



# Degree Project

Teacher Education for Upper Secondary School, 300 credits

## Semantics Is Always a Bitch:

A Close Reading of Gil Scott Heron's Poems "Black History" and "Whitey on the Moon" through the Lens of African American Criticism.

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## Abstract

Racism is sadly a never-ending problem that must be discussed with every new generation. This study poses the questions: *How does Gil Scott-Heron use humour in his poems to problematise a racist discourse?* and *Why and how should poetry with multimodal features covering aspects of racism be used to teach students about human rights and critical thinking in upper secondary school?* Through close reading, we analyse the poems “Black History” and “Whitey on the Moon” by Gil Scott-Heron through the lens of African American criticism with particular attention to the concepts of Whiteness and Africanism as described by Toni Morrison. Scott-Heron uses signifiers to satirize racist discourse and he mocks white supremacy for behaviour towards people of colour. The multimodal aspects of the poem enhance the satire. This study also utilises bell hooks’ and Paolo Freire’s theories of radical pedagogy to connect the analysis linked with multimodality to a classroom environment. With radical pedagogy, teachers can create a safe environment where Scott-Heron’s poetry can be discussed with students. The multimodal aspect ensures that more students may understand and relate to the material.

**Keywords:** poetry, African American criticism, close reading, radical pedagogy, multimodality, racism, Gil Scott-Heron.



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# 1. Introduction

Gil Scott-Heron matters, and ought to be celebrated, because he's a testament to the extraordinary heterogeneity of black popular music, and the fact that innovation and inspiration can just as easily come from individual striving, artistic ambition, and inimitable mixtures of talent and technique as much as from a transhistorical group condition that may or may not have produced a unifying aesthetic tradition.

- Jack Hamilton in "Pieces of a Man," 125

In 2021, several billionaires, including Jeff Bezos, travelled to space to spend a short time there before returning (Mitchell). Billionaires are spending their money on space tourism rather than helping those in need, showing that space tourism for the wealthy is more important than caring for those left behind. Gil Scott-Heron released his song "Whitey on the Moon" in 1970 as a way of critiquing the space race and the U.S. government funding space travels rather than basic human needs, an evergreen problem. In "Whitey on the Moon" and other poems Scott-Heron challenges dominant, white discourses with witty comments and humour while being fully serious in his criticism.

The realness which Scott-Heron mediates through his poetry is what we admire most in his work. The lack of research on his poetry inspired us to write this essay, as we wanted to explore ways to work with his poetry in the classroom. Our study is grounded in the Swedish curriculum. According to Skolverket, "education shall contribute and establish respect for the human rights and the foundational democratic values on which Swedish society rests" (our translation). These values include intolerance of racism, which should be prevented and dealt with by raising knowledge and using active intervention. Additionally, the curriculum for English 5, 6, and 7 states that "students shall be given the opportunity to develop an understanding of living conditions, social issues, and cultural conditions in different contexts and areas where English is used." Furthermore, the section on reception in English 6 states that "fiction, as well as poems and drama, both contemporary and excerpts from older works" should be covered. Thus, our essay aims to overlap course curricula to give teachers effective material to use in order to teach the "democratic values on which Swedish society rests."

This essay analyses two poems by the poet Gil Scott-Heron through an African American critical lens. Showing how Scott-Heron's poetry challenges the centring of whiteness in historical narratives, the essay aims to answer two questions: *How does Gil Scott-Heron use humour in his poems to problematise racist discourses?* and *why and how should poetry with*

*multimodal features covering aspects of racism be used to teach students about human rights and critical thinking in upper secondary school?*

Firstly, we will present previous research and relevant literature in the area. Secondly, we will give the theoretical background of African American criticism, particularly Toni Morrison's ideas of Whiteness and Africanism as well as the theory behind signifiers, Black Signifyin(g) and weak signifiers. Along with that, aspects of multimodality are explored, as well as radical pedagogy as described by bell hooks and Paulo Freire, both of which contribute to this essay's pedagogical perspective. Thirdly, the analysis covers the poems "Black History" and "Whitey on the Moon" separately, performing a close reading of each poem and then comparing the two. Educational considerations will follow the analysis. Lastly, the conclusions of our findings are presented, along with the connection between the analysis of the poems and the educational considerations that can be made through radical pedagogy and the element of multimodality.

### 1.1 Gil Scott-Heron

In his memoir *The Last Holiday: A Memoir*, Gil Scott-Heron tells the story of his life. He was born in 1949 in Chicago, Illinois (17). After a childhood spent in Tennessee and New York, largely with the women of his family, Scott-Heron began his writing career in 1970. From the start of his career, Scott-Heron incorporated music and musical aspects into his written poetry. He released his first album of spoken word poetry, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, in 1970 where he combined his poetry with musical aspects. The recording included what later became one of his most famous songs, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," which has, since its release, been sampled several times. About a year later, Scott-Heron released his second musical album, *Pieces of a Man* (Poetry Foundation). At the start of his career, the poetry he wrote treated subjects such as racism, poverty, police brutality, and drug and alcohol addiction in America (Schreiber 154). After the 1980s, he unfortunately developed a drug addiction, falling prey to the dangers he had spoken about in his poetry (Hamilton 106). Gil Scott-Heron passed away in 2011 at the age of 62 (Poetry Foundation).

In *Pieces of a Man*, Jack Hamilton discusses how Scott-Heron never dedicated himself entirely to one genre. Instead, his music was inspired by jazz, blues, and RnB. During and after his career, Scott-Heron was claimed to be the father of hip-hop and is still praised for his contributions to Black music (Hamilton 125). He has later significantly influenced contemporary hip-hop artists, for example, in 2023 Jay-Z sampled Scott-Heron's poem "New

York is Killing Me” in a new version of “Empire State of Mind” (Strauss). Thus, Scott-Heron’s legacy is still topical in today’s discussions of contemporary hip-hop and social situations.

## 2. Literature Review

There is limited research on the use of Gil Scott-Heron’s poems, and most of it covers his famous poem and song “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” We found one article that covers “Whitey on the Moon,” but we did not have access to it when writing this essay. However, there is research on the pedagogical uses of hip-hop where Scott-Heron’s music and poetry is used.

