Literary Alibi: The Consumption of African American and Dalit Literatures

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Literary Alibi

The Consumption of African American and Dalit Literatures[1]

NOUN. Alibi. /ˈaləˌbī/ Def. a claim or piece of evidence
that one was elsewhere when an act, typically a criminal one,
is alleged to have taken place.

Black writers occupy a seemingly paradoxical social position in contemporary American society where certain Black writers receive cultural acclaim while structural anti-Blackness continues to harm Black people as a whole. In 2018, historian Fred L Johnson III wrote, "American race relations are taking two very different paths at the same time. On the one hand, we're seeing growing mainstream acknowledgment of black pride projected through art. [. . .] On the other, racism and xenophobia are exerting tremendous influence in national politics." Black culture remains one of the most popular commodities in America. This is particularly apparent in literature where, as an example, African American writers—Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ibram X. Kendi, Jeffrey C. Stewart, Sarah M. Broom, Les and Tamara Payne, and Tiya Miles—have won 6 of the last 7 National Book Awards for Nonfiction. Black writers have been rightfully lauded for work that often interrogates or celebrates Blackness. Yet, Black people remain widely subjugated by both overt racism and racial microaggressions. Cultural celebration has not brought about universal social change, and, most crucially, all the deserved acclaim bestowed on exceptional African American writers cannot resuscitate George Floyd-Breonna Taylor-Michael Brown-Philando Castile-Eric Garner-and every other Black victim of racial injustice.

In *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African Americans in Contemporary Sports*, David J. Leonard and C. Richard King argue, "New racism, although articulating dominant white narrative and stereotypes, is equally defined by the consumption and celebration of commodified Blackness" (8). While Leonard and King focus on how "Black male bodies are increasingly admitted and commodified in rap, hip hop and certain sports," all aspects of Black culture have been consumed as part of this commodification process (8). Bell Hooks defines this process as "eating the other," and Nyambura Njee argues, "[T]he essentialized and simplistic construct of 'Blackness' that is popularly consumed and applauded by whites harms the Black community" (366, 121). While most Black writers are almost certainly not writing for a white gaze, the white consumer's insatiable appetite for Black culture

attempts to subsume Blackness for its own entertainment without enacting widespread social change.

The African American writer's seemingly paradoxical condition of cultural praise alongside social subjugation reoccurs in different literary traditions with different cultural contexts. Take writers from the erstwhile French colonies. In a famous 2007 manifesto, "Pour une 'littérature-monde' en français" ["Toward a 'World Literature' in French" (113)], over forty French-speaking writers demanded that the French literary world drop the label "Francophone literature" when referring to French writers from former French colonies and instead adopt the moniker "littérature-monde en français" ["world literature in French" (113)]. The signatories aptly note how writings from the so-called 'global periphery' are increasingly the most-celebrated writings by the 'center.' They demonstrate how the French literary establishment is bestowing numerous accolades upon texts from the former French colonies. While the signatories of this manifesto are speaking specifically about writers from the former French colonies, the phenomenon of the celebrated minority writer can be seen throughout the world. In 2018, Northern Irish writer Anna Burns won the UK's Booker Prize. In 2019, Black South Africans won ten of the thirteen South African Literary Awards. For seven of the last ten years, Portugal's most prestigious literary honor, the Camões Prize, was awarded to a writer from a former Portuguese colony. However, bias and discrimination against the minority or subjugated population remains in all these countries despite the literary success of a few writers from those same populations. French citizens from the former French colonies are widely discriminated against in contemporary France[2]; Brexit is said to have led to a re-kindling of Anti-Irish racism in the U.K[3]; South African race relations are described as "toxic"[4]; and cases of xenophobia against Brazilians in Portugal increased 150 percent in 2018.[5]

This phenomenon is particularly acute in Dalit Indian literature where Dalit novels and poems are wildly read and lauded while Dalit people still suffer the same abuses that the abolition of untouchability supposedly ended. A comparison between African American and Dalit writers is particularly generative given the similar place they occupy in their respective societies. Dalits are a class of people outside of the four-fold varna caste system. While every country has social stratification, the caste system is unique to India. The Brahmins—occupying the role of religious leaders—retro-fitted the caste system to Hindu theology and suggested that the caste system was divine order. The Kshatriyas, or kings, entrenched the social and political regulations of the caste system into law. Arjun Dangle writes, "[T]o follow the duties allotted to a particular caste in the texts became not only a religious obligation but also obedience to a royal order" (xx). The Dalits occupied the lowest rung of Indian society and were forced into deplorable living conditions. They were only allowed to participate in menial labor, and the social system of untouchability

discouraged contact between the upper-castes and Dalits because the Dalits were said to 'pollute' the upper-castes. As Dangle writes, "the untouchables lived a life full of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustices, atrocities" (xxi).

The 1949 Constitution of India abolished untouchability, and B. R. Ambedkar, himself a Dalit, was the architect of the Indian Constitution. Nevertheless, Indian society remains largely caste divided. Caste atrocities endure, and it is not uncommon to see headlines like "In Tamil Nadu, beheading of a 14-year-old is suspected to be a caste crime." Caste atrocities are particularly common in rural India, but caste prejudice remains a reality for Dalits even in cosmopolitan areas outside of India. In 2019, Indian scholar Shailaja Paik described being on the receiving end of a "casteist remark" while having "dinner at a prestigious US university." Even across the globe, Paik could not escape "the codes of the caste mechanism." Just as Harvey Young suggests "[A]n idea of the black body has been and continues to be projected across actual physical bodies," the idea of the Dalit is projected across actual physical Dalit bodies enacting a system of social subjugation that transcends legality (4). Further, Dalit writers have achieved extraordinary literary acclaim, such as legendary Dalit writer Manoranjan Byapari's 2019 Hindu Literary Prize and US-based Dalit writer Sujatha Gidla's 2018 Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize. Dalit writers are being lauded for extraordinary literature that grapples with Dalit identity. And yet, just like Black Americans, Dalits are not granted true equality despite the cultural acclaim bestowed on a few Dalit writers. Perhaps we should take heed of Ankit Jaaware's suggestion that "a literary revolution was celebrated in order to preempt the other, social one" (Eating 276).

