

# **The Rose that Grew From Harlem:**

**Tracking the Pessimism within 20<sup>th</sup> Century African American Protest Literature**

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## Project Abstract

The twentieth century contained multiple African Americans movements that helped to change the conversation about Black agency within the United States. The Harlem Renaissance, The Black Arts Movement (within the Civil Rights Movement), and the Hip Hop Era are three distinct movements within this period that had a tremendous impact on the African American community. My project focuses on Black protest literature in the twentieth century with an emphasis on the major works within the larger cultural movements of this century from the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip Hop era. Through prominent protest literature, these movements were able to take shape and allow for immense social change to permeate through the time periods. In this project, I look at the writings of Claude McKay, James Baldwin, and Tupac Shakur in order to analyze the pessimistic themes that are prevalent within each respective era. In Claude McKay's "If We Must Die", the collective voice demonstrates a cautious optimism with pessimistic undertones about the position of Black Americans during the Harlem Renaissance. By the time the Black Arts Movement came about in the 1960s, James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time" becomes a piece of protest literature that takes some of McKay's optimism and brings about concepts of Afropessimism and distrust of the American system. Finally, with Tupac Shakur's groundbreaking album titled *Me Against the World*, the collective African American position has moved completely away from McKay to mirror one of intense pessimism (described as Afropessimism) and a complete distrust of the social position of the Black community.

Overall, I discuss both the continuities and discontinuities in Black protest thought now characterized by a strident pessimism and apathy. It is through these shifts and these authors that it is shown how the cautious optimism present within the Harlem Renaissance transitioned into the pessimism that continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is through these concepts that I explain how

the current state of protest came about in the African American community in both content and tone. I combine both literature, historical analysis, and literary theory to articulate the trends that were present in protest literature throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and convey the shifts that occurred throughout the three major African American movements that shaped the world today.

## **Thesis/Artist Statement**

I contend that in order to understand the African American voice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is absolutely paramount to understand the shift in protest literature from the 1920s in the Harlem Renaissance through the Hip Hop Era in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Through three distinct authors, one can understand the shift in African American voice from one of cautious optimism in the poetry of Claude McKay, to a rise in pessimism in the essays of James Baldwin, to the extremely pessimistic view of Black life in Tupac Shakur's music. These three authors set the tone for the protest literature that is present in our current society. The foundation McKay, Baldwin, and Shakur set forth is the foundation for which the current pessimism that arises in protest literature is built upon. It is in these three protest authors that the African American protest literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be understood and the rise of Afropessimism can be analyzed. It is in this understanding that we can begin to understand the protest literature of today's society as well. Through poetry, essays, and musical lyrics, the pessimism in the African American voice can be dissected and analyzed on a grand scale.

## Theory Section

The theories involved within this project encompass literary theory and African American theory. The primary theoretical lens that I will be investigating in relation to my overarching topic is known as Afropessimism. Simply put, this theoretical idea is the modern contention that the African American voice is one of distrust for the American system. This theory contends that the African American community is pessimistic of the current state of race relations in society and aims at combatting this anti-back sentiment in writing. This theory arises out of the notion that past experiences of the Black community contribute to the growing distrust of the American system and the hope for equal rights. It is through this theoretical lens that I hope to contribute my research into the shift in African American voice and the rise of this theoretical study in 20<sup>th</sup> century protest literature.

Afropessimism is most commonly first associated with the work of Orlando Patterson and his book “Slavery as Social Death” that is concerned with the residual impact of enslavement upon the lives of African Americans. Though Patterson rejects the label of “pessimist,” it is his claim about Black social death that is core to Afropessimism as an interpretive lens for studying Black life and culture. This concept is then taken up by literary scholars such as Saidaya Hartman in works such as “Lose Your Mother” and later Frank Wilkerson in his autobiography entitled “Afropessimism”. Furthermore, Afropessimists argue that because humanity is equated with whiteness social death is the only thing possible for the Black subject. In other words, African Americans are among the walking-dead and a life of subjectivity is not only implausible but ultimately impossible. This is a tone that is strikingly reinforced in Shakur’s song “If I Die Tonight.” As will be shown, Afropessimism is not shown in each work discussed in the scope of this project. However, this project shows the shift towards a

more unified understanding of the theoretical lens. Through this lens, African American protest literature can be better understood as a socially mobile vehicle for change.

I am also going to heavily rely on the works of Theodore Mason Jr. and his research in “African American Literary Criticism and Theory”. This work centers upon the African American voice and the theory surrounding that voice dating from the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip Hop Era. The theoretical framework within Theodore Mason’s work is crucial to understanding the nuance within African American protest literature. The piece does not concern itself with Afropessimism, but it does concern itself with the effects and qualities of African American thought in literature. It serves as a sort of baseline for literary analysis and provides a critical framework for understanding themes, motifs, and imagery.

In conjunction with Mason’s literary theory piece, Toni Morrison also produces a small theoretical work titled “Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination”. This piece is part literary theory and part literary analysis. Morrison explores Black literature and explains the presence of slave narratives throughout protest literature’s brief but profound history in African American studies. A contemporary of Baldwin, Morrison sheds light on why Black protest literature works and why it is important. Overall, this is a piece that is not focused on entirely, but it does provide some background for the argument that I put forward in this project. Morrison and her opinions are crucial to understanding protest literature as a vehicle for change. Unfortunately, the scope of this project could not encapsulate all of Morrison’s ideas and they are not necessarily noted within the pages that follow. However, her thoughts and ideas are nevertheless important in crafting this project.

Overall, I will be relying heavily on the theory of Afropessimism, and African American literary theory to accomplish the theoretical analysis necessary to complete my project. Through

these works, I create a well-rounded argument surrounding protest literature's shift and effect in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Literature Review**

### ***INTRODUCTION***

My research into this topic was divided into three subcategories. Just as my abstract suggests, I analyze three distinct pieces of protest literature and explain the shift in African American voice from early signs of pessimism in the 1920s to one of intense Afropessimism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. As such, I divided my research into three categories of the Harlem Renaissance, The Civil Rights Movement, and The Hip Hop Era. In each of these time periods, I investigated one specific work of protest literature and the tone that literature possessed. In dividing this project into three categories, I accomplished my goal in researching three distinct works of literature and I have distinguished the shift in voice in these three time periods.

### ***Subcategory 1: "The Harlem Renaissance, Black Optimism, and Claude McKay's "If We Must Die""***

Protest literature had been around in the African American community for decades by the time the 1920s came around. Notable works such as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" had sparked immense change and created even more of a desire for many African Americans to elevate their social position. By the time the Harlem Renaissance began in 1919, protest literature began to hit the mainstream in an even larger way. Protest literature came about with a need for African Americans to have a voice and take a literary approach in the attempt to do so (Saul). Within the Harlem Renaissance specifically, the African American voice was one of cautious optimism in

hopes of achieving upward social mobility. Scholars such as David Lewis, Clare Corbould, and Shannon King offer great insight into the world of Harlem during the Renaissance. Scott Saul and Frances Keller also provide an analysis of protest literature as a whole in its early stages in great detail and are vital to the study of the genre in Harlem. Finally, Roger Valade, Robert Lee, James Keller, and Molly Vorwerck culminate the study of Black optimism in the Harlem Renaissance with scholarly works centered on Claude McKay and his poem “If We Must Die”. Together, these scholars provide groundwork for the question that I will work to answer in this project. Each author holds a piece to the proverbial puzzle that I construct when demonstrating the tone present within Harlem Renaissance protest literature.

Any analysis of one primary work (i.e McKay’s poem) would be incomplete without first an understanding the time period in which it was constructed. David Lewis provides a detailed timeline of the Harlem Renaissance in his anthology titled, “The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader”. Vital to understanding the time basic layout of the time period, Lewis lays out the major events in Harlem’s literary sphere from the Red Summer in 1919 to the end of the era in 1939 (Lewis). Lewis’ work also includes a multitude of primary protest works form the era including McKay’s famous poem “If We Must Die”. Lewis as a whole creates a great framework for the time period and allowed for organization when dissecting this complex time period.

Building off of Lewis’ anthology of primary texts and timelines, Claire Corbould and Shannon King are two scholars who provide insight into the what the Harlem Renaissance was all about and the attitude of the African American community during the era. Corbould writes a historical analysis about what went on in Harlem titled, “Becoming African American: Black Public Life in Harlem”. Clare Corbould’s book takes a distinct tract when discussing the Harlem Renaissance. Corbould does not necessarily look at the strict history of events within the Harlem



Renaissance. Rather, she looks at how African Americans came to have a new identity during the profound era of cultural explosion. In order to gain more of a stake in American life, Corbould argues that Black citizens needed to have a concrete identity. People during this period went back to their African roots in order to accomplish this. As Corbould writes, “for many of these years Black Americans directed their attention toward Africans in the past and on Black history” (Corbould 214). In focusing on their ancestral lands, African Americans at the time were able to communicate to the world something that was inherently theirs. There was a reflection of Africa in their music, their writing, and (perhaps most obviously) in their art. As Corbould’s title suggests, there was a necessity for Blacks to become both African and American. By the end of the 1920s, Africa was, “now something living and breathing within Black identity and at the force of a newly expanded and dynamic public life” (Corbould 23). In other words, what Corbould analyzes is the necessity for African Americans to go backward in order to move forward. In order for African Americans to move forward and establish themselves as inherently American in the eyes of the rest of the population, they needed to move backward in their history and first relish in their rich ancestral history found in the continent of Africa. As a whole, Corbould’s historical work suggests that by traveling back to Africa metaphorically, the African American community established themselves an optimistic group with a unified identity that was ready for upward social mobility.

The other author that provides a well-rounded analysis of the Harlem Renaissance and the attitude of the era is Shannon King. King’s work titled “Whose Harlem is this Anyway?” is a great piece that surrounds the Renaissance. Instead of strictly discussing the explosion of culture and the nods back to Africa by people of color living at the time, King uses a more historical approach. King outlines the historical significance of the political and social activism that takes

place during the Harlem Renaissance that contributed to an influx of Black agency. King outlines his historical piece in the introduction stating, “I tell the story of Black politics and community rights in Harlem during the New Negro era” (King 2). The book centers upon the idea that the community of African Americans was situated based off of activism and political agency. Of course, this is in contrast to Corbould’s claims of culture being the reason for Black agency. Nevertheless, King’s book outlines the social advancements of the age by outlining various events in the advancement of colored people living at the time and discussing the dichotomy between these events and the northern racism that persisted. King begins his piece by discussing Harlem’s political culture and explaining its cultural and religious roots. He writes, “once in Harlem, Blacks began the work of creating a Black mecca” (King 23). In order for the activism and change that was needed, African Americans needed a cultural hub. The answer was undoubtedly Harlem. King goes on to explain the activism by African Americans within the labor market as well as the political landscape. As a whole, this historical piece does a great job at explaining multiple facets of the civil lives of people of color at the time and the strides they made in the early years of the fight for civil rights. He takes a well-rounded approach to a time that may have experienced racial violence, but also was enveloped in change.