Firstly, because Scott-Heron’s artistry is mostly connected to spoken word poetry, it is necessary to discuss the differences and similarities between spoken word poetry and rap, as explained in “MC Origins: Rap and Spoken Word Poetry” by Alice Price-Styles. African-style orality and the oral folk tales can be linked to different musical genres and musical styles used by African American artists, including spoken word poetry as well as rap. Spoken word poetry became popular during the earlier part of the twentieth century, with connections to the Harlem Renaissance, when it was combined with elements of jazz and given a clearer sense of rhythm with a musical beat. Spoken word later grew to be used in political spheres in the 1960s, which has inspired today’s modern usage of spoken word poetry as well as rap. When rap began to grow big in the 1990s from the roots of funk/soul movements in the 1970s, similarities with spoken word poetry could be observed. As rap began to grow in popularity artists were able to explore other genres to find their own style, being inspired by contemporary music such as jazz, blues, and even spoken word poetry. However, Price-Styles argues that rap is not a type of spoken word poetry but that the two instead should be considered equal members of a “family tree of Black artistic expression” (13), having their own unique qualities. She argues that rap does not need political agendas, and the form is free for the artist to experiment with. According to Price-Styles, the two forms may be differentiated based on sound and content, where rap is often intended to entertain rather than produce a poetic effect. However, she also states that rap is a diverse genre with a great many different styles and sounds to it. This understanding of the two genres is relevant for our suggested approach of working with Scott-Heron’s poems in the classroom. We consider these poems to belong primarily to spoken word poetry and not to rap. However, the two styles can be handled similarly and compared in the classroom, due to the genres’ representation of and connection to African American history. In the following paragraphs, the term hip-hop will be mentioned. The term sometimes refers to the genre of music in a general sense. However, other times hip-hop refers to the cultural and

global phenomenon that developed in New York City in the 1970s, where rap is included as a music style.

Teaching hip-hop and spoken word as multimodal genres can offer diverse pedagogical opportunities. In “Multimodal Pedagogies for Teacher Education in TESOL,” Youngjoo and Tuba argue that implementing multimodal practices enables students to develop multiliteracy skills, practice critical thinking, and become more aware of sociopolitical issues. The authors also argue that using multimodality can be beneficial in creating a classroom with more cultural diversity.

In “Multimodal Literacy: From Theories to Practices,” Frank Serafini discusses how multimodal literacy could help students comprehend texts. Multimodal texts include pictures, visuals and sometimes sound, which can create a more accessible comprehension for students to understand the content. Exploring multimodal texts may help students translate their “inner text” and analyse the content. A multimodal text is more complex than a traditional one and utilises various cultural and semiotic resources to communicate new meanings and concepts. Serafini argues that it is essential to discuss what multimodal texts do, not only what they are. According to Serafini, multimodal literacy should focus on the individual perception of the text and how multimodal texts function in broader sociocultural contexts. Multimodal literacy involves understanding how discrete sign systems or individual modes articulate and represent potential meanings and how meaning is constructed as sign systems interact. Serafini presents a theoretical framework for approaching and understanding visual images and multimodal texts through an ideological analytical perspective. This view extends the interpretive process of multimodal texts to sociocultural, historical, and political contexts of the production of the text. The multimodal perspective will be used in the discussion of the educational context; by using Scott-Heron’s poems and songs the students will acquire a deeper understanding of the lyrics and their context.

The previous research on how Scott-Heron’s music is used is limited. However, the following article explores the usage of Scott-Heron’s famous poem “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” in a pedagogical context. Malcolm Scott demonstrates in “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Exploring Contemporary Social Justice Issues in the United States” how Scott-Heron’s poetry can be exercised in the language classroom. Scott argues that hip-hop can create an engaging and inspiring atmosphere for students, and as a way of encouraging other teachers to practice similar lessons, he provides a complete lesson plan, focusing on one of Scott-Heron's poems. With the help of music spanning from the 1970s to today, Scott introduces students to complex issues that would otherwise be challenging to comprehend and

discuss. He explains that hip-hop can be used as an entryway to discuss matters of prejudice, racism, and intolerance with the students.

In “Hip-Hop Literature: The Politics, Poetics, and Power of Hip-Hop in the English Classroom,” Lauren Leigh Kelly argues that hip-hop may be used to connect students’ lives to their learning. She suggests that hip-hop be applied to teach skills and literary concepts which usually are perceived as complex such as metaphor and implied meanings, but also to develop critical thinking skills. Moreover, Kelly challenges the common perception of the sometimes-explicit language in hip-hop. She argues that even if the language can seem unfavourable, it is essential to prepare the students to make informed decisions regarding media consumption.

### 3. Theoretical Background

#### 3.1 African American Criticism

According to JoAnne Cornwell-Giles in “Afro-American Criticism and Western Consciousness: The Politics of Knowing,” African American criticism developed as a criticism of mainstream literature portraying African Americans in American literature as less than human. Historically, literature portraying African Americans has centred on otherness, creating distance between people of colour and white people (88). In *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Lois Tyson explains that institutionalised racism is the form of racism that has affected African Americans most and is reproduced in canonical literature, which has prioritised white European experience and superiority (344) and has thus contributed to the shaping of white supremacist ideology in literature and society. This racism has remained present through centuries due to the mistreatment of African Americans by American law, where many continue to face racism in both legal and quotidian contexts (Tyson 169).

White supremacist ideology is especially apparent in the legacy of *double consciousness*, an important concept in African American criticism. Coined by W.E.B. DuBois, it is “the awareness of belonging to two conflicting cultures” (Tyson 346), the African American culture and the white culture of the United States. Black Americans are aware of the white supremacist society they live in but are still not a part of, which can lead to a sense of being foreign in their own country. Tyson explains that this double consciousness affects African American writers when they use two languages, Black Vernacular English and standard American English. Because literary language is connected to politics, social situations, and power relations (348), the choice of language, be it standard English or Black Vernacular English, reflects the politics, social situations, and power relations that affect Black communities.

In our analysis, we will use African American criticism, as described by Cornwell-Giles and Tyson, to discuss Gil Scott-Heron's poems and explore how his work connects to a larger agenda of Black literature. The following concepts and terms within African American criticism will be of particular importance in our analysis of Scott-Heron's poems.

### 3.1.1 Whiteness and Africanism

In *Playing in The Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison presents her version of the term *Africanism*. She describes the term as “the denotative and connotative blackness that African people have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people” (6-7). She explains that the term is used to represent all people who are not white and along with the usage of blackness follows a range of signifiers that marginalise these people. Morrison describes the term *whiteness* as a concept “that surface[s] in American literature whenever an Africanist presence is engaged” (32-33). Whiteness is constructed by portraying a character of colour as the negative opposite of a white character (16-17).