In his essay "Eating, and Eating with, the Dalit: A Re-consideration Touching Upon Marathi Poetry," Jaaware examines the consumption of Dalit Marathi Poetry among non-Dalits. He writes of the "total politicication of the field" of Dalit literature because the consumption of Dalit literature is a political act in-and-of itself (285). Whenever a non-Dalit reads a work of Dalit literature, they are implicitly rejecting Dalit subjugation. As Jaaware so astutely writes, "Somethings like dalit poetry could be produced, circulated, and consumed only within a certain tacit assumption that the caste system was not good" (284). Yet, of course, reading is not the same thing as activism. Those systems of social stratification and political subjugation remain intact no matter how many well-meaning upper-caste readers read Dalit literature. Like bell hooks, Jaaware uses the metaphor of eating to explain how upper-caste readers "eat" the Dalit's literature instead of "eating with" the Dalit person:

> [T]he non-dalits managed to eat the dalit, without ever really having to eat with the dalit. The only metonymy through which the non-dalit can bear the touch of the dalit is through the dalit's words. It would be difficult to touch the real body

of a real dalit, or to eat with him, in the same plate, or to allow our daughter to marry a dalit (281).

For Jaaware, "eating with" means commensality—it implies actual intimacy between the Dalit and non-Dalit. By "eating," Jaaware means an almost cannibalistic consumption of the Dalit writer. In this devouring of the Dalit writer's essence, the non-Dalit centers themselves in their interaction with the Dalit text. Crucially, this consumption forecloses the need for actual intimacy. This entire literary enterprise is bound up in a self-congratulatory forgiveness where "[w]e could now begin to undo the sins of our ancestors it seems by reading and praising dalit poetry" (282).

I contend that we see a highly similar phenomenon in America with white consumption of African American literature. Building upon the work of Ankit Jaaware and bell hooks, I would like to suggest that rampant consumption of Black and Dalit literature by liberal members of the dominant white-American and upper-caste Indian communities can be understood as a process I call literary alibi. White-American and upper-caste Indian readers use their cultural consumption of minoritized literature as an "alibi" for the cultural failure to afford Black and Dalit people full social—and, by extension, political—recognition. These readers often participate in a system of innocence by association where they use their familiarity with cultural production, especially literature, created by people of color and Dalits to proclaim their own racial and caste innocence. These readers repurpose Fanon's seminal story about the forced construction of Black identity as a defense of their whiteness or upper-caste identity by proclaiming, "Look! (I read) a Negro."

To articulate my literary alibi thesis, I would like to examine two writers who have been culturally codified as representative of their race and caste—Langston Hughes and Namdeo Dhasal. A key point of commonality between these two exemplary writers is that they both produce work that resist attempts by the dominant-group readers to utilize their work as literary alibi. First, I must observe previous attempts to compare race and caste as social categories and African American and Dalit literatures as literary categories. Then, I will offer a close reading of Langston Hughes's "The Cat and the Saxophone: (2 A.M.)" and Namdeo Dhasal's "Stonemasons, My Father, and Me" to articulate how Hughes and Dhasal preemptively defy literary alibi. Finally, I will note the widespread cultural purchase of literary alibi in our current moment and argue for the importance of foreswearing literary alibi.

COMPARING AFRICAN AMERICAN AND DALIT LITERATURES

Dalit and African American literatures have been compared before, and N.M Aston argues for reading these two literary traditions as "literature of marginality" (9). African Americans and Dalits have a similar lived experience, and Mantra Roy

"demonstrates how two disparate societies, USA and India, are constituted by comparable hegemonic socio-economic-cultural and political structures of oppression that define and delimit the identities of the subalterns in the respective societies" (3). Additionally, many Dalit and African American writers have utilized writing as a political weapon. Finally, Dalit writers have frequently cited African Americans as a direct influence[6]. The lack of comparative scholarship between the two literary traditions in the American academy is surprising, and this work will attempt to rectify this gap in scholarship.

While we must be cognizant of the differences between casteism and racism, there are still similarities between Dalits and African Americans and their respective literary traditions. As cultural anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran wisely writes, "To say that two phenomena (caste and race) are similar is, after all, not to say that they are identical" (150). To be clear, this work does not presuppose that the Dalit and African American experiences are the same, and we must be cognizant of the different social and literary contexts. Nevertheless, this type of comparative scholarship is important and needs to be taken seriously because "race and racism travel" (Visweswaran 5). Journalist Isabel Wilkerson's recently released *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* makes the case that American racism operates *as* a caste system analogous to the Indian caste system, and Wilkerson's text is indicative of the value in comparative race-caste studies. Comparative work of this nature is particularly useful for Critical Race Theory because it points to the slippage of these supposedly fixed ideas of race or caste. Visweswaran writes, "Globalization not only produced a shift in what we take to be an analytic object, but also enables the displacement and relocation of apparently stable analytic objects like 'caste' and 'race' to new contexts" (5). With some key exceptions, the American academy has by-and-large neglected to compare African American and Dalit literatures. The rare work that does make this comparison, such as Vivek Bald's *Bengali Harlem* or Nikhil Bilwakesh's "Emerson, John Brown and Arjuna," are typically historical efforts that focus on the influence of the two literatures on one another rather than a literary comparison.

