Black on Purpose / Poor on Purpose:

Language, Positionality and Poetic Artistic Resistance

NCAD MA – Art and Social Action
Module: Framing Research in Art and Social Action
Assignment 1: Critical Glossary – Six Key Concepts

Elayne Adamczyk Harrington
November 2026

A six-part research enquiry exploring key concepts in Art and Social Action. Each glossary entry examines the cultural and historical contexts, changing meanings and critical uses of selected terms, while considering their relevance to my own practice as an artist, poet and educator.

My encounter with *Black on Purpose* through The Last Poets' contribution to the 1995 *Panther* film soundtrack prompted my own adaptation, *Poor on Purpose* (The Last Poets, 1995). Through this, I seek to bring questions of poverty and class into socially engaged enquiry, while exploring how language is navigated and reinterpreted within my own practice.

As a poet and rapper, I am interested in the relationship between the two phrases as a process of linguistic reclamation: decoding and reinterpreting language within different social and historical contexts. Through over-identification and the ironic application of

social labels, language can offer authorship and agency to those positioned as outsiders or marginalised. Rather than rejecting the label of poverty, *Poor on Purpose* deliberately embraces and amplifies it as a form of defiance. Its apparent declaration of choice is tongue-in-cheek: poverty is not necessarily chosen, but the language through which it is acknowledged and represented can be reclaimed.

Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons, I understand *Poor on Purpose* as emerging through an encounter between The Last Poets' original cultural and historical expression and my own social position. Rather than reproducing its meaning, I reinterpret its linguistic construction through questions of class, poverty and resistance. As David E. Linge explains, interpretation requires critical awareness of our own prejudices and a willingness to hear what the text says to us (Linge, 1976, pp. xviii). This brings me to positionality as a key term in socially engaged practice: an awareness of how our lived experiences, social locations and assumptions shape the way we encounter and interpret the experiences of others.

This enquiry has also led me to Nick Cave as a socially engaged practitioner. I am interested in how his work moves between sculpture, performance, material experimentation and community participation to address wider social and political conditions. His first Soundsuit, developed in response to the police beating of Rodney King, emerged from questions of racial profiling,

vulnerability and representation. The Soundsuits transform the body, obscuring familiar markers of identity while creating new possibilities for movement, visibility and expression.

His later installation *Until* (2016) extended this engagement through an immersive exhibition involving community participation, performance and public dialogue. I am particularly interested in how the work was contextualised through the histories and communities of its exhibition sites, and how it brought audiences into an encounter with issues of race, violence, inequality and public life.

In his foreword to *Nick Cave: Until*, Joseph C. Thompson describes the work as addressing “the most poignant issues of our times: gun saturation, violence, race and the convoluted nature of civil discourse today in America”, while also recognising its capacity to engage diverse communities in “acts of ritual and sheer beauty” (Thompson, 2017, p. 7).

Claudia Rankine's reflection, “February 26, 2012 / In Memory of Trayvon Martin”, included in *Nick Cave: Until*, draws together the histories of “plantation, migration, of Jim Crow, segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling” (Rankine, 2017, p. 121). This historical layering places individual experience within wider structures of racial and social inequality. It also prompts me to consider positionality: how our own social locations shape our understanding of these histories, and the responsibility involved in

interpreting experiences beyond our own.

I am interested in how these artistic practices hold resistance, vulnerability and beauty together. In my own work, *Poor on Purpose* attempts a related inversion: bringing language associated with deprivation or social deficiency into view and transforming it into an expression of authorship, agency and poetic resistance. These connections are helping me consider how socially engaged art can create space for different histories and experiences to be encountered without assuming they are interchangeable.

Bibliography

Gadamer, H.-G. (1976) *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Edited and translated by D.E. Linge. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Linge, D.E. (1976) ‘Editor's Introduction’, in Gadamer, H.-G., *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. xiii–xxxiv.

Markonish, D. (ed.) (2017) *Nick Cave: Until*. Munich: DelMonico Books/Prestel.

Rankine, C. (2017) ‘February 26, 2012 / In Memory of Trayvon Martin’, in Markonish, D. (ed.), *Nick Cave: Until*. Munich: DelMonico

Books/Prestel, p. 121.

The Last Poets (1995) ‘Don't Give Me No Broccoli and Tell Me It's Greens (What Happened to Our Rhythm)’. In: *Panther: The Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*. Mercury Records, track 16. Track listing available at: https://www.moviemusic.com/soundtrack/M01214/panther/ (Accessed: October 2026).

Thompson, J.C. (2017) ‘Foreword’, in Markonish, D. (ed.), *Nick Cave: Until*. Munich: DelMonico Books/Prestel, p. 7.