After establishing a firm foundation surrounding the Harlem Renaissance, it was important to look to authors such as Scott Saul and Frances Keller to gain an understanding about protest literature created during the period. Scott Saul, in his piece titled “Protest Lit 101” argues that in order to have an effective social movement (like the Harlem Renaissance), there is a necessity for identity within protest literature. While Saul does not specifically author a piece pertaining to protest literature, he analyzes its use and is apropos in reading when looking at the starting point of African American literature of this genre in the 1920s (Saul 1). Frances Keller

plays off of this idea when looking at the content material African Americans used within their protest novel in the early stages in her article titled “The Harlem Literary Renaissance” (Keller 3). The scholar argues that at the forefront of Harlem Renaissance protest literature is a necessity for identity. Novels published during the time had a profound emphasis on a theme of personal identity and the identity of the entire Black community. The issues within the genre arose when miscommunication was present according to Keller. While these groups of authors shared a common past, a common interest, and a common genre, they did not share the same methods. As such, there was a necessity for a unified image of the Black American at the time.

After obtaining good background knowledge with Lewis, Corbould, King, Saul, and Keller, it was important to then dive into Claude McKay and his specific poem in the research. Roger Valade writes a piece titled, “A Black Literary Guide to the Harlem Renaissance”. This article is very similar to Lewis’ timeline in that it outlines various people within the Harlem Renaissance to give a well-rounded analysis of key figures in the era. Specifically, his section on Claude McKay gave enough background to distinguish who the author was and why he was so important. Valade writes, “his work helped establish him as a voice for the civil rights movement that fought for racial equality after World War I” (Valade 107). Valade establishes McKay as a paramount figure that comes from the Renaissance and allows McKay to distinguish himself as a key author within this research project. Valade continues into a brief analysis of “If We Must Die” which was written by McKay in 1919. Valade writes, “[the poem] most clearly stated his belief that even interracial violence was preferable to maintaining the status quo and was in a collection that protested the persecution of Blacks in America” (Valade 107). Overall, Valade points to two important facets of McKay and his writing. For one, McKay’s poem was an excellent example of protest literature at the time. It was one that stood up for the persecution of

Blacks and attempted to change things just as authors like Scott argued it should. What Valade also points to is McKay's ability to find optimism in the suffering and hope / expect for change to occur. Overall, there seems to be a positive connotation to what he is writing in a way and that allows for a great starting point with what this paper investigates.

Three authors build off of Valade's brief analysis of McKay and his writing: James Keller, Robert Lee, and Molly Vorwerck provide in depth observations on McKay's most famous poem "If We Must Die". Published in 1919, this poem sparked the Harlem Renaissance and a whole new era of protest poetry according to James Keller. Keller notes the combination of form and content in McKay's poetry and how these two facets provide for an extremely interesting message to take form in his writing. Keller takes particular interest in the sonnet form of the famous poem noting, "the sonnet form was not merely an accident of McKay's education but was specifically selected to illustrate the poet's political agenda, to expose and undermine the many misconceptions about African Americans that dominant culture seeks to perpetuate" (Keller 450). Overall, Keller provides a brief overview of the writing career of McKay and then dives deep into one particular poem in "If We Must Die". Keller, a prominent protest literature scholar, points to McKay beginning an exciting cultural movement in his poem. The Black community would not have been where it was after the Harlem Renaissance if it were not for the artful words of McKay and Keller seems to think that the optimism present in McKay's writing was paramount to his success.

Bouncing off of Keller is Robert A. Lee who writes an in-depth article surrounding "If We Must Die". It is worth noting that this ten-page article focuses on McKay's sonnet completely and does not stray from the poem. This source allows for an in depth look into the style, form, and function of this specific poem and attempts to find the deeper meaning imbedded

in the lines. Lee argues that the poem has a tone that, “results in immediacy” (Lee 216). In other words, the poem acts as a call to action. This call to action, while important, is not the most important aspect of the poem in Lee’s opinion. Rather, Lee agrees with my thesis in stating that McKay allows for the African American population to reach a level of humanity in the poem. Lee writes, “the hogs gain a measure of humanization: their blood is now ‘precious’; they can ‘defy’ the monsters, an act which suggests an attained dignity” (Lee 217). The hogs are representative of the Black readership in the poem and Lee points to the optimism that is so present in McKay’s poem. Overall, Lee provides great content analysis in his article that completely surrounds the poem. He goes line by line dissecting meaning and form. He was easily the most interesting and insightful source that is a part of this lit review because of the detail he uses.

Finally, I would be remised if I did not utilize a source that puts McKay’s poem into perspective. Molly Vorwerck, while not a scholarly author, writes an article for *USA Today* that puts McKay’s poem in conversation with the current state of the world in 2019. I found it useful to use this source as it gave some scope to the study of this poem and this time period. Vorwerck writes of McKay’s attempt to fight with words in the midst of the Red Summer in 1919 exactly 100 years earlier. The most insightful portion of the article reads, “As we continue to face these conditions of oppression and police brutality, art provides an emotional and intellectual space for people to imagine otherwise” (Vorwerck 3). Even 100 years later, writers point to McKay’s optimism being a vital part of his protest literature. It is through this news article and the other sources surrounding McKay that the optimism can really be shown. As a whole, Vorwerck completes what authors like Saul and Keller started with this theme in research. That is, there was something about the protest literature produced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that contained hope.

That hope was for the African American community and their upward mobility in American society. Through McKay's poem and through these scholars, this can be proven true

***Subcategory 2: "The Civil Rights Movement, A Shift in Voice, and James Baldwin's The Fire Next Time"***

The Civil Rights Movement in many ways is known best for its fierce protests, marches, and famous leaders. While all of these facets of the movement played a crucial role in what would result in "equality" in the late 1960s, many history books do not necessarily focus a whole lot on protest literature created in the era. Many authors contributed major works leading up to the 1960s. The most famous included Richard Wright and James Baldwin. James Baldwin in particular is a particularly interesting character because he represents the shift in tone that is present in protest literature by the time the 1960s and the movement really picked up steam. "The Next Time", is the next work that I investigate and my research for this theme surrounds three facets much like the first theme. I use William Chafe and David Shi to gain an understanding for the overall historical events of the period. After creating a base of knowledge, it is appropriate to look at Jack Gould, *Essence Magazine*, and Marc Dudley to gain an understanding for who James Baldwin was and why his protest literature was so influential. Finally, in researching "The Fire Next Time", it was appropriate to look at Kathy Forde, Christopher Metress, and Grant Farred to understand why "The Fire Next Time" was so influential. Through these authors, I gleaned a lot of useful information that I could then use to continue with my overall project.

As with researching the Harlem Renaissance, it was important to first understand the historical relevance of the 1960s before diving into the prominent author and work created

during the time. As with David Lewis, David Shi is the author of a work that was used for very broad reference. His text titled “America, The Essential Learning Edition” was a book that did not go into particularly grave detail. As such, it was beneficial to look into just as David Shi’s timeline was useful. Shi writes one specific unit in his book surrounding the 1960s and 70s. He looks at the Civil Rights Movement from a broader historical perspective, noting the counterculture and increased frustration that was felt by the Black community at the time. In his piece, Lewis writes that “The Civil Rights Movement relied on every member of the Black community to succeed” (Shi 1049). Overall, Shi’s insight into the era did not provide intense insight into protest literature at the time. Rather, his work provided a great timeline for the period and outlined the major events that went on in the physical world of the 1960s. While he touched on the work of various authors, Baldwin and his famous essay were not a focus. Shi was simply used to gain a refreshed understanding of the era and lay the groundwork for a more intense study of the time period Baldwin wrote in.

Expanding upon Shi’s historical analysis was William Chafe. Chafe wrote a book titled, “The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II”. This work represented an in-depth history of the time period lasting from the late 1940s until the 1990s. What Shi lacked in depth; Chafe definitely made up for with his piece. Several chapters focus on the 1960s and 1970s and the Black sentiment of the population. While Shi’s piece focused almost completely on the physical protests of the time, Chafe focused on tone and intellectual movements towards change. Chafe points out the strides that were made in the period and what exactly the African American community attempted to succeed in changing. Chafe represents the first historical author to recognize this shift in tone from the Harlem Renaissance. While the Renaissance and McKay exuded a somewhat optimistic tone, Chafe points to the 60s representing a stark shift to that

optimism. He writes, “Precisely because whites refused to act on the Black agenda, it became necessary for Black Americans to seize the initiative, take control of their own lives and voices, and create new vehicles of protest” (Chafe 169). The author points to multiple aspects that Baldwin hits upon in his writing. This made Chafe a perfect source when attempting to understand the time period and what went on in the Black community. The piece really hits at the change present in the period and provides for a great bridge to Baldwin in this historical study. As I transitioned my research, Chafe was someone who I constantly turned back to when there was a hole that needed to be filled.

After gaining a better understanding for the Civil Rights Movement as a whole, it was important to investigate James Baldwin as an author and an activist. One of the paramount protest authors of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, Baldwin was an accomplished essayist and storyteller. Marc Dudley, a renowned literary and historical scholar, writes a historical piece titled “Understanding James Baldwin”. Within the larger context of the book, Dudley devotes one chapter to Baldwin’s essays and his specific protest works. Dudley notes that for Baldwin’s protests, “the essay is perhaps the most appropriate and suitable form” (Dudley 55). Dudley goes on to analyze various Baldwin works and he creates a picture for who Baldwin was as both a person and a prominent figure in Civil Rights discourse. It is evident in his analysis that there was attention given to every Baldwin essay including “The Fire Next Time”. Dudley also points to Baldwin representing a shift in African American voice in his writing. He writes that Baldwin stated, “This world is white no longer; and it will never be white again” (Dudley 81). This quote in particular will be very important in the next theme within this project and Tupac Shakur’s connection to the Black Power movement. As a whole, Dudley provides great insight into Baldwin and his life as a protest author. He compares him to prominent authors such as Richard



Wright and Harriet Becher Stowe. While a short chapter in the scope of his large historical work, this chapter on Baldwin and his protest is vital to understanding him as a person and understanding his writing's impact on the period.

Two other smaller pieces gave good insight into who Baldwin was as a figure in the 1960s with the "Fire Next Time". Jack Gould wrote an article in 1963 shortly after *The Fire Next Time* was released and it provided a glimpse into what it was like to be a reader at the time. He writes about Baldwin putting the problem of racial inequality squarely on the laps of Americans in his piece and in his most recent TV interview. This source serves as one of the few primary source texts I used for background knowledge. Nevertheless, it was important in that it allowed the research to take a different, more relatable turn. The most fascinating line of the short, two-column article came at its closing. Gould writes, "Mr. Baldwin's purpose was to remove the segregation issue from its usual Southern context and to stress that discrimination was a nationwide cancer" (Gould 2). Gould's article speaks to the great social reach that Baldwin had and gives great insight into what it was like to be an audience member or reader at the time. His writing was again invaluable to understanding who Baldwin was.

