

## **Changing the Exchange**

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**“An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose.”<sup>1</sup>**

**—Langston Hughes**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines a selection of Langston Hughes’ poetry related to past events placed in a cultural context examining issues surrounding isolation, race relations, and “othering” in the literary realm within the duality of worlds in which he dwelled—the literary and the musical.

Langston Hughes remains a modernist voice of change and influence whose reputation as an author of literary merit has been enhanced by his consistent incorporation of musical influences, bringing the concept of “othering” into the literary realm as he crossed a multitude of barriers in the process. New Historicism, as a rich method of critical interpretation, provides a mechanism by which to analyze his intricate literary collage methodology that invokes an indictment of racial injustice and the attendant isolation. This sophisticated *bricolage* incorporates historical realities as the found materials. These provide chronological frames of reference which preserve one artist’s ontological journey as his writings are immortalized in the amber that is both historical fact and artistic commentary.

In exchanging preconceived notions with alternate viewpoints, Hughes invites us to deconstruct both his text and meaning, all within an historical framework. Hughes sought to make sense of his world through his art in order to effect change, and his findings and methods remain relevant today. This process does not allow for the separation of the text from its creator or its audience preserving the integrity of his views within the natural context of his historical time and place. Hughes created his own category—heretofore not fully recognized—which in this paper is termed, “Rhythm on Layered Literature” (ROLL). This is arguably the precursor of “Rhythm and Poetry” (RAP), which substitutes the spoken word for the written. This acronym also approximates the other half of “Rock and Roll,” furthering the notion that the author managed to use united themes for divisive realities. Hughes’ modernist messages are cogent today due to the fluidity of his style

which leads us through the shameful corridors of our past into the murky labyrinth of our future.

### **Changer l'échange**

par Diane Dean-Epps, M.A.

#### **Résumé**

Cet article examine une sélection de la poésie de Langston Hughes sur des événements passés dans un contexte culturel qui examine les questions autour de l'isolation, les relations interraciales et « l'altérité » dans le domaine littéraire dans les limites de la dualité des mondes dans lesquels il vit – le littéraire et le musical. Langston Hughes demeure une voix moderniste du changement et d'influence, dont la réputation en tant qu'auteur littéraire mérite d'être rehaussée due à son incorporation régulière d'influences musicales, amenant le concept « d'altérité » dans le domaine littéraire, traversant une multitude d'obstacles ce faisant. En tant que méthode riche d'interprétation critique, le nouvel historicisme fournit un mécanisme avec lequel on peut analyser sa méthodologie littéraire de collage complexe qui invoque une accusation d'injustice raciale et d'isolation concomitante. Ce *bricolage* sophistiqué comporte des réalités historiques comme matières de base. Ceux-ci fournissent le cadre de référence chronologique qui préserve le périple ontologique de l'artiste lorsque ses écrits sont immortalisés dans l'ambre qui est à la fois fait historique et commentaire artistique.

En échangeant des notions préconçues avec d'autres points de vue, Hughes nous invite à déstructurer à la fois son texte et sa signification à l'intérieur d'un cadre historique. Hughes a cherché à trouver un sens à son monde à travers son art pour amener un changement, et ce qu'il a découvert et ses méthodes sont encore pertinentes aujourd'hui. Ce processus ne permet pas la séparation du texte et de son créateur ou son audience, conservant l'intégrité de ses points de vue dans le contexte naturel de son lieu et son heure dans l'histoire. Hughes a créé sa propre catégorie – jusqu'à maintenant non entièrement reconnue, qui dans cet article est appelée « Rythme sur la Littérature Superposée » (ROLL). Ceci est manifestement le précurseur du « Rythme et Poésie » (RAP), qui substitue le parlé par l'écrit. Cet acronyme approxime également l'autre moitié du « Rock and Roll », faisant avancer la notion que l'auteur a réussi à utiliser des thèmes unis pour des réalités qui divisent. Les messages modernistes de Hughes sont convaincants de nos jours, due à la fluidité de son style qui nous mène à travers les honteux corridors de notre passé vers les labyrinthes troubles de notre futur.

### **Cambiando el Cambio**

Por Diane Dean-Epps, M.A.

#### **Resumen**

Este documento examina una selección poética de Langston Hughes, relacionada con eventos pasados ocurridos en el contexto cultural examinando detalles que rondan entre aislamiento, relaciones raciales, y “otros” en el realismo literal dentro de los mundos

duales en los cuales el residió, -(el mundo literal y el musical). Langston Hughes nos recuerda una voz modernista de cambio e influencia cuya reputación como un autor de mérito literal ha sido exaltada por su incorporación inconsistente de influencias musicales, trayéndonos el concepto de “otros” dentro del realismo literal al cruzar una multitud de barreras durante el proceso. La historia moderna como un rico método de interpretación crítica provee un mecanismo por el cual se puede analizar su intrincado montaje literal de metodología, que invoca una acusación de injusticia racial y aislamiento del sirviente. Este sofisticado contexto, incorpora realidades históricas así como el nuevo material descubierto. Esto provee medios cronológicos de referencia los cuales preservan la jornada cronológica del artista y sus escritos son inmortalizados en el ámbar el cual es ambos, (hechos históricos y comentarios artísticos).

Durante el intercambio de las nociones preconcebidas, se alternan puntos de vista, Hughes nos invita a deconstruir ambos: su texto y significado; todo dentro de un formato histórico. Hughes busco darle sentido a su mundo através de su arte en orden de efectuar el cambio, y sus descubrimientos y métodos aún continúan relevantes en nuestros días. Este proceso no permite la separación del texto y el creador o su audiencia preservando así la integridad de sus puntos de vista dentro del contexto natural de lugar y la hora a través de la historia. Hughes creo su propia categoría – aquí-y- adelante no reconocido completamente, al cual se le da el termino en este articulo, “ritmo en literatura en capas” (ROLL), el cual substituye la palabra hablada por la escrita. Esta sigla también aproxima la otra mitad de “Rock and Roll,”mas allá de la noción que el autor logro utilizar para unir los temas con las realidades divisivas. El mensaje modernista de Hughes, es en estos dias muy evidente debido a la fluidez de su estilo en cual nos lleva através de recorridos vergonzosos de nuestro pasado y dentro del laberinto nublado del futuro.

### **Mudando a Troca**

Por Diane Dean-Epps, M.A.

### **Resumo**

Este artigo examina uma seleção da poesia de Langston Hughes relativa aos eventos passados colocados num contexto cultural examinando as questões relativas ao isolamento, relações raciais, e “alterização” (othering) no domínio literário, dentro da dualidade de mundos em que ele residiu - o literário e o musical. Langston Hughes continua sendo uma voz modernista de mudança e de influência, cuja reputação como um autor de mérito literário tem sido realçada por sua incorporação consistente de influências musicais, trazendo o conceito de “alterização” no campo literário, atravessando muitos obstáculos durante este processo. O novo historicismo como um método valioso de interpretação crítica fornece um mecanismo para analisar sua complicada metodologia de colagem literária que invoca uma acusação da injustiça racial e da isolação assistente. Este *bricolage* sofisticado incorpora realidades históricas como os materiais encontrados. Estes fornecem quadros de referência cronológica que preservam uma viagem ontológica do artista, enquanto suas escritas são immortalizadas no âmbar que é simultaneamente fato histórico e comentário artístico.

