

Introduction
Langston Hughes in Context

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From his emergence during the Harlem Renaissance, James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902–67) embodied the contradictions and promise of black life and art in the twentieth century. Born in Joplin, Missouri, Hughes established himself as the “Poet Laureate of the Negro Race” with *The Weary Blues* (1926). But “the Negro Race” was never bound by one nation, and geographies in Hughes’s work are always sites of crossing, migration, immigration, and emigration. His reception bears this out. Early on, Hughes – arguably the most influential writer among his Harlem Renaissance peers – established an enduring reputation in the United States and abroad through his poetry, prose, drama, and their translations. By the time he graduated from Lincoln University in 1929, he had already published a second volume of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), and he had visited West Africa, France, and Italy. Extended trips to Haiti, Cuba, the Soviet Union, and Spain followed, and with them versions of his poems in many languages.

The essays in this volume focus extensively on Hughes’s internationalism across different periods in his career. Hughes was a lifelong traveler, sojourning throughout North America, the Caribbean, Europe, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan. He never traveled light: in addition to scores of books, he famously lugged his Harlem Victrola and collection of blues and jazz records. Where he did not travel, notably to Korea, South Africa, and the Middle East, his work did, appearing in English and a host of other languages throughout all those regions. As practice and theoretical lens, travel and translation are touchstones for our essays, which engage Hughes’s own practice of translation, the circulation of his books in English, and the many foreign-language versions that appeared during and after his life. A number of essays also address the metaphorical “translation” of musical techniques and genres that informs his own writing. We can hear his blues poetry, for example, in tandem with electric sound recording as a translation of the sounds of African American urban

culture for audiences across the color line. As Hughes's own phonograph underscores, music and travel move together to create new modes of listening and, as Angela Davis, Michael Denning, and others argue, new forms of counter-modern consciousness in the process.¹ Rather than add more essays to the robust scholarship emphasizing the influence of black vernacular music on Hughes's practice, we chose to emphasize international and inter-vernacular translation and entanglement to stress the ways Hughes's writing participated in a global decolonizing project for which the spread of music and poetry played a vital role. With travel and translation as overarching and overlapping frames, we hope that this volume provides readers with new ways of conceiving Hughes and his numerous contexts. This volume also, inevitably, reflects its own context: that of the COVID era and its personal and professional challenges for all of us. In this book, the exigencies of the past two years manifest themselves in and as gaps. Most notably, we were unable to secure essays on Hughes's impact on and broad reception in the francophone world. We take these gaps as reminders to ourselves that completeness or comprehensiveness, though one may aspire to it, remains elusive, which, on a more positive note, also makes our volume an opening to future research.

Hughes was enough of a prolific and popular author to make a living from his writing. During his lifetime, he published sixteen volumes of poetry, two autobiographies, seven short-story collections, twenty-six plays and librettos, and twelve books for children and young adults. He also contributed to many sound recordings as featured performer and liner-note author and produced scores of published and unpublished nonfiction essays and letters. Many of his books remain in print in both scholarly and popular editions. Hughes was canny enough as editor and curator of his poems for anthologies to frame his work for the audiences he cared most about. Those audiences were not primarily academics. This broad accessibility of his writings has posed difficulties among contemporary scholars: the very elements of his writing that make it accessible and popular with diverse audiences worldwide have also created the impression that his work lacks literary complexity. As a result of this lingering perception, Hughes's writing in genres other than poetry has not yet received sufficient critical analysis.

This tendency is changing. Now, academic scholars increasingly move beyond biographical and cultural studies approaches primarily emphasizing vernacular music that dominate much of the early Hughes scholarship. While that focus is completely justified, our volume departs from it. In keeping with this departure, Part I, "Singing America: Different Voices

