black poets, he managed to hear and understand what people in the streets were talking about, managed to speak like them in the same language, the language of combat, of fighting back and standing tall. The poet and political man are one in him. This is what Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about him: “Chance taker / Emotion voyager / Street-strutter / Contemporary spirit / Untamed proud poet / Rough Healer / He is His” (1-8) (Qtd. in Byng 2011). Like all other activists of his time, he too was taking his chances. His contemporary spirit strutted down many streets completely untamed, as he healed those around him as well as himself through his poetry and music.

He was a musician, but also, above all, a bluesician, as he defined himself. He knew a lot about race relations in the US, the history behind such problematic issues, and also its present-day status. He wrote a lot about black history, he knew a lot about the history of black music, and he was a magnificent exponent of black culture. To say he is a jazz poet binds him to Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, or even Charles Mingus, all of whom used their art as a means of resistance; to say he is a proto-rapper places him in the same league as The Last Poets or Watts Prophets, notorious for having used music to galvanize people into taking action.

These are but a few things that can be said about his life and work. These are the pieces of the man, some of the fragments he has left behind for us to piece together. These are a few of his sound explorations, but they already reveal a talented musician, who was willing to search for new rhythms and styles. The more we understand and discuss his work, the more we understand about the Black Experience within the US; in that he was certainly responsible for maintaining Black culture alive in people's minds, for expanding it into new spheres, and transforming and renewing it. Above all, it must be underscored that he repeatedly manifested his support for various minority struggles from all around the world,

and his political positioning was beyond bipartisan, he was from the party of the common man and woman, as he said.

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