Trocando as noções preconcebidas com os pontos de vista alternados, Hughes nos convida a desconstruir seu texto e significado dentro de uma estrutura histórica. Hughes procurou fazer sentido do seu mundo através de sua arte, a fim de efetuar mudanças, e seus resultados e métodos permanecem relevantes hoje em dia. Este processo não permite a separação do texto de seu criador ou de sua audiência, preservando assim a integridade de suas opiniões dentro do contexto natural de seu tempo e local históricos. Hughes criou sua própria categoria - precedentemente não muito reconhecida, a qual é denominada neste artigo de, "Ritmos na Literatura em Camadas" (Rhythm on Layered Literature - ROLL). Este é provavelmente o precursor do "Ritmo e Poesia" (RAP), que substitui a palavra falada pela escrita. Este acrônimo também é similar a outra metade do "Rock and Roll", promovendo a noção de que o autor conseguiu utilizar temas unidos para realidades divisórias. As mensagens modernistas de Hughes são irrefutáveis atualmente devido à fluidez do seu estilo que nos conduz através dos corredores vergonhosos do nosso passado para o labirinto tenebroso do nosso futuro.

### **Das Aendern des Wechsels**

Diane Dean-Epps, M.A.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Dieses Schriftstueck untersucht eine Auswahl aus der Poesie von Langston Hughes die mit vergangenen Geschehnissen zusammenhaengen, und zwar untersucht es im kulturellen Rahmen Probleme wie Isolation, Rassenbeziehungen und "othering", innerhalb der Dualitaet der Welten in denen er lebte - der literarischen und der musikalischen. Langston Hughes verbleibt eine modernistische Stimme von Wechsel und Einfluss dessen Ruf als Autor literarischer Verdienstes noch gesteigert wurde durch seine bestaendige Integration musikalischer Einfluesse, die den Begriff des "othering" in die literarische Welt brachte, und im Prozess eine Vielfalt von Schranken ueberschritt. Der neue Historizismus, als eine reichhaltige Methode kritischer Interpretation stellt einen Mechanismus zur Analyse seiner veknuepften, literarischen Collagemethodologie zur Vefuegung, der eine Anklage gegen rassische Vorurteile und die damit verbundene Isolation ins Feld bringt. Diese Verfeinerte *bricolage* verkoerpert historische Realitaeten als die gefundenen Materialien. Diese, wiederum, stellen chronologische Bezugssysteme zur Verfuegung, welche die ontologische Reise des Kuenstlers bewahren, waehrend seine Werke unsterblich werden im Bereiche historischer Tatsachen, sowohl als kuenstlerischem Kommentar.

Im Wechsel vorgefasster Ideen mit wechselhaften Standpunkten, Hughes fordert uns auf den Text, sowohl als die Bedeutung im historischen Rahmen zu zerlegen. Hughes strebte an durch seine Kunst Sinn aus seiner Welt zu machen um Aenderung zu schaffen, und seine Ergebnisse bleiben heute noch zustaendig. Dieser Prozess laesst nicht zu, dass der Text von seinem Autoren oder seiner Leserschaft getrennt wird. Und so wird die Einheit seiner Ansichten im natuerlichen Zusammenhang seiner historischen Zeit und Lage bewahrt. Hughes schuf seine eigene Kategorie, die bisher nie voll erkannt wurde und die in diesem Schriftstueck mit "Rhythm on Layered Literature" (ROLL) bezeichnet ist. Dies mag wohl ein Vorgaenger von "Rhythm and Poetry" (RAP) sein, der das gesprochene

Wort mit dem geschriebenen ersetzt. Dieses Akronym naehert sich der zweiten Haelfte von "Rock and Roll", was die Idde foerdert, das der Autor es verstand vereinigte Themen fuer Uneinigkeit schaffenden Realitaten zu gebrauchen. Die modernistische Botschaft die Hughes uns bringt wird heute gueltig durch die Fluessigkeit seines Stils der uns durch die schaendlichen Korridore unserer Vergangenheit in das truebe Labyrinth unserer Zukunft fuehrt.

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### **Introduction**

Langston Hughes (February 1, 1902 – May 22, 1967) was an American poet, essayist, playwright, novelist, and journalist, best known for his work associated with the Harlem Renaissance movement of the 1920s and 1930s, although his oeuvre stretches across many decades. In spite of the fact that he often dealt with quite volatile subjects, his poetry is not steeped in fear, rather it rests comfortably in a cultural context that examines issues surrounding equality, race relations, and "othering" in the literary realm. Hughes' thematically rich body of work which is framed within this literary landscape, undeniably juxtaposed between his collage of the duality of worlds in which he dwelled, undeniably juxtaposed white with black, the literary with the musical.

It is not always easy for members of one segment of society—whether the differences are based on socio-economic, religious, ethnic, gender, or other qualities—to fully enter into the experience of another segment. The work of Langston Hughes permits such a privileged viewpoint: rooted in the Black American experience of the twentieth century, it is open to all who would cross over into Hughes' milieu with an open heart and mind. The result for the early twenty-first century promotes understanding and a celebration of diversity, and enables those who truly enter into Hughes' world to face the challenges new forms of discrimination present, as well as confronting oppression in a dynamic and positive manner. It has not only literary and artistic merit, but a preeminent social function as well.

### **Rhythm on Layered Literature**

Hughes created his own category—heretofore not fully recognized—which in this paper is termed, "Rhythm on Layered Literature" (ROLL). This is arguably the precursor of "Rhythm and Poetry" (RAP), which substitutes the spoken word for the written. This acronym also approximates the other half of "Rock and Roll." In this "Roll" is transformed into "ROLL," an acronym representing not only Hughes' uncredited genre delineation, but also the realization that black America was no longer "rolling over."

Instead, the culture was evolving to a new place where simple messages were the most powerful. “That’s what Rock and Roll is...the old songs reduced to the lowest common denominator.”<sup>2</sup> In this way, before there was even a term for Hughes’ genre, he successfully married two art forms into what in this study is termed ROLL: the literary equivalent of Rock and Roll as a radical mode of expression ameliorating the adverse effects of racial inequality while accessing the universal appeal of music.

## **A New Order**

This process of reduction to the lowest common denominator on the model of Rock and Roll is furthered by creating literature that speaks a language that may be seen, heard, and felt. In this way Hughes “...conceals his revolutionary energies only so that he may more powerfully reveal them, and swerves or rebels so that he may triumph by founding a new order...” What is this new order, but a re-ordering of the old?<sup>3</sup> Would it be any surprise that such a new order would be conceived in a nation whose Great Seal hearkens back to the ancient prophecy of Virgil’s Fourth *Eclogue*: “Annuit Coeptis, Novus Ordo Saeclorum” ([Providence] has approved our beginnings: A New Order of the Ages); as well as the promise of Unity from Diversity: “E Pluribus Unum” (Out of many, the one)?<sup>4</sup>

In exchanging pre-conceived notions of “separate, but equal” with an alternate viewpoint of equality for all, Hughes invites us to deconstruct both his texts and their meaning, all within an historical framework. As an artist, he crosses over boundaries, seeking to make sense of his world through his art. The goal is to effect change. His findings remain relevant, even as readers delve into his literary legacy as a *bricoleur*—one who creates an artistic work from diverse found elements in the environment, who used the music of his day to build a bridge to unity through diversity.

