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## The Black Box Unboxed: Black Music As a Medium for Black People to Wield Rhetorical Power

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## The Black Box Unboxed: Black Music As a Medium for Black People to Wield Rhetorical Power

### Abstract

"Freedom, too, the long-sought, we still seek, —" (DuBois, 1903, p. 7) The foremost endeavor of people of historically marginalized racial/ethnic communities, and particularly for the purposes of this paper, Black people, is to be free. The term "free" has several connotations that are frequently used by the general public in a typically detached manner. *Free*. To be educated, empowered and autonomous, thus unobstructed and restrained by subjection to the hegemony of the more highly educated and empowered. You might be wondering, "Who are 'we'?" and "Why are 'we' still seeking freedom?" The answers to your questions will be addressed in subsequent paragraphs through the analysis of several texts with the common themes of identity, striving, and freedom from W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin, and Angela Davis, among other scholars whose scholarly articles will be examined. There are tons of people that populate our world and while we cannot achieve receiving the personal narratives of everyone, it is worthwhile to sit alongside even merely one person, because maybe beyond the ability for one to gain perspective from their story, they can sympathize as well, and that is what the included found poem that I created serves to do. To genuinely reconcile race relations in America, it is imperative that consumers become more informed of the messages that are being conveyed through the literary works of people who have historically marginalized racial/ethnic identities. Hence the purpose of this poem being presented first to establish a groundwork for what is to be understood from the scholarly works that will be examined in this paper.

## The Black Box Unboxed: Black Music As a Medium for Black People to Wield Rhetorical Power

“Freedom, too, the long-sought, we still seek, —” (DuBois, 1903, p. 7) The foremost endeavor of people of historically marginalized racial/ethnic communities, and particularly for the purposes of this paper, Black people, is to be free. The term “free” has several connotations that are frequently used by the general public in a typically detached manner. *Free*. To be educated, empowered and autonomous, thus unobstructed and restrained by subjection to the hegemony of the more highly educated and empowered. You might be wondering, “Who are ‘we’?” and “Why are ‘we’ still seeking freedom?” The answers to your questions will be addressed in subsequent paragraphs through the analysis of several texts with the common themes of identity, striving, and freedom from W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin, and Angela Davis, among other scholars whose scholarly articles will be examined. There is an affinity that exists between DuBois’s, Baldwin’s, and Davis’s literary works in that they provide their audiences with insight on the introspection of the Black person on their identity as a sheer indicator of their life trajectory, and they share a cognizance of having two identities, or what Baldwin describes as a “double-consciousness.” Also worth noting is that the broader context within which these texts are written, communicate messaging of Black people’s narratives under control. Firstly though, I created a found poem titled *Arresting*, that I wrote below derived from “The People Could Fly,” a folktale by Virginia Hamilton. A

folktale is an oral story transmitted through generations of a culture that in totality is a conglomeration of messages about an era(s) that is nostalgic. There are tons of people that populate our world and while we cannot achieve receiving the personal narratives of everyone, it is worthwhile to sit alongside even merely one person, because maybe beyond the ability for one to gain perspective from their story, they can sympathize as well, and that is what my found poem serves to do. A found poem is a type of poetry created by extracting words, phrases and sometimes entire passages from other sources and reconstructing them by making alterations in the spacing and lines, or by incorporating or removing text, thus conveying a new message. For the purposes of this poem, I want you to view the term “arresting” in both the descriptive manner and as an action, of something that is striking or eye-catching and as seizing and detaining. Normally the white spaces between the lines in the poem would be longer to better understand the points that are made, but for the purposes of this paper I shortened them. To genuinely reconcile race relations in America, it is imperative that consumers become more informed of the messages that are being conveyed through the literary works of people who have historically marginalized racial/ethnic identities. Hence the purpose of this poem being presented first to establish a groundwork for what is to be understood from the scholarly works that will be examined in this paper.

*Arresting*

Channing Harrell

Isolated

separate

but

Significance

Enduring

climbin' up

captured

shed their wings

full of misery

up and down

could no longer

Breathe.

