

The Muse Is Music

THE NEW BLACK STUDIES SERIES

Edited by Darlene Clark Hine
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*Jazz Poetry from
the Harlem Renaissance
to Spoken Word*

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Listening to What the Ear Demands *Langston Hughes on the (Jazz) Record*

I had worked out a public routine of reading my poetry that almost never failed to provoke, after each poem, some sort of audible response—laughter, applause, a grunt, a groan, a sigh, or an “Amen!”

—Langston Hughes, “Making Poetry Pay”

Laughing, groaning, grunting, moaning, clapping, and calling out “Amen!” These depictions of the audience’s “audible response” to Langston Hughes’s practiced and well-pitched delivery of his poems at readings appear in the second volume of his autobiography, *I Wonder As I Wander*. In addition to this life narrative, Hughes penned numerous volumes of poems as well as short stories, children’s books, plays, librettos, liner notes, song lyrics, photo-texts, and pictorial histories, leaving behind a vast multi-genre publication record matched by corresponding volumes of criticism. “So diverse was Langston Hughes’s literary canon,” Faith Berry asserts in the liner notes to *The Voice of Langston Hughes*, “that some dimensions of it have been obscured” (4). I wondered as I wandered through literary and jazz studies on Hughes if the poet’s conscious engagement in the performer-audience dynamic within such rituals of recital had been taken seriously. Was Hughes *heard*? If so, how so?

In searching for responses to this question, I turned to initial critical reactions to his poetry. The Harlem Renaissance novelist Jessie Redmon Fauset wrote one of the earliest reviews of Hughes’s debut collection of blues-based and jazz-influenced poems, *The Weary Blues* (1926). Fauset praised him for “addressing universal subject[s] served Negro-style,” adding that “while I am no great lover of any dialect I hope heartily that Mr. Hughes will give us many more” comparable poems (61). Fauset’s evocation of universality, racialized

style, and vernacular speech supports a consideration of how relevant the terms of Hughes's initial reception may be today compared to when his presence in twentieth-century American literature did not loom large. In other words, what continuity or vagary exists between contemporary and retrospective receptions of Hughes's poetry, particularly in terms of his vocalicity and audibility? What can readers, writers, and listeners learn by assessing Hughes's critical and creative legacy on and off the (jazz) record?

Reviewing the historical and contemporary record of Hughes scholarship indicates that at least three key aspects of his poetry have not been sufficiently appraised: (1) the critical role of vocal instrumentality and performance for assessing the nuances in the gendered, racialized, and sexualized innovations evident in his blues and jazz aesthetic;¹ (2) the caliber of complexity and avant-garde experimentation in his book-length poem, *Ask Your Mama: Twelve Moods for Jazz* (1961); and (3) the import of Hughes's iconicity among the intertwined realms of visual culture and jazz performance. Ultimately, developing "big ears" in jazz terms as articulated by the feminist historian Sherrie Tucker, for hearing how race, gender, and sexuality inform these traits in Hughes's later writings and recordings is the heart of this chapter's interpretive exploration.² Hearing how Hughes employs his voice in archival poetry readings and studio-arranged performances, including on compilations such as Verve Records' reissue of *Wearry Blues: With Langston Hughes, Charles Mingus, and Leonard Feather*, will enhance our understanding of his jazz-, gospel-, and blues-inflected verses. Such close listening, in Charles Bernstein's apt term, can illuminate the gendered contours of Hughes's poetic techniques and performance possibilities, including its limitations or omissions.

Listening to Hughes moves the familiar conversation reflected in Fauset's initial review from racially rooted concerns about the poet's use of dialect to commentary on the sonic territory of the poet's idiolect. Predominant motifs found in Hughes's poetry that we will explore include the delights of music recording technology and the disappointments of its misappropriation; the latent queer blues aesthetic and the emergent "quare" prism for hearing Hughes;³ and, finally, the racialized treatment of death. These recurring themes parallel concerns within jazz discourse and are adapted by subsequent poets. They signal a tradition that can be examined within a tradition of African American poetry: the jazz poetry idiom. My introduction established the parameters of this idiom; my purpose here is to comparatively close read and listen to poems and performances that expand our notion of Hughes's aesthetic and reveal his position as a progenitor for emblems and methods found in succeeding poetry motivated by jazz.