## **The New Historicism**

New Historicism is a literary form of analysis which came into being circa 1982 when Stephen Greenblatt was interviewed by the journal *Genre* and was asked for the nomenclature for his mode of literary analysis. He straight-away answered: “New Historicism.” He has spent the nearly twenty years since attempting to correct the misnomer to reflect the more apt term of, “cultural poetics.”<sup>5</sup>

Based on the work of Michel Foucault, key assumptions in New Historicist criticism include:

- that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;

- that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
- that literary and non-literary “texts” circulate inseparably;
- that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature;
- that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.<sup>6</sup>

Providentially, this method of literary interpretation makes it possible to construct meaning from Hughes’ poetic compositions when preconceived notions are exchanged with an alternate viewpoint, allowing for the deconstruction of the text, all within anhistorical framework.

### **Langston Hughes Anticipates the New Historicism**

Hughes anticipated the New Historicists’ theory of appropriation as he captured images and language from a rich historical time period producing powerfully original results. Langston Hughes remains a modernist voice of change and influence whose reputation as an author of literary merit has been enhanced by his consistent incorporation of musical influences beyond Rock and Roll, including jazz, be-bop, swing and the blues. The brought the concept of “othering” into the literary realm as he crossed a multitude of barriers along the way. The author’s work continues to provide scholars with an opportunity to apply New Historicism as a rich method of critical interpretation, offering a mechanism whereby analysis may be applied to his methodology of clever literary collage.

Hughes’ messages are sealed in a glass time capsule that preserves history, even as it allows access to messages of resilience that still hold true due to their consistent subtext and text. Hughes’ work also serves as a chronicle of American musical history, preserved in literary works of merit, sending a message of hope through a refrain of dreams, realized and unrealized. These messages provide chronological frames of reference which preserve one artist’s ontological journey as his writings are immortalized in an amber that is both historical fact and artistic commentary.

History often presents itself to us as a collection of disconnected moments, but Hughes utilizes these vignettes as opportunities for in-depth interpretation, based upon his view of related themes and their meaning within the context of the occurrences. This becomes obvious through the lens of New Historicism. Providing us with messages rich in imagery, Hughes establishes the reader as a dynamic entity who interpolates creative meaning in the text. The reader is thus an active participant, not a passive receiver. The process by which artists seek to make sense of their world through their art, and the

process by which referential meaning is made necessitates the dissection of each segment of the work, in addition to looking at the body of work as a whole. The process incorporates what is known about cultural and historical occurrences, and this information is gleaned from the author's representations, or what research of the referenced time period determines.

### **Changing the Exchange**

For instance, in "Cultural Exchange," Hughes envisions this reality:

*In white pillared mansions  
Sitting on their wide verandas,  
Wealthy Negroes have white servants,  
White sharecroppers work the black plantations,  
And colored children have white mammies.<sup>7</sup>*

These lines must be necessarily viewed as tropes for a more all-encompassing theme, lest these seemingly literal references seem wholly preposterous. Taken as they are intended, they reside as oppositional messages that highlight what has been wrong historically within the system, naming the wrongs that had not been righted by accentuating the reverse image.

He is "changing the exchange" here and, essentially, swapping it out. What better way to gain new perspective on an old issue, such as race relations, than by presenting a mirrored "Alice in Wonderland" distorted image of the cultural reality? After all, a mirror can reflect or project, but it never allows for invisibility. In "Cultural Exchange" the switching of roles between whites and blacks allows for the possibility of empathy. The piece offers up an altered reality, which could certainly create an opportunity to change the exchange by initiating communication via the contextual offering "What if this was *your* reality?"

It is not so much a literal vision of the future that is offered, but rather an oppositional vision that dramatically and interactively pulls the reader into the indicated chronological period of slavery and demands "How would *you* feel?"

What readers may feel is outrage at such a "white" viewpoint—white not being positive in this case, but rather portraying a repressed, colorless faction which allows for the application of a more colorblind viewpoint. While there was a built-in viewpoint because of Hughes' experience as an African-American, this bias does not negate the point he makes in order to give voice to, and for, those who cannot speak for themselves. He was



a product of his time, as was his poetry, and the historical context is imperative whether it is found to be palatable or not.

Hughes' ability to appropriate cultural images and language for effect, providing an opportunity to connect to a shared history remains his distinctive literary characteristic. This methodology accords with the theory of the New Historicists, who examine appropriation in an effort to bring awareness to the forefront, which prevents the possibility of an erroneous interpretation of materials if we neglect to examine them from the standpoint of the time of their creation.

Literature often references terms, appellations, or the like that are particularly objectionable in the current year, although they may be perfectly appropriate as placeholders for the time from which they originated. In this way the understanding of history is supplemented, particularly if that understanding renders the text more meaningful to the reader.

Foucault would have us reject any notion of history as a linear progression and, indeed, Hughes' references are non-linear and often lack chronology. History is a collection of disconnected moments. The text in "Cultural Exchange" is a useful illustration of this principle. Wildly alternating historical allusions abound which are seemingly random, but are, perhaps, meant to be just that. In fact, the concept of a changing society must encompass a chaotic historical account before some sort of new order may be established. Pierre Bourdieu says that, "To understand the practices of writers and artists, and not least their products, entails understanding that they are the result of the meeting of two histories; the history of the positions they occupy and the history of their dispositions."<sup>8</sup>

The literary canon can no more remain static than the culture from which it originated. It must be revised, challenged, and interpreted even as it is hermetically sealed. As was Hughes' wish, America has not remained static, nor has the author's work, though the events remain the same.

In the text, "White Man," we are treated to an opportunity of viewing Hughes' work both through the historical time frame within which he worked and the 20/20 lens that time's passing has afforded us. All struggle possesses political ramifications and records will be kept, so why not put your own name in a book—or in his case, on a book—because the framing will occur one way or another. Why not a cultural framing based on the reality of the times?

*But now,  
I hear your name ain't really White Man!*

*I hear it's something  
Marx wrote down  
fifty years ago  
that rich people don't like to spell.  
Is that true, White Man?  
Is your name in a book  
called the Communist Manifesto?  
Is your name spelled?  
C-A-P-I-T-A-L-I-S-T?  
Are you always a White Man?  
Huh?<sup>9</sup>*

Hughes is challenging his white counterparts to reexamine who they are as opposed to what they (currently) do. Being white is not synonymous with delineation as a capitalist. Marx was white and, undeniably a Communist, and many people of Sub-Saharan African descent have embraced unbridled capitalism. The poet is breaking apart and recombining identities and activities to change the exchange once again.

Fish states, "If the self is conceived of not as an independent entity but as a social construct whose operations are delimited by the systems of intelligibility that inform it, then the meanings it confers on texts are not its own but have their source in the interpretive community...of which it is a function. Moreover, these meanings will be neither subjective nor objective...."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it is enough to say these meanings are simply different, evolving and open to interpretation.