The Indian academy has produced excellent race-caste comparative work. S.D Kapoor's *Dalits and African Americans: A Study in Comparison* is a worthy point of entry into this intellectually generative field. However, almost all these works are limited to the comparison of African American and Dalit novels. From my research, there has been no major comparative study of African American and Dalit poetics. This is a shame because, as Kapoor argues:

> Comparisons between oppressed groups are not only natural but also sometimes necessary; natural because their struggle to reclaim the human space de-

> nied them for centuries is almost similar; necessary because the group that has taken a lead in reclaiming that space influences the other group in devising their strategies, far removed from the area of their operation. (13)

Dalit and African American's histories are uniquely kindred where they have been oppressed by their own country while both literary genres have been celebrated by their respective centers. While the Dalit and African American experiences are unique, a comparative analysis is valid and important.

Now, I will turn to an aesthetic comparison between African American and Dalit poetry by foregrounding my concept of Literary Alibi in a comparative analysis of Langston Hughes and Namdeo Dhasal—canonical poets in the African American and Dalit literary canons. I focus specifically on a poem from each of their debut collections: "The Cat and the Saxophone: (2 A.M.)" from Hughes's *The Weary Blues* (1926) and "Stonemasons, My Father, and Me" from Dhasal's *Golpitha* (1972). A comparison between Hughes's Harlem Renaissance and Dhasal's Dalit Panther period is generative yet remains woefully understudied. Both literary movements took place during a period of significant social change for African Americans/Dalits, and both literary movements advocated for civil rights for their people. Hughes and Dhasal are especially worthy of comparison because both poets are key writers of their respective literatures who preemptively defy literary alibi through the mobilization of polyvocality, their reflection of multiple positionalities within the subjugated groups, and their deliberate forging of divergent insider and outsider readerships.

THE WEARY BLUES, *GOLPITHA*, AND THE REJECTION OF LITERARY ALIBI

Langston Hughes open his 1926 debut poetry collection *The Weary Blues* by declaring "I am a Negro." Coming before the title page, "Proem" is an unabashed celebration of a universal Black identity. Karl Henzy suggests the poem is an example of Jungian collective unconscious because "the 'I' that is the subject of the clause" could not "have done all the things the 'I' of the poem has done" (921). The universal first-person reading has become the most common reading of both this poem and, I would suggest, Hughes generally. Henzy goes on to argue, "This collective first-person singular is in fact the central thread woven throughout the tapestry of *The Weary Blues*," and this collective first-person singular reading has captured the public's imagination since the release of Hughes's debut poetry collection (921). In one of the earliest reviews of *The Weary Blues*, Jessie Fauset wrote in *Crisis* that Hughes addressed the "universal subject served Negro-style" (61). Likewise, *The Toledo Times* claimed Hughes was "destined to be one of the great poets

of his race" (4). Understanding Hughes as a, or even *the*, racially representative Black author remains the most common reading of the poet and his poetry—especially *The Weary Blues*. Hughes is, to use Meta DuEwa Jones's formulation, a "literary totem" that "has been critically codified in a racially and culturally symbolic manner" (1146). This critical codification has transformed him into the key poet of the Harlem Renaissance, which was intellectually aligned with Du Bois's Talented Tenth thesis that "The final measure of the greatness of all people is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced." Du Bois believed this representative literature would lead to racial uplift, and this uplift narrative worked to commodify Black culture via a "literary program of racial publicity and civil rights known as the Harlem (or New Negro) Renaissance" (Vogel 3).

Yet, Hughes's status as *the* Harlem Renaissance poet has always been ironic because he rejected the idea that Black inferiority would be combated by the "respectful self-representation" of Black authors (Gaines 69). In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes responded to a poet's desire, likely Countee Cullen, to be seen as "a poet—not a Negro poet." Hughes claims, "No great poet has ever been afraid of being himself," and he states, "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." He goes on to argue: "We know we are beautiful. And ugly too." These two sentences are crucial because they indicate that Hughes's poetic project represented the broad spectrum of the African American experience and not an idealized mediation of Black life. While Du Boisian New Negro intellectuals sought to respond to "pseudo-scientific and cultural representation" of Black life via racial respectability, Hughes's poetry sought to "express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame" (Vogel 134; Hughes). "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" is indicative of Hughes's lifelong rejection of being read as '*the* Black poet.' Take, for example, his Jesse B. Semple[7] character featured in his prose writings published in *The Chicago Defender* between the 1940s and the 1960s. Hughes described Semple as "the folk philosopher of Harlem," and Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper argues, "Jesse B Semple offers particularly useful insights into the ways Hughes valued and interpreted the lives of those 'low-down' people he celebrated in his landmark 1926 essay 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain'" (63). "Coffee Break" is particularly insightful for Hughes's resistance to universal Negro ideology. Semple is meeting his white boss for coffee, and his boss asks him "just what does THE Negro want?" Semple responds:

> "I am not THE Negro," I says. "I am me."
> "Well," says my boss," You represent THE Negro."
> "I do not," I says. "I represent my own self." (80)

While we should not conflate Jesse B Semple's voice with Hughes, it is notable that Hughes's character explicitly rejects his white boss's monolithic idea of Blackness by asserting his own identity.