The other small piece that was used surrounding Baldwin as a person and protest advocate was an interview done by *Essence Magazine* in 1984. This was not so much an article in a magazine as it was a transcript of a conversation between James Baldwin and another prominent Black thinker Audre Lorde. This conversation went into great detail in discussing each person's views on racial disparity and gender disparity as well. Of course, this project does not focus specifically on the issue of gender. However, it is important to note that it is in fact a part of the conversation. Gender and race intersect, as noted by multiple sociological works that are a part of the research pertaining to this project such as Emibayer's piece titled "Race in

America” (Emibayer). What was important about this document was the revelation of certain positions that Baldwin held. These positions were undoubtedly reflected in his writing, but this conversation served as another research element to reinforce that point. Throughout the article, Baldwin points out the problems of racism and the need for change. So many of the themes within the conversation are reflected in “The Fire Next Time” and many of the lines he uses will be in the overall paper in later pages.

After laying the groundwork with historical perspective and an in-depth search for more information on Baldwin as a person and advocate of protest, it was important to transition into sources that pertained to his piece titled “The Fire Next Time”. It is worth noting that a bulk of my independent work will be done dissecting this and two other works. Therefore, much of my research surrounded historical context on time period and research pertaining to the authors themselves. Nevertheless, I found great insight from Kathy Forde, Christopher Metress, and Grant Farred that specifically surrounded “The Fire Next Time” and the protest elements involved. Kathy Forde uses Baldwin to discuss a shift in content that is present in the period. Instead of historical analysis, Forde focuses on literary journalism and the effect one of Baldwin’s pieces had on the government and society as a whole. In her piece “*The Fire Next Time* in the Civil Sphere: Literary Journalism in America 1962”, she discusses one of Baldwin’s most provocative works and its representation of a shift in protest literature content. As Forde writes, “[the essays] helped many Americans, including those in the highest offices of the federal government, understand the moral good of the goals of the African American freedom struggle” (Forde 2). In other words, Forde argues that Baldwin takes an approach to his protest literature that allows for African Americans to enter the political and social stage in a more proactive way. There is not a sole focus on Black identity, but a focus on Black social mobility. Baldwin is cast

in this piece as someone who changes the narrative and places the Black Protest novel on a social stage... not just an intra-racial stage. In using the identity established by the writers of the Renaissance, Baldwin is able to make more provocative social claims and create a piece that has profound social implications to all who read it.

Christopher Metress published a piece titled "Literature, Civil Rights, and Political Imagination". The article describes an integration of all of the ideas each author discussed puts forth and analyzes the protest novel's significance on the fight for African American equality. A quote towards the end of the article perfectly sums up this research project. The project as a whole aims at answering the question of how protest literature has shifted since the Harlem Renaissance and given rise to the social change of the 1960s. Metress captures this idea perfectly stating, "we need writers who not only name and mourn injustice but also inspire us to lean into the future, never forgetting that we have yet to deliver on the promise of a more perfect union" (Metress 1). In speaking on writers who name and mourn injustice, Metress speaks upon the Black identity and social position conveyed within Harlem Renaissance protest literature. When he shifts in his quote, he speaks of authors and works that inspire people to lean into the future and invoke change. This relates to the writers that would spring up in the 1950s and 1960s.

Finally, Grant Farred perfectly encapsulates the shift that is present in Baldwin's work with an article titled, "Love is Asymmetrical: James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*". Farred argues that the essays are not only protest literature, but also philosophical discussions on love. It is through this conversation surrounding love that Baldwin is able to exhume a sense of protest. While Farred points out that Baldwin's tone is that of violence in some respects, he argues that there is love imbedded within the lines. This is where the shift is present. In the Renaissance, it appears that there is an influx of love and unity despite the horrible situations. In Baldwin's

writing, Farred notes the love, but asserts that love is juxtaposed with violence and utter chaos. Farred writes, “it is a love that risks itself absolutely by offering love to those who will do violence to the subject who gives love” (Farred 284). As a whole, it is this article that shows the hints of optimism that is still present in Baldwin’s writing. It is important to recognize that this research proves that Baldwin is not a total turn away from McKay. Rather, Baldwin represents a bridge between McKay and Tupac Shakur. He does not have wide eyes like McKay, but he does not have a heavy, cold heart as we will see with Shakur. Instead, Farred, Forde, and Metress show that Baldwin’s “The Fire Next Time” is a vital step in the progression that I attempt to expose.

### ***Subcategory 3: “The Hip Hop Era, The Building of Pessimism, and Tupac Shakur’s Me Against The World”***

After the end of the Civil Rights Movement and subsequent Era of Black Arts, there seemed to be a growing pessimism in the African American community. Perhaps no person exemplified this pessimism than Tupac Shakur. In his multitude of musical lyrics and poetry, it is evident that Tupac thought there was no way the Black population would ever attain what they set out to do. He thought the system was so broken that even the highest members of the community could not fix it. In his protest literature, there was a growing theme of extreme pessimism and a recognition that it was the Black community against the rest of the population. In researching this idea, there was a similar approach taken in regards to theme. Bakari Kitwana and Jessica Harris provide great scholarly insight into the rise of the Hip Hop Era in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and lay the groundwork for what Tupac produced in the realm of protest literature. Armond White creates a fascinating biographical account of Shakur and that builds off of what

scholars like Karin Stanford and Kara Keeling analyze in their historical articles about this prominent artist's background. Finally, Walter Edwards and Timothy Brown shed light on the specific musical and lyrical elements within the protest literature that is contained in Shakur's groundbreaking album. Together, these artists speak to the growing pessimism present in the realm of the Hip Hop Era.

Bakari Kitwana lays the groundwork for the complex study of Tupac Shakur and the rise of Gangsta rap in the Hip Hop Era. Her historical analysis titled, "The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture" shows what the era was all about historically. Kitwana puts multiple artists in conversation with each other in order to explain what the Hip Hop Era meant to the United States and why it was so influential. The book explains that Gangsta rap was a new form of protest literature and it shed light on the Black community's situation as a whole. Kitwana writes, "Rap artists between 1991 and 2001 have been the most effective medium for defining and disseminating the new Black youth culture" (Kitwana 121). The author argues that the everyday Black person of the late 1900s was not the same as those people seen in the Harlem Renaissance or even in the Civil Rights Movement era. Rather, there came to be a new pessimism that was present in the lives of many African Americans (specifically men in Kitwana's study). While Kitwana does mention gender in multiple instances, the bulk of her work solely focuses on the prominent rappers of the time and the growing anger that was present in both their lyrics and life. Kitwana closes the analysis by stating that rap provided a glimpse into the Black community's everyday lives. The author writes, "largely because of rap music, one can tune in to the voices and find the faces of America's Black youth at any point in the day". Overall, Kitwana provides one of the best

historical analysis pieces that is present surrounding the Hip Hop Era and lays great groundwork for further study into the life and protest of Tupac Shakur.

While Kitwana's historical analysis is in depth and gives great insight into the Hip Hop Era as a whole, it was important to narrow research after reading the work and find some political sources that connected to the Black Panther Party theme that Kitwana makes mention of in relation to Shakur and many other rappers. Jessica Harris provides a brief but insightful analysis of the Black Panther Party in her article published in the Journal of Negro History titled "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party". In this piece, Harris speaks to the nationalistic approach to civil rights and Black mobility within the Black Panther Party. Overall, Harris provides analysis dating back to the early 1900s and ends with the late 1990s in her research. It is clear that her research encapsulates many of the themes found in Gangsta rap and the Hip Hop Era. Specifically, being that the purpose of this project surrounds protest literature, Harris points out that the Black Panther Party was a major aspect of the protesters during the Hip Hop Era. She writes, "Throughout the history of Africans on these hostile American shores, Black nationalism has found itself on numerous occasions to be the significant school of thought for many of our organizations, institutions and protest activities" (Harris 409). Harris continues this quote by explaining that prominent figures such as Martin Luther King, Marcus Garvey and Tupac Shakur are examples of this idea. Harris includes that there were multiple connections to Shakur within the Black Panther Nationalist group and that allows for a great reference point in the larger scope of this paper. While this historical research does not pertain to the Hip Hop Era specifically, it is a useful source in that it allows for the Hip Hop Era to expand past music into the political realm. This will help to expand the paper to other facets as more research is done and more of my own analysis will take shape in the subsequent pages.

After creating a good base layer through Kitwana and Harris, it was necessary to dive into Tupac Shakur as a figurehead for protest literature in the Hip Hop Era. Armond White, Kara Keeling, and Karin Stanford provide great insight into the life and music of Tupac Shakur. Keeling in particular provides an interesting segway from the previous source with her article titled “A Homegrown Revolutionary: Tupac Shakur and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party”. This article focuses on Shakur’s connections to the Black Panther Party. Touched upon briefly by Jessica Harris, the Black Panther party was crucial to the development of Shakur as a protest figure. Tupac’s parents were members of the political party and they groomed him almost immediately to be a voice of protest. In the article, it is clear that the pessimism of the era is evident through the persona of Tupac. As his career began to take hold in the mainstream, Keeling points out that Shakur became a poster child for not only the pessimism felt by the Black community, but for the Black Panther Party as a whole. She writes, “building upon our cultural memory of the Black Panther Party, the image of Tupac Shakur, with his heavily tattooed body and his middle finger in the air, also stands in for Black rebellion and dissatisfaction” (Keeling 61). Shakur in his life and actions begins to stake his claim as a prominent protest figure. Keeling argues that Tupac continues this protest in his lyrical achievements in music. She makes mention of Tupac’s primary texts making, “disillusionment and legacy visible” (Keeling 64). As a whole, it is clear that Keeling draws intense parallels between the political party of Tupac’s parents and Tupac’s works in the musical world. Together, these parallels make for a great analysis of the protest nature of Tupac and Keeling is a great resource for the purpose of this project.

Moving slightly away from the complicated analysis of the Black Panther Party and its ties to Shakur are Karin Stanford and Timothy Brown. These two scholars focus on the protest lyrics of Tupac specifically and how these lyrics not only provide for great protest literature, but

also give insight into his life as a protest figure. In Karin Stanford's article "Keepin' It Real in Hip Hop Politics", Stanford touches upon the Black Panther Party, but also looks into the impact Shakur had on the Black community as a whole. Stanford's goal of her piece is to, "expand the discourse of Shakur's contribution to the African American fight against racism and injustice" (Stanford 3). As a whole, the article focuses on the attitude and sentiment that Shakur possessed in his writing and life. Stanford points to Tupac's lyrics reflecting the real world for many listeners and he was one of the most relatable artists of the time. It was through the music he produced that he was able to captivate audiences. By captivating audiences, he was able to move to the forefront of the Hip Hop Era and become an advocate for change. Stanford writes, "Tupac became their political advocate, educator and motivator" (Stanford 20). The popular rap artist did not just produce great music that blared through every young African American's stereo. Rather, he used music to attempt to change the situation of everyone in his community. As a whole, Stanford's article helps encapsulate the life's mission of Shakur that surrounded protest literature and changing the system. It is a great resource in the larger scope of the Journal of Black Studies that sheds important light on Shakur's life and career.