She also explains that “Africanist” characters exist to emphasise whiteness, arguing that “the subject of the dream is the dreamer” (16-17), meaning that the creation of literary whiteness and literary blackness is an attempt to use blackness as a self-reflection, in which blackness is negatively portrayed against the “positive” qualities of whiteness. However, to not acknowledge race and to act as if the world is raceless is itself an act of racism, according to Morrison (46). Her work aims for readers and writers “to benefit from the lessons of earlier mistakes and past misfortunes to record them as to prevent their repetition through exposure and inoculation” (36). Over time, literary discourse has controlled Black people's narratives and cultural perceptions (9). By questioning this discourse, historically controlled by white authors, Morrison aims to challenge the hierarchical logic rooted in political power and literary culture to the point that it has been normalized.

Using Morrison's perspective, we will investigate how Scott-Heron's poems challenge the hierarchy presented within the discourse of literary whiteness. Through this approach, we attempt to understand how whiteness and Africanism are portrayed and expressed within the poems by looking at signifiers, amongst other aspects. Scott-Heron attempts to create a more diverse picture of the Black community by flipping the dominant discourse when he plays on signifiers of whiteness, by using humour and satire.

### 3.1.2 Signifier + Signified / Signifyin(g) / Weak Signifier

Tyson explains that the equation  $sign = signifier + signified$  is an arbitrary relationship associated with structuralist criticism (202) and frequently connected with Ferdinand de Saussure (Gates 64). Marcel Danesi explains Saussure's idea in "Saussure's View of Language as a System of Arbitrary Signs" and it is, simply put, that the signifier and signified are dependent on each other (20) and that the *signifier*, seen as "a mental imprint of a linguistic sound" (Tyson 202) relates to what will be signified, based on the reader's interpretation of the concept of the signifier and vice versa (Danesi 20). A well-known example of this is "rose" as a signifier, where the signified will be dependent on the reader's perception, resulting in the signified being various forms of a rose.

In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains *Signifyin(g)* as a rhetorical game of using tropes, such as irony, by playing on words to signify another meaning (71). Gates states that *Signifyin(g)* helps Black people share a language that white people cannot understand the same way (94). In *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*, Samuel A. Floyd explains the concept of *Signifyin(g)* as a psychological self-defence and self-empowering strategy that originated in Black cynicism (92). *Signifyin(g)* is figurative and implied speech within the Black Vernacular, using the words to imply something else, a reinterpretation and a metaphor that alludes to other texts or figures. Therefore, the main focus lies on the signifier and not the signified to create an ambiguous play of words (95).

In "The Power of the Weak Signifier: Wordsworth's Lucy in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*," Nicole Gervasio presents the concept of a *weak signifier* as when the signifier does not have an explicit signified associated with only one sign. This makes the understanding of the signifier and what it represents ambiguous (38). Gervasio describes how a word can have different meanings associated with it, leading the reader to imagine different visual representations of what is signified by the given word. The point of a weak signifier is to trouble power discourses in literature.

When discussing the complexity of sign systems, the relation to deconstruction needs to be commented on. In "A Tinker's Damn: Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and "The Signifying Monkey" Twenty Years Later," Joyce Ann Joyce explains that language is unstable from a deconstructive point of view "because meaning is always deferred, because the signifiers consistently defer meaning" (374). She also states that "[m]eaning [...] does not lie in the texts we read, but instead in how the language manipulates the reader" (374). Although we do not explicitly explore the use of binary opposition in the analysis of the poems, which Tyson explains as one of the strategies when deconstructing a text (240), we do break down the

meaning of specific words when analysing the poems to show the words' ambiguity, and, therefore, it may be argued that we use deconstruction as a tool to understand the meaning behind the language. The deconstructive approach is implicit when reading the poems. It is, however, not mentioned further in our chosen method.

The play on Saussure's signifier + signified through the Black Vernacular use of Signifyin(g), will be investigated in the analysis of the poems to show how Scott-Heron humorously comments on and challenges dominant discourses. Weak signifiers will be considered to discuss how Scott-Heron uses ambiguity and double meanings in his poems.

### 3.2 Multimodality

Scott-Heron's poems exist in various formats, including video, spoken word, text, and songs, meaning that they exist in multimodal formats. This essay explores the benefits of their multimodal aspects, how the poems' multimodal aspects help shape meaning and the pedagogical benefits of incorporating them in the classroom.

Multimodal social-semiotic theory interprets meanings through various perspectives, with a significant focus on multimodality. This theory, as explained by Gunther Kress in *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*, addresses common issues across all modes and examines the relations between them. Another aspect of the theory delves deeper into specific modes, exploring factors such as cultural origins that have shaped them (61). The interpretation of the signs and concepts is highly dependent on their environmental and contextual placement. According to Kress, different communities and societies employ modes in ways that are influenced by their cultural norms, values, and technologies (13). Kress elaborates on the social-semiotic theory of multimodality, highlighting how individuals use different signs and symbols in social contexts to communicate, emphasising that all forms of communication involve a combination of modes (5). Multimodality encompasses various modes, including images features, music, and sound (6), which are often used together in modal ensembles, each serving a specific purpose. The design of each mode is driven by the text's objectives and is influenced by financial, social, and cultural power, implying that the style is inherently political (28).

Since cultural norms and backgrounds are vital for interpreting content, Kress argues against the phenomenon of a "universal language" (8). Kress describes the process of creating new meanings when the interpreter is presented with material in different modes. It starts with interest and ends with the recipient making a new inner sign of what is offered. The process begins with the previous knowledge and creates new and adapted knowledge (42). This essay

will focus on the different modes that Scott-Heron has chosen to present in his poems and our interpretation of the word's meaning when reading.

### 3.3 Radical Pedagogy

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks describes radical pedagogy as a way of teaching that not only spreads information but encourages students' intellectual and spiritual growth, which leads to respect and care for all students. The aim is to transgress the boundaries that confine students to monotonous learning approaches. She advocates that teachers approach students as individuals so as to let each student grow uniquely (13) and that they treat students as active participants in learning, not passive recipients (8). The goal should be to create a safe classroom environment where students and their words are equally acknowledged and valued and in which the students themselves contribute to the creation of knowledge.

Another important proponent of radical pedagogy was Paulo Freire. In an interview, he encourages teachers to develop certain qualities or virtues to prevent what he calls "bureaucratization of mind" (15). Teachers should be humble towards what needs to be learnt and relearnt to understand the feelings and pains of others. Therefore, Freire emphasizes that teachers need to begin from the students' starting point rather than their own and to be patient when creating and maintaining a relationship with them. Freire discusses the importance of not only processing knowledge about the subject being taught but also having knowledge and skills to help the students comprehend texts.

