

“SHAKING THEMSELVES FREE”: BLACK POETS, WHITE AUDIENCES, AND  
THE SPACES OF PRIVATE SELF-REFLEXIVITY

by

Lilith Osburn-Cole

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Thesis Supervisor:

Ronald Johnson

Second Reader:

Nancy Wilson

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## **ABSTRACT**

My work explores how white racially conscious readers can make themselves aware of their own racial subjectivity and positionality when engaging with Black poetry and poetic spaces. This research delves into Black world life expressed in the African American literary tradition spanning from the Harlem Renaissance throughout the Civil Rights/Black Arts movement and now continuing into the contemporary Hip-Hop/Rap cultural movement. My argument focuses on Black writers' portrayals of private, self-reflective spaces. These portrayals and revelations function as resistance in Black literature allowing for a window for a white racially conscious reader, such as myself, to witness profoundly real and raw moments of truth, I otherwise may never witness personally, creating and inspiring an impenetrable foundation of empathy through radical self-reflexivity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The African American literary tradition encompasses a diverse array of artistic expression. From the Harlem Renaissance to Hip-Hop/Rap poetry, black protest of structural racial oppression has been interwoven in fine poetic expression. Black protest poets going back to W.E.B Du Bois have thrived in reimagining and affirming African American identity through the validation of widespread experiences of oppression. However, the black aesthetic tradition has been historically submitted to the “white gaze” which shadowed and invalidated realities described by black artists. In this essay, I hope to address some of these historical practices of white scholarly engagement with black protest writings to compare them to contemporary white Hip-Hop audiences’ gaze upon Hip-Hop poetry. Addressing Hip-Hop/ Rap artists as poets in this essay positions Hip-Hop/Rap artists within a stream of preceding black literary poets/poetry. Historically, white scholars have attempted to objectively engage with black protest poetry and were sometimes successful in at least validating portrayals of race in America.

White literary audiences and white hip-hop audiences could invest in seeing specific black protest literature, such as that of James Baldwin or Alice Walker, as a mirror for themselves to reflect on their whiteness. I have recognized that bringing into focus my own positionality and subjectivity as a white woman deconstructs the limitations of my identity to hopefully and intentionally results in a much more self-aware and culturally conscious reading with the goal of reconciling with the historical and cultural realities of racial oppression in America. From this exploration, I found that it is when the artist allows the audience to see themselves through the artist exposing his/herself, a dialogue may take place. Specifically, Black poets masterfully expose



themselves through creating moments--or spaces--of private within their mind spaces to convey their emotional struggle, self-reflection, and reconciliation, and they address, grapple with, and reveal their suffering from societal, white-structural oppression. The creation of private spaces, I argue, is a motif in African American literary poetics and appears in contemporary Hip-Hop/Rap poetry, specifically in artist Kendrick Lamar's writings such as in his albums *To Pimp a Butterfly* and his Pulitzer prize winning album *Damn*. This thesis explores how Black poets reveal their internal struggle and reconcile their racial realities while simultaneously inviting readers into their private mind space, providing an opportunity for white racially-conscious audiences, to respond and engage in meaningful self-reflection, racial reconciliation and internalization of Black poetry.

## II. RESPONDING TO THE “WHITE GAZE” FROM W.E.B DU BOIS TO JAMES BALDWIN

Engagement with the trope of the white gaze in African American literature reveals much about the oppressiveness of white structural racism. In the early twentieth century, the white gaze was manifested into a literal white man in many works of Black literature. However, to understand the history of the response to the white gaze by



*Figure 1* photo from Du Bois *Types of American Negroes, Georgia, USA 1900*. Photo reproduced from Danial Murray collection. Library of Congress