Without a doubt the greatest single work surrounding the life of Tupac Shakur is written by Armond White. In his biography titled "Rebel for the Hell of It: The Life of Tupac Shakur", White analyzes Shakur's life and music in great detail. White provides an intricate timeline of Tupac's life in the latter portion of the book to reinforce what he speaks about in the pages leading up to it. He tracks Tupac from his birth in 1971 to his death in September of 1996. Throughout the entire biography, White uses lyrics to demonstrate the life actions of Tupac in his brief time on earth. White writes that what Tupac wanted was, "to find significance in earthly pleasure, physical excitement, and the cruel world met on cruel terms" (White 207). The book as



a whole is a very well-rounded autobiography that gives great insight into the life and music of Tupac. Of course, being that this is one of the paramount sources on Shakur's life, a formal lit review will not do it the justice it deserves. This will be one of my main sources when discussing the life of Shakur and for that reason it will not be discussed in great detail here. Rather, it will serve as a bulk of the historical perspective that is necessary in the latter portion of my project. Nevertheless, what White does in his biography is nothing short of incredible and it helps a great deal in understanding who Shakur was and what he attempted to do through his music.

Timothy Brown takes a different approach to analyzing the life of Tupac Shakur than Karin Stanford. Rather than focusing on the physical actions that Shakur takes in the political and social arena, Brown focuses on the music Shakur creates and how that music acts as an autobiography. His piece is a much smaller piece of what White writes about in his biography. Specifically centering his work on "Tupac's Greatest Hits", Brown speaks to the unique characteristics of discourse that Shakur uses in his writing. He speaks to the significance of Shakur's social position and how his music did so much for the Black community. He writes, "These texts are significant because Shakur had greatly impacted rap music, hip-hop culture, and Black culture" (Brown 559). In a sense, what Brown does in combining music and the life of Shakur is beneficial. However, what Brown does not do is touch upon *Me Against The World* (the album), which would have been more useful for this project in particular. However, that does not mean it is useful in displaying what Shakur thought of the pessimism that was present in protest literature during this era. In the final lines of his piece, Brown writes, "Shakur transforms to the cultural values to achieve what Frederick Douglass articulated long ago: agitate! Agitate! Agitate!" (Brown 571). As a whole Brown displays the pessimism present in Tupac's music in a

well-rounded way and provides great insight into the growing anger Shakur exhumes in his music.

In looking at *Me Against The World* specifically, Walter Edwards contributes a lot to this conversation of protest. In his piece surrounding the album, Edwards points out that “Tupac learned to believe that racism, economic discrimination, and other forms of oppression contributed to the poverty and powerless working-class Blacks” (Edwards 61). As such, Edwards notes songs such as “If I Die 2Nite”, “So Many Tears”, “Death Around the Corner”, and “Me Against the World” as great songs that hint at this idea. The album as a whole comes after Tupac’s conviction on sexual assault charges. While there may be some hints to this in the musical and lyrical elements of the album, it is clear that this work is merely a protest piece that puts all aspects of Tupac’s community into the limelight. Edwards argues that there is no better album that protests the situation of the African American community than this album. The album is a complete turn away from the tone that is set forth in McKay’s poem or Baldwin’s essays. Tupac is not content, and he is most certainly not optimistic. He wants to burn the whole thing down and that is the message contributed by Walter Edwards. He writes of this stating, “I suggest that this artistic integrity and voice allowed the world to experience his brief brilliance” (Edwards 69). As a whole, it is clear in this article specifically that Tupac is representative of a complete move away from the optimism expressed in the Harlem Renaissance and even in the 1960s. It is through this idea that I attempt to analyze the shift present and why it occurred. All of these scholars will contribute in a drastic way to my analysis by providing background information and personal insight into the time period in which Tupac lived and produced great protest literature.

## **CONCLUSION**

There are many scholars who have started to analyze protest figures and their effect on African American advancement in American society. With these sources, I analyzed three specific works of protest literature produced by these figures and demonstrate a cohesive shift in tone and social implications throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. All sources analyzed were used to form a general knowledge of the shift and be integrated into the specific literature to explain how the tone of protest literature has advanced and has had an impact on the fight for African American upward social mobility.

## **Research Methodology**

In this project, I looked at how the protest literature shifts from the Harlem Renaissance, to the Civil Rights Movement, and to the Hip Hop Era. Due to the complexity of combining History, English, and Race and Ethnic Studies, my methodology was starkly different from those of other thesis projects and presentations. My methodology was solely based off of literature itself and analyzing it through English and African American theoretical lenses and historical context. I first chose three pieces of protest literature. These three pieces include a poem from Claude McKay, an essay from James Baldwin and an album from Tupac Shakur. These literary works served as my “data”. I then studied scholarly literature surrounding the historical and theoretical context of these pieces to get a well-rounded understanding of the rhetoric surrounding them. These three works served as my data for analyzation and through these works, I came to my conclusion.

I think that this methodology is appropriate for answering my question because it is necessary to look at the pieces themselves in order to truly understand the impact that they had

and the tone they possess. It is not worthwhile to use interviews or sociological studies because people themselves are not what is needed to answer the question. Rather, in order to answer the question of how these works of literature represented a shift in African American voice, I had to dive into the works themselves and understand the protest and activism imbedded within their pages. Then I can put them into context and form an overarching argument surrounding my research question.

## **Findings/Results Section**

There is a long tradition of protest literature in the history of the African American experience from the poems of Phillis Wheatley to the song lyrics penned by Tupac Shakur in the late twentieth century. In fact, given the prohibitions on teaching the enslaved to read, and learn, in most instances, the act of writing itself was often viewed as a form of protest by African Americans. Thus, there are multiple examples of African American protest writings including poems, pamphlets, slave narratives, novels, essays and song lyrics. Wheatley mastered the classics and used her pen to protest slavery, while Frederick Douglass wrote works such as “My Bondage” and “My Freedom” advance the cause of abolitionism. David Walker wrote a searing appeal against slavery and Black novelists of the nineteenth century criticized both slavery and Black oppression.

This paper is an analysis of pessimism in African American protest literature from the Harlem Renaissance to the rise of Hip Hop through the lenses of history and literary theory. It is a type of genealogy or history of the idea of pessimism as it unfolds in literary texts as conjoined with literary analysis. In this thesis paper, literary theory and the historical method are applied as, in part, juxtaposed with Afropessimism as an interpretive framework. That said, the goal here is to discuss the genealogy of the idea of pessimism as asserted in a specific set of literary texts

representative of key moments in the development of African American literature throughout the twentieth century; including writings by Black authors drawn from New Negro Era, the Civil Rights Movement, and the emergence of Gangsta Rap during the Hip Hop Era. These authors at the focus of my work include Claude McKay, James Baldwin, and Tupac Shakur. While there are a host of Black writers who made a pessimistic turn in their work as the twentieth century evolved, McKay's poem "If We Must Die," Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time", and two songs drawn from Shakur's album *Me Against the World* are not only representative texts of their generation but also key moments in the development of the idea of pessimism in the history of African American literature across variant genres. While in my thesis I do not claim "If We Must Die" and "The Fire Next Time" as Afropessimistic texts per se, I am asserting here that pessimism is evident in these works and representative of a broader history or move toward pessimism evident in Black literary culture that is strident well before the late twentieth century.

It is necessary here to pause and briefly discuss the concept of Afropessimism<sup>1</sup>. Afropessimism is most commonly first associated with the work of Orlando Patterson and his book "Slavery as Social Death" that is concerned with the residual impact of enslavement upon the lives of African Americans. Though Patterson rejects the label of "pessimist," it is his claim about Black social death that is core to Afropessimism as an interpretive lens for studying Black life and culture. This concept is then taken up by literary scholars such as Saidaya Hartman in works such as "Lose Your Mother" and later Frank Wilkerson in his autobiography entitled "Afropessimism". Furthermore, Afropessimists argue that because humanity is equated with whiteness social death is the only thing possible for the Black subject. In other words, African Americans are among the walking-dead and a life of subjectivity is not only implausible but

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is taken from my full theoretical analysis found in an earlier section of this project. Full analysis of the theoretical lenses that I incorporate into this project can be found on Pg. 5.

ultimately impossible. This is a tone that is strikingly reinforced in Shakur's song "If I Die Tonight".

The Harlem Renaissance represented the first major cultural movement in the African American community in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lasting from 1919 to the mid-1930s, the movement was a social, intellectual, and artistic explosion in the Harlem section of New York and beyond. Fitting then, that this area, predominantly occupied by African Americans, became a sort of "spring" for cultural agency. George Haynes, a prominent activist and member of the National Urban League, noted that, "the cosmopolitan atmosphere [of New York City] knows less of color prejudice than probably any other city in the United States" (King 13). Throughout the period from the 1919 to the mid-1930s, Haynes' assertion proved correct. Harlem became a sort of quasi-capital for the African American community as a result.

In an era of hostility, Jim Crow, and subjugation, the Black Diaspora needed an anchoring point. Harlem proved to be this anchor. Claire Corbould contends that this anchoring point was not restricted to those living in and around Harlem. Rather, she writes that, "Even if they never traveled to Harlem, Black Americans nationwide, and worldwide for that matter, turned their attention toward it and derived pleasure from the simple fact that it was there" (Corbould 10). Harlem, and the cultural explosion that resulted from it, represented an extreme cultural transition. With prominent figures coming from the era such as Langston Hughes, W.E.B DuBois, Jean Toomer, and Claude McKay, the era was one that produced colorful art, vibrant poetry, and intense protest literature. Frances Keller writes, "During the anxious prosperous decade bounded by the race riots of 1919 and the stock market crash of 1929, Negro writers and a few concerned white writers produced a flood of novels and essays and poetry dealing with aspects of the race problem" (Keller 30). Each of these aforementioned figures had

a voice that could investigate and reveal the problem with race in America during the 1920s. They wanted change and were optimistic that they would achieve it through the cultural explosion in Harlem.

Most historians date the Renaissance that ensued in Harlem as starting in 1919. They mark the beginning of this period of cultural explosion with Claude McKay's short poem titled "If We Must Die". Born in Jamaica in 1889, Claude McKay asserted himself as a dominant African writer far before he came to the United States permanently in 1914. An avid commentator on Black life in Jamaica, McKay had already won two Jamaican Medals for his poetry collections titled "Songs of Jamaica" and "Constab Ballads" (Valade 107). Each collection concentrated on the Black experience in his native home and included motifs of love and nostalgia. By the time McKay came to his new home in 1914, he was already a relatively well-known poet who had experienced moderate success before venturing to the United States. McKay settled in New York, and as Roger Valade asserts, the United States was not what the young man had hoped (Valade 110). The first several years of schooling and living in a foreign country still engrossed in the Jim Crow era of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was most assuredly not an easy path. McKay experienced intense racism upon arriving to the United States. Subsequently, this racism elevated his literature to a whole new level. Kotti Ramesh noted that, "The repressed Afro-America, struggling with Jim Crowism and lynching, found a fresh and strong militant voice in McKay (Ramesh 20). McKay found his true home in New York's neighborhood of Harlem and began the tall task of commentating on the African American position through his poetry. Whatever he wrote, it incorporated protest and voiced the necessity for Black social mobility. As Ramesh contends, "Whether it was the peasants of Jamaica, the working class in America, or the Black vagabonds, his sympathies were always with the underdog" (Ramesh 21).