Being able to comprehend texts includes an awareness of language and its usage, especially when working with poems, such as those discussed in this essay. bell hooks uses the term "oppressor's language" when discussing how enslaved people needed English to communicate without the enslavers' understanding. A new way of communication was created, incorporating music and other elements to give the words a new meaning and to foster resistance (170). Similarly, the legacy of Black Vernacular and its message of resistance is apparent in contemporary hip-hop and other genres (171). By engaging with such cultural works, bell hooks encourages diverse language, voices, and speech in the classroom to create a more self-actualized learning environment (173).

Reading is, as Freire describes it, a dynamic movement that consists of reading the word and re-reading worlds. In the meeting with the words, the reader is challenged to think critically about previous knowledge of the world (18). Developing a deeper understanding of the word by looking at its context and understanding what a text implies are the foundation of critical perception, interpretation and "rewriting" what is read. As Freire puts it: "reading is not walking on the words; it's grasping the soul of them" (19). When working with Scott-Heron's

poems, this perspective of reading will be used, both in the analysis and the pedagogical implementation of Scott-Heron's multimodal poetry. The poems are often ambiguous, and contextual details are needed to understand what the text implies. It also allows the students to challenge and "rewrite" the world shaped by dominant discourses.

## 4. Material and Method

### 4.1 Material

The material used in the analysis comprises the poems "Black History" and "Whitey on the Moon," both of which are found in *Now and Then*. As a musician, Scott-Heron released "Black History / The World" as a combined recording of two poems on his album *Moving Target* in 1982. For this study, the version of "Black History" in *Now and Then* will be used in the analysis. "Whitey on the Moon" was first heard on *Small Talk at 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox*, released in 1971. Regarding that poem, the first three lines are not included in *Now and Then* but can be heard on *Small Talk at 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox*. The 1971 version's first three lines will be included in the analysis. However, for the remainder of the poem, the version published in *Now and Then* will be analysed. Therefore, a combination of the 1971 recording and the version in *Now and Then* will be included. For the multimodal section of the essay, we will refer to the *Moving Target* recording of "Black History / The World" from 1982, and the *Small Talk at Lennox 125<sup>th</sup>* recording of "Whitey on the Moon" from 1971.

In "Black History," Scott-Heron reflects on the struggles of African Americans throughout history. The poem challenges the mainstream narrative of history and calls for recognition of the Black narrative. The poem serves as a reminder of the importance of acknowledging and honouring the experiences and achievements of Africans and African Americans. In the recorded version of the poem from 1982, Scott-Heron combines spoken word with a guitar and drum beat which enhances the words and phrases he performs.

In "Whitey on the Moon," Scott-Heron criticizes the societal priorities that lead to the living standards of Black people being neglected. Scott-Heron contrasts the challenges of poverty, with those of the space race. Through figurative language and irony, he highlights the injustices present in American society during the 1970s. In the recorded version from 1971, Scott-Heron added bongo drums to the spoken word performance with a lively 4/4-time signature. This gives a sense of rhythm and musicality to the production, adding more impact and strength to the lyrics. On the other hand, the sound of drums also represents a sense of African spirit, which strengthens the connection to African American people. That connection is also visible in the poems' content and lyrics where both poems address historical moments with direct as well as indirect consequences for Black people in modern time. "Black History"

focuses on a past historic event whilst “Whitey on the Moon” deals with history in a more contemporary context.

It is worth noting that in the analysis, we support our interpretations of the poems with definitions mainly from the Oxford English Dictionary except for one definition where we also referred to Merriam-Webster. This helped create broader understanding of the word in question.

#### 4.2 Method: Close Reading

The method used for this analysis is close reading. Close reading can be defined as “the scrupulous examination of the complex relationship between a text’s formal elements and its theme” (Tyson 135). Close reading seeks to show how a text’s underlying discourses connects to its theme. Awareness of figurative language, such as metaphors, allows the reader to explore linguistic devices like irony and ambiguity present in the text. Thus, linguistic devices become tools to express themes.

Another understanding of close reading is presented in *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism*, where Paula M. L. Moya describes close reading as the type of reading which demands the reader to work with the text through intense reading and re-reading to analyse and enter a deeper understanding (9). Moya states that when worked with correctly, close reading “involves a heightened attention to literary language and form in a way that acknowledges the shaping force of culture and society on a text’s development and expression” (10). Moreover, Moya argues, close reading facilitates an exploration of the themes of race and ethnicity in texts by addressing the correlation between race and power. She advocates the analysis of race as a foundational and systematic understanding to draw a connection to white supremacist racial hierarchy, where race is arranged around white superiority (32).

We will examine Scott-Heron’s usage of irony and ambiguity in the poems with the purpose of understanding “the shaping force of culture and society on a text’s development and expression” (Moya 10). Thus, close reading becomes a method of understanding themes expressed through linguistic devices. When close reading the poems, the focus primarily lies on analysing signifiers that are understood as ironically reproducing the dominant discourse. In troubling signifiers and discussing weak signifiers, a deconstructive approach is implicit in the close reading. However, other tropes and stylistic features will be taken into consideration. The poems will be analysed more or less line-by-line from beginning to end, with the exception of some lines due to repetition and a need for concision.

## 5. Discussion

A signifier is never, ultimately, able to escape its received meanings, or concepts, no matter how dramatically such concepts might change through time.

- Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey*, 54.

In the discussion of the poems, three themes will be the focus of attention: Whiteness and Africanism; signifiers and Signifyin(g); and figurative language. The poems are first analysed separately and then put in dialogue with each other. The musical aspects will mostly be highlighted in the discussion of pedagogical considerations.

### 5.1 “Black History”

“I was wondering about our yesterdays  
and started digging through the rubble”

The speaker introduces the poem by referring to “our.” Whom “our” includes depends on the topic and the implied reader. For this poem, Black people, which includes people of African heritage, belong to the inclusiveness of “our,” hence the topic of Black history and the colonisation of the African continent. The version of history Scott-Heron tells includes the white narrative as well. He recites the white perspective of history but uses rhetorical tropes and irony in the poem to flip the discourse.