Their Power

Secret Magic

scorned

moved

move faster

couldn't stop

“Keep

quiet

Overseer.

low.

hurt

go

soon.

too weak.

down

Magic Words

Lifted

held tightly

the mystery rose free

as a bird. as light as a feather.

the overseer

could not snag

next

spoke words

remembered completely

inside

awhile

whispers

above the head

crossed

runnin'

tie

just laughed

kill

*Don't you know who I am?*

Dark promise

in the field

a great outcryin'.

joined hands

in a circle.

in a flock

shadows. It didn't matter,

above

way over

away

behind them,

The seer gaze

fell

looks spoke

afraid.

trick

light

love

tellin

extraordinary

Accounts

Combined

disappearing

used

In code language,  
might have been the words  
the wish fulfillment motif.

empty after all.



often attributed to

Exceptional powers.

Fantasy tale of suffering

exerted against

underlings.

Testament to the millions

who never had the opportunity

remained

told and retold

### **Unboxing: A Look Inside the Margins**

As you read you might have inquired about several things. Firstly, perhaps you took notice of the structure of the lines, *stratification*. Next, maybe you wondered why there is so much space between the first stanza and the second stanza, and why it concluded the way that it did. I did this because of a concept in psychology called the serial position effect. The serial position hypothesis posits that the order in which items are presented affects the ability to recall them correctly. The effects that are a result of this evaluation are the primacy and recency effect. The primacy effect represents an abundance of information that was recalled as a result of those items being presented early in a sequence. The recency effect represents an abundance of information that was recalled as a result of those items being presented later or nearing the end of a sequence (Reisberg, 2021). All of this considered, I now want you to reread the poem applying these instructions: (a) read *very* slow and carefully; (b) embrace the emotions that the poem elicits; (c) occupy space in this poem; (d) listen and hear; and (e) join the conversation and respond. After you reread I want you to

reflect, answering the following questions: Did you remember the earlier presented items and the later presented items as the serial position effect suggested you should? Do you see these white spaces in your life?

### **The Instrumental**

The most power that any one individual yields is the power to share their narrative, and fundamentally their interpretation of the world in the way that they do so choose. Essentially through art an individual can have the opportunity and autonomy that may not otherwise have without it.

In her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis (1998) asserts:

Art never achieves greatness through transcendence of sociohistorical reality. On the contrary, even as it transcends specific circumstances and conventions, it is deeply rooted realities. ...it is at its best when it fashions new perspectives on the human condition, provokes critical attitudes and encourages loyalty 'to the vision of a better world, a vision

which remains true even in defeat. In the transforming mimesis, the image of liberation is fractured by reality. ...there are only islands of good where one can find refuge for a brief time. ...for the realm of freedom lies beyond mimesis. (p. 183)

If the serial position effect held true, what I wanted you to remember was “Significance Enduring” and “told and retold.” I wanted you to remember “Significance Enduring’ and “Testament to the millions who never had the opportunity told and retold” with regard to the historic marginalization and exorbitant killings of Black American people, for the reason that no matter how far ostracized Black American people are, their significance is enduring; indeed, America makes their significance enduring by marginalizing them. As long as there is attention, negative or otherwise, their significance is still enduring, that also includes those that were unjustly killed. Told and retold because their lives mattered and they still matter, their significance is enduring, and as long as we are existing in this space, we need to tell their stories to keep people’s awareness and attention on how America treats the Black American person. Only then will we be able to gain perspective from the evocative manner with which they present their narratives through music.

Black people who espouse historically stigmatized identities are regarded as insignificant and to reinforce these ideas and maintain this attitude, those who perceive them in such a way marginalize them. The line structure of the poem, *stratification*, class statuses that have been constructed to oppress certain racial/ethnic groups, thus the fracturing and incoherence of the poem, and the incohesiveness of our world writ large. There is an abundance of white space in this

poem because I wanted you to reflect on how you existed in this white space. I told you this now instead of in your instructions to reread, because you likely just kept scrolling until you saw the next words. In doing so, you missed some things, some things that you won’t find in those white spaces when you go back, because they don’t exist there, they exist in the margins. Historically, Black people have strived to declare independence from their stigmatized identities. You might be wondering why, and the answer is because in a way, to be American living in black skin is like living in a box, a black box.