This sense of the underdog and the pessimistic nature of the Black condition was solidified when he penned the short, fourteen-line poem that kicked off one of the most significant cultural experiences African Americans had gone through in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“If We Must Die” proved to cement McKay’s legacy and speak about the advancement of the African American position in a profound, graphic, and insightful way. The poem, in all its elements, began an era of protest literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that was foundational in changing the course of thousands of lives. It was a poem that contained a largely pessimistic tone, but also incorporated a sense of cautious optimism that things would get better for the Black community. He writes...

“If We Must Die”, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.  
If We Must Die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,



Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

- Claude McKay "If We Must Die" (1919)

McKay wrote this poem in 1919 with the intent of commenting on the need for advancement in the social position of African Americans. He certainly does not hold back. He speaks of the necessity for violence in certain respects and the very likely chance that there will be many who will die for the opportunity to achieve equality. The poem, "broke out from his deep disgust against inhuman racial oppression" (Ramesh 20). At face value, the poem does not necessarily provide for a positive feeling in the mind of the reader. While this poem contains intense imagery and graphic detail on the part of McKay, the pessimism present turns to an optimistic and resounding call to action in the final lines. This poem is not entirely pessimistic and does not assert, in McKay's words, that there is no hope as Baldwin and Shakur will eventually contend. Rather, McKay uses intense imagery and difficult content to call all African Americans to action. In his literary analysis, Robert A. Lee notes that while "If We Must Die" reinforces the tension felt throughout the era, "the resulting effect is one of immediacy and urgency" (Lee 216). McKay recognized in the production of this poem that the racial situation of African Americans needed to advance soon or there would be unacceptable consequences. He is hopeful, but that hope is dwindling.

In order to fully understand the content, meaning, and tone of McKay's poem, it is necessary to progress line by line and fully investigate the poem. On the surface, McKay's poem consists of fourteen lines and takes the traditional Shakespearean sonnet form. Within these fourteen lines, there are three quatrains, and the poem culminates with one final heroic couplet. Throughout the poem, there is a common theme of conflict between two adversaries. This

conflict transitions as the reader moves down the lines of the poem and eventually comes to a culmination with the final couplet. It is this traditional form that is the first hint of separation in McKay's writing. While other prominent Harlem Renaissance poets such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes use a freer flowing method of writing, McKay uses a traditional template. While this poem may look as though it is just another sonnet, using traditional form and scheme, it is extensively unique. In order to fully appreciate its unique nature and optimistic tone, one must understand the progression within the template he uses and relish in the fact that his poem is anything but ordinary.

From the very beginning, McKay starts out with imagery that places African Americans in direct conflict with their white oppressors at the time. In the first quatrain, McKay uses the terms "We" and "They" to denote this distinction. As Robert Lee notes in his literary analysis, "We" seems to point to Black people who (in this poem) are analogous to "Hogs". These "Hogs" that McKay writes about are hunted and "penned" (Lee 4). This most assuredly refers to the fact that African Americans at the time are extremely oppressed and hunted by white adversaries. In a real-world context, this is a clear reference to the Jim Crow era and how Black Americans were quite literally hunted. This hunting came in the form of lynching in the American south. The "Hogs" are also penned, a clear reference to the lack of social agency that the African American community possessed. It is this lack of agency that provides for the chaos of the Red Summer of that year as well (Corbould 50). The white oppressors, referred to as "They" are compared to "Dogs" in this first quatrain. McKay seems to suggest that the position of the dogs is a far more agreeable description than the position of the hogs (i.e. Black Americans). This first quatrain, and the imagery of African Americans ("We") dying as "hogs" and being "penned in an inglorious spot" attempts to show the negative social position of the Black community. It is

through this negative position that the poem begins. The conflict between the “hungry and mad” white oppressors of the time and the “hog-like” African Americans creates a jumping off point that allows for the poem to take a significant step forward and hit at the heart of the pessimism that McKay is communicating

As McKay transitions into the second quatrain, there is the first notable shift in his use of pronouns and descriptive imagery. The “Dogs” that are the descriptor of the white, oppressive community, are made to look even more evil. They have turned into “Monsters”. This of course is a stark transition from the “Dogs” that are prevalent in the first quatrain. Conversely, the “Hogs” are humanized in a way. Rather than the group having a negative connotation (as they do in the first quatrain), they are described as having “precious blood”. McKay writes that, “our precious blood may not be shed in Vain” (McKay). He positions himself as being one of the “Hogs” but humanizes both himself and the rest of the African American community he is commenting on by describing them as precious. Already, there is a transition in tone and content. He continues with the transition when he speaks of “honor” in the final line. Though the hogs have seemingly died, they should be honored by their sacrifice in fighting the “monsters”. In a sense, Robert Lee argues that McKay uses this imagery of honor and the elevated connotation of the “hogs” to show that the African American community, through fighting their adversary, have attained respect. As opposed to the first quatrain in which the “hogs” are shown to have little to no respect, there is a transition in the second quatrain that allows for the poem to shift slightly. McKay clearly still does not have a positive attitude in the poem, but the narrative is progressing slightly as African Americans are given some agency.

McKay continues this transition in the third quatrain. The pronouns and connotations shift once again in the next four lines. The “Hogs,” while fragmented in the first section of the

poem attain a sense of unity. While there is some hint at unity in the beginning lines, it is a unity that possesses a negative connotation. Remember, the hogs were “hunted and penned”. In this quatrain, the “hogs” have become “Kinsmen”. They solidify their position by facing a “common foe” and become not unfavorable and weak but brave and affirmative. McKay writes that though they will be struck “thousands of blows”, all that the group of “hogs” needs to do is strike once and their goal will be achieved. This section in particular not only shows the solidarity within the African American community, but also the fortitude that exists within each and every Black person at the time. It is as if McKay is saying, “It does not matter how many times we get knocked down. For if we get back up and strike in a steadfast way, nothing will stop us.” This third quatrain is by no means the culmination of the narrative McKay puts forward. Rather, it continues with the tone of pessimism and is another slight move forward. Black Agency is possible, but it is not present yet. To this point, McKay has been pessimistic about the fight for equality and this trend is important in understanding the pessimistic ideals that he demonstrates.

The key to this poem demonstrating a cautiously optimistic attitude is in the final couplet. Commonly referred to as a “heroic couplet” this is the final two lines of the poem and provide for the biggest shift in tone. The “Hogs” that were the pronouns of choice for McKay in the first twelve lines of the poem are no longer. Instead, there has been an incredible transition. The “Hogs” are now “Men”. The final two lines read as follows:

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (McKay)

The “Men” that McKay refers to are still the same group of African Americans that McKay has been referring to. They are still in direct confrontation with the white oppressors of the time. However, the white oppressors are no longer placed under the same umbrella term either. They are no longer “Dogs”. Instead, they have become a “cowardly pack”. They have become lessened in their force and are no longer looked upon as being at a top social tier. They are scared and their power is dwindling. Yes, McKay notes that Black Americans are still pressed against a proverbial wall. There is still conflict. But this conflict has taken a turn. They have achieved what is necessary to fight with a positive outlook against the white oppressors. They might be “dying” but they are fighting back. The “Hogs” have achieved a cultivated identity and they have gained agency. While the poem started out pessimistically, the final two lines of the poem give McKay’s writing a tone of slight optimism for what is to come the remaining years of the Harlem Renaissance. Stating that it is cautiously optimistic is not necessarily a full move away from pessimism. There is room to suggest that dying while fighting was a better existence than what was currently the social position of Black America. This is still pessimistic. What is important, though, is that change is still possible in the mind of McKay. The writing produced by Baldwin and Shukur will not leave much room for this change. These authors will turn away from it and assert that agency is not possible. McKay still has a glimmer of hope, albeit a small one.

What started out bleak and hopeless now has a glimmer of hope. As Robert Lee notes in his analysis, “the positions in the opening have been completely reversed” (Lee 217) and “the former inevitability of [the poem] is undercut by the sense of futurity now present” (Lee 218). This is where “If We Must Die” shows its cautiously optimistic nature. No longer is the African American community going to sit by the wayside and allow for their social position to be

determined for them. They will fight, they may die, but they will (hopefully) prevail. It is worth noting at this point that the fight is by no means over with the production of this poem and Afropessimism is still in its early stages. The fight has just begun and there is still some hope for advancement. These small layers of optimism that are intertwined in McKay's poem are important in understanding pessimism. These layers provide a framework of hope for social change. As the years progress, these layers will begin to fade. By the time America gets to the protest writing of Tupac Shakur, these layers of cautious optimism will be virtually nonexistent. Afropessimism is not a major theme in McKay's work, but the concept begins to take hold through his imagery and his narrative. What saves McKay from being an Afropessimist writer is the final couplet and his hope for change. This hope for change will continue in protest literature for the next several decades and inspire future writers to comment on the African American social position.

The African American condition underwent some change from the end of Harlem Renaissance, but it was not a point of focus like it was in the 1920s. The 1930s brought the Great Depression and the 1940s brought World War II. It was not until after the dust settled in Nagasaki and Hiroshima that America could go back to focusing on the issue of equality on a larger scale. During this period of transition, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright took the reins in terms of African American protest literature. These two men would form the foundation for African American commentary from the 1930s until the late 1950s. While not the focus of this paper, both Ellison and Wright used much of the same tone and imagery as McKay in their writings. Ellison's award-winning story "The Invisible Man" was published in 1952 and proved to be a fantastic representation of Black life in America. It utilized much of the pessimistic undertones of McKay, while also looking towards a better future. Wright's most famous work,

“Notes of a Native Son” proved to do a similar thing twelve years prior to “The Invisible Man”. It inspired a generation of young African Americans and became one of the most popular protest writings of the 1950s. It was so popular, that it inspired James Baldwin to shift his focus to the race problems within the United States and craft one of the most important protest writings in African American history. If it were not for Ellison and Wright, who were as important to the 1940s and 50s as McKay was to the Harlem Renaissance, Baldwin’s “The Fire Next Time” and the continuation of pessimistic protest literature may not have had such a large impact.

James Baldwin was born in Harlem in August of 1924 as the cultural explosion in America’s most populated city was in full force. By no means did Baldwin show signs of becoming one of the most foundational activists in the African American writing community from an early age. Rather, he seemed like an ordinary kid who had an immense love for writing. As he grew older, he began to recognize the issues within the community he resided in and America as a whole. His reference point for Black America was assuredly that of Harlem, of which, his early memory was of a place “where people still clung to the possibility of a normal life” (Leeming 11). Multiple influences in his early life allowed for James to find his love for writing and eventually strive to have a career in the art. His essays were focused on Black identity, the African American social condition, and the state of America as a whole.