In her "Listening to What the Ear Demands," Meta DuEwa Jones argues Hughes has been critically codified as a "racial placeholder" and "a totemic figure whose pedestal is primarily built on his 'authentic' rendering of African-American forms of vernacular and musical expression" (1145). Jones continues, "The heavy emphasis on Hughes' poetry's linguistically and culturally authentic African-American 'folk' and urban characteristics has tended to oversimplify his corpus," which Jones problematizes by revealing the complexity of Hughes's *Ask Your Mama* and *Montage*. (1145). The "totemic reading" of Langston Hughes that Jones so wisely articulates also makes him an apt poet for literary alibi. If a white reader can approach Hughes as a Black literary totem, then literary alibi can be enacted by reading Hughes's poetry as a defense of whiteness—I read this poem, therefore, I am not a racist. Building upon Jones's nuanced reading of Hughes's late period verse, I would like to suggest that Hughes's early verse displays the same complexities and technical inventiveness that Jones sees in *Ask Your Mama* and *Montage*. In particular, "The Cat and the Saxophone: (2 A. M.)" utilizes heteroglossia and musicality to defy literary alibi:

EVERYBODY
Half-pint,—
Gin?
No, make it
LOVES MY BABY
corn. You like
liquor,
don't you, honey?
BUT MY BABY
Sure. Kiss me,
DON'T LOVE NOBODY
daddy.
BUT ME.
Say!
EVERYBODY
Yes?
WANTS MY BABY
I'm your
BUT MY BABY

sweetie, ain't I?
DON'T WANT NOBODY
Sure.
BUT
Then let's
ME,
do it!
SWEET ME.
Charleston,
Mamma
!

Placed in "The Weary Blues" section of his debut collection, Hughes presents an image of the Black Harlem cabaret. Hughes describes two people at a jazz club attempting to have a conversation. One person offers to buy the other a drink, and they eventually agree to dance the Charleston. Meanwhile, the band onstage plays Spencer Williams and Jack Palmer's "Everybody Loves My Baby," which is indicated by the bolded text. Unlike the other fourteen poems in "The Weary Blues" section, "The Cat and the Saxophone" uses heteroglossic poetics to blend its voices to a point where it is often difficult to discern the speaker. Hughes's deliberate ambiguity in this poem is crucial because early Hughes is often positioned as a poet translating the 1920's Black experience onto the page with his cabaret poetry. Lawrence Kramer argues, "Black music has often been a focal point for ascriptions of racial authenticity," and critics such as Hao Huang, David Chinitz, and Yusef Komunyakaa have praised Hughes for his 'authentic' rendering of Black Blues/Jazz poetry (5). However, in his *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, Shane Vogel makes the key intervention that "In the 1920s a very specific image of Harlem cabaret was crafted," and he quotes James Weldon Johnson who writes, "The picturesque Harlem was real, but it was writers who discovered its artistic values and, in giving literary expression to them, actually created the Harlem that captured the world's attention" (74, 74–75). With *The Weary Blues*, Hughes was, in effect, creating the popular and lasting image of the Harlem cabaret. However, with "The Cat and the Saxophone," Hughes embraces the nonmimetic qualities of his verse through heteroglossia. Vogel argues, "It was between the 'literary' and the 'real,' that the scene of the Harlem cabaret becomes legible *as* a scene," and "The Cat and the Saxophone" operates in this liminal space between the 'literary' and the 'real' to deconstruct an 'authentic representation' of the Harlem cabaret (75). This point is crucial because literary alibi depends upon the conception of the subjugated group in totalizing terms. If reading a text by a Black author is to offer some type of literary intimacy between oppressor and oppressed, then the text must be an authentic presentation of that author's race.

Hughes, however, rejects an authentic rendering in his poetry. As I will show, "The Cat and the Saxophone" is impenetrable without intimate knowledge of the Black Harlem cabaret he presents.

With his title, Hughes references an actual upper 5th Avenue jazz club, the Sugar Cane Club, which was commonly called Cat on the Saxophone by its regular patrons. Unlike the extremely popular segregated clubs, Cat on the Saxophone was a "Black cabaret," which Vogel calls, "[A] space [of] sociality, intimacy, and performance for primarily—though not exclusively—black audience and performers" (78). David Rosen writes, "The Sugar Cane Club was a late-night uptown speak, off-limits to the casual white slummer" (94). With this poem, Hughes seemingly reveals this space of intimate Black sociality—a space that Vogel points out "offered many black musicians a crucially supportive environment"—to a wider and whiter audience (117). David Chinitz argues *The Weary Blues* is imbued with "romanticized primitives" through Hughes presentation of the Black Harlem cabaret, and he argues, Hughes "gravitated unapologetically towards primitivism as an affirmative racial discourse" (66, 65). By rendering the Black cabaret on the page, Hughes is seemingly translating the Black cabaret for the white people who went to Harlem with, according to Paul Chevigny, "a shiver of adventure, supposedly to abandon the restraints of respectability" (33). However, this seems to run counter to Hughes's artistic project. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes writes about the cabaret clubs throughout Harlem and the relationship both Black and white people had with these clubs. He refused to go to the Cotton Club and other segregated cabarets because of their Jim Crow policies, and he writes, "Ordinary Negroes [did not] like the growing influx of whites towards Harlem after sundown" (176). The white patrons of these cabaret clubs were blissfully, and perhaps purposely, unaware of the resentment that the Harlem community had for the afterhours gentrification. Hughes writes, "So thousands of whites came to Harlem night after night, thinking the Negroes loved to have them there, and firmly believing that all Harlemites left their houses at sundown to sing and dance in cabarets, because most of the whites saw nothing but the cabarets, not the houses" (176). Why would Hughes—a man who completely disavows "the growing influx of whites towards Harlem after sundown"—'let the cat out of the bag' about one of Black Harlem cabarets that explicitly catered toward the Black residents of Harlem? As you may suspect, I do not believe Hughes is giving up the ghost that easily. Recall, the title of the poem.