In the second line, the speaker refers to the “rubble” of history. The primary understanding of rubble is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (hereafter OED,) defined as “[w]aste or rough fragments of stone, brick, concrete, etc., esp. such debris resulting from the demolition of buildings” (“rubble,” 1.a.). However, the definition need not always signify rocks and fragments of buildings and can instead according to Merriam-Webster indicate “a miscellaneous confused mass or group of usually broken or worthless things” (“rubble,” 1b). If rubble may signify a mass of broken or worthless things when speaking about Black history, does the narrative centre around the Black experience or a coloniser’s experience, imagining what (or who) was colonised as “worthless things?” This usage of words can be seen as what Gates and Floyd present as Signifyin(g), a rhetorical game of tropes for Black people to communicate without white people understanding the real meaning behind the words (Gates 71, Floyd 95). If rubble can signify the broken and worthless, then the poem asks not only whose experience is considered rubble but also who reduced it to that state.

The poem signifies on the idea of rubble from a white coloniser's experience, the rubble might be an unnecessary waste of effort when colonising the continent or the result of taking the land from others. This aligns with Morrison's argument of literature diminishing Black people to make whites more powerful (32). On the other hand, from a Black person's perspective, that rubble might be the suffering and violence visited on African people and the things that were destroyed. By using rubble in this context of Black history, Scott-Heron changes the meaning of rubble, as first seen as worthless, into something of value worth learning about, as the work of an archaeologist. "Rubble" is used as a weak signifier, as described by Gervasio, for which different understandings of the word are possible (38). The understanding of the second line changes depending on how the word "rubble" is read. By using a white narrative and a presence of whiteness to make the colonisers seem better, following Morrison (16), Scott-Heron plays on the given narrative by using irony to highlight the suffering and pain experienced by Black people.

"and to say, at least somebody went  
to a hell of a lot of trouble  
to make sure that when we looked things up  
we wouldn't fare too well"

"Somebody went to a hell of a lot of trouble" indicates that what the white colonisers did was exhausting and admirable, when in reality, they created a narrative that privileged and made them the "good guy" by civilising Africa and profiting from its suffering. This way of portraying white greatness has been at the centre of literature throughout history and is in line with the way Morrison describes how Africans are portrayed negatively against whiteness (16). The definition of trouble in this context becomes ambiguous, as it refers to the colonisers' efforts as unnecessary expenditure as well as calls to mind the "trouble" experienced by the colonised.

The expression "[w]hen we looked things up, we wouldn't fare too well" is formulated to show how the white narrative has shaped the perception of Black history. By using "we wouldn't fare too well," Scott-Heron is indicating that Black people would not be portrayed fairly and benefit from the white narrative of Black history. He negates the phrase "fare well" as doing well for oneself, showing how Africans suffered due to the white narrative as well as the outcome of the colonisation of Africa, which did not benefit the people of that continent.

"First, white folks discovered Africa

and they claimed it fair and square”

By using the phrase “fair and square,” Scott-Heron refers to the narrative as being as simple as discovering and claiming ownership over Africa, a continent already inhabited by many people. With this, white discourses are repeated ironically. The absurdity of discovering an inhabited place and claiming it is played on in this verse, and Scott-Heron further shows the ridiculousness of these actions as “fair and square.” That particular phrase thus reflects the discrepancy between the Black and white narratives. Worth noting is the definition of fair as being pale, referring to the colonisers as fair skinned people. Additionally, when Scott-Heron uses the phrase “fair and square,” he plays with the homophony of “fare too well.” Ironically, then, white people could claim Africa “fair and square,” whilst Black people, when looking up their history or being taught about it in school, would not “fare too well.”

“Cecil Rhodes couldn’t have been robbing nobody  
‘cause he said there was nobody there.  
White folks brought all the civilization  
Since there wasn’t none around”

In the first line, Scott-Heron uses the Black Vernacular English trait of double negatives. Due to this stylistic feature, his position is strengthened, which is reminiscent of Tyson’s argument that a language choice is an expression of power relations (348). The combination of using Black Vernacular English combined with a standard American English shows the presence of double consciousness in the poet, who is not being able to separate from either of the two cultures. However, the choice of combining both language styles in the poem can be an act of resistance towards the white narrative.

Additionally, this verse enhances the irony when the white perspective defends the actions. Cecil Rhodes said nobody was there, a perspective told to justify the idea that Africa was free to take. Scott-Heron is aware that the audience knows that people already were in Africa. He shows the double meaning of saying that “nobody” was in Africa as a way to showcase the colonisers’ view of the inhabitants. Using the double negatives allows Scott-Heron to say two things simultaneously. Moreover, considering how the colonisers scorned or even despised the inhabitants gives the understanding that they did see them as nobodies or non-human creatures, as described by Cornwell-Giles as the view the colonisers had of these people (88). The Africanist image is weakened through historical narrative (Morrison 6), but through Scott-Heron’s poem a Black perspective is awakened.

“White folks brought all the civilization” is phrased from the white standpoint, believing that the Africans were not civilised and instead uncultivated, unsophisticated, and rough. By repeating this perspective of history and using another double negative, Scott-Heron mocks the discourse of whiteness, which has viewed itself as historically unique, as ridiculous and unethical.

“But no paper and pencils and other utensils  
and hell, these folks never even heard of a gun.”

Here, the emphasis is put on the nouns “paper,” “pencils,” “utensils,” and “guns” as criteria for civilisation. By using these specific nouns to signify necessary qualifications for civilisation, the words become ironic, seeing that the Europeans only saw their way of living as civilised. This is especially transparent with “gun,” an instrument of violence and death, being treated as a marker of civilisation. In the musical recording from 1982, Scott-Heron makes a subtle remark on these specific nouns in the change of his voice, adding to the sense of irony. Additionally, “paper” and “pencil” can signify education, knowledge, and the ability to write and create one’s narrative. Scott-Heron uses these specific words to show the arbitrary facts of the colonisers’ knowledge; Africans would not be able to write down their narrative. Therefore, the colonisers took it as an advantage for their cause.

“They would ‘discover’ all the places with promise.  
You didn’t need no titles or deeds.”

The ambiguity of the historical events is also shown in the above lines when the speaker explains that the colonisers would travel far away to find places with “promise,” which according to OED is defined as “[a]n indication of future event or condition; esp one giving strong or reasonable grounds for the expectation of future achievements or good results” (“promise,” def 4.a.). However, as is well known, Africa was already inhabited, which is indicated by the use of inverted commas for the word “discover.” This further emphasizes the irony of the story. Additionally, in the 1982 version, a subtle change of tone can be heard in the voice of the speaker when pronouncing “discover,” a remark easily overlooked. With this change of tone, the speaker plays on irony to mock the white narrative for believing they had discovered Africa.

The speaker then states that there is no need for titles or deeds to become a discoverer. Thus, Scott-Heron implies that the colonisers were nobodies without legal recourse, suggesting

that their superiority towards other people is groundless, built solely on their position as white Europeans. By ignoring responsibility before the law, the colonisers could both shape and undermine their own legal discourses.