As Baldwin came of age in a racialized America, he knew that he had a responsibility to investigate the Black experience from a literary standpoint. Words on pages had long been his method of dealing with reality, and Baldwin felt that there was no career more suited for him than that of a writer. He wrote from time to time, but nothing really hit the mainstream media as being all that popular. He did not have a space where he could truly investigate himself and his own innerworkings as a Black, homosexual man. It was for this reason that Baldwin emigrated to

Paris, France in 1948 (Leeming 54). As biographer David Leeming notes, this was move away from America was paramount to Baldwin's success as a writer and elevated him to a level of social commentator unseen in the African American community since the Harlem Renaissance. Leeming states, "He maintained that he needed distance from the racial realities at home so that he could become the writer he wanted to be" (Leeming 56). Baldwin needed to step away, collect his thoughts, and find out what kind of writer he really wanted to be. After his hit novel "Go Tell it on a Mountain" debuted in 1953, Baldwin became a superstar. He published "Notes of a Native Son", his first collection of essays, two years later which commented on Wright's famous work mentioned earlier. It is through these two works that Baldwin began to enter the American consciousness. By the end of the 1950s, Baldwin had cemented his fame in the world of literature and elevated his voice for all to hear. In return, Baldwin used this platform to analyze Black life in America and reveal the pessimism present in the African American psyche at the time.

While Baldwin found much joy and inspiration during his time in Paris, there was something missing. The problem of race relations was raging back home, and Baldwin felt that he needed use his platform to show how frustrated the African American community was. Already a popular figure, Baldwin returned home and found some success. In 1963, he crafted his most provocative and his most famous piece that hit at the heart of Black pessimism. The Fire Next Time, a collection of two essays, swept that nation and became an instant classic. The two essays, titled "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation" ("My Dungeon Shook") and "Down at the Cross: Letter from A Region of My Mind" ("Down at the Cross") investigated the position of African Americans within America and protested the social norms of the 1960s. Famous leaders like Martin Luther King and



Malcom X had been leading protests, rallies, and long marches to fight for African American equality. James Baldwin used his pen. In his two short essays, Baldwin awakened a generation and fought in his own way for African Americans. The fight for equality was nowhere near over, and while there were still small notes of optimism in some people's minds, Baldwin's commentary in "The Fire Next Time" began to stray away from the tone McKay used just forty years earlier. There was little to no optimism in Baldwin's writing, rather, Afropessimism began to come to the forefront of protest literature.

The two essays published by Baldwin in 1963 are extremely important in tracking the pessimism in African American protest writings. "My Dungeon Shook" is a piece that is still somewhat cautiously optimistic but drives a pessimistic tone towards the end of the short, four-page essay. The second work, "Down at the Cross", is one of the first true works of Afropessimism. Through this second essay, Baldwin's voice and tone begins to lose hope and recognize that the future is not as bright as McKay might have hoped. In a sense, "The Fire Next Time", the title of the collection, says all that one needs to hear. Baldwin ends his second essay by paying homage to an old slave spiritual saying, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, The Fire Next Time!" (Baldwin 106). In other words, it was time to burn everything to the ground and start over. Through these two essays, I believe that there is a shift in voice within the African American community. Optimism is thrown out the proverbial window and Afropessimism becomes the written norm for protest writers. If history is to regard Baldwin as the premier social commentator of the 1960s, it is safe to say that Baldwin sheds immense light on what African Americans were thinking and feeling during the time. As such, the African American community takes a turn from being cautiously optimistic about social change, to

pessimistic that “true change” is impossible. In order to understand this shift, it is necessary to look at each essay<sup>2</sup>, what it says, and how Baldwin’s pessimism is displayed.

Thus, begins Baldwin’s analysis of the position of African Americans in society. Taking a nod from McKay in many ways, the essay puts Black people and White people in direct confrontation with each other in his first essay. “My Dungeon Shook” is framed as a letter written to his nephew. In it, Baldwin does not use the same imagery as McKay, but he illuminates a similar message. White America may not recognize the detrimental effects of their behavior. They are oblivious to the turmoil they have caused because they are on an elevated position, and the African American community is thought of as inferior. Where McKay describes African Americans as “hogs,” Baldwin is much more blunt and to the point. He notes, “you were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were Black and for no other reason” (Baldwin 7). In a sense, Baldwin is telling his nephew that the only reason that he is struggling in his life is because he is Black. That is at the heart of his essay and his protest. He writes that, “You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity” (Baldwin 7). It is a harsh reality, but one that Baldwin is trying to change. As the beginning of the essay points out, Black America, to this point, has faced a grim and dark reality. Just as McKay’s poem begins with a pessimistic tone, Baldwin begins this first essay with confronting the issue of race in America. Following a similar trend to that of McKay, Baldwin then reveals that there still is hope by writing the following:

Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go. The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you

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<sup>2</sup> Unlike with McKay, Baldwin’s essays are far too long to include them in this paper. That being said, the essays will be summarized, and key quotes will be used to exemplify the general ideas, themes, and tone within each respective work. These essays are available online in full.

believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear. Please try to be clear, dear James, through the storm which rages about your youthful head today, about the reality which lies behind the words "acceptance" and "integration." There is no reason for you to try to become like white men and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them, and I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love, for these innocent people have no other hope. They are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. (Baldwin 8)

In this paragraph of his essay, Baldwin reverses what is commonly thought to be true in the mind of African Americans. It was thought that African American's position may be a result of their own misfortune. That (as Baldwin wrote earlier in his essay) they were simply inferior because they were Black. Instead, in this excerpt, Baldwin shows that everyone is thinking about the Black condition incorrectly. The state of Black Americans is no longer solely focused on being "hunted" as they were in the Jim Crow South and in McKay's poem. Rather, Black Americans were more concerned with living up to the standards that White America has laid out for them. This is an impossible task in the mind of Baldwin because the roles are reversed. Baldwin points out that the African American should no longer continue to strive for acceptance. Instead, African Americans need to be more accepting of the white community. They must act with love and understand that white history is not the history of Black people. It does no good to continue to convince white Americans of a history they have no interest in learning. Instead, Baldwin preaches that love is the answer. There is no reason to strive to be a white man because

that is an impossible task. Instead, Baldwin asserts, relish in the fact that you are Black and live as though there is no other option but for white America to accept you as just that.

It is through this idea of acting with love that makes Baldwin's first essay in this work act as an optimistic form of protest. Love is (In Baldwin's mind) asymmetrical and Black Americans will not receive any love in return. That being said, love of neighbor is still important, ergo the love Black Americans express will be a love not reciprocated. The white community may not love the Black community; however, it is important for Baldwin to communicate that the only way towards change is through love. As Grant Farred writes, the love present in Baldwin's essay, "makes itself vulnerable before the Other [white people] and, most importantly, it is a love that risks itself absolutely by offering love to those who will do violence to the subject who gives love" (Farred 1). Baldwin ends his essay with profound words that assert that America is celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of emancipation one hundred years too soon. America has not moved very far away from the climate of slavery and injustice. While the motifs of love and acceptance are present in this essay, optimism is by no means what Baldwin attempts to communicate. Rather, he takes a similar approach to McKay. McKay asserts that change is possible just as Baldwin does. They both have cautiously optimistic attitudes and point to change still being possible. That being said, Baldwin is much less sure that the possibility of change is realistic. There are small hints of optimism, but "My Dungeon Shook" begins the transition completely away from optimism. Baldwin starts to move away from a positive outlook and towards an Afropessimistic point of view in this poem and that transition only continues in his next essay.

The full transition to a more Afropessimist approach is evident in looking at Baldwin's second essay "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region of My Mind". A much longer essay, "Down at the Cross" acts as another quasi letter that Baldwin writes as a way of protesting the African American position in the world during the time. Whereas his first essay was written to his nephew, this essay was not directed to anyone in particular. Rather, it was simply from a "region of his mind" and he goes on to explain the social change necessary to elevate African Americans to a higher level. He does this explanation through the lens of religion. The essay can be dissected into three parts, with each part pointing to a different portion of the African American condition. While the entire essay (which totals close to eighty pages) cannot be fully analyzed in the scope of this paper, it will be necessary to look at each section, investigate what it says, and place it in the conversation of how Baldwin attempts to protest for change.

The first section of "Down at the Cross" centers on Baldwin's own personal experience growing up a Christian. He notes that when he was fourteen, he underwent his first identity crisis and he realized that so many of his Black peers were headed down a bad path. This was the first moment in which he felt the fear of not amounting to anything because of the color of his skin. He seems to point to the overall "system" being set up for him and those around him to fail. As Baldwin grew up, he became pessimistic of his own path, an idea that will be extremely relevant to Tupac Shakur in the third piece of protest I investigate. When Baldwin was fourteen, he notes that he recognized that those around him were realizing the limitations that had been set on them. Friends dropped out of school, girls resorted to working on the street, and boys began to fight back. Baldwin fell into the church, an outlet that proved to help him develop a strong sense of love. Baldwin recognized ignorance, and as such, the letter turns (in a similar way to "My

Dungeon Shook”) to the ignorance of white people and that being the reason for their curtailing of African American progress.

He writes in this section, “The White Man’s Heaven is the Black Man’s Hell” (Baldwin 45). It is ignorance and a sense of selfishness on the part of white people that allowed for Blacks to be subjugated. It is a misreading of religion that allowed for white Christians to not spread love to everyone, but to love those who looked like them. If the concept of a Christian God, in Baldwin’s mind had any use whatsoever, “it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving” (Baldwin 47). It is in this instance that religion failed Baldwin, and its failing provided Baldwin the capacity to recognize what is wrong with the world. That being said, this first section notes, that the way to change was still through the Christian love that Baldwin learned from a young age. Love was the answer... at least in the beginning.

The second section of this letter turns to Baldwin’s growing in a relationship with a Muslim minister named Elijah Muhammed. It is through this relationship that Baldwin recognized the power of the Nation of Islam Movement. Early on in this section of his letter, the reader can see his surroundings getting more militant. As the Nation of Islam Movement throughout the 1960s is historically understood, it was not love that was the answer to the trials of the Black community. Rather, it was violence and uprising. Baldwin writes,

Power was the subject of the speeches I heard.

We were offered, as Nation of Islam doctrine, historical and divine proof that all white people are cursed, and are devils, and are about to be brought down. (Baldwin 49)

It is in this moment in “The Fire Next Time,” that the work becomes almost entirely Afropessimistic. No longer is he speaking about love, acceptance, and change being brought about through those ideas. Those were major themes in his first essay. Instead, this section begins to reconcile with the fact that nothing is changing. The only way for things to change, is to act out and change things by one’s own power. Baldwin continues to analyze the thought that African Americans need to resort to other methods as this section continues. He compares the Black experience to that of the Jews in Germany during the 1940s. He recognizes that white men seem to look at Black men in a similar way to how the Nazis looked at the Jews. He states, “I could not share the white man’s vision of himself for the very good reason that white men in America do not behave toward Black men the way they behave toward each other” (Baldwin 53). In Baldwin’s mind, though things have changed (somewhat) in America over the last several years, it is not enough. It is here that the groundwork for Afropessimism is laid out. Baldwin is not entirely pessimistic of the African American position as of yet, but he begins to “read the tea leaves” and recognize that what change there has been is small and insufficient.