African American poets and writers, we must explore the history of the focus on the “white gaze” in Black literature. Interestingly, the creation of not only the idea of the “white gaze” in theory, but the artistic interrogation with it began at the turn of the twentieth century with W.E.B Du Bois’ work. W.E.B Du Bois created a photography exhibition for the “American Negro” exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition. His exhibition brought into question Black identities as

opposed to the white middle-class perceptions. In the article “‘Looking at One’s Self through the Eyes of Others’: W.E.B. Du Bois’ Photographs for the 1900 Paris Exposition,” Shawn Smith argues that Du Bois strategically wanted to subvert white middle class depictions of African Americans as criminals using typical white middle-class photography settings and portrait styles. Smith insists “Du Bois’ photographs asked African American and white American viewers to interrogate the images of African Americans produced ‘through the eyes of [white] others,’ and thereby to question the foundations of white privilege” (582). Smith also discusses that the photographs

challenged the depictions of Black criminality by having the portraits also mimic turn of the 20th century mug shots (583). Du Bois' photographs demand the engagement and response of white audiences to witness their own racialized perspectives of not only blackness, but of whiteness as well.

This is one of the first examples of Black artistic expression to bring attention to the "white gaze." Considering Du Bois created the theory of double consciousness, his work created spaces that encouraged and demanded racial awareness from white audiences. Du Bois did not just want to appeal to white audiences' capacity to empathize with African American's experiences with brutal racism, such as Slave Narratives did, but he purposefully summoned racial awareness of white audiences. I find it interesting to think about these photographs as representing private spaces even though many of them are of groups and are set in public spaces. However, Du Bois still created a space for which white racial identities were questioned prompting a tradition that challenged the very foundations of white supremacy.

While continuing to demand white audiences to see themselves racially, Langston Hughes, along with many other Harlem Renaissance poets and writers, brought white audiences into the private and emotionally vulnerable Black spaces. Langston Hughes revealed spaces of common people experiencing white racial oppression all around them. His works intertwined pressing, violent, experiences of black people with eloquent, poetic frameworks. In his poem "The Weary Blues" published in 1926, Hughes creates an intimate and revealing space of a black musician. This poem encompasses several linguistic indicators of emotional torment such as the "moan" of the piano or the

musician's "mellow croon". The use of "blues" also indicates a double meaning. Blues refers to the musical genre but also the emotional state of the musician. Being that the Blues was an important Black cultural genre born out of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes connects the artistic expression of African American artists to their suffering and oppression. Hughes, and other Harlem Renaissance writers, transformed spaces where white racially-conscious readers are encouraged to acknowledge themselves through racial subjectivity. Hughes' poetry very much called into question white racialized identities, but unlike Du Bois whose visual protest of racial identities essentially brought black people into "white" spaces, Hughes brings white audiences into black spaces.

Hughes' poetry brings into focus Du Bois' theory of *double consciousness* specifically the practice of seeing one's self through the eyes of others. In "Dinner Guest: Me," Hughes places himself in a space metaphorically to be examined by quite literally a white gaze:

I know I am  
The Negro Problem  
Being wined and dined  
Answering the usual questions  
That come to white mind (78).

Hughes reveals his own self-awareness, his presence, and how it functions in what could be considered a white space. Therefore, Hughes is setting up a specific source of a white gaze. However, he also implies that the white people hosting the dinner believe they are racially-conscious of themselves, but then quickly undermines that truth:

Wondering how thing got this way  
In current Democratic night  
Murmuring gently  
Over *Fraises du bois*

“I’m so ashamed of being white”

[...]

Solutions to the problem

Of course, wait (79).

Hughes reveals how white people, even supposedly racially-conscious white people, address racism. Hughes also invokes “the negro problem” which puts the responsibility of remedying racism on African Americans. Looking at two very different settings in Hughes’ poems, searching for how a white racially-conscious audience could see themselves in each of these works. In “The Weary Blues,” the text reveals the suffering endured in a private and emotionally vulnerable space in which a white racially-conscious audience has to see where they exist in this poem. Since the white gaze is not explicitly pointed out, unlike in “Dinner Guest: Me,” it is actually the white reader who creates the white gaze element in the space of the text. Approached from this perspective, the white gaze goes from being a foreign, oppressive force to an intimate and internal state.