Likely successors appear, such as the contemporary poet Carl Phillips and the British filmmaker Isaac Julien; less likely kinfolk make cameo appearances as well, such as the Broadway stage performer Audra McDonald. These creative producers differently reflect Hughes's "prominent influence"; "like Coleman Hawkins in jazz, Hughes was a bridge between generations of black artists" (Nielsen, *Black Chant* 41). I read the rituals of revisionary recital of Hughes's work by Phillips and others as offering a template for how Hughes can figure as a bridge in "the search for a usable past for black queer studies" while "avoid[ing] essentializing black gay subjectivity." My reading of "black gay presence" in Hughes's recorded legacy follows scholars such as Sharon Holland, Dwight McBride, and Mark Anthony Neal, who encourage critics to make "room in the closet for discussions of sexuality that move beyond a heterosexist paradigm" in African American studies.⁴

Toppling the Totemic Folk: "Poet Laureate of the Negro"

Hughes is one of the best-known African American poets in American literature; he is also one of the most recognized American poets internationally. But how have we come to know the Hughes we think we know? In written, musical, and spoken-word anthologies as well as in the pedagogical record of high school and college syllabi, a portrait of Hughes's poetic range emerges through personae poems such as "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Mother to Son," and "Theme for English B."⁵ Such poetry often confirmed common perceptions of Hughes's literary stature as a vernacular poet with limited artistic scope who wrote chiefly of and for the black masses. That mass of black bodies—Hughes's ostensible audience, as well as Hughes himself—was also historically constructed in ways that continue "the reproduction of normative black sexual and gender relations" (M. Neal, *New Black Man* 72). His status as a totem in literary and popular cultural studies signals that his poetry was codified in raced and gendered terms to serve a primitivizing and totalizing agenda, as the glissando shift between his often-attributed moniker "poet laureate of the Negro race" and the more derisive label "poet lowrate of the Negro race" denotes.⁶

True, the author's self-fashioning complicated this one-dimensional portrayal; Hughes often called himself a "folk poet" and otherwise encouraged the view that he was far less well read than was the case. He described the ease of his compositional process in ways that masked both his erudition and his efforts to hone his writing craft, asserting that "there are seldom many changes in my poems, once they're down . . . the rest of the poem flows from

those first few lines, usually right away" (*Big Sea* 24). Despite his performatively anti-intellectual stance, many of his poems resulted from well-wrought revision. *Ask Your Mama*, for example, which Hughes commenced on the riotous occasion of the Newport Jazz Festival in 1960, was first drafted as the poem "Show Fare, Mama: Notes for Jazz"; this ambitious work underwent thirteen subsequent drafts over the course of several months before Knopf published the book (Rampersad, *Life* 2:314–17). Hughes's meticulous composition process also included hearing his written work performed aloud for a large audience. His correspondence with the composer Jan Meyerowitz, his collaborator on several operas, manifests his intense writing investment. Hughes fumed to Meyerowitz, "As operas are done in America, the words had just as well be nonsense syllables. I see no point in spending long hours of thought, and weeks of writing seeking poetic phrases and just the right word—and then not enough of the librettist's lines are heard for anybody to know what is being sung" (qtd. in Rampersad, *Life* 2:321). Hughes's strenuous efforts to place the right words in the right order for the right level of audibility does not mean he did not occasionally dash off doggerel. Nevertheless, the totem canonization of Hughes as a writer uninterested in the erudite—one who eschewed the recondite and favored accessible language—contributed to his reputation among poet critics as having an unsophisticated poetic approach. Although reappraisals of Hughes's verse have demonstrated otherwise, too many scholars have insisted that his verse is "limited in scope, or otherwise aesthetically deficient" and that it "fails lamentably to satisfy their desire for a modernist literature attuned to the complexities of modern life" (Ponce 506; Rampersad, Introduction 3).

A Formal Innovator and Jazz Imagist

Some of Hughes's poems do contain simple rhyme schemes and transparent meanings, yet many do not. And even the folk poems, when scrutinized thoroughly, reveal something of the modernist complexity and literacy that both Hughes and his critics falsely throw overboard. Poems like "Young Prostitute," rendered in an imagist cinquain—

Her dark brown face
Is like a withered flower
On a broken stem.
Those kind come cheap in Harlem
So they say.

(33)

—offer multiple, even contradictory interpretations that belie this alleged folk simplicity. For example, the deceptively casual phrase "so they say" serves a grave function. It distinguishes the projections of an external interlocutor from the poem's narrator and extends the word "cheap" from an economic to a moral discourse. It also hints that the personal and societal price within the sex work industry is set by a gendered and racialized pay scale. The dehumanization and commoditization of the black female body from slavery onward had led some to assume that "the darker the berry, the *cheaper* the juice." However, Hughes alludes to an alternative readership's perspective, through his careful use of line breaks, to counter this sexist and racist articulation by the hostile "they" mentioned in the poem's last line. Hughes, who consistently employed a fluid and shifting lyric "I" to imagine a collectively racialized and gendered "we," distances the poem's speaker from the perspective of the "they" invoked in the poem. The combined dynamics of colorism and primitivist voyeurism—the devaluing of the woman's dark brown face by those outside of the Harlem community—are exposed. "They" can merely "say," the poem's omniscient speaker implies; others can more powerfully see the value in the young woman's beautiful brown body and black life.