“But still we are victims of word games  
semantics is always a bitch.

(...)

but if interpreting were left up to me  
I’d be sure every time folks knew this version wasn’t mine  
which is why it is called ‘His story.’”

The speaker indicates that the victimisation Black people face today is part of their history, referred to as “word games.” The word game can be seen as the white narrative establishing certain signifiers of Black history and culture. In seeking to control the narrative, colonisers have used language as an instrument of oppression.

At the poem’s end, Scott-Heron remarks on the hypothetical chance of changing the narrative in the phrase “if interpreting were left up to me.” Here the conjunction “if” is used to indicate the possibility of reclaiming a Black narrative. Even in modern times when writing the poem, Scott-Heron is unsure if Black history can be authorized. With the linguistic choice, he signifies that the Black narrative could still be excluded from the discourse of Black history. In the last line, stating that the story told is “His story,” Scott-Heron again uses wordplay to create new meanings. Literary whiteness shines through in the pronoun “his,” as it does not belong to Scott-Heron or other Black people but instead to the white man who told the story for his own benefit. With the phrases “if interpreting were left up to me” and “this version wasn’t mine” the speaker states that the story is not his by using first-person pronouns to reject ownership of the white narrative. Hence, he reclaims the Black narrative as different from this version. As he states, “semantics is always a bitch”; the usage of language as an instrument for one’s cause is a powerful tool, and through his poem, he tries to reclaim the language or at least shows that two can play that game. However, as the language itself can be broken down, he cannot regain the actual power (and loss) as the one used in the actions done towards the colonised Africans, simply by using his words and telling a different narrative than the one told before.

## 5.2 “Whitey on the Moon”

“We have a poem here, it’s called ‘Whitey On The Moon’

It was inspired by some whiteys on the moon  
So I wanna give credit where credit is due” (Scott-Heron 0:01)

In this poem, Scott-Heron ironically acknowledges the significance of the first lunar landing in 1969 by referring to the people involved as “some whiteys,” suggesting they are anonymous, and that whiteness is their defining feature. He contrasts how white people are sent to the moon, but improving the lives of the Americans on Earth is not prioritised. Playing with words and mocking authority within the verses, Scott-Heron flips the discourse of this “historic” event, challenging narratives in which whiteness is the base of experience, as described by Morrison. The poem both highlights and diverts attention from the moon landing; whilst it is constantly present and repeated, it is juxtaposed with the issues of the speaker and his sister down on earth. In doing so, the speaker “give[s] credit” to the “whiteys” for both causing social injustices and their indifference to them while they are “on the moon.”

“A rat done bit my sister Nell.  
(with whitey on the moon)  
Her face and arms began to swell.  
(and Whitey’s on the moon)” (*Now and Then*)

In the first line, we learn that a rat bit the speaker’s sister, causing her face and arms to swell, as stated in the third line. At first glance, the word rat signifies the animal. However, in this context, Gervasio’s weak signifier can be applied to rat. According to OED there are two applicable suggestions for “rat.” Firstly, “[e]sp. in political contexts: a person who deserts his or her party, side, or cause; a person who puts personal considerations before political principles, departs radically from the official party line, or adopts the political beliefs of a rival party”; and secondly, “[a] dishonest, contemptible, or worthless person” (“rat,” def. II.4.d. and II.4.a). The definitions suggest that the word rat can refer to the literal animal but also be a weak signifier for a person who promises people something, for example, politicians and the government, who then departs from the promises made and, therefore, fails its citizens. As mentioned above, if the speaker signifies the informal meaning of rat, this can be seen as a way to criticise and mock the authority through satire.

The usage of rat as a weak signifier can also signify the living conditions for the speaker and by extension people, implying that they live in poor conditions. Institutionalised racism can be seen in the way that Black people are treated and prioritised by society, as explained by Tyson (344) something that is signified by the usage of rat in this context. This can then be

connected to the government, which, instead of prioritising Black people on Earth, sends white astronauts to the moon.

The speaker has given the name Nell to the sister, whether that be a biological sister or a sister based on a Black Vernacular (and some religious language) definition as one who someone shares experiences with. The name Nell connects to and signifies on the name most associated with the moon landing in 1969: Neil Armstrong. The names Nell and Neil have phonetic and orthographic similarities, and when the third line informs that the sister's face and arm begin to swell, it is difficult to miss the play on Neil Armstrong in Nell and her arm. Her arm is weakened and is, therefore, played on by comparison to *Armstrong*. By using the name Nell, Scott-Heron also diminishes Armstrong's actual accomplishment, focusing on the name of a Black girl who was bitten by a rat. Thereafter follows the phrase "done bit" as African American Vernacular English, which is used to show the aspect system of the speaker's portrayal of the narrative. Nell is also the only character in the poem who is given a name. As previously stated, by making "whitey" anonymous, Scott-Heron de-centres the white narrative from the story and instead focuses on Black peoples' suffering.

Throughout the poem, Scott-Heron contrasts how Black people suffer on earth "but whitey's on the moon." The repetition of this phrase strengthens the feeling of satire. "On the moon" is also used as a metaphor for distance and obliviousness. The African American literary tradition has two prominent features: folk motifs and *orality*. This essay focuses on the latter. Orality gives the literary work a sense of human presence and is usually achieved by using Black Vernacular English and repeating important phrases (Tyson 369). This is done with the repetition of the line "whitey's on the moon." Scott-Heron wants the audience to focus on the contrasts and the distance they signify. The distance between Black people and white people grows stronger with each verse, where it becomes known that Black people are barely surviving, whilst the U.S. government focuses on matters that seem more trivial in comparison.

"I can't pay no doctor bill.

(but Whitey's on the moon)

Ten years from now I'll be payin' still.

(while Whitey's on the moon)"

This verse begins speaking about the price of medical bills, something that is too costly. With the contrasting conjunction "but" Scott-Heron is Signifyin(g) on the distance between Black people's suffering and white privilege; the speaker cannot pay for healthcare, but white people can travel to space. The contrast of injustice continues in the verse when in the third line the

speaker states in ten years he will still be paying. This line could signify paying with money or with his life (or his sister's life), as he cannot afford to pay the bills for healthcare. What Scott-Heron illustrates is the inequality the people endure to ensure space travel. Thus, he criticises the power structure in the U.S., which exacerbates sickness for those who cannot pay. He repeats the contrast between the two sides of the moon travels throughout the whole poem, with words like "with," "and," "cause," and "but" Signifyin(g) on the difference made between Black people and those who can benefit from them, the white establishment. The people down on earth are sick while "whitey's" on the moon, far away from the problem.