Langston Hughes brought white audiences into black cultural spaces while also reimagining and reaffirming blackness. However, the Civil Rights era brought about revealing poets who exposed themselves and their own personal experiences and inner struggle with racism. Poet, writer, activist James Baldwin was one of the most beloved and revealing poets who critiqued and acknowledged the resistance of white people to see themselves in racial history or see racism as indeed not a separate problem to be dealt with. Like Hughes and Du Bois, Baldwin’s works reimagine and empower Black racial identity while simultaneously exposing and acknowledging the white gaze. In his 1963

essay collection “The Fire Next Time,” published in the depths of the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin includes his essay “My Dungeon Shook: A Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation.” In “My Dungeon Shook,” James Baldwin creates a space of seemingly private insights in the form of a letter to his nephew whose name is also James which gives the illusion that this letter is self-reflective. In “Introduction: Stumbling on our Past, Reflections on James Baldwin’s “My Dungeon Shook,” Bernard Edelstein, a psychoanalyst who also identifies explicitly as both a White man and Jewish, reveals his own struggle dealing with realities of racism while reading Baldwin’s work: “it is our work to help in a process through which thoughts and feelings that are forgotten or unseen, that are disavowed or pushed from consciousness, can come to light to help our patients bear reality” (298).

Baldwin provides white racially conscious readers a space to bear witness to their identity and engage in meaningful dialogue. Edelstein also argues for this approach insisting “writers ask us to listen, to be aware of our own capacities to acknowledge and to disavow, and to enter into a dialogue about race and racism” (297). Baldwin reveals his own experiences of being black in America as well as an analysis of why white racial oppression perpetuates. He explains to his nephew the problematic “innocence” that white America adopts to hide behind their destruction and urges his nephew to “accept them with love” for they do not know any better” (23). Baldwin then explains that white America is trapped in a cycle of history “which they do not understand” and claims that if white people do not accept the reality of racism in America, “they cannot be released from it” (23). Finally, Baldwin reveals the premise for why he believes the cycle of racism continues to fester, claiming that white peoples’ reluctance to act on injustice

stems from fear of putting oneself in danger because “to be committed is to be in danger” (24). However, Baldwin so cleverly insists that the danger is not external but exists in the “minds of most white Americans.” He reveals this danger is “the loss of their identity.” Therefore, Baldwin’s message to us as white racially conscious audiences is that structural racism cannot be broken without individual reconciliation with the historical and cultural reality of their (our) racial identity.

Baldwin not only created spaces where he revealed his own experience and inner struggles, but many of the characters in his fiction works reflected those same struggles as well. His short story “Sonny’s Blues” concerns the relationship of two brothers and their struggle to communicate and understand one another. The inability for these two brothers, Sonny, and the unnamed narrator (Sonny’s older brother), to communicate stems from the very different lives they live. Sonny is a jazz pianist and ex-heroin addict and SB (Sonny’s brother) is a math teacher living in Harlem with his wife and children. It is only at the very end of this narrative where Sonny and SB start to reconcile their years of suffering from emotional disconnect. After a street revival one afternoon, Sonny invites his brother to come watch him play at a club that night. The club scene is the most transformative scene in the narrative and demonstrates the compelling nature as humans to empathize and reflect on ourselves when exposed to the suffering of others. The club scene represents how spaces can be transformative and revealing when artists feel safe and free to expose themselves and be heard which is exactly what happens to Sonny. It is only in this space, the nightclub, where Sonny is able to convey his truth to his brother, and his brother receives it. Before Sonny begins his set, SB discusses what he believes happens to audiences when they hear music, that is, real music:

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasion when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air (Baldwin 45).

SB's description of how audiences engage with artistic expression offers insight into the process of an outsider per say going into a foreign space for the sake of hearing, accepting, and reconciling with others' truth. From the moment Sonny starts playing, SB changes. For example, SB says that "Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did" (47). This last line is crucial for white audiences to take in because Baldwin is speaking through SB in this moment and reveals a truth for how reconciliation may lead to healing and freedom. Baldwin demonstrates with these two brothers a model for reconciling and dealing with the truth of suffering.