More compellingly, when one looks at "Young Prostitute" in its original book publication context, a viewpoint counter to the mainstream devaluing of black bodies along a racist and colorist hierarchy surfaces. The poem that faces it on the adjacent page is addressed "To a Black Dancer in 'The Little Savoy.'" The lineation and variable syllabics of the poem isolate key corporeal features celebrating a dark "Wine-maiden / Of the Jazz-tuned night" whom Hughes apostrophizes:

Lips
Sweet as purple dew,
Breasts
Like the pillows of all sweet dreams,
Who crushed
The grapes of joy
And dripped their juice
On *you*?

(*Weary Blues* 35)

In one view, singling out the black woman's body parts continues the male-centered tradition of poetical musing on the female body as the singular object of a controlling gaze. The "lips" and "breasts" are isolated in the visual logic of the poem; they are the only words that carry the weight of the verse line alone. This view is bolstered by the realization that the jazz dancer's

artistry and embodied skill are not emphasized. The only motion present in the poem exists between two verbs conjugated in the past tense, “crushed” and “dripped,” and two words presenting the object of the preposition, “on you.” The query the poem presents (who crushed the grapes of joy?) activates an image of something done to the dancer’s body; she receives the stained juice on her mouth and nipples with all the sexual innuendo—and eroticized feminine passivity—that the poem’s grammatical structure and linear form problematically construct.

In a more generous view, Hughes engages in a gendered reversal of the colorist protocols largely evident among the chorines in Harlem’s dance ballrooms and Broadway stages in the twenties and thirties. As Jacqui Malone reminds us, although “the role of chorus line dancers in the development of jazz has been consistently overlooked by jazz and dance historians . . . throughout the twenties, jazz musicians, singers, and dancers worked together in night clubs and cabarets. Their shows were inter-artistic performances; jazz music’s ‘visible rhythms’ resulted from the collaboration across artistic genres” (278, 285). The graphic history of swing-era jazz often consists of pictures of fully suited dark brown male jazz band members whose deeply pigmented complexions contrast with nearly naked vanilla-hued tappers and dancers.⁷ Hughes’s address to a “Black Dancer” as opposed to a “Negro” one, and his modification of the nouns “dancer,” “maiden,” “dew,” and “juice” with the adjectives “black,” “wine,” “purple,” and “grape,” deftly harness the devices of simile and metaphor to connote joy in dwelling in sepia skin. Such usage reflects his sophisticated play with language and form to reframe the colorist aesthetics bound up in black representational performance space. In such light, his poetry’s supposed surface simplicity reveals its opposite, a complex and deep investment in challenging the rigidity of racialism and colorism through the elasticity of the lyric form.

Scanning the Sonic Shadow of Racial Ambiguity

Hughes’s allusions to Ezra Pound, more proof of his modernist complexity and his interest in the ambiguities of racial and gender performance, exist in poems originally included in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. In “Ezra Pound’s early *Cantos*,” as Marjorie Perloff eloquently asserts, “the role of syntax is characteristically subordinated to that of Image. . . . As in the case of film montage, the canto’s technique is to produce . . . ‘again the vision’” (*Radical Artifice* 54–55). Perloff’s connection between montage and imagism illuminates Hughes’s vision and version of Pound’s imagist aesthetics. He translates

Pound’s paradigmatic imagist poem “In a Station of the Metro” into the poems “Subway Rush Hour” and “Chord.” In “Chord” we find:

Shadow faces
In the shadow night
Before the early dawn
Bops bright.
(422)

Imagism valorizes precise execution of maximum resonance with minimum words; Hughes pushes this principle of concrete condensation even further. The first seven words in Pound’s poem, “The apparition of these faces in the crowd,” Hughes reduces to three: “Chord,” “shadow,” and “faces.” The definite articles and prepositions “the,” “of,” and “these” drop out, leaving us with the synonym of “apparition”: “shadow.” Musically and metaphorically “Chord” paradoxically reverses and repeats “crowd.” The phonetic “or” sound is transposed into the “ow” sound, while the meaning for chord—a group of three or more notes played simultaneously—suggests another kind of crowd, a concert of musical notes.

The synesthesia present in the movement from “chord” to “shadow faces” is inflected by stereotypes concerning blacks’ alleged aptitude for music. In *Ask Your Mama* Hughes subverts the racialist belief in blacks’ innate abilities as singers by blending the ironies of a rhetorical question with ruptured visual and sonic repetition:

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
BELGIUM SHADOWS LEOPOLD
PREMIER DOWNING AGING
GENERAL BOURSE BELEAGUERED
EASTLAND AND MALAN DECEASED
DEAD OR LIVE THEIR GHOSTS CAST SHADOWS
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
WHERE NEGROES SING SO WELL
NEGROES SING SO WELL
SING SO WELL
SO WELL.
WELL?

TACIT

Humming:
“All God’s
Chillum
Got
Shoes”

(“Shades of Pigmeat,” *Ask Your Mama* 19)

In the poem above, readers can see a song form architecturally drawn on the page—the round of “wells.” Listeners may also hear the homophone “wail”