"The man jus' upped my rent las' night.

(cause Whitey's on the moon)

No hot water, no toilets, no lights."

In this verse, "the man" could signify a landlord, given that the speaker describes higher rent, something a landlord would control. However, according to the OED, "man" is in an African American context defined as "a white person, esp. regarded as an oppressor; white people collectively" ("man," def V.18.c.) or the colloquial definition of "a person in authority." ("man" def V.18.b.). Applying the two definitions to the poem's "the man," Scott-Heron is Signifyin(g) that the white man is the one in control and is taking money from him, using the citizens' money to send "whitey" to the moon. Scott-Heron once again criticises and problematises the control and power the white establishment has. The white achievement becomes both contingent upon and causes Black suffering on the ground. Once again, the people living with these conditions are denied basic needs, which demonstrates that they are treated as less human or less worthy than white people. Here, Scott-Heron shows that this occurs not only in discourse but in real life and highlights the casual relationship.

"Taxes takin' my whole damn check,

Junkies making me a nervous wreck,

The price of food is goin' up"

Scott-Heron uses "taxes" to criticise the government although the word choice makes the situation seem exasperating rather than threatening. By stating that the taxes are taking the whole check, Scott-Heron illustrates how the power institution badly affects the speaker and how their earnings are not even theirs.

The second line starts with the word “junkies.” The word has different definitions, the primary one being a person addicted to drugs. However, in an extended use, according to OED, it refers to “a person with a compulsive habit or an obsessive dependency on something specified” (“junkie,” def. 2.b.). If the context of government power were to be applied to the understanding of this verse, a junkie could signify someone who craves power and cannot get enough of it, perhaps the government seeking more power by sending “whitey to the moon.” Junkie would, in this context, be another example of a weak signifier, signifying the state’s obsession with control and power, to such a degree that it consumes the government. This obsession would lead to the suffering of Black people, making them “nervous wreck[s].”

In the third line, the speaker explains that “the price of food is going up,” referring to inflation. However, since the government has sent people to the moon, the price of food could be connected to “going up” as flying up to the moon. By sending “whitey” to the moon, the government excludes Black people from gaining wealth in the country due to higher food costs and an obligation to pay tax money to the “whitey.” Thus juxtaposing “whitey on the moon” with problems on the ground, Scott-Heron highlights the effects of institutionalised racism.

### 5.3 Challenging the White Discourse

Both poems juxtapose Black and white history and narratives using word games and ambiguous meanings and so doing, reveal and challenge the discourse of institutionalised racism. The poems therefore act as resistance to institutionalised racism. bell hooks uses the term “oppressor’s language” when she describes how the enslaved people needed to use the same language as their oppressors for them to communicate without the oppressor knowing. They developed new meanings for the words by using other elements with musical aspects when communicating (170). Scott-Heron acts on this term in his poems when he uses the “oppressor’s language,” which he then signifies on to criticise the white narrative.

Both poems use Signifyin(g), a self-empowering strategy that has its origin in Black cynicism (Floyd 92), to produce satire and irony. Both Gates and Floyd explain the importance of focusing on the signifier rather than the signified to create a play on the meaning of words. In “Black History,” Scott-Heron is Signifyin(g) with the word “rubble,” marking different perceptions of the word’s meaning depending on the narrative. In “Whitey on the Moon” contrasting words are used when Signifyin(g) for the injustice and difference made between Black and white people. Through these means of communication, Scott-Heron plays his own word games to criticise and mock the racist discourse of authority.

As shown above, the two poems use Signifyin(g) and word games to create ambiguity, drawing attention to the social injustices created by narratives. This awareness relates to

Morrison's call "to benefit from the lessons of earlier mistakes and past misfortunes to record them as to prevent their repetition through exposure and inoculation" (36) when educating about whiteness. In both poems, the Black perspective is contrasted with the white when Scott-Heron questions white narrative being the only one regarding Black history. Thus, whiteness in the context of Black suffering is called out when Scott-Heron signifies injustice in his poems. Furthermore, Morrison states that "the subject of the dream is the dreamer" (17), meaning the illusion of white superiority and Black inferiority is beneficial for white people (Morrison 16); however, entering another's dream results in a nightmare for Black people.

In both poems, Scott-Heron tells the white narrative through a Black man's perspective and questions the dominant discourse to which Black people have fallen victim. He answers Morrison's call for a more diverse and inclusive literature by centring Black experience through his ironic reframing of white narratives. Scott-Heron's last line in "Black History" is *His story* which can be seen as an objection to the language through which history is told whilst using the "oppressor's language" to tell the story. By turning the language of the oppressor on itself, the semantics becomes Scott-Heron's "bitch."

## 5.4 Educational Considerations

### 5.4.1 Radical Pedagogy

One of the primary duties of teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools is to educate students within human rights and the fundamental Swedish democratic values (Gy11). Teaching material should therefore be used to raise questions regarding prejudice, racism, and social issues. The poems presented in this essay can be used to develop critical thinking and the understanding of implied meanings about these issues. Using Freire's definition of reading as a dynamic movement between reading the word and re-reading the world (18) when working with Scott-Heron's poems will help broaden the students' world knowledge. The reading strategy will also benefit understanding for the attention of connotations, double meanings and dialect. The poems contain elements that can be used to practice Freire's dynamic movement, putting the poems into different contexts to discover and create deeper and new meanings. In "Black History," Scott-Heron finishes the poem with "His story"; reading that phrase with the dynamic movement to re-read the world and word can create new understandings of the historical narrative of colonisation.

The choice of using Scott-Heron's poems accords with the approach suggested in both Scott's (25) and Leigh's (53) studies, which advocate that hip-hop be introduced in the classroom to help students identify literary devices and encourage critical thinking. Both

authors argue that hip-hop helps motivate students to discuss literary devices as well as social issues. The use of hip-hop, as well as spoken word poetry can help students understand and translate the implied meanings. It can also be used as an approach to discuss complex subjects with the help of the lyrics; for example, in “Whitey on the Moon” the line “while whitey’s on the moon” is repeated to enhance ongoing injustices in society. The discussions that emerge from the poems would meet the curriculum for English 6, which aims “to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues, and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used,” as well as to “encourage students’ curiosity in language and culture” (Lgy22, our translation).