The title of the poem "Cat and the Saxophone" is not the same as club's nickname, Cat on the Saxophone. Vogel suggests, "The title points instead to the practices of everyday life by which city inhabitants negotiate the administration of the city with their own vernacular renaming and remappings" (410). I extend Vogel's suggestion even further, and I read the slight title change as an example of Hughes's refusal to offer a metonymic presentation of the Sugar Cane Club. By altering the

title, Hughes refuses to provide his reader with the Black Harlem cabaret gloss. A reader who already approaches the poem with an intimate awareness of the Sugar Cane Club will immediately recognize the title as a reference to the club's nickname. If a reader lacks this intimate knowledge, they will be just like those "growing influx of whites" making their way "towards Harlem after sundown" and seeing "the cabarets, not the houses" (176). His title change creates a divergent insider and outsider reader and cannily resists translating the Black Harlem cabaret for the white gaze.

Throughout the poem, Hughes uses heteroglossia to merge the voices of the performer and the couple's conversation, and this technique mimics the frenetic atmosphere of the jazz club. The Sugar Cane Club was often crowded, and "members of the orchestra would wait on the tables when it became rushed" (Vogel 121). Hughes's fragmented language and enjambment contribute to the frenetic and 'noisy' atmosphere of the poem. Take the first few lines where Hughes writes:

> EVERYBODY
> Half-pint,—
> Gin?
> No, make it
> LOVES MY BABY
> corn. You like
> liquor,
> don't you, honey? (1–8)

There are three distinct voices here—performer, speaker A and speaker B. If we reformat the poem by speaker, it might look something like this:

> Performer: EVERYBODY LOVES MY BABY
> Speaker A: Half-pint,—Gin?
> Speaker B: No, make it corn.
> Speaker A: You like liquor, don't you, honey?

While the reformatted version is simpler to read, Hughes's original recreates the atmosphere of the Cat on the Saxophone cabaret. The enjambed lines suggest how the band's performance interrupts the natural flow of conversation and thus creates intimacy between performer and audience. Brent Hayes Edwards suggests, "The many languages in the poem are a means of apprehending a music so intimately concerned with dialogue and exchange among a group of performers and the audience that it can be approached only through a kind of critical multilingualism" (66). Hughes's heteroglossia reveals the intimacy between performer and audience found in the Black Harlem cabaret.

While scholars such as Edwards and James Smethurst have noted that Hughes's typography creates a heteroglossia where the capitalized text indicates the perfor-

mance and the sentence case text indicates the conversation, I believe the punctuation of the poem offers a third distinct language—music. We can read each punctuation mark as a moment of musicality. I am not suggesting that Hughes has created a literal one-for-one musical notation system where each period corresponds to a specific note, rhythm, or timbre. Rather, Hughes uses these punctuation marks to gesture towards musical moments, and he attempts to recreate the *feeling* of musical sound with his often-sporadic punctuation. Often, the punctuation marks do not correspond to any grammatical logic. Take, "ME," (25). What function does the "," serve? Perhaps it offers a break to the next conversation line, "do it!" (26). However, we do not see this type of punctuation in the remainder of the poem. The "," also does not logically correspond to the following bolded text "SWEET ME." (27). The punctuation should instead be read as Hughes's attempt to inject musicality into the poem. Writing of Hughes's blues poems in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, Edwards argues they, "suggest the graphic particularities of a musical score: a writing that precedes and structures a performance rather than follows and records it" (61). We can see something similar with "Cat on the Saxophone (2 A. M.)." Hughes creates a type of musical score with his punctuation marks, and, if we read the punctuation as musical notation, we add another voice into Hughes's heteroglossia.

Reading the punctuation as musical also answers the perplexing "!" that closes the poem. Of the final exclamation point, Vogel argues, "The poem's final line is given over to a visual symbol that cannot be read, *per se*, but is used to convey that surplus of feeling and emotion that shapes the meaning and interpretation of language before it" (123). We can apply Vogel's reading to a musical interpretation of the punctuation. With this exclamation mark, Hughes is punctuating the type of held horn or vocal run that would typically close a jazz song of this nature. The final exclamation point is the band's empathic resolution—the return to the I chord with a dramatic flourish. This is indeed a moment that should "convey that surplus of feeling and emotion" (123). Philip Ernstmeyer was undoubtedly correct when he suggested, "In the end, language collapses; the poem is reduced to the strange, unspeakable exclamation mark" (3). But this "unspeakable exclamation mark" does not lead to the unknown. Rather, the "unspeakable exclamation mark" offers an attempt to render the unspeakable nature of music in poetic form. Importantly, the reader must already have familiarity with the jazz music Hughes represents to understand the musicality of the poem. The reader who lacks familiarity with the 1920s jazz tradition, *feel* the "surplus of feeling and emotion" that the musical punctuation represents.