In essence, this referent to the Black American living in a black box is a play on words, referencing what was once a controversy in psychology called “The Black Box Problem”. The problem that was presented was that we cannot directly observe what is happening in the mind. Which sparked the question that for this reason are we truly able to study cognitive processes? Those who maintained “The Black Box Problem” were solely interested in what happened between the stimulus, or environmental input, and the response, or how we react, who were called behaviorists. There were two behaviorists that maintained “The Black Box Problem”: John Watson and B.F. Skinner (Reisberg, 2021).

John Watson became prominent in the 1920s for his study of the relationship between the stimulus and the response only, essentially how different stimuli affect different outputs. He posited that what happens in between, that is the cognition, which is the acquisition, storage, and transformation of information, is irrelevant. He acknowledged that perhaps cognition exists, albeit to study it is beyond the limits of our analysis because we cannot observe this, just like how what you missed exists not in front of you (or in the white spaces for

that matter) but in the margins. Thus, he thought that because we cannot observe cognitive processes, we have no right to. Which is more or less what B.F. Skinner also believed (Reisberg, 2021).

B.F. Skinner became a notable figure in the field of psychology in the 1940s, like Watson for his study of behaviorism, believing that cognitivism did not exist. Instead, he adopted the stance that all behavior can be explained as a function of a reaction to an environmental stimulus. Also around this time, there was a strong dissenter by the name of Edward Tolman (Reisberg, 2021, p. 15).

Edward Tolman was a pivotal figure in transitioning from behaviorism to cognitivism. He presented the claim that there is thought and we can come up with methods of approximating what is going on in that “black box” by making small changes in the environment and evaluating what happens to behavior, suggesting that this approach should be taken by others. How does the Black person exist in this “black box,” not that is their brain, but their skin?

The Black life is to live in a box, *arrested*, marginalized, but if we go into these communities, connect and expose ourselves to their forms of expression, we can garner a more informed understanding of how to navigate spaces with them. How do we get into these communities without going in? Through Black poetry, and for purposes of this paper, music.

Music is instrumental to the Black experience in that it supports Black people with reconciling and responding to their extant realities, thus ultimately allowing outgroups to empathize with them. Before Black identity development in this reality and the meaning of the music is discussed, it is appropriate that you first understand this

freedom that is sought after in light of the literary work of W.E.B. DuBois.

## Tones of Turmoil

DuBois’ literary work serves to speak truth to what the black person’s experience is in America; to be subjected to “The seer gaze...”. DuBois’ purpose for writing the “Strivings of the Negro People” was to present to his audience the conflicting inner landscape of being a black person in America at this specific time — about three decades post-Civil War and during the Jim Crow Era. DuBois would argue that the Black American person has two goals. The first goal is not to separate themselves, but exist holistically and not be seen as either Black or American, and not to assimilate nor forcibly impose their culture onto anyone else, but for their identities to coexist; they want to exist independent of a “double-consciousness.” The second goal of the Black person is to balance who they feel they are inside with how the world sees them.

DuBois (1903) begins his essay by saying, “Between me and the other world...” (p. 2) implying that there is a separation. Where is this separation coming from? DuBois reveals in the crux of his essay:

...the Negro... is born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is this peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness — an American, a

Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two-warring ideals ins one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. This history of the American Negro is the history of his strife, — his longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wished neither of the older selves to be lost. ...He simply wished to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (DuBois, 1903, p. 3)

*Amused.* Amused takes on a tacit nature in this quote, fundamentally condemning the fervor in the tactics of this “other world.” DuBois’ goal in making this claim is to disclose and make known to the audience the aims of the “other world”: to trap Black people in this mental oppression that is shrinking and inhibiting their motivation. The second-consciousness, that is the perceptions of white people, serve to coerce Black people into acquiescing, and believing the ill that is spoken to and about them to be true of themselves, until these contentions become manifest in their behaviors and are thus self-fulfilling. Black people are trapped by their skin color and the perceptions that accompany it which make the endeavor to be free doubly strenuous, and therefore a more distant aspiration. On top of this, Black American people have to learn how to present themselves in an acceptable manner to attempt to merely exist in spaces with them, let alone survive. James Baldwin in his book entitled *The Fire Next Time* in the chapter “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” explores this concept in depth as it pertains to supporting his

nephew. The one hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation was in 1965 during the civil rights era.

