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ENGL M40 – Children’s Literature

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Rhythmic Crossover

Kwame Alexander’s *The Crossover* is a 2014 children’s novel written in verse that follows 12-year-old basketball player Josh Bell. The story blurs the line between Josh’s personal life and the game of basketball while utilizing unique visual and auditory formatting and wordplay elements. *The Crossover* also serves to represent and uplift the black community by highlighting and showing appreciation for various facets of black American culture. Alexander uses a distinctly freeform approach to the book’s layout and structure, through which he utilizes stand-alone poems, clever dictionary-like definitions, and numbered rules of basketball to not only segment the story but narrate it as well. His deliberate use of poetic conventions generates a recognizable rhythm to each chapter of Josh’s story that parallels that of both the game of basketball as well as the jazz, rap, and hip-hop music that is referenced throughout the novel. This distinct rhythmic sensibility is a central backbone of the black American culture that the author affectionately and inventively highlights throughout the book. To better tell the story of Josh Bell’s relationship with his father and celebrate identity, Kwame Alexander pays respect to black American music through his unconventional use of formatting and wordplay elements by

reproducing jazz music's freeform approach and emulating the rhythmic conventions of rap and hip-hop.

A central theme of *The Crossover* is Josh's relationship with his father and how he continues his father's legacy. Through Josh's father, who is characterized as an outspoken fan of jazz, Alexander includes several nods to jazz musicians, including Horace Silver, Dizzy Gillespie, and John Coltrane. Jazz has long been celebrated as a black art form in the United States, with a distinctive style tight-knit with racial and cultural identity. In an analysis of the correlation between black identity and the mutual rhythmic qualities instinctive to jazz musicians, Matthew W. Butterfield formulates that

race and music are mutually constitutive: musical difference is figured discursively through the concept of race, just as racial difference is produced through music. The ease by which musical genres serve up targeted demographics in radio marketing reveals the extent to which we in the West invest identity in our musical tastes. Music is clearly a domain in which we locate who we are, a powerful social sphere through which racial identities are articulated, consolidated, or contested, where racial experience is modeled, conditioned, and aestheticized. (315)

Josh's dad indicates a sense of pride in jazz music and frequently expresses it to his sons, going so far as to grant Josh the nickname "Filthy McNasty" after a piece by jazz pianist Horace Silver. Alexander's loose and spontaneous formatting method makes clear use of visual and auditory elements in a way that signifies an appreciation for jazz on behalf of the author. This inspiration is notably present on page 10 of *The Crossover*, in the poem "Filthy McNasty." The way this passage reads is reminiscent of many vocal accompaniments to jazz arrangements from the

1960s swathe of modal jazz and post-bop. This connection is reinforced by the way it is written and formatted. In this segment, Alexander implements a fairly loose and spontaneous phonetic meter with a sparing rhyme scheme. The first few lines proceed: “Filthy McNasty / is a MYTHical MANchild / Of rather *dubious distinction*” (Alexander 10). In these lines, Alexander uses alliteration with capitalization for emphasis and italicization to emulate the signature sly and smooth-talking nature of certain vocal deliveries in the genre. In a later excerpt of the same poem, Alexander uses flavorful and ostentatious vocabulary to a fairly superfluous degree that is also evocative of the genre:

He has a *SLAMMERIFIC SHOT*

It’s

Dunkalicious *CLASSY*

Supersonic *SASSY* (10)

Throughout the poem, Alexander also uses a great deal of long and syllable-rich words that reinforce its similarities to extemporaneous jazz vocal accompaniments. In a sense, it seems, Josh’s dad represents the older generation of black music in the form of jazz, while his son, who prefers rap and hip-hop, represents the new generation carrying the torch of its predecessor by continuing to impart black identity into music.

Throughout *The Crossover*, Josh and his brother Jordan express a liking for various rappers and emcees. Josh even names a few who serve as a source of pride in his identity through how he wears his hair. Much like jazz, rap and hip-hop arose as musical vessels for the expression of black identity in modern America. Rap and hip-hop take after prior genres rooted in the African-American experience that collectively paved the way for nearly every category of

Western popular music. What these African-American art forms have in common is an emphasis on a distinct rhythmic sensibility, whose metrical emphasis is generally inverse to how time is conceptualized in traditional Western music. Most African-American music achieves a unique groove or swing feel that contrasts the more rigid and uniform quality of traditional Western rhythms by accenting the offbeats of a rhythm or by employing various other rhythmic techniques. Butterfield attempts to pin down this aesthetic collective of rhythmic qualities that is so foundational to African-American music and culture by cross-referencing the research of other scholars: “What are these ‘African ways’? White scholars such as Waterman have tended to stress specific material practices common to West African and African American musics, such as an emphasis on percussion, the use of polymeter and polyrhythms, off-beat phrasing in melodies, and overlapping call-and-response phrases” (311–312). Alexander’s use of verse emulates some of these rhythmic conventions, especially those present in rap and hip-hop. A poem that stands out for these parallels is “The Last Shot,” which follows Josh’s final basketball game of the book, in which he plays to honor his dad. This poem, which reads like one of Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s lyrical exposés, has a more noticeably consistent rhyme scheme than other verses in the novel and features deliberate spacing of words and the use of linebreaks to pattern after the qualities of rap and hip-hop. In the first few lines of the poem, Alexander makes clever use of spacing:

5... A bolt of lightning on my kicks...

The court is SIZZLING

My sweat is DRIZZLING

Stop all that *quivering*

’Cuz tonight I’m *delivering* (221)

Alexander offsets the predictable rhythm in the second line, creating syncopation by extending the gap between “is” and “DRIZZLING” compared to the previous line with which it rhymes.

The poem later features the lines,

Take it to the hoop.

TAKE IT TO THE HOOP

3... 2... Watch out, 'cuz I'm about to get D I R T Y

with it (Alexander 221)

The first two lines of this excerpt mirror the call-and-response techniques prominent in hip-hop.

The italicized countdown that is abruptly interrupted is also reminiscent of how samples are frequently superimposed in rap. Alexander seems to best achieve this signature rhythmic push-and-pull in the lines,

Ohhhhh, did you see McNASTY cross over you?

Now I'm taking you

Ankle BREAKING you

You're on your knees.

Screamin' PLEASE, BABY, PLEASE (221)

Alexander's use of capitalization punctuates a distinct rhythm in this segment. Alexander capitalizes “-NASTY” but not the preceding “Mc-.” In this line, “Mc-” functions the way grace notes do in rhythmic composition; it is used to accent the rhythm by prefacing the emphasized beat. Alexander uses several lowercase two-syllable words to aid in the flow from one emphasized word to another in the same way that eighth notes are often paired in rhythms to similarly sway from one pulse to another. He subverts this in the third line of this segment, only

to lead into the next, which is almost entirely capitalized, with another transitory two-syllable word. Through the way it is written and formatted, *The Crossover* is embedded with the rhythmic qualities of both hip-hop and jazz.

Kwame Alexander integrates a respect for black music history into his book through the use of visual and rhythmic elements that take inspiration from jazz, rap, and hip-hop. Reapproaching *The Crossover* in this context solidifies Josh's dynamic with his father and his will to continue his legacy in his own fashion, as well as the author's efforts to celebrate black American culture and identity.

Works Cited

Alexander, Kwame. *The Crossover*. Clarion Books, 2014.

Butterfield, Matthew W. "Race and Rhythm: The Social Component of the Swing Groove." *Jazz Perspectives*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2010, pp. 301–335.