Phillip Ernstmeyer argues, "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 A. M.)" is "not directly representational." Yet, Hughes is representing a specific cabaret at a specific time. The poem, rather, is not directly representational to the outsider reader. To this reader, Hughes mobilizes heteroglossia to obscure his references to the Black

Harlem cabaret. However, a reader who patronized the Sugar Cane Club would instantly recognize Hughes's presentation of this specific Black cabaret. Likewise, his use of musicality communicates the feeling of music without transcribing it, requiring the reader to already have intimate familiarity with jazz to understand the poem's musicality. In his description of the Sugar Cane club, David Rosen writes, "The entrance was guarded by a man seated behind the front window, who, if he knew the visitor, pulled a long chain connected to a bolt on the entrance door that let the customer in. The patron then walked down a flight of stairs to join the festivities. If he didn't recognize you, good luck" (94). With "Cat on the Saxophone (2 A. M.)," Hughes allows his reader a glimpse inside the Sugar Cane Club, but, if he doesn't recognize you, he pulls the long chain shut.

We now turn to another poet who has been critically codified as a representative author of his people. Namdeo Dhasal's poetry is a wrecking ball of venom, vulgarity, and violence. Vijayanand Bansode writes, "It reflects the inner affliction, emotion, feelings, and pains of suppressed people" (2). Dhasal's debut poetry collection *Golpitha* was published in 1972 as a direct response to the caste atrocities of the 1960s. Raja Dhale, J.V. Pawar, Arjun Dangle, and Dhasal founded the Dalit Panthers—a political and literary movement inspired by the Black Panthers—in 1972. The Dalit Panthers sought to increases Dalit rights via militancy and revolution, and they formed, in their words, to "protest both atrocities against untouchables in the villages and the ineffectiveness of the Republican Party." (3 qtd. in Dharwadker). The four founding Dalit Panthers wrote literary works in addition to their political texts, and they brought forth perhaps the most famous Marathi literary movement, which was, according to Arjun Dangle, "the first time in India that creative writers became politically active and led a movement" (xli). The Dalit Panthers split in 1982 over ideological difference, and their political standing faded. Though the political movement was short-lived, the Dalit Panthers' literary impact remains a powerful force India, and their literary corpus is now firmly entrenched in the Indian Marathi literary canon.

The Dalit Panthers' poetics, as Padma D. Maitland argues, "shocks" by confronting readers with scenes from the slums and 'polluting' images associated with untouchability (184). With *Golpitha*, Dhasal focuses on the damaging effects untouchability has had on his hometown in Maharashtra, India, and he violates untouchability with his vulgar verse, profanity, and deconstruction of Brahmin imagery. *Golpitha* has often been read as a manifesto of Dalit pride, and critics have praised the collection for its unfettered realism. Dhasal himself contributed to this image by calling his debut collection "only an observation" that he developed while working as a taxi driver in Maharashtra (121). Maitland articulates the standard reading of *Golpitha* when she writes, "Dhasal's poems transform the 'dirty

imagery' of Dalits into a poetics of liberation and Buddhism into a model of social revolution" (185). Simply put, his poetry embraces Dalitness.

Yet, it is this embrace of Dalitness that has allowed Dhasal to be misread as mediating the 'universalized Dalit' and thus utilized within the literary alibi framework. To be sure, Dhasal refused to separate his poetry from his politics, and, as Swati Suri writes, "[His] poetry was a form of weapon that he used in his class struggle" (91). However, I would like to suggest *Golpitha* reveals a poet constantly questioning a fixed Dalit identity through his use of polyvocality, presentation of disparate Dalit personality, and thoughtful fashioning of an 'insider' and 'outsider' reader. Through his repudiation of a singular Dalit perspective, Dalit implicitly forecloses the possibility of literary intimacy that literary alibi depends upon because the upper-caste reader cannot read Dhasal as representative of the entire Dalit populous. To support my reading, I would like to examine a relatively obscure poem in *Golpitha*:"Stonemasons, My Father, and Me."

> Stonemasons give stones dreams to dream; I set a match to fireworks.
> They say one mustn't step into one's father's life: I do; I scratch his
> elbows, his armpits.
> Stonemasons give stones flowers; I play horns and trumpets.
> I overtake the Parsi who stands turned to stone by the bodies of four
> women bent like bows. I see my father's bloodied rump. In the chaos
> of the dark I smoke a cheroot and smolder with memories till my
> lips get burnt.
> Stonemasons inseminate stones; I count exhausted horses.
> I harness myself to a cart; I handle my father's corpse; I burn.
> Stonemasons mix blood with stones; I carry a load of stones.
> Stonemasons build a stone house. I break heads with stones.[8]

While I am examining the English translation, the poem was originally written in Marathi. Dhasal's language forecloses familiarity with his upper-caste reader. *Golpitha* is incomprehensible to the average Marathi reader because Dhasal uses an abundance of Dalit-specific slang. Brahmin critic and playwright Vijay Tendulkar wrote the original foreword to *Golpitha*, and he famously noted his inability to understand Dhasal's language—writing, "this is a world where the night is reversed into the day" (qtd. in Chitre 10). Jaaware suggests the language of *Golpitha* is "incomprehensible to the average reader" and this incomprehensibility functions as an "inverted snobbery" (*Practicing Caste* 275, 276). *Golpitha* famously includes a gloss, which produces a deviating readership. The Dalit or 'insider' reader can read the poem unmediated. This reader does not need to turn to a gloss while reading the poem, and their reading process is uninterrupted. The non-Dalit or 'outsider'

reader must rely on the gloss to understand Dhasal's poetics, and their reading process is interrupted by the need to flip from poem to gloss creating an unstable reading experience. By using language that is "incomprehensible to the average reader" and including a gloss to decipher the poetry, Dhasal creates two different reading cultures within the same poem—an 'insider' and an 'outsider' (Jaaware, *Practicing Caste* 275).