### **Crescendo**

Baldwin’s “Letter to My Nephew” is ultimately words of wisdom for his nephew, a “tough, dark, vulnerable” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 3) young Black man existing at this particular juncture wherein Baldwin’s brother (his nephew’s father) passed away grappling with his existence in this period of time. In an article entitled, “From Crib to Coffin: Navigating Coping From Racism-Related Stress Throughout the Lifespan of Black Americans,” Jones et al. (2020) state that “Black parents and families have and continue to use racial socialization as a means of protecting Black youth...” (p. 270). This evidence suggests that by Black parents and families transmitting this information, values, and perspectives about their race to their children, their goal is to instill pride in their child in their racial heritage and provide their child with strategies for coping with racism, discrimination, and often barriers to success in mainstream society. Black American children experience stress that is inextricably linked to their racial identities that predisposes them to maladaptive psychological functioning which is a product of disparate treatment. At this amenable phase in a Black child’s life, these experiences engender complex emotions that they do not yet have the cognitive capacity to conceptualize and respond to. However, come adolescence, in contrast to childhood, Black youth become more enlightened and conscious which enables them to respond effectively and exert self-determination in their emotion regulation strategies, thus enhancing their ability to make sense of their reality” (Jones et al., 2020). This is a guiding reason why Baldwin is conveying this message to his nephew. Baldwin communicates to his

nephew that “the limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 7). Baldwin tells his nephew this not because he wants his nephew to loath the oppressor, but to empathize with them, and recognize that they are also victims of a system, understand the oppressors’ intentions, and once he achieves this understanding, he can navigate in their world, not by assimilating but by changing the way they look at him. But first, we “...shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 10). How will we force our brothers to see themselves as they are, cease them from fleeing from reality, and begin to change it? What is the necessary force to be exerted? Is this force universal, in that all the oppressed possess it within themselves by virtue of their passion for better? Will exerting this force ever be enough to genuinely change anything? Earlier I mentioned that the way that we could get into the Black communities without going into them is through Black poetry, and for purposes of this paper, music.

### **The Interlude**

Music serves the same purpose as a folktale in that it is an oral story that is transmitted through generations of one’s culture that in totality is a conglomeration of messages about an era that is nostalgic as well. To “force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality, and begin to change it” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 10), through the efforts of such artists like blues phenom Billie Holiday who

Davis discusses in her book. Holiday’s songs were a vehicle by which listeners were authorized to gain an awareness of the Black person’s emotional and social realities. To the service of Black people and their politically empowered white counterparts, “Strange Fruit” granted a collective consciousness surrounding the carnal demolition prompted by lynching and the succeeding mental ruin it imposed on its victims and imposers (Davis, 1998).

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves, blood at the root  
Black bodies swinging in the  
Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar  
trees  
Pastoral scene of the gallant South  
The bulging eyes and the twisted  
mouth...  
smell of burning flesh...  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.  
(Davis, “Strange Fruit” 1998)

Holiday wanted to impart a sense of urgency and solidarity among her listeners, which essentially underscores a point Audre Lorde made about writing, that “Poetry is not a luxury” (Lorde, 2015, p. 37). Poetry for the Black person is a modality within which they can communicate the inaudible utterances and unspoken, uncommunicative, or silenced thoughts and feelings by oppression, because they are otherwise paralyzed by fear and feel unsafe and insecure in doing so. Lorde is telling us that she wants us to reframe our approach to consuming poetry. Not to merely, in this case, listen to the music for the thrill of it, but to find meaning in it. Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” served a purpose that is more complex than that provided above. Davis briefly details the story of Holiday’s father who was a jazz, guitarist and World War I veteran, who developed chronic lung problems which exacerbated, turning into a

chest cold and due to Jim Crow segregation, he did not get treatment for it and it progressed into pneumonia which caused him to die (Davis, 1998). Followed by her saying that, “According to Holiday’s account, the antilynching theme of “Strange Fruit” resonated with her own anger about her father’s death and with her desire to protest the racism that had killed him” (Davis, 1998, p. 187).