Through our exploration of the various forms that Black artists use to demonstrate the urgency for racial awareness, Du Bois, Hughes, and Baldwin, although different in their expression, revealed the construction of racism and how white people, especially white audiences, have failed to witness the realities of black people in America. With Du Bois' photographs, Hughes' poetry, and Baldwin's narrative poetic style, they have each exposed the oppression of the white gaze and the ways the gaze fails to reflect upon its' witnessing. In the next chapter, I explore different approaches to dealing with the white gaze/racism that Black women protest poets offer in their writings. Unlike the previous writers i've discussed, poets Alice Walker and Maya Angelou engage in much more



revealing language providing a space that fully demands self-reflexive engagement from their white racially conscious audiences.

### III. PROTEST POETRY MODELING RECONCILIATION METHODS

Alice Walker is one of several prolific black feminist poets whose rise began during the Civil Right/Black Arts movement. Having written profoundly moving works such as *The Color Purple* and other bodies of literary work including poetry, Alice Walker has a remarkable way of revealing herself to the reader so that the reader is thoroughly compelled to reciprocate self-reflective exploration. In Walker's newest work "Taking The Arrow Out Of The Heart," published in 2018, although not a work from the Civil Rights period, she shows how one can grapple with realities of social injustice in contemporary times. Interestingly, Walker included a completed Spanish translation of this book of poetry. In the letter from her translator, Manuel Garcia Verdecia, entitled "Translating Alice Walker: A Work of Intellectual and Spiritual Growth," Verdecia praises Walker for her poetic revealing of what it means to be a holistic and harmonious human being. He writes, "to be human is to reaffirm life in its complex and inexhaustible diversity, and that is precisely what Alice Walker does when she writes" ( p. xix ). Verdecia insists Walker's writing reveals to us "the real sense of who we are," and through her creative reimagining of life "we discover the soul in its most comprehensive and interconnected essence " (p.xix). Verdecia's synopsis of the effect of Walker's writing demonstrates how her poetry makes the reader feel what she feels, but as an audience we can look inward also to see how we are connected to her subjects.

In her poem, "Later We Would Miss You So Much," Walker describes Dr. King's impact on America and the profound grief this country felt after his assassination. In this work, she addresses the passion and love he poured over humanity, citing "the thrill of

being in [his] presence” and the fact that not even “the most horrible criticisms evil genius could devise” could stand “against [his] love” (137). Most striking, however, is

Walker’s very next lines, exclaiming:

Even the white people  
that day  
looked different  
to us  
who had never known  
them in their free form”  
They had a look  
of release  
of knowing they were bound also  
by chains and shackles  
& were at last  
Shaking themselves free (.

In these lines, Walker makes it very clear to her audience, especially her white audience, that the “shackles” on white people are not ones of societal and structural oppression but the oppressiveness of ignorance, hatred, and fear. White audiences may choose to explore how they too are bound by their blindness and reluctance to see themselves as part of and a beneficiary of our cruel racially constructed society. Within Walker’s mind space, she offers her white audience a helping hand in reconciling realities of racialized oppression with her.

Thinking about this idea of audience, writer, subject interconnectedness, prolific and beloved African American protest writer Dr. Maya Angelou offers possibilities for this approach in her writings. In her poem “We Saw Beyond Our Seeming,” Angelou explores her own self-reflective performativity to make a statement about all of us. She writes:

Our guilt grey fungus growing  
We knew and lied our knowing  
Deafened and unwilling

We aided in the killing,  
And now our souls lie broken  
Dry tablets without token (40).

These stanzas demonstrate the veil being pulled back, revealing an intense and solemn solitude. Angelou here is speaking from the standpoint of a revelator of hard truth; however, her tone has an affirmative layer to it as she represents a perspective of experience of which her audience may understand and be empathetic to. The lines “Deafened and unwilling, we aided in the killing” specifically stand out as Angelou speaking to a broad audience. Her use of the pronoun “we” establishes accountability with herself which simultaneously summons a reflexive response.

Alice Walker and Maya Angelou demonstrate how to engage and reconcile with truth. Through Angelou’s revealing self-reflection and Walker’s instructive, poetic mapping, both of these Black female poets distinguish themselves from earlier poetic forms of dealing with the white gaze, white oppression, and racism. The motifs established in the works of Walker and Angelou are also found in contemporary Hip-Hop poetry. Specifically, Hip-Hop artist Kendrick Lamar replicates and reinvents the motifs of self-reflective revelation as well as engaging with the white gaze.