Finally, in the third section, Baldwin really gets down to his protest in “Down at the Cross”. While the first two sections of this essay lay out the foundation for why African Americans are so frustrated, the third section takes a different route. It is worth noting that to this point, Baldwin’s method of protest does not have pessimistic undertones. While it has hints of pessimism at the African American condition and where it is going, it is not fully an essay claiming that there is no hope. It is in this third section that Baldwin lays out what is to be done. White America sees the African American community as already being equal. They were emancipated, they were freed. Baldwin notes this false thought of equality saying, “It is the Negro, of course, who is presumed to have become equal – an achievement that not only proves

the comforting fact that perseverance has no color but also overwhelmingly corroborates the white man's sense of his own value" (Baldwin 94). There is intense sarcasm here. African Americans are not equal. They have not achieved true equality. So then, what is there to do?

Baldwin continues to assert that love is the answer. His Christian roots, though a distant memory, had taught him to act with love and love will eventually be granted to you. Baldwin truly believes that, "we, the Black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation – if we really are [we must] achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women" (Baldwin 97). Baldwin is optimistic that if love is shown on both sides, Black and white, then true equality can come about. That all being said, Baldwin shows that this may not be the likely outcome. Love is the ideal solution, but it is not necessarily the realistic one. As he has seen with the Nation of Islam, love does not necessarily provide for change because change might not be possible.

Baldwin concludes with his essay by noting the pessimism that is present in the African American mind. They have been scorned for too long. They have been told that they have achieved equality, but in actuality that was not entirely true. America is facing a crisis point. He is not optimistic that love can be shared by both sides in an effort to enforce change. He is not optimistic that the African American community is closer to achieving equality. As such, he concludes with a warning. He does so by drawing upon his Christian roots and seemingly warns a predominantly Christian and white society with a passage they know so well. He uses the story of the Great Flood and Noah's Ark to warn America of what is to come. "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, THE FIRE NEXT TIME (Baldwin 106). It is in this final line that Baldwin shows his pessimism. There should be no more waiting. Black America has waited long enough. If water is love... that spring has dried up. It is gone. There will be no more love if



nothing changes. Instead, there will be fire. And it will be a fire that consumes America and will not quench until equality is reached.

If James Baldwin warned of a fire, the kindling certainly started to set ablaze by the time America reached the late 1980s and early 1990s. Baldwin grew older and America began to notice that he was right back in 1963. The African American community had not advanced to the point of true equality. As Baldwin drew closer to his final days, he befriended another famous Black author who would take the reins of protest literature. Toni Morrison and James Baldwin formed a friendship that provided for the pessimism of protest literature to continue. Morrison elevated Baldwin's tone of pessimism even further, providing America with famous works such as "The Song of Solomon" (1977) and "Beloved" (1987). These two works in particular continued to hit upon the theme of Afropessimism and demonstrated a bleak future for the African American community. In reality, America was still a racialized country that did not offer its Black citizens the same opportunities as their white counterparts. Protest literature, dating back to the words of Claude McKay, had morphed from poetry, to essays, and now to novels with Morrison. Afropessimism had entered the main stage of protest literature, and it was clear that protest literature was moving in a new and more intense direction. Optimism was gone, and pessimism was at the forefront of the African American mind. That all being said, the shift in tone was not the only shift that was present. The way protest literature (and the Afropessimism present within it) was being consumed and produced was changing too. The Afropessimism of African American protest literature entered new medium. As America entered the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, protest literature moved from the written word to the spoken one. Gangsta Rap took the reins of Afropessimism and allowed for the theme to take hold in a new way.

Initially called “reality rap” (Kitwana 1), the age of Gangsta Rap began in the late 1980s as a new form of musical expression. It was raw, controversial, and sometimes violent. The new genre came at a time where America was thrust into its famous “War on Drugs” which negatively impacted the Black community living in urban areas. While there had been progress as far as the race relations in the U.S went, Black people across the country were still not happy with their social position. As is the case with these times, artists turned inward to express the frustration of their own people at a time where they needed a unified voice that was centered on change. Afropessimism entered the mainstream through Gangsta rap and the medium allowed for the themes of traditional protest literature to be communicated to a larger audience. Artists like Ice T, Dr. Dre, Notorious B.I.G., and Tupac Shakur flooded the airwaves with music that asserted the values of African Americans.

The genre of Gangsta Rap was a way for these artists to comment on the living conditions and social situations of the Black Americans that were supposed to be looked upon as equal. Widely referred to as the Hip-Hop Generation, artists involved in this genre were unique in purpose. They did not just want to produce good music. They wanted to produce music that would push the agenda for social change and equality. As Bakari Kitwana writes, “the Hip-Hop Generation lived in a more inclusive society than existed in pre-Civil Rights America. However, continuing segregation and inequality have made it especially illusory for many young Blacks. Blacks continue to be discriminated against in often subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways” (Kitwana 13). There was still racism in America, albeit a more covert form of racism. America had not moved all that far from the socially polarized world that was present in the 1920s despite the social change that occurred in the 1960s. Gangsta Rap artists knew this and produced music that was centered on change and had a tone of intense Afropessimism.

In order to dive deeper into Gangsta Rap as protest literature and the pessimism that artists like Tupac Shakur exhumed in their writing, there first needs to be a slight deviation once again to the literary concept of Afropessimism. All Gangsta Rap works, which act as protest literature, contain nods to Afropessimism. While not necessarily a concept that was created in the 1980s and 1990s, Afropessimism as a literary technique comes to fruition in the Hip Hop Era in a major way. Again, Afropessimism is a framework that views the effects of racism throughout history as having bearing on African American life today (Sexton 1). In other words, Afropessimism is the idea that things are no greater today than they were two hundred years ago. It is of course, much more nuanced and complicated, but this is the general idea for Afropessimism.<sup>3</sup> While there might not be slavery in the world, there is still racism that curtails the African American experience and allows for little to no social mobility.

This framework is what many of those producing Gangsta Rap view the world through. They are no better off than the people who were undergoing the trials and tribulations a generation earlier. Instead of living in the Jim Crow South, African Americans in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were living in ghettos. Instead of being lynched by members of the KKK, young Black men were being killed by police officers in the streets of Los Angeles (Sexton 15). While the characters may be different at this point in history, the plot is the same. The African American position had changed very little over the course of the century. The 1960s, while a crucial step in the attainment of Civil Rights for the Black community, was by no means an assertion of equality. That was the framework that many were viewing the country in during the 1990s and Gangsta Rap was the method of communicating it. As Kara Keeling writes, “Gangsta Rap emerges as a hyper-commodified form of rebellion and, as part of this mysterious but

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<sup>3</sup> See Theory Section on Pg.5 for more in-depth definition and analysis of Afropessimism.

intriguing phenomenon, Tupac Amaru Shakur emerges as commodity, philosopher, and representative of the children of the Civil Rights/Black Power generation” (Keeling 59). In terms of Gangsta Rap, no artist better exemplified this framework of Afropessimism than Tupac Shakur. An artist centered on rebellion, activism, and change, Shakur was to the 1990s as McKay and Baldwin were to the 1920s and 1960s.

Harlem continued to be a proving ground for protest literature when Tupac Shakur was born in East Harlem in 1971 (White 5). Born into a world that was not extensively different from the one of Baldwin or McKay, Shakur was the firstborn child of Afeni Shakur who had been a prominent member of the Black Panther Party. It seems as though Tupac would become a revolutionary at birth. His mother Afeni gave birth to her son just months after being released from prison for a suspected bomb plot as a member of the Black Liberation Army (Keeling 59). His social reformer roots began in Harlem and followed him for the rest of his young adult life. The family, due in part to the controversial background of Afeni, moved multiple times before Tupac was even in high school. While homes changed, one thing remained constant in Tupac’s life. Poetry.

From a very young age, Tupac had a love for artistic expression, and many saw the potential that the young man had (White 4). By the time Shakur was in high school, he had moved across the country to California. There, he joined a small group run by Leila Steinberg that centered on poetic and musical expression (White 5). It was in these early moments of writing poetry that Tupac (and Steinberg) recognized his musical potential. As Armond White contends, “Tupac listened, observed, and absorbed. His bright eyes reflected a generation alert to the culture and the times” (White 5). In 1989, Tupac debuted as “MC New York” and began his career in rap music. Two years later, he would sign a record deal with Digital Underground and

produce *2Pacocalypse Now* the same year (White 10). Using his mother's foundation, Tupac became a cultural icon through his music. He became a revolutionary and an advocate for change. He protested everything from drug violence to police brutality and even gang activity. His protest was absolute, and he intended to become an ally and force for change within the African American community. As his career progressed, he would put out several albums before his crowning achievement was produced in 1995. *Me Against the World* debuted in 1995, and the protest literature within the album would be another force for racial change that would exemplify the social conditions of an entire population of African Americans.

Regarded by many as Shakur's crowning achievement, *Me Against the World* was produced in 1995 and was an instant hit. It sold over 240,000 copies in the first week (White 45) at a time when people had to physically go to a store and purchase music. The album, with all of its success, represented the most major example of protest literature that Tupac produced in his career. It came after allegations of rape were made against the celebrity and the album's content was a narrative that encapsulated the Black experience in America. *Me Against the World* acts as a pessimistic work that investigates the Black social position in the 1990s. America is not the same place that it was in the 1960s (and the 1920s for that matter), but it certainly is not where it needs to be from a racial standpoint. Tupac knew this, and using his revolutionary roots, attempted to exhume a feeling of pessimism in regards to the social system in the country. Things needed to change, and maybe by naming what was wrong in the world, Tupac could be a catalyst for such a change. While many point to "Dear Mama" as his crowning achievement on this particular album, that song represents a song that is not indicative of protest literature to its fullest extent. Rather, there are other songs that Tupac uses in this album to comment on the social condition of the African American community just as Baldwin and McKay did in their own way. Of course,

in the scope of this paper, it is not feasible to analyze each of the fifteen songs on the album. Instead, I believe that two songs in particular represent the pessimism that Shakur shows in his music. It is through the songs “If I Die 2Nite” and “Me Against the World” that the full transition of the African American tone can come to fruition. These two songs represent the shift that African Americans possess in tone throughout the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. These two songs are the protest literature that Tupac worked his entire career to produce.