While Holiday may have been confined to the reality of her blackness not being accepted, she did not concede, thus her decision to sing “Strange Fruit” because blues innovated dialogues about the concept of freedom such that it portrayed more practically (Davis, 1998). This choice speaks to the “Magic Words Lifted held tightly,” because what was otherwise intangible or revocable, this music was always available allowing them to reconcile and respond to their realities. Funk and hip-hop have also served to do, as evidenced in Chic’s song, “Good Times”:

Good times  
These are the good times  
Leave your cares behind...  
Our new state of mind...  
Must put an end to this stress and strife.

Funk, a music style of resounding beats that influence people to act in a boisterous manner. In an article titled, “Get Down: Funk, Movement, and the End of the Great Migrations,” the Patrick Sullivan of the University of Rochester, states that “Historically, funk developed in tandem with the social structure of the end of the Great Migrations and, in many ways, should be seen as its sonic relief. It is a cultural form all about moving when social and economic mobility was winding down” (Sullivan, 2020). Where Black people may have otherwise been wallowing in their

sorrows, funk music provided them a distraction, an escape, a way to free themselves from their mental constraints and exist in a joyous manner, which is paradoxical. Similarly, there are reverberations of this paradox in hip-hop, in that issues are being highlighted with this emotionality that is nonconforming to the stereotypes:

We just some products of our environment...  
Throw us in handcuffs and arrest us...  
Know we needed help, they neglect us...  
They know what we a problem together  
...we gotta start somewhere  
Might as well gon’ head start here...  
I got power, now I gotta say somethin’...  
I did what I did’ cause I didn’t have no choice or no hope...  
Our people died for us to be free...  
This was a dream  
Now we got the power that we need to have (Lil Baby, “The Bigger Picture”)

Lil Baby’s song was released in 2020 in the midst of instances of police brutality that were occurring in the United States. In his song, Lil Baby says, “I got power, now I gotta say somethin’...,” where there was once a time in his life when he did some unlawful things because he “didn’t have no choice or no hope,” thus implying that because he made it to where he is, it is imperative that he leverages the “light” and “love” to his advantage to say something important. Also worth noting is that Lil Baby uses the words “we” and “us” several times clarifying that though he is telling this story, it is not solely *his*, but the story of myriad people who share his racial/ethnic and gender identities, bids itself to a

“Testament to the millions who never had the opportunity remained told and retold”.

### **The Reverb**

Considering that you likely grappled with reading and comprehending my poem the first time, until maybe I gave you those instructions for your reread, I implore you to employ those same strategies when you are listening to Black music. To genuinely reconcile with race relations in America, it is imperative that you become more informed of the messages that are being conveyed through the literary works of those who have historically marginalized identities. As one who may not be able to sympathize, you aren't going to be able to fathom the references that are made in the music at first glance, there are these nuances that need to be disambiguated; they need to be sat with, you need to be arrested by the arresting of their stories. I provided a mere three examples amongst a plethora of examples that are existent, thus there is a vast array of

perspective to be taken, and oftentimes, especially in rap/hip-hop, the messages are of a tumultuous lifestyle. That said, these stories are not to be scorned or consumed because they are popular. Get to know the person by listening to them and hearing them. Now that you have read this essay you might now have an answer to “Do you see these white spaces in your life?” and “How are you existing in these white spaces?” If you are using parts of these stories to connect to your life, be mindful of how you are using them because sometimes when people do such things they dilute and diminish the authentic meanings of these stories by only highlighting the bad, when there is a lot of triumph and honor to be found in these stories. I implore you to recognize and acknowledge the humanity of the people who are sharing their stories, because did you live a lifestyle synonymous to theirs? Do you have their courage and strength? Be open-minded, think critically and allow yourself to be enriched and enlightened.



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