### **A Bricolage of Dreams**

Hughes' messages are always played against the be-bop thematic backdrop of dreams, whether they are deferred, weary, forgotten, or inaccessible. What they are is possible as an available antidote for the isolation that Hughes and others like him felt when they dreamed about belonging, about being accepted. This is highlighted in his poem, "Dream Variation":

*Till the white day is done.  
'Then rest at cool evening  
Beneath a tall tree  
While night comes on gently,  
Dark like me-  
That is my dream!  
To fling my arms wide*

*In the face of the sun,  
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!  
Till the quick day is done.  
Rest at pale evening...  
A tall, slim tree...  
Night coming tenderly  
Black like me.*<sup>11</sup>

He manages to create an air of celebration in preparation for a time when the world acknowledges what African-Americans already knew: that they are first-class citizens. It is no small wonder that “Black Like Me” became an anthem that moved African-Americans into the daylight of self-empowerment that is the enlightenment that occurs when one has a voice and is heard. The phrase inspired John Howard Griffin’s 1961 groundbreaking non-fiction study of discrimination, *Black Like Me*.<sup>12</sup>

It is imperative to consider cultural and historical context in Hughes’ body of work in establishing him as a *bricoleur*. Within that scaffolding is his use of history and diverse musical styles as found materials in establishing his literary bricolage which creates music “...as Communication—since it’s a circle, and you yourself are the dot in the middle.”<sup>13</sup>

This process does not allow for the separation of the text from its creator or audience. In fact, it is Hughes’ biography that allows a glimpse through history’s half open door, into his house of blues and bricolage. It is this bricolage—this literary collage—that rendered his writing style unique, establishing ROLL as a category all its own, where all that Hughes loved and despised resides.

This combination establishes him as an artist of great import who not only offered himself up as a provocateur who cried out against what ailed society, but who also watched us watching him by virtue of the literary window he opened, allowing us to peer in at the spectacle housed by society. Hughes was in possession of a literary sight which allowed him to combine the mixed media of music and literature, resulting in strong racial and ethnic crossover messages, much as music crosses the ethnic and cultural divisions.

While Hughes’ found materials were often primarily from history, his ancillary materials included the tools of any artist whose societal messages provoke and inspire. W.E.B. Du Bois comments on this:

“First of all, he has used the Truth—not for the sake of truth...but as one upon whom Truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding.”<sup>14</sup> Truth, as Hughes saw it, often took the form of ironic statements contained in works such as “Cultural Exchange”:

*Dreams and nightmares!  
Nightmares, dreams, oh!  
Dreaming that the Negroes  
Of the South have taken over—  
Voted all the Dixiecrats  
Right out of power—*<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note the interrupted cadence and the allusion to culture whereby Hughes incorporates yet another “found material” in the form of popular lines from *The Wizard of Oz*. He would have, most certainly, been aware of the popular movie and the books that preceded it, so it is difficult not to hear the phrase, “Lions and tigers and bears. Oh my!” when reading, “Dreams and nightmares!; Nightmares, dreams, oh!” It is notable that these lines spoken by Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* acted as a mantra in response to fear. That is an appropriate connection to make here as well. Hughes’ greatest fear was the loss of hope—a specific kind of hope. The “I’m-gonna-be-happy-anyhow-in-spite-of-this-world kind of hope...that going-on beat.”<sup>16</sup>

As to the specific meaning of the lines, what may be one person’s dream is another’s nightmare and, in this case, that dream/nightmare is equality becoming the true law of the land. The possibility is presented that power might be wrested from Whites and that the South would not rise again to fight the Civil War, but rather rise again in order to represent *all* of its citizens. Hughes adjusted his vision, as did so many of his peers, with hindsight rooted in the knowledge of outcome. Each piece of his work, including “Cultural Exchange,” acts as a snapshot in time revealing what he was feeling, what the country may have been feeling, and what was happening at that instant—the moment of truth. *His* moment of truth.

His creation of a language is understandably why Hughes is termed a modernist. O’Meally refers to this as “an approach to cultural production that we can call *bricolage aesthetic praxis*. It is a distinctive approach to the interfusion of art and social reality; borrowing from notions of pragmatism, it is also culturally transformational. It represents an aesthetic practice that is de facto revolutionary in the cultural sphere....”<sup>17</sup> Any memorable revolution is in need of a strong, loud, and creative reactionary voice. Hughes is a calm, but vocal, revolutionary, exercising patience and asking others to do

the same. Rest, and bide one's time. This is seen in "Boogie 1:00 A.M." where Hughes tells us to wait for:

*The boogie-woogie rumble  
Of a dream deferred  
Trilling the treble  
And twining the bass.*<sup>18</sup>

Delayed gratification will render the sweet victory that is a color-blind society. Hughes reminds those who were still suffering from injustice that there was beauty in the waiting if one could still make music through the pain. In this way, music is an act of civil disobedience, its notes sustaining all who listen.

Hughes' adeptness with literary collage invoked strong images of hope by utilizing primary materials consisting of music such as jazz, the blues, and be-bop. It may be argued that it either filtered or highlighted his own poetic performances. "Jazz seeps into words—spelled out words."<sup>19</sup>

It is through these spelled-out words that he hoped to spell out the end of suffering and the beginning of living...moving toward the dream. "To me jazz is a montage of a dream deferred. A great big dream—yet to come—and always *yet*—to become ultimately and finally true."<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, a valid assessment of Hughes' historical referencing may be his ability to prove this very assessment himself. Richter comments, "One of the marks of a good professional historian is the consistency with which he reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events...."<sup>21</sup> Hughes' text is subject to debate, interpretation, and criticism, but it exists as one man's vision of a myopic world. Just as quickly as Hughes could whip up outrage, he could transition into a beautifully syncopated anthem of love as he does in "Juke Box Love Song." Music can "heal what ails you." The one-two punch of love and music delivers that magic which illuminates the rock that is ROLL:

*I could take the Harlem night  
And wrap around you  
Take the neon lights and make a crown,  
Take the Lenox Avenue busses,  
Taxis, subways,  
And for your love song tone their rumble down.*<sup>22</sup>

A dream is a vision to hold in the mind's eye. It can be deferred, postponed, rescheduled, adjourned, or suspended, but it is never far from that mind's eye where true vision must remain. Meanwhile, solace may be found in love, not hate.

### **Hughes' Unique Position in History**

Hughes lived during a unique span of time that allowed him to chronicle history as he saw it unfolding. Race relations can certainly be counted as a predominant issue of the time. His personal history shows a predilection for “fighting the good fight” against injustice. Hughes was not the most radical writer, but even so, he sought to challenge the culture. He challenged events which appeared strange, enigmatic, or intolerable in their immediate manifestations in order “to encode the set in terms of culturally provided categories”<sup>23</sup> Segregation was a category provided by the culture, and Hughes offered up a great deal of poetic commentary on this topic as he does in, “Dream Boogie”:

*Good morning daddy!  
Ain't you heard  
The boogie-woogie rumble  
Of a dream deferred?  
Listen closely:  
You'll hear their feet  
Beating out and beating out a—  
    You think  
    It's a happy beat?  
Listen to it closely:  
Ain't you heard  
Something underneath  
like a—  
    What did I say/  
Sure,  
I'm happy!  
Take it away!  
Hey, pop!  
Re-bop!  
Mop  
Y-e-a-h!<sup>24</sup>*

In short, Hughes' writing did not brook apathy, seeking instead to break down boundaries, barriers, and barricades through metaphorical commentary. In this way, *bricolage* is used “as a metaphor for the unpredictable ways people operate in asserting

their freedom.”<sup>25</sup> Indubitably, Hughes was asserting his own freedom, and the freedom of others, through his freedom to write his truth.