## IV. HIP-HOP DISCOURSE AND THE CONTINUATION OF THE BLACK POETIC TRADITION

### 1. Arguing for reconnecting hip-hop to the black literary tradition

Hip-Hop poetry is part of and a continuation of black protest poetry, and literary scholar-activist Reiland Rebaka addresses this concept in *Hip-Hop's Inheritance: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip-hop Feminist Movement*. She argues for placing hip-hop in a transhistorical stream of African American cultural arts traditions. Notably, She refers to African American music, visual arts, and literature as being a part of an aesthetic tradition, as well as a sociopolitical tradition deeming the transgenerational artistic expression of black people as deeply connected to and reflective of their collective struggle and strife in a racist America (6). Rabaka also insists that there is a perceived disconnect between the historical continuum of black art and contemporary Hip-Hop music. She argues this perception results from either a rejection of Hip-Hop as part of a historical continuum of black artistic expression or a lack of exposure and knowledge of African American artistic traditions and how these traditions functioned as a means for black people to “raise their concerns and express their issues” within the black community and outside of it (7). Rabaka’s perspective gives light to the importance of recognizing the historical/cultural relationship between contemporary Hip-Hop and the long-standing black arts tradition, insisting that “African American popular music, then, is much more than the soundtrack of black popular culture. It is more akin to a musical map and cultural compass that provides us with a window into black folk’s world” (7). She also points out that the African American tradition of artistic expression has always

emphasized “eloquence, rhetoric, and spiritual dimensions of the spoken word,” especially during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, which were undoubtedly intertwined with Black Arts Movement (9).

It is undeniable that Hip-Hop as a genre and as a broader cultural movement has given birth to a vast amount of literature ready and hungry for analytical exploration. Hip-Hop scholars such as Bakari Kitwana have tackled issues surrounding the white-washing and appropriation of African American artistic expression. In his lecture series at Brown University, Kitwana, a prominent African American activist whose life work has rested on revealing the powerful connections between Hip-Hop and social justice, discusses his *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* and the many ways that Hip-Hop functions as a platform for political activism. He makes an important point at the end of the lecture that there is little work being done to connect current Hip-Hop/Rap literature to the long tradition of black artistic expression. He insists this is important because connection back to the roots of Hip-Hop/Rap reveals how black art has and continues to be deeply connected to socio-political experiences of black people.

In *White White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wangstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America*, Kitwana addresses the myth that suburban white males are the primary intended audience for Hip-Hop music. He questions “what is at stake if white kids are not hip-hop’s primary audience and we accept the myth?” (102). He offers an answer, explaining that “the overwhelming message here is that Blacks are not a significant variable in a music they created and a music of which black culture is the very foundation” (102). This explanation reveals how white Hip-Hop audiences are not

responding to this literature in such a way that would encourage themselves to become racially aware of their positionality in these Hip-Hop/Rap cultural and literary spaces.

## 2. Analysis of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*

Hip-Hop rapper and poet Kendrick Lamar is arguably one of the most famous and accomplished contemporary artists whose works builds off of traditional black literary forms, motifs, and messages. Lamar truly encompasses the building of private spaces in his lyrical form and reveals his inner most demons through compelling poetics. His album *To Pimp a Butterfly* embodies the motifs of the private mind space as Lamar grapples with the effects of his fame and fortune on his character and cultural roots while also interrogating structural racism in American society. His song “The Blacker the Berry” showcases Lamar’s *double consciousness* as he assesses the racial construction of black people from the perspective of white people and his own perceptions of himself:

You hate my people, I can tell 'cause it's threats when I see you  
I can tell 'cause your ways deceitful  
[...]  
It's funny how Zulu and Xhosa might go to war  
Two tribal armies that want to build and destroy  
Remind me of these Compton Crip gangs that live next door  
Beefin' with Pirus, only death settle the score  
So don't matter how much I say I like to preach with the Panthers  
Or tell Georgia State "Marcus Garvey got all the answers"  
Or try to celebrate February like it's my B-Day  
Or eat watermelon, chicken, and Kool-Aid on weekdays  
Or jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements  
Or watch BET 'cause urban support is important  
So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street  
When gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?  
Hypocrite!