Treating the students as resources and letting them scaffold each other in discussions regarding the poems will open the classroom for greater diversity and place emphasis on the students’ agency and voice. The critical lens provided to the students will be used to explore how the white discourse has shaped the standard historical narrative and to help them create a counter-discourse. Furthermore, by exposing students to the context of racism and discrimination with the help of Scott-Heron’s poetry, we can answer Morrison’s call to “benefit from the lessons of earlier mistakes and past misfortune ... to prevent their repetition through exposure and inoculation” (36).

#### 5.4.2 Multimodality

The multimodal aspects of the poems can be used to advantage in our highly digitised society, where the students are as used to moving pictures and music as they are to written text. Incorporating the multimodal aspects of the poems in the classroom can facilitate greater engagement and understanding. The accessibility of music creates a gateway for students to connect to poetry through different media other than written text alone. The multimodal aspects of the poems, using both text, video, and music, would increase the availability for the students and make the lyrics and content more comprehensible than written text alone. Scott-Heron’s aim with his poems is to communicate his message. This occurs through a combination of modes which will assist the students in comprehending the poems. By examining Scott-Heron’s spoken word recordings the students are also exposed to a sound they might not be completely familiar with. Furthermore, this can be compared to the students’ knowledge of musical styles, such as rap, to better understand the way that the modes of text and sound work together and how it has evolved through time. According to Kress’s social-semiotic theory of multimodality, all communication is a combination of modes (5). In this instance, the poems are presented in text, with sound, and gestures (if using video-recordings). The modal ensembles are designed to fill specific purposes, and the design choices are determined by different social and cultural

powers (Kress 28). Price-Style argues that spoken word grew to be used in political spheres in the 1960s, which is noticeable in Scott-Heron's poetry, reflecting the society he lived in. The modal ensembles and design choices are not randomly made but a product of their time.

Scott-Heron's words are not only written but they are also spoken by the poet himself. When Scott-Heron chose to do a spoken word poem or put musical aspects to the lyrics he combined several modes to communicate. The use of irony and intonation amplifies his arguments, and his lyrics challenge social and cultural oppression. By using different modes of communication and letting the students see the poems presented in different modes they will access a broader understanding of the words and create their own meaning to the lyrics. As Serafini phrases it, the students will be given the opportunity to translate their "inner text" (413).

Additionally, musical elements can help amplify the poet's stylistic choices. In both poems, tone of voice and intonation of words make it easier to distinguish irony. In the 1971 recording of "Whitey on the Moon," bongo drums accompany the lyrics (Scott-Heron 0:27). The sound of upbeat drums combined with lyrics of injustice contrasted with privilege in the refrain with "Whitey on the Moon." The upbeat energy amplifies the sense of irony and humour when the two elements of music and lyrics are put against each other. The music evokes a different perception than the text alone.

Youngjoo and Tuba argue for the benefits of implementing multimodal practices to encourage critical thinking skills and increase awareness of socio-political issues (989). That said, this does not mean that critical thinking and awareness develop just because of multimodal content. However, by including various versions of the poems, students can explore how interpretations change depending on performance, tone of voice and other musical aspects. The students can compare the written version of "Black History" in *Now and Then* to the 1971 recording to identify lyrical differences and discuss why the differences exist. The recording does not include all words written in *Now and Then*, which can create interesting discussions in the classroom.

Serafini discusses how multimodal literacy involves understanding how discrete sign systems or individual modes articulate and represent potential meanings and how meaning is constructed as sign systems interact (413). In the 1971 recording of "Black History," Scott-Heron combines a peppy jazz tune with a monotone and calm voice creating a contrast between the music and the poetry. In the poem, Scott-Heron combines Black Vernacular English and Standard American English which in the recording is emphasised through intonation on the signified, enhancing the irony of the poetry (Scott-Heron 1:40). Since the students will come from different backgrounds and cultural norms than Scott-Heron, an opportunity is created to

let the students explore his experience in the 70s and compare it with their perception and experience today. Kress argues that the environment in which the content is presented is vital for the interpretation of the modes as well as the cultural norms and backgrounds. Along those lines, the teacher will be able to let the students make several interpretations of the poems, trying to understand the experience of Scott-Heron and applying the poems to their own life experiences. Furthermore, letting the students compare the two poems and creating new interpretations can lead to generating the dynamic movement of reading the word and re-reading the world, that Freire suggests one should aim for.

Thus, the analytical perspective, as presented above, would be helpful when working with the poems. The aim of working with multimodal texts is to extend the interpretive process to sociocultural, historical, and political contexts of the production of the text. The analytical perspective, combined with Morrison's critical discussion of whiteness will lay a strong foundation for working with the poems. Students will be able to explore, interpret, and discuss the poems through the dynamic movement Freire suggests. The poems include lines with ambiguous meanings and as mentioned above, multimodal literacy involves understanding how the sign systems within the mediums interact to create new meanings. This gives the students the opportunity to read and re-read the word and world.

## 6. Conclusion

The research questions that have been posed in this study are: *How does Gil Scott-Heron use humour in his poems to problematise a racist discourse?* and *Why and how should poetry with multimodal features covering aspects of racism be used to teach students about human rights and critical thinking in the classroom in upper secondary school?* Gil Scott-Heron's poems "Black History" and "Whitey on the Moon" have been analysed through close reading and an African American critical approach to show how he uses humour to problematise signifiers relating to the dominant discourse. We found that Scott-Heron plays on signifiers to question white supremacy, problematising white narratives and treatment of Black people. By teaching his poetry through the approach of radical pedagogy questions about racism and white supremacist ideology can be handled in the classroom safely and freely. By engaging with the multimodal aspects of Scott-Heron's poetry, students may access ideas and stories of historical racism through modes other than just written text. The multimodal aspects of Scott-Heron's poems in combination with hooks' and Freire's theories of radical pedagogy create the possibility of a more open and accepting environment for discussion and development.

Racism and racial injustice cannot be discussed enough with adolescents. For further research within this field, other poets and artists' work could be covered to broaden the discussion of multimodality when teaching students about human rights and inequity. Along with that follows the method of deconstruction and the possibility to further research the deconstructive elements within Scott-Heron and other artists' poetry. Future research could analyse the musical aspects more thoroughly and further explore how to teach poetry themes with multimodal features. His poetry offers a strong foundation for discussion and analysis, which can be strengthened by further incorporating the multimodal aspects of the poems. Scott-Heron's poetry shows that words have meaning, and semantics is and have been powerful tools throughout history. Showing the younger generation that they can use their word to create their story rather than "His Story," we encourage not only teachers to incorporate diverse narratives in education, but mostly adolescents to create their own narrative.

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