It is imperative to consider the cultural and historical context of his literature which allows for the building of a scaffolding, which establishes Langston Hughes as a *bricoleur* who uses history and musical influences as his found materials in establishing his literary *bricolage*. A *bricoleur* [*bricoleuse*, fem.] picks and chooses appropriate pieces from the overall construct of the world as he or she finds it. This world possesses smaller building blocks from which Hughes was able to choose his materials to reconstruct a freshly interpreted world.

This process does not allow for the separation of the text from its creator or its audience, thereby preserving the integrity of his views within the natural context of his historical time and place. Even so, the messages may be applied to many of the same issues that remain pertinent today in the same analogous contexts. Equality is just such an issue. Although many of the parameters have changed, providing evidence of progress, the basic problem remains unsolved as inequalities continue to arise.

Hughes established his very specific and unique writing style by combining all of these elements into a literary collage that speaks to a new generation in a universal language. His writings and messages of perseverance stand the test of time as an ever-evolving complicated *bricolage*, thereby allowing us to delve more deeply into the power of cultural messages.

“The *bricoleur*...is someone who uses ‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary....”<sup>26</sup>

Hughes, naturally, used a veritable arsenal of materials as the “means at hand” in order to create his commentary. He preserves our objections to the history of racism, even as he destroys those constructs, creating a less idealistic viewpoint of our society, possibly even more objectivist than utopian. “One calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one’s concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined....”<sup>27</sup>

### **Hughes’ Credo: Positive Change as Necessary and Inevitable**

Langston Hughes wrote his own credo, which may create the impetus for his substantial body of work when he spoke to the inevitability and necessity of change.

“I do not believe in a static America.... I would like to see an America where people of any race, color or creed may live on a plane of cultural and material well-being...an America proud of its tradition, capable of facing the future....”<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, Langston Hughes’ poem, “Cultural Exchange,” which appeared in a 1961 compilation entitled, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*, represents an opportunity whereby objectionable notions may be exchanged in order to reach a middle ground and an understanding about that which is often *not* understandable—namely, inequality and troubled race relations.

Cultural context is crucial in order to parse the situations and gain insight into any author’s materials. When reading Hughes’ work, indefatigable readers follow a path that will ultimately lead them to pivotal historical references. Past events play a profound role in the variety of interpretations that Hughes’ work elicits, and his incorporation of these events is at least partially responsible for his identification as a major Harlem Renaissance-era writer.

Hughes is known as a literary balladeer who effected major change by striking complementary major chords in his poetry, novels, plays, and essays. This reputation was solidified when he consistently incorporated the musical influences of his time into his work. Just as music crosses the color barrier, never sacrificing its uniqueness, so does Hughes’ literary interpretation cross boundaries by turning mournful blues and sassy jazz into metaphorical messages of hope. “But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world....”<sup>29</sup> His writing plays on—not out—and just as its own music renders every generation fully alive, so Hughes’ writing accomplishes this life-giving process. Notes fade, but tonal structure remains, thereby sustaining African-American racial integrity.

### **“Rhythm on Layered Literature” Creates the Change it Celebrates**

Rhythm on Layered Literature (ROLL) is the artist’s distinctive music-making endeavor. His instrument is the syncopated rhythm of his pen. Though many of his poems are literally about music, elements of musical composition are present in all of his work, such as time signatures, progression, tone and, of course, rhythm. Poems such as “Juke Box Love Song,” offer soothing tones, usually reserved for lovers, while angry anthems such as “White Man” speak to the oppressive—and from a twenty-first-century viewpoint, ridiculous—rhetoric African-Americans suffered through and from. It was within the poles of oppositional realities of the world that Hughes created his poetry.



*Blues at Dawn*

*I don't dare start thinking in the morning  
I don't dare start thinking in the morning.  
    If I thought thoughts in bed,  
    Them thoughts would bust my head—  
So I don't dare start thinking in the morning.  
I don't dare remember in the morning.  
Don't dare remember in the morning.  
    If I recall the day before,  
    I wouldn't get up no more—  
So I don't dare remember in the morning.<sup>30</sup>*

Allow for two beats between each line and the blues (willingly appropriated by Hughes)—alongside that Rhythm on Layered Literature—fairly smokes off the page asserting the need to wait, once again, in order to claim that which is every individual's right or choice: remembering.

If what Stanley Fish says is true that, “Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing,” then Hughes’ construction was accomplished in no small part by his remarkable observational abilities.<sup>31</sup> Though Hughes’ *bricolage* evolved with every poem he wrote through the incorporation of fresh found materials, these found materials often referenced musicians of his time. One of his many favorites was musician Louis Armstrong. Hughes records for us the duality in status that musicians and writers of his time were consigned to—the need for subjectivity and objectivity—and the fact that their very survival relied upon skillful acting. This is evident in his poem, “White Man”:

*Let Louis Armstrong play it-  
and you copyright it  
and make the money.  
You're the smart guy, White Man!<sup>32</sup>*

This takes on the tone of “having the last laugh” because little does the “White Man” know that all the African-American musician wants—in this case Louis Armstrong—is to play music and own it in that way, not in a monetary way. Hughes demonstrates that while it may be possible to “separate the man from his money” and from his rightful due, it is impossible to separate artists from their language, and from their music, no matter how many contracts claim ownership.

This solidifies the claim that there is no longer ownership in the mind of non-Whites because it is a concept created and propagated by the then-ruling majority—Whites. Hughes argues that such concepts will no longer matter or be honored because African-Americans will no longer be complicit in their propagation. The formerly binding contract has been revoked.

Through his writing, Hughes celebrates the defiant act of musicians like Armstrong in simply making music. This same correlation applies to Hughes making his poems and, in this way, the musician and the writer form a solidarity whereby they blow true notes in a pitch that may be understood and appreciated by all. Music is not static, musicians are not static, nor are writers. Each moves forward, through their art forms and through their message making. As Hughes put it, “There’s a certain/amount of traveling/in a dream deferred.”<sup>33</sup> In this case, the path would be the roads built by Hughes himself as he journeys into the “real” New World and learns what it means to navigate the cultural divide.

The modernist imperative “Make it New!” undoubtedly defines Hughes’ work, particularly since he successfully breaks down the boundaries between music and literature, encompassing these contrasting, complementary, and resilient images into his work. This breaking down of barriers also applies to the breaking down of racial barriers, placing the emphasis of responsibility squarely on the shoulders of African-American writers, especially the writers of the Harlem Renaissance period.