"Stonemasons, My Father, and Me" reflects multiple positionalities within the Dalit group, which is evident by the poet placing himself in opposition to the Stonemasons. The reader immediately understands that both Dhasal and the Stonemasons are Dalits because stonemasonry is a Dalit-prescribed labor practice. Dhasal positions the Stonemasons as his Dalit foil. Dhasal writes, "Stonemasons give stones dreams to dream," while he sets "a match to fireworks;" and "Stonemasons give stones flowers," while Dhasal disrupts by playing "horns and trumpets." The implication is clear. The Dalit Stonemasons are accepting their position in the caste system, while Dhasal is rejecting his place. Dalits have always been associated with exploited laborers, and, in his foundational *Gulamigiri*, Jyotirao Phule argues that Indian peasant workers are the "proverbial Milk Cow" for India (31). When Dhasal is writing in 1972, some Dalit leaders had begun to romanticize Dalit labor. For example, at the 1958 Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha, the first Dalit literary conference, Anupama Rao writes:

> [T]he performer Sathe associated the invisibility of outcaste labor with the devaluation of labor more generally, and argued that Dalits' capacity for struggle and hardship, kashta, produced wealth: Dalits' labor, because it created the world, also made Dalits the malaks, or proprietors, of that world. In his famous words, "Hi prithvi dalitanchya talahatavar tarleli ahe (This world turns/dances to the Dalits' tune)." (155)

While Sathe was attempting to bestow dignity upon Dalit laborers, privileging this labor has the damaging potential to reiterate Dalit identity as depressed and exploited. As Rao argues, "The emancipatory potential of labor universalism created the possibility of Dalit utopia but simultaneously foreclosed it" (155). Dhasal rejects this utopic foreclosure by placing himself in opposition to the Stonemasons' acceptance of their caste-prescribed labor and differentiating the Dalit experience.

Dhasal also refuses to romanticize the Stonemasons by making their labor hardships visible. While the first two stanzas perhaps repeat Sathe's claims that "This world dances to the Dalits' tune" because Dhasal uses the romantic vision of Stonemasons creating "dreams" and "flowers," the subsequent stanzas complicate and ultimately abandon this reading. In stanza three, he claims the Stonemasons "inseminate" the stones, which brings a sexualized vulgarity to the labor. The fourth stanza makes the human cost of this labor visible when Dhasal writes, "Stone-

masons mix blood with stones." Dhasal refuses to let an idealized image of the Stonemasons linger without also revealing the pains behind their labor.

Dhasal even forecloses literary intimacy with other Indian poets by breaking from traditional Sanskrit poetic theory. According to traditional Sanskrit aesthetics, there are nine types of rasas[9], or emotive stimuli, that any literary work may offer. Each rasa produces a different emotional state. Traditional Indian poetry primarily offers Śṛṅgāraḥ [romance] or Adbhutam [Wonder]. Bībhatsam [Disgust] is the dominant feeling of *Golpitha*, which is highly unusual for Indian poetry. Chitre suggests Dhasal creates a poetic "dissonance" by centering the Bībhatsam whilst juxtaposing the other rasas (12). We can see this dissonance in the first line of "Stonemasons, My Father, and Me" where Dhasal writes, "Stonemasons give stones dreams to dream; I set a match to fireworks." He begins with a traditional romance affect where the idealized Stonemasons are a conduit for the stones' dreams. Dhasal then switches to the personal first person and breaks out of the romance affect with an implied explosion because he "set a match to fireworks." Dhasal refuses to be bounded to Śṛṅgāraḥ or romance. This line is indicative of Dhasal's entire poetic project in *Golpitha* where he deliberately violates traditions from vocabulary to content to aesthetics. By juxtaposing Śṛṅgāraḥ [romance] with Bībhatsam [disgust], Dhasal creates a poetics entirely outside of traditional Sanskrit aesthetics.

While Dilip Chitre argues Dhasal offers "the undercaste in universal terms," poems like "Stonemasons, My Father, and Me" complicate this reading because the poet refuses to mediate a homogeneous Dalit identity (94). In this refusal, Dhasal resists literary intimacy with his upper-caste readers and preemptively defies literary alibi. A close reading of "The Cat and the Saxophone: (2 A.M.)" from Hughes's *The Weary Blues* (1926) and "Stonemasons, My Father, and Me" from Dhasal's *Golpitha* (1972) reveals two different poets from different marginalized groups who have been used as literary alibi. While both poetry collections have been rightfully canonized, both poets resist simple metonymic readings by using modernist poetic techniques such as shifting perspectives, heteroglossia, dialectic, and free verse; and in doing so, Hughes and Dhasal reject literary alibi.

FORESWEARING LITERARY ALIBI

This question of literary alibi in African American and Dalit literature is all the more important when we consider our moment. While finalizing this project, the world has witnessed the fallout of George Floyd's murder and the subsequent global protest against police brutality and anti-Blackness. Since the video's release, books about race and racism—such as Ibram X. Kendi's *How to be an Antiracist*, Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*, and Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race*—shot to the top of the *New York Times* and Amazon Bestseller List. Obviously, not

only white people purchased these books, but many of these consumers surely are white given the demographic makeup of the United States.

