American Hero

Essex Hemphill

I have nothing to lose tonight.
All my men surround me, panting,
as I spin the ball above our heads
on my middle finger.
It’s a shimmering club light
and I’m dancing, slick in my sweat.
Squinting, I aim at the hole
fifty feet away. I let the tension go.
Shoot for the net. Choke it.
I never hear the ball
slap the backboard. I slam it
through the net. The crowd goes wild
for our win. I scored
thirty-two points this game
and they love me for it.
Everyone hollering
is a friend tonight.
But there are towns,
certain neighborhoods
where I’d be hard pressed
to hear them cheer
if I move on the block.

Understanding the poem

1. In lines 5-6, the poet uses a metaphor to compare the basketball to what other thing and, by extension, playing basketball to what other activity?

2. Find examples of onomatopoeia which emphasize the sound of the game.

3. The cheers of victory are muted by the speaker’s realization at the end of the poem. What is the message about racism at the end of the poem?
Summarize the poem: ____________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

Compare the poem to *The Outsiders* using the following Venn diagram:

*The Outsiders*  
“American Hero”

- How does this poem relate to *The Outsiders*?

- How does this poem relate to the characters in *The Outsiders*?