As Hughes made old outrage new, he incorporated social outrage into his writing, blowing the traditional sweet notes of despair, even as he was singing the blues of his heritage. He never lost his way and, in fact, created his own conduit with ROLL, adhering to the “modernist credo”:

“The heart of the modernist credo was the primacy and at least implicitly the redemptive potential of the aesthetic act, a notion best expressed in Nietzsche’s dictum, ‘We possess art lest we perish of truth.’ This was the stance of the early Eliot and Pound, and it became the root principle of the New Critics, with their insistence on the sovereignty and independence of the aesthetic object.”<sup>34</sup>

Shared experience is invoked when Hughes writes in “Cultural Exchange,” “Boundaries bind unbinding,” perhaps referring to the unbinding of history that is necessary in order to rebind it in a better, more realistic way. It may also be that all people are bound in some way and this binding and unbinding leads into a redefinition of culture. Hughes writes, “Culture, they say, is a two-way street.”<sup>35</sup> This leaves the reader to wonder at the irony of this statement, since history has shown that culture may be metaphorically

defined as a dead-end or one-way street; rather, Hughes asks the reader to ponder other possibilities. Filled with hope he could be forecasting a future where culture travels up and down the street, never static, always open to interpretation and possibilities.

The issue of equality includes a great fear that history and ethnicity will disappear altogether; that a group of people will not retain its proud history, and will rather allow it to be defined by others who would seek to destroy it or even assimilate it.

W.E.B. Du Bois stated that, “This is brought to us peculiarly when as artists we face our past as a people. There has come to us...a realization of that past, of which for long years we have been shamed, for which we have apologized. We thought nothing could come out of that past which we wanted to remember; which we wanted to hand down to our children. Suddenly this same past is taking on form, color and reality, and in a half shamefaced way we are beginning to be proud of it.”<sup>36</sup>

This can be applied to the moment in “Cultural Exchange” when Hughes acknowledges that his culture is filled with “doors of paper” and “a leaf of collard green”:

*In the Quarter of the Negroes  
Where the doors are doors of paper  
Dust of dingy atoms  
Blows a scratchy sound.  
Amorphous jack-o'-Lanterns caper  
And the wind won't wait for midnight  
For fun to blow doors down.  
By the river and the railroad  
With fluid far-off goind  
Boundaries bind unbinding  
A whirl of whistles blowing.  
No trains or steamboats going--  
Yet Leontyne's unpacking.*

*In the Quarter of the Negroes  
Where the doorknob lets in Lieder  
More than German ever bore,  
Her yesterday past grandpa--  
Not of her own doing--  
In a pot of collard greens  
Is gently stewing.*

*Pushcarts fold and unfold  
In a supermarket sea.*<sup>37</sup>

While this may seem stereotypical or, worse, inconsequential, it is part of the historical context. What is emerging out of this past is a burgeoning optimism about the future where people of color will have more choices in the supermarket of life. He continues, “Pushcarts fold and unfold; In a supermarket sea”: arguably, “pushcarts” signifies his people coming from their tradition and history, fighting for a place in this large “supermarket” field of possibility called “progress,” as a way to be counted and even noticed. Eradication of the race is not acceptable. The ugly and old reside next to the beautiful and new, and there is an anticipation of the growth of supermarkets with their plentiful foodstuffs and choices, even as people of color anticipate their own possibilities, options, and choices.

An intrinsic component of the historical context is the preservation of hope as the antidote for isolation. In Hughes’ short poem, “Chord,” he uses strong imagery to bring forth a theme that must have seemed distant so much of the time: a bright future:

*Shadow faces  
In the shadow night  
Before the early dawn  
Bops bright.*<sup>38</sup>

The fact that shadows may be equated with dark faces juxtaposed with the lightness of their hope is powerful. Once again, we see the tonal integration of music as the reference to be-bop being “bop.” This is an àpropos reminder that in making our own music, we make our own way, and that language and music are the two constants in an inconstant world. Melody and words vary and increase in volume as the mood, or venue, allows.

Undeniably, music was the foundation upon which Langston Hughes built his commentary about social-consciousness. In “Cultural Exchange” he astutely offers up a reference to one of his favorite, yet obscure musical influences, the German *lieder* tradition, which are also known as art songs:

*In the pot behind the paper doors  
on the old iron stove what’s cooking?  
What’s smelling, Leontyne?*

*Lieder, lovely Lieder  
And a leaf of collard green.*

*Lovely Lieder, Leontyne.*<sup>39</sup>

While he was influenced by countless musicians, he also references American soprano Mary Leontyne Price in this piece when he says, “What’s smelling, Leontyne?”—perhaps a play on the query “What’s cooking?” combined with the melodious pleasure of the aromas emanating from the “old iron stove.” The phrase, “What’s cooking?” utilized in common parlance when asking someone “How are you doing?” takes on greater import when framed within the context of a color barrier.

He adds, “Lovely Lieder, Leontyne,” by association commenting on the loveliness of this woman he appears to have admired greatly, combining his admiration and respect for the woman, her music, and German *lieder*, the latter being something they both experienced as listeners and performers.

While Mary Leontyne Price was famous for her voice as a successful African-American singer, the first to become a leading prima donna at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, she gave voice to the words and sentiment “accomplishments have no color” as she was famously quoted in Brian Lanker’s *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America*.<sup>40</sup> Hughes sought to establish—in a complementary if ironic fashion—the fact that accomplishments do have color—all colors—and one of the most talented and neglected groups were people who have been saddled with the term “colored.”

Additionally, in the first four lines of “Cultural Exchange” we are immediately thrown into a staccato cadence, reminiscent of improvisational jazz with the lines:

*In the Quarter of the Negroes  
Where the doors are doors of paper  
Dust of dingy atoms  
Blows a scratchy sound.*<sup>41</sup>

“Dust of dingy atoms; Blows a scratchy sound,” conjures up powerful imagery, seating the reader in a dingy, smoke-filled club, listening to a story about the state of the African-American condition as spoken word.

Later:

*Her yesterday past grandpa—  
Not of her own doing—  
In a pot of collard greens  
Is gently stewing.*<sup>42</sup>

is evocative of a rich stew which is in the pot, a building crescendo which juxtaposes the rising crescendo of change with Hughes' disgust at passive acceptance: there are those who are "stewing." Whether they will boil over remains to be seen, but if the text is effective, this is a foregone conclusion, and fair warning has been given.

Hughes himself stated that, "In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed, jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and bebop—this poem...is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in transition."<sup>43</sup>

It was about testing limits and finding new boundaries that would lead the downtrodden out of isolation. In another poem, "Up Beat," Hughes refers to the access point by which one may pull oneself out of the gutter. "But it requires/plenty eyes."<sup>44</sup> Hughes himself always wrote with "plenty eyes" letting us see all and, surely, hear all: the readers are active participants in his work.