What drove so many people to purchase these books in the wake of George Floyd's murder? While some were surely motivated by a desire to understand racism in America, I cannot help but feel a bit cynical about the mass consumption of books about race following a racist tragedy. In my mind, literary alibi undoubtedly played a role in many consumers' decision to purchase these books. This is a cycle of recurrent consumption of Blackness where, as Nyambura Njee writes, "Blackness is rampantly consumed, commodified, and appropriated, while Black people daily lose their lives to police brutality and systemic racism" (124).

Let me be clear. I do not question that African American or Dalit literature is important and needs to be read, or that the acclaim bestowed upon these texts is both well-deserved and overdue. My contention is that literary alibi does not *equal* social change and must not be a substitute for it. Aniket Jaaware beautifully elucidates the dangers of conflating literary revolution with social revolution in his work on Dalit literature when he writes, "[W]e could always eat the dalit by consuming his speech, thus satisfying our so easily satisfiable conscience" (287). This line always stays with me because the white American consciousness is indeed so very easily satisfied. Simply having proximity to a Black person or Black culture via literature is used to immunize white people from racism, and the same is true in Dalit literature.

Returning to Langston Hughes and Namdeo Dhasal, we see two representative poets producing strictly similar modernist poetry. Despite both poets' resistance to metonymic readings, both were 'consumed' and used for literary alibi. As Jaaware writes, "Words can always be eaten, made substitutes for any real or metaphorical touching" (287). By way of this cannibalistic consumption, white and upper-caste readers were able to metonymically 'touch' these Black and Dalit texts without actually interacting with Black or Dalit people. Hughes was deeply suspicious of metaphorical touching. In his late career poem "Ode to Dinah," Hughes writes, "White folks' recession / is Colored folks' depression" (32). This recession is not simply economic but also a metaphor for social concern. If anti-racism becomes a mere passing fad, racial justice will not be achieved.

Literary alibi is not enough. Worse still, the cannibalistic consumption of Dalit and African American texts can become an act of containment. In his radical call-to-arms "Man You Should Explode," Dhasal writes, "Man, one should tear off all the pages of all the sacred books in the world / And give them to people for wiping shit off their arses when done" (45–46). Instead of leading to the destruction of savarna (upper-caste) culture as the author intended, Dhasal's poetry was instead consumed by his upper-caste readers and incorporated into Indian literary culture. In this corporeal incorporation, Dhasal's mighty pen was dulled. As Jaaware states, "a literary revolution was celebrated in order to preempt the other, social one" (Eating 276).

Where do we go from here? How do we foreswear literary alibi? Jonathan W. Gray argues, "perfecting America's union requires actions as well as words" (13). In the US, all of the rightful success bestowed on Black authors has not necessarily changed viewpoints regarding racial policy. In their study of white attitudes towards racial justice, Meredith Conroy and Perry Bacon Jr. write, "White Democrats are wary of big ideas to address racial inequality." They continue, "While an overwhelming majority of white Democrats said that racial discrimination was a major barrier to Black people…white Democrats [remain] fairly opposed to giving reparations to the descendants of enslaved people… And on a wide range of other policy ideas intended to address racial inequality, white Democrats are fairly tentative." Crucially, this study was conducted *after* the 2020 Black Lives Matter protest and the subsequent success of books about race and racism. Many of the policies that white liberals are hesitant towards would integrate African Americans into predominately white communities and white schools. Let's recall Jaaware's claim, "It would be so very difficult to touch the real body of a real dalit, or to eat with him, in the same plate, or to allow our daughter to marry a dalit" (281). If well-meaning white and upper-caste people truly want a more just society, we must foreswear literary alibi and cease to use Black or Dalit literature to assuage white or upper-caste guilt. Measurable action is needed in the forms of reparations, criminal justice reform, and aggressive legislation supporting racial and caste justice. When a white or upper-caste person closes a book by a Black or Dalit author, our anti-racist and anti-caste work is not done. It should be just beginning.

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NOTES

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2 See Ware, Leland.
3 See Feenan, Dermot.
4 See Keane, Fergal.
5 See Miranda, Giuliana.
6 The connection between African America and Dalits is especially apparent in Marathi Dalit literature. Jyotirao Phule (1822–80) is considered one of the intellectual forefathers of modern Marathi Dalit literature. In 1873, he wrote his pamphlet “Gulamgiri” celebrating the abolition of slavery in the US, and he writes, “The depressed and downtrodden people of India feel especially happy at this development because they alone or the slaves in America have experienced the many inhuman hardships and tortures attendant upon slavery.” Likewise, B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956)— perhaps the most important figure in Dalit history—wrote to Du Bois in 1946 regarding the National Negro Congress’s petition to the U.N to secure minority rights on the UN Council. Ambedkar writes, “There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchable in India and of the position of the Negros in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary.” The 1970s Dalit Panther—a political organization founded by

poet Namdeo Dhasal (1949–2014), writer J.V. Pawar (1944–), writer Raja Dhale (1940–2019), and writer Arjun Kamble (1953–2009) in Maharashtra, India—offer the most direct parallel with African American literature. These are but a few examples of the long intertextual history between Dalit and African American literature.

7 Jesse B Simple in some publications.

8 Translated by Vijayanand Bansode.

9 The rasas are Śṛṅgāraḥ (romance), Hāsyam (Laughter), Raudram (Fury), Kāruṇyam (Compassion), Bībhatsam (Disgust), Bhayānakam (Horror), Veeram (Heroism), Adbhutam (Wonder), and Śāntam (Peace). Traditional Indian poetry primarily offers Śṛṅgāraḥ (romance) or Adbhutam (Wonder).