This excerpt includes a shift from speaking to the oppressor or the white gaze to Lamar's interrogation of himself and the ways in which he, as black man, perpetuates violence created by white structural oppression. He also includes an interesting comparison between South African tribal/political warfare and Compton gang politics which Lamar then uses to catapult into his self-reflective cliffhanger in the last lines. After this intense analysis of himself and his efforts to represent black culture, the song quite literally explodes into a chaotic mesh of instrumentals and results in a solemn meditative instrumental. This ending is Lamar's call to the audience to reflect on his words in an engaging and meaningful way. This space represents a musical manifestation of the types of spaces non-musical poets create linguistically to provoke a reflective response.

In the article, "From Compton to Congress: The Barbarians Inside the Gates--an Exploration of 'Black Subjectivity' in Kendrick Lamar's 'Pimp A Butterfly,'" author Siebe Bluijs, makes a point to bring his own subjectivity into focus, reminding the reader that as a white male from the Netherlands, he has "internalized the 'white gaze'" and "listening to Kendrick Lamar makes me aware of this, and this realization is often discomfoting (and sometimes downright painful)" (75). Bluijs also analyzes Lamar's use of reversals such as changing the names of Democrats and Republicans to "DemoCrips" and "ReBloodlicans" to highlight the criminality of the American political system. Lamar uses clever language to draw comparisons between white power structures and gang culture which exposes the racial underpinnings of the white structural power. This artistic repackaging of American political systems and power structures is reminiscent of Du Bois'



Paris photographs which also call into question racial construction and the perceptions attached to racial spaces.

Indeed, Lamar's work reflects earlier poetic interrogation of whiteness and the white gaze while also reflecting practices of self-reflexivity and instructive reconciliation. Lamar's intense interrogation of himself summons a self-reflective response from white audiences as Alice Walker's and Maya Angelou's work does. Therefore, demonstrating the connections between Lamar's writings and earlier black protest writings addresses the need to not only acknowledge Hip-Hop as a continuation of the Black literary arts tradition but also showcases the history of Black poets messages to white audiences and, therefore, teaches white racially conscious Hip-Hop fans of their responsibility to engage with this genre in more meaningful and effective ways.

## V. CONCLUSION

Throughout this essay, I have addressed various motifs and practices of Black protest writers and poets to analyze the differences between their works regarding racism and white oppression while also looking at how white racially conscious audiences should acknowledge Black protest poets' quest for how to reconcile with racial realities and accepting the truth of racism in America. The interrogation of the white gaze, self-reflective private spaces, and instructional mapping for reconciliation with racial injustice, and one's role in perpetuating it, are some elements that create spaces where white racially conscious readers can address their own racial identities and reconcile with their responsibility in perpetuating internalized racism. Historically, engaging with Black literary spaces through a white racially conscious lens ignored the presence and power of the "white gaze" which amongst Black writer communities has symbolized cultural dominance and racial oppression. From the turn of the twentieth century to the Harlem renaissance, to now the Hip-Hop poetry movement, writers such as W.E.B Du Bois, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, and many more have grappled with and exposed the crushing oppression of racism in their works. From visual representations of racial construction to narratives of personal strife, Black poets and writers have created spaces to deal with and understand the manacles of racial oppression for both African Americans and white Americans. Therefore, as contemporary white audiences, we should see the realities of our gaze, acknowledge our presence, and learn to accept what our engagement with Black protest writing symbolizes. Let's not assume our presence and engagement with these private spaces is automatically welcomed and unproblematic. Instead, recognizing private spaces in Black literature encourages an awareness that we

are invited to look through a window into Black world life, created by Black protest poets. Engaging with Black protest poetry as a white racially conscious reader is least effective when approached as a white savior moment. My privileged identity limits me from being able to fully submerge and personally identify with experiences of Black poets and their subjects. However, the limitations of my identity open the door for exploring just that.

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