### **"Othering" Empowers Hughes' Envisioning of the Bright Future**

Isolation is certainly an integral aspect of any repressed segment of the population, and one method of confirming this is "othering." Othering is a concept that comes from the Continental Philosophic tradition, first mentioned explicitly by Hegel. With roots as old as the scholastic aphorism "Esse est co-esse," (To be is to-be-with), Othering has been embraced by Lacan, Derrida, and the Semioticists, as well as psychologists and philosophers in general. The "Other" refers to that which is different from the person or concept which is the subject. In psychology, it is a key to the process of individuation. Othering can have both negative and positive aspects.<sup>45</sup>

Othering may be utilized when speaking about musicians, and it has direct application to Hughes' work as he performs a translation from musical phrasings to literary ones, setting into motion a revival of hope in the face of bigotry. O'Meally states:

"Artistic othering by black musicians is understood here in a profoundly materialist sense as a social struggle realized in two ways: first, as an affirmative othering, or dialogue, between black artists and audience, with the effect of drawing these two parties together into a musically-enacted community; second, as a form of other, providing black artists and audiences a sanctuary, or refuge, from the white world. Indeed, in the latter case, the

white world and its deformed images of self and society are relegated to the status of 'other' ....<sup>46</sup>

Hughes adopted othering as his own in "Cultural Exchange" when he recreated musical language in a literary form and forged empathy among those members of the African-American culture as the "others," while speaking of those "others" who have acted as the repressors. This, conversely, allows for a connection and a disconnection at the same time, helping to create artistic meaning, if not always societal understanding. In this way Hughes shaped, as O'Meally says, "a new art out of alienation," which was the "recurrent story in the history of modernism, but to tell the story that way privileges the community of artistic practices...of shared historical experience they leave behind...."<sup>47</sup>

The concept of shared historical experience was important in rallying the masses by nudging, shoving, or pushing other African-Americans to take umbrage and fight back against the oppression they experienced. In this way Hughes' work acted as a connection to the musical legacy of the Negro spiritual, providing a mechanism of common language for his own people, even as this language morphed into his uniquely crafted modernist message. The message remained one that addressed the feeling of isolation, both in Hughes himself and in his peers.

"The relationship between jazz and Hughes' poetry has profound implications for our understanding not only of his work in isolation but also of the aesthetic and cultural phenomena of modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. Like other great innovators from the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes blends the black vernacular with modernist experimentation."<sup>48</sup>

He was a man with a mission for change and he never forgot his roots or the importance of preserving pride in his people. He also never forgot that, while the fight was important, it was critical to take a break every now and then as he said in "The Weary Blues." "And put ma troubles on the shelf." It was imperative that the struggle for justice continue, but respites were necessary even as, "Weary Blues echoed through his head./He slept like a rock or a man that's dead."<sup>49</sup> The fight is only over when a person is rendered numb by apathy, so it is up to those who will listen to decide whether they are going to stay asleep or wake up to a change, otherwise they are no better than dead.

Hughes argued in defense of the need for ethnic pride while commenting, often pessimistically, about his dim view of race relations. He seemed to alternate between his collage of pessimistic and optimistic visions, just as extensively as "Cultural Exchange" vacillates between the hope of the future in leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and

A. Philip Randolph, juxtaposed against despair over the “Quarter of Negroes; Where the doors are doors of paper.”<sup>50</sup>

Hughes was an observer and commentator on the unvarnished social condition, such as it was, and what was lacking in the current social order was brought to the foreground by his literary magnifying glass. “Cultural Exchange,” in particular, is multi-layered and vast, often utilizing collateral cultural references such as “Lieder,” “Mount Vernon,” and “Leontyne,” which act as a written *bricolage* in order to conjure up commanding images and influences, such as Germany, Thomas Jefferson, and a powerful African-American singer.

This intersection between social commentary and social conscience finds some explanation in O’Meally’s “New Jazz Studies,” article when he suggests that, “Changing articulations of black identity and consciousness have rested upon a fairly consistent concern with time and history. Such concern for the recovery of a usable past, however, has often led to an historical preoccupation with a search for origins, leading to reinventions of a mythic past as the basis for authentic black being.”<sup>51</sup>

It was important to draw large, “mythic” inferences from what had preceded the cultural climate of Hughes’ day. This often took the form of divulging information that one would not find in history books, but which was accepted and tolerated. There is an expression of concern over the more negative aspects of history repeating themselves, and this led to pessimism about the ultimate outcome, even as Hughes, on the other hand, held out hope for an optimistic viewpoint.

“While Hughes remained optimistic, he saw that other black writers were slipping into pessimism, focusing on the pain and suffering of racism, not the triumphs, the heroes, or the possibility of change.”<sup>52</sup> His entire body of work is a call to action, a drive toward increasing momentum, and an impulsion to take up the banner of pride in one’s race, one’s cultural and ethnic heritage. The latter became a familiar refrain with many prominent African-Americans of the time, including W.E.B. Du Bois who stated, “We black folk may help for we have within us as a race new stirrings; stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be; as though in this morning of group life we had awakened from some sleep that at once dimly mourns the past and dreams a splendid future. . . .”<sup>53</sup>

In order to enjoy a “splendid future” one must envision it as such, and that was one of the many roles Langston Hughes agreed to play, on the condition that the future be accorded perspective. A past mourned and a future envisioned involve a change in perspective which will present itself in its own time. Hughes was speaking about the future—the future of music, the future of equality, and the future of America—when he said, “You



will tell me about its perspectives when you get ready.”<sup>54</sup> He seems to be addressing a deity that possesses a master plan that must surely be different than what has been witnessed thus far.

### **A Continuing and Effective Message for the World**

Hughes’ art was his message to the world and he wrote for many. He wrote for the erudite lovers of poetry and profound prose. He wrote for the misguided, seeking reasons to indict. He wrote for the misaligned and the oppressed. He wrote for all of these factions, not the least of which he wrote for himself, drawing upon his world view and his vision: Classism could be abolished by igniting a revolution of thought.

He combined integral parts of music and literature to make a whole and he felt that nothing was an either/or set of circumstances. How fitting that he chose Duke Ellington’s song which appears in *The Great Music of Duke Ellington*, “Do Nothin’ Till You Hear From Me,” to be played at his funeral. As a sender of messages his entire life, he did not miss an opportunity to send one from his last gig:

*Do nothing till you hear from me  
Pay no attention to what’s said  
Why people tear the seam of anyone’s dream  
Is over my head.*<sup>55</sup>

He may have torn the seams out of the tattered overcoat of preconceived notions of the racial limitations, but he never gave up the vision or the ownership of that dream of acceptance.

Hughes’ words gave a voice to people who not only suffered, but for whom every opportunity to experience true freedom was denied, *except* the opportunity to think freely. Although he valued artistic freedom above all else, he often suffered for his intended messages and even found himself recanting earlier work when he was called by Senator McCarthy to testify before the now-infamous House Un-American Activities Committee.

He persevered, which is what he wanted for other African-Americans. Whether he felt he had succeeded in effecting change remains open to interpretation, just as does his work. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess...strength without sight.”<sup>56</sup> These words are truly the crux of what Langston Hughes attempted, and succeeded in achieving, during the course of his life. All of Hughes’ poetry, and even his

work in other genres, thematically display the hope that lies in the exchange of ideas, of philosophies, and of cultures.

He took action and he was a dreamer for his people long before others would espouse a hopeful remedy for what ailed the United States during a time when it was suppressing a huge portion of its own people's strength and resources through legalized and cultural racism. There was a need to change it up, shake it up, and switch things around.

Although great progress has been made in many of the areas that Hughes wrote about, America, and even the global culture, is still divided by many differences—including some that Hughes might not have envisioned. Nevertheless, his methodology for creating a rhythm of change is as powerful and effective today as ever

*Exchange* is an incendiary word used by a revolutionary, particularly when examined within the context of the entire work in which “Cultural Exchange” appears. In this way, this poem acts as a flashpoint for his complete *oeuvre*. Synonyms for *exchange* include *swap, switch, replace, trade, barter, substitute*, and the words exist as a continuous syncopated line of melody that seeks for a moment of clarity which can lead to the next moment's empathy. If we cannot feel it, we cannot change it.