The first track on this hit album is titled “If I Die 2Nite”. It is a song that follows the narrative of Tupac in his everyday life and envelopes the fear he has when living life as a Black man in America. Beginning the song with the popular protest metaphor of soldiers and cowards (much like McKay uses in his poem), Tupac writes, “A coward dies a thousand deaths, a soldier dies but one” (Tupac 1). The song begins with dramatic imagery and an upbeat tempo. Throughout the “plot” of his writing, Tupac outlines the negative social position of Black Americans. A disproportionate number of African Americans at the time were living in horrible situations. Violence was prevalent, equality was not achieved, and drugs became an outlet for many. All anyone needed to do was turn on the evening news to recognize that America was not equal. The ghettos of the inner cities were flooded with people of color, and the idealistic America that was the subject of protest literature in the 1920s was not reality anymore. Black America was still struggling, and Tupac was going to reveal that very fact. The song, in summary, represents that African Americans were no better off than they were at the start of the Harlem Renaissance. Perhaps the most profound portion of the song goes as follows:

Pray to the heavens, .357's to the sky

And I hope I'm forgiven for thug living when I die

I wonder if heaven got a ghetto for thug n\*\*\*\*s

A stress free life and a spot for drug dealers (Tupac 3)

This short excerpt from the third verse of “If I Die 2Nite” shows the violence and horrendous living conditions that Black Americans are living in. The community is set up to fail, and Tupac knows it. In saying, “I hope heavens got a ghetto” (Tupac 3), Shakur is recognizing that Black Americans should not rest their hope on this life, but the next. It is not safe for a Black man to walk around without being armed, for fear of being gun downed in the streets over a couple of dollars or a parking ticket. While Baldwin and McKay talked about the glorious fight and acting with love, Shakur talks about the impossible task of equality and the fact that Black people face a violent adversity every day. There is little to no hope in Shakur’s mind. Heaven hopefully has a ghetto, because otherwise, it seems as though African Americans will never get there. They have not achieved equality, and in Tupac’s mind, the future does not look positive by any means. This song, perhaps Tupac’s greatest form of protest, hits at the heart of Afropessimism as a cultural lens. As Bakari Kitwana contends, “the hip hop generation does not romanticize the change that existed in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. We’ve witnessed the erosion of the euphoria of racial integration and quasi equality” (Kitwana 147). “If I Die 2Nite” represents, in and of itself, the idea that Black Americans are stuck. They have not achieved equality and they are frustrated at the notion that nothing has changed.

Shakur’s protest does not cease after his first song. Instead, he follows up his first track on this album with “Me Against the World” (A song that dons the same title as the album). As any educated person could guess, Tupac is positioning himself as the spokesperson for the African American community. “Me Against the World” places Tupac in direct confrontation

with White America, just as Baldwin and McKay do. This time though, Tupac has the recognition that he has nothing to lose. He is stuck, and the world is not going to give him any opportunities. The only opportunities he has had, has been because he has achieved celebrity. Being that he is at the top of the Gangsta Rap scene in 1995, Tupac has been on television, radio, and in the newspapers. That is not the typical experience for African Americans living at the time. As he stated in his first song, African Americans are dying, living in ghettos, and experiencing intense poverty. That is the reality, and that is the issue that Tupac addresses. There is little to no hope for those living in subjugation. McKay and Baldwin had hope. Tupac does not. It is the ultimate culmination of Afropessimism in 20<sup>th</sup> century African American protest literature. In the most profound portion of his piece Tupac states:

The power is in the people and politics we address  
Always do your best, don't let the pressure make you panic  
And when you get stranded  
And things don't go the way you planned it  
Dreamin' of riches, in a position of makin' a difference  
Politicians and hypocrites, they don't wanna listen  
If I'm insane, it's the fame made a brother change  
It wasn't nothin' like the game  
It's just Me Against the World (Shakur 2)

Tupac has the recognition and the foresight to recognize that the battle McKay was speaking about is not a game. It is not a question of dying an honorable death like the poet said



in the 1920s. By the same token, living life as a Black man in America did not require love for a white oppressors and allowing them to listen as Baldwin contended. Instead, Shakur says, “politicians and hypocrites they don’t wanna listen” (Shakur 2). White America is not going to look out for their African American brothers and sisters. It is, quite literally, Black America against the world. In saying, “If I’m insane, it’s the fame made a brother change” (Shakur 2). Fame and publicity allowed Shakur to relish in the reality of equality for some time. However, he had the recognition that his Black brothers and sisters had not been afforded such a luxury. They were still living in ghettos and being killed at high rates. Politicians and those in power framed a “war on drugs” that subliminally punished those of color who were simply trying to get by in a world that was skewed against them.

This “game” that Tupac played to get to where he was did not seem to be worth it. He played the proverbial game, and still was discriminated against and subjugated. Fame was still not the answer to his problems. So he positions himself against the world, as so many Black members of the community do, because it truly was a fight with everyone who did not look like them. Politicians only addressed what benefited them, and being that politicians were largely white, the Black community went on without representation. As such, African Americans were extremely pessimistic, and that tone came through in Tupac’s music. Through this song, Tupac exhumes the idea that there is no hope, for Black Americans are positioned in a fight against the rest of the world for an equality that may not be possible.

McKay, Baldwin and Shakur acted as a mouthpiece for African Americans in their respective decades. The cultural explosion of the 1920s allowed for a pessimistic Claude McKay to look to the future and remain cautiously optimistic that the glorious fight for equality would be achieved. As the Civil Rights Movement came about in the 1960s, James Baldwin used some of

that optimistic tone but recognized that change might be impossible. The Fire Next Time represented a shift from cautious optimism on the part of equality, to Afropessimism that true equality was far away. Finally, this pessimism came to fruition in the words of Tupac Shakur in the 1990s. Shakur recognized that American thought it had achieved equal opportunities for all, when in actuality true equality had not been reached. It is through this shift in tone that the position of African Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be better understood.

What started out as a glorious fight ended in a recognition of a broken system that might not ever be fixed. It is a sad reality to admit that African Americans may not have been as well off socially in 1995 as they were in 1919. Was there progress? Absolutely. However, the goal of equality was still a long way away by the end of the century. Progress had been made, but progress does not indicate a concrete result. Using the anchoring point of Harlem, prominent protest authors shed great insight into the mind of African Americans aspiring for change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The budding rose that grew out of the explosion of culture in the 1920s, began to be set ablaze in the 1960s and began to come close to wilting in the 1990s. It is in this progression that the African American voice was given power. Hopefully, as America progresses further, the rose can bloom once again, and true equality can be attained.

## Discussion:

Throughout my findings in this progress, I found an interesting shift in the voice of African Americans. I found that the African American tone shifts towards a more overt form of pessimism throughout the century of change that was the 1900s. The Harlem Renaissance was the starting point. The Civil Rights Movement was a time of change. Finally, the rise of Gangsta Rap and the Hip Hop Era represented the culmination. What started out as being a century of progression, ended with a feeling of disappointment and frustration. I found that through the writings of McKay, Baldwin, and Shakur, a true shift in tone from cautious optimism to complete pessimism could be shown. I truly believe that the world looked upon each of these men as being the mouthpiece for the African American community. Through their writings, the voice of a subjugated community can be better understood and investigated. In looking at each author, their time period, and their writing, I believe that I have found an interesting corner of protest literature. It is a corner that envelopes generations of Black activists who aspire for change and are frustrated with the conditions of people of color in America. Through this study, I have learned more about a group of people that are so desperate to live in a country that accepts them regardless of the color of their skin. It is a sad reality that in 2020, the things that McKay, Baldwin, and Shakur write about have proved to be reality. Change is still not here. True equality has not been achieved.

I set out in this project with the plan of looking at how protest literature encapsulated an entire community of African Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What I found was so much more than that. I found that just as the methods of delivering protest changes, so does the tone in which authors write in changes. The results of my findings do not necessarily line up with what I set out to uncover because what I found was completely different than I expected. I did not intend to

find a shift in tone, nor did I even think to look for ideas such as optimism and pessimism. In fact, Afropessimism was a literary concept that was completely unknown to me. Moreover, Afropessimism is a term that has only recently been studied from a literary and historical standpoint. The first major book on the term was published just last year. In many respects, I am ahead of the curve in terms of uncovering this concept in protest literature. As a student of English, History, and Race/Ethnic studies, I set out to explore the complex world of protest literature. What I found was so much deeper than that. Instead of looking at protest literature and how it enforced change, I found a shift in voice that has gone largely unnoticed in historical analysis of protest. I found that the voice of African Americans today is not what it was 100 years ago. It is much different. It has changed. As such, I found that if I looked in the right places and at the right people, I might be able to explain why that was. I believe that I did that in this project and because of that, I think that I can become not just a better student of History and English, but a better citizen and a better person.

In terms of how my findings and research relate to what has been previously published and investigated, I believe that this project has asserted itself in a profound way. No one has put these three authors in conversation before on this deep of a level. Scholars have attempted to understand the protest writings of McKay, Baldwin and Shakur individually. However, they have never attempted the tall task at demonstrating how each of these authors build and expand on each other. It is through this building and expanding that I believe demonstrates a unique project that stands alone in the scope of historical analysis. Not only is the project unique in that it incorporates a conversation of authors that has never been done before, this concept of Afropessimism and tracking how pessimism has changed and shifted has never been done before either. So to answer the question of how the results of my research could have been expected

based off of other work that has been done or other theory that has been produced, it could not have been accurately depicted. Due to the new nature of this area of study, no one has really been able to create a timeline or demonstrate tone on this scale before. Did I expect pessimism to be this prevalent? Absolutely. But I would not go so far as to say that I found exactly what I expected to find because it is such a new corner of intellectual history. I have Dr. Williams to thank for helping fine tune what I was looking for and craft an argument that is unique and important.

I think that my results do not necessarily refute my hypothesis, but it does take my hypothesis and show that protest literature is a area of history that is much deeper than I originally thought. I did not foresee how deep this topic went and how involved I needed to be in order to strive for an answer to my question. Today, I do not wholeheartedly agree with my original hypothesis, but I was not completely off base. Rather, the material took me in a new direction, and I was able to comment on an area of history that is new and exciting.

James R. Watson III

## CONCLUSION:

This project, in all of its complexities and nuance, is important in the scope of African American history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this historical and literary analysis, I have uncovered what I believe to be an important discussion of the pessimism present within African American protest literature. In order to understand the psyche of those living in a racialized America today, it is necessary to go back just one hundred years ago and see what protest literature attempted to convey. In doing so, I have seen that Afropessimism is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it has been a sort of “Rose” that started to bloom in the 1920s and now it has come to the forefront of thought in 2020. Using the anchoring point of Harlem, I believe that I have proven the existence of pessimism in protest literature and shown that it has shifted and morphed over the last century. It is through this shift in McKay, Baldwin and Shakur that African American protest literature can be better understood. Society’s only hope for a better future comes with a recognition of the past. As Martin Luther King Jr. stated on Monmouth University’s campus in 1966, “If we are to go on in the days ahead, if we are to solve these problems, there must be a kind of divine discontent all around”. If society is to move forward, there needs to be an understanding of the past. Through this project, I believe that I have allowed for this past to be better discovered. Only the future will tell if America is able to see past racial barriers and allow for the optimism of McKay’s poem to manifest itself in American life.

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