As a *bricoleur*, Hughes acted as a recorder, not a filter, providing progression historical and musical. He reflected all of the cultural influences of his time (1902-1967) and all those that preceded him: diverse music, racial injustice, a legacy of talented artists, and cultural events. These represent only a fraction of his influences. As an observer, inciter, historian, visionary, and all points in between, he managed to make the “others” feel a part of a community and, in that process, he combated the isolation repressed people feel. He sought to highlight old, unacceptable cultural norms while creating bold, fresh art. In the process, he froze historical moments in time, using oppositional images to his advantage, and setting an example for other African-American artists. W.E.B. Du Bois comments on the success of these artists: “Through art they compel recognition then let the world discover if it will that their art is as new as it is old and as old as new.”<sup>57</sup>

Hughes' modernist messages remain powerful because, as it turns out, the “good fight” is a never-ending fight. Whether this is due to a lack of forward movement and evolution in our culture or the brilliancy of Hughes' portrayal of images and themes that predicted as much as they chronicled, it is difficult to separate, just as it is impossible to separate the text from the writer. Whether the cadence is musical, the subtext melodic, or the allusions discordant, the language of music is there, constantly playing against the backdrop of dream imagery.

While many writers accessed sensory details and illustrated what the issues *looked* like, Hughes entered a heretofore undiscovered realm and made us privy to what issues

*sounded* like. Harkening back to Negro spirituals when the only “safe” communication was singing songs that were overtly spiritual, but covertly defiant, singing of deliverance and freedom, Hughes delivered a history that was at once sad and joyous—just like the blues. It was and is about survival and endurance. Whether writing poetry, plays, children’s stories, or short stories, the thematic content included creating a rhythm in life—sometimes dissonant, sometimes mellow, always unique. He talked about this approach in “Easy Boogie”:

*Down in the bass  
That steady beat  
Walking walking walking  
Like marching feet.  
Down in the bass  
That easy roll,  
Rolling like I like it  
In my soul.*<sup>58</sup>

Make an exchange, do not give anything up, and do not let anything get taken away. And when the old exchange has lost its luster, “Change the Exchange.” Langston Hughes’ inimitable writing style and literary collage of messages are distinctly his own in that he managed to use united themes for divisive realities. His ability to construct a mixed-media production of music and literature to strengthen his seemingly oxymoronic messages of hope and despair, cleverly offers us universal truths in a more pleasant package.

By establishing a duality of meaning in the form of literary and musical concepts such as progression, syncopation, and intonation, Hughes provides a richly textured backdrop for his messages, including the sometimes surprising combination of literary elements such as onomatopoeia—a word (or words) that sounds like what it/they represent—and bebop. Hughes’ progressive messages are still cogent today because of the fluidity of his style, which leads us through the often shameful corridors of our past into the murky labyrinth of our future into which Hughes’ work shines the light of hope.

Even as we navigate this jarring terrain it is always the author’s own words that serve as one of the most fitting valedictions, “When peoples care for you and cry for you, they can straighten out your soul.”<sup>59</sup>

Langston Hughes allowed us to care for him, his causes, his beliefs, and he made them our own, regardless of what any reader’s background may be. He still makes them our own as his words remind us that the most important mind-set to guard against is apathy

toward crucial thematic issues: “Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz...”<sup>60</sup>

Jazz is rarely predictable, always meaningful, much like people, and much like the body of work representing “...the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world...” His writing plays on, not out, and just as every generation is enlivened by its own music, so Hughes’ writing still enlivens readers today. Notes fade, but tonal structures retain their ability to sustain hope and integrity in music and in humanity, creating a direct connection to our soul. Our story of wishful equality rolls out fresh every time as Hughes tells it like it is, like it was, and like it will be.<sup>61</sup>

*Tell Me*

*Why should it be my loneliness,*

*Why should it be my song,*

*Why should it be my dream*

*Deferred*

*Overlong?*<sup>62</sup>

Dreaming is the backbeat over which, like a musical refrain, the overarching theme of equality plays on the highest, farthest, most deferred dream of all.

## Notes:

1. Langston Hughes , “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” *The Nation*, June 23, 1926.
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## **Appendix:**

### **Cultural Exchange**

In the Quarter of the Negroes  
Where the doors are doors of paper  
Dust of dingy atoms  
Blows a scratchy sound.  
Amorphous jack-o'-Lanterns caper  
And the wind won't wait for midnight

For fun to blow doors down.

By the river and the railroad  
With fluid far-off goind  
Boundaries bind unbinding  
A whirl of whisteles blowing.  
No trains or steamboats going--  
Yet Leontyne's unpacking.

In the Quarter of the Negroes  
Where the doorknob lets in Lieder  
More than German ever bore,  
Her yesterday past grandpa--  
Not of her own doing--  
In a pot of collard greens  
Is gently stewing.

Pushcarts fold and unfold  
In a supermarket sea.  
And we better find out, mama,  
Where is the colored laundromat  
Since we move dup to Mount Vernon.

In the pot behind the paper doors  
on the old iron stove what's cooking?  
What's smelling, Leontyne?  
Lieder, lovely Lieder  
And a leaf of collard green.  
Lovely Lieder, Leontyne.

You know, right at Christmas  
They asked me if my blackness,  
Would it rub off?  
I said, Ask your mama.

Dreams and nightmares!  
Nightmares, dreams, oh!  
Dreaming that the Negroes  
Of the South have taken over--  
Voted all the Dixiecrats

Right out of power--

Comes the COLORED HOUR:

Martin Luther King is Governor of Georgia,  
Dr. Rufus Clement his Chief Adviser,  
A. Philip Randolph the High Grand Worthy.  
In white pillared mansions  
Sitting on their wide verandas,  
Wealthy Negroes have white servants,  
White sharecroppers work the black plantations,  
And colored children have white mammies:  
Mammy Faubus  
Mammy Eastland  
Mammy Wallace  
Dear, dear darling old white mammies--  
Sometimes even buried with our family.  
Dear old  
Mammy Faubus!

Culture, they say, is a two-way street:  
Hand me my mint julep, mammny.  
Hurry up!  
Make haste!

—Langston Hughes

### **White Man**

Sure, I know you,  
you're a White Man.  
I'm a Negro.  
You take all the best jobs  
and leave us the garbage cans to empty and  
the halls to clean.  
You have a good time in a big house at  
Palm Beach  
and rent us the black alleys  
and the dirty slums.  
You enjoy Rome-

and take Ethiopia.  
White Man ! White Man!  
Let Louis Armstrong play it-  
and you copyright it  
and make the money.  
You're the smart guy, White Man!  
You got everything!  
But now,  
I hear your name ain't really White Man!  
I hear it's something  
Marx wrote down  
fifty years ago  
that rich people don't like to spell.  
Is that true, White Man?  
Is your name in a book  
called the Communist Manifesto?  
Is your name spelled?  
C-A-P-I-T-A-L-I-S-T?  
Are you always a White Man?  
Huh?

—Langston Hughes