and Genres,” offers fresh approaches to familiar questions, largely through the lens of intimacy. Pushing against our collective tendency to understand Euro-American modernism and black modernism as wholly separate, Anita Patterson’s “Langston Hughes, Chicago, and Modernism” and Michael Borshuk’s “Jazz, Performance, and Modernist Embodiment in Langston Hughes’s Early Writing” reconsider Hughes’s relationship to Euro-American modernism. Emily Bernard’s “His Ways with White Folks: Langston Hughes and Literary Patronage” takes another look at Hughes’s fraught relationship to literary patrons, while John Edgar Tidwell and Carmaletta M. Williams’s “Love at a Distance in Selected Letters by Langston and Carrie Hughes” offers a provocative reading of Hughes correspondence with his mother Carrie. Looking at Hughes’s short fiction from the 1930s, Gary Holcomb’s chapter on Hughes’s 1930s short fiction suggests that Hughes drew on the norms of a putatively apolitical white modernism *and* those of Popular Front-era social realism to craft a distinctly Black modernism of his own design. Hughes’s relationship to popular forms and media also informs “Langston Hughes and Simple: Across Form and Space to a Political Consciousness,” Sandhya Shukla’s essay on Hughes’s carefully curated collection *The Best of Simple*. Her chapter resonates with Gary Holcomb’s and with Dorothea Fischer-Hornung’s readings of the German translations of the Simple stories. Katharine Capshaw raises new questions of domesticity and the black family by putting Hughes’s *Famous* biographies for young adults and children in conversation with his contribution to *Ebony* magazine, an all-black alternative to *Life*. Similar questions concern Andy Oler’s “Rural Black Masculinity and the Blues in *Not without Laughter*,” an extended reading of Hughes’s novel *Not without Laughter*. Oler shows how the blues’ emphasis on nonnormative sexualities and so-called deviant sexual mores spurs novel ways of conceiving black masculinity. Juan J. Rodríguez Barrera and Matthew Beeber engage Hughes’s Popular Front era with renewed attention to literary form and the problematic practicalities of sustaining coalition, concerns that put their chapters in dialogue with Gary Edward Holcomb’s first contribution and Evelyn Scaramella’s “Langston Hughes in Spain” from Part II. In the final chapter in this part, Keith Michael Green reads Hughes’s poem “To a Negro Jazz Band” (*CP*, 60) in the context of translingualism and foreign-language pedagogy. His essay prepares the transnational ground for Part II, “The Global Langston Hughes: Travel and Translation.”

Despite contemporary desires among some for unambiguous freedom fighters, the Hughes in this volume, which canvasses his four decades of

professional life, is complex. One of our primary objectives has been to attend to the ever-shifting national and international contexts in which Hughes and his work circulated. This means that, rather than attempting to resolve contradictions by producing a coherent narrative, we allow some contradictions to stand unresolved, especially in Part II. Hughes's eventual embrace of African decolonization, as Vera M. Kutzinski's chapter on Hughes in Cuba and South America suggests, is as much a product of an affirmative investment in Black freedom globally as it is occasioned by the cultural politics in the Hispanic Americas. That key figures (and friends of Hughes) came to embrace Martí-inspired notions of *mestizaje* or cultural mixture, in effect downplaying blackness, left Hughes's insistent black internationalism increasingly illegible there. Harilaos Stecopoulos observes the degree to which personal connections to Nnamdi Azikiwe – first president of independent Nigeria and Hughes's fellow alum of Lincoln University – enable those connections, which are compromised by his involvement with the US State Department's Cold War cultural diplomacy. James Smethurst's "Langston Hughes and the Black Arts Movement" (in Part III) observes the degree to which Hughes, as a supporter of younger writers such as Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, and the young LeRoi Jones (who would become Amiri Baraka only after Hughes's death), adapted some of the younger generation's militancy. But Hughes also clashed with some of those writers and was markedly uncomfortable with the paths by which they sought to create a political aesthetic. Cultural change, as Stuart Hall has remarked, is an active process by which some cultural forms and practices are driven from the center of popular life and actively marginalized.² The chapters in this volume examine how Hughes negotiated those processes as a young upstart and an established figure, as an outspoken leftist and a more circumspect elder, when Harlem was in vogue and in its twilight.

Contemporary scholarship continues to underscore the extent to which Harlem, itself complicated by patterns of migration and immigration, is not the only important site for Hughes's work. Readers familiar with Hughes's biography know of his early trips to Mexico, during one of which he wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (*CP*, 23). Astrid Haas's "Langston Hughes and Mexico" and Evelyn Scaramella's "Langston Hughes in Spain" draw readers' attention to the formative roles that post-Revolutionary Mexico and Civil War Spain played in shaping Hughes's worldview and early aesthetic. Shane Graham's "Langston Hughes, Colonialism, and Decolonization" traces a longer history of Hughes's anticolonial writing, from his early outrage at the spectacle of

European ships (on which he sailed and worked) waiting “to carry away the treasures of Africa” through his more mature writing beginning in the 1930s (*CW* XIII, 95). As Philip Kaisary argues in “Langston Hughes and the Haitian Revolution,” this anticolonial perspective matures during an encounter with Haiti following his break with domineering patron Charlotte Osgood Mason. By writing about Haiti as a journalist covering the 1915–34 US occupation and engaging with the Haitian revolution as a playwright, Hughes found in Haiti a new focal point around which he could begin to articulate an international consciousness. Bernie Lombardi’s “Taking Louise Bennett Seriously: Langston Hughes, Gender, and Transnational Friendship” unearths a rarely discussed intervernacular correspondence between Hughes and the great Jamaican poet and folklorist Louise Bennett-Coverley. Kate A. Baldwin’s “Langston Hughes in the Soviet Union,” Cristina Lombardi-Diop’s “Translating Blackness: Langston Hughes in Italy,” Jang Wook Huh’s “Langston Hughes’s Short Fiction in 1930s Korea,” and Selina Lai-Henderson’s “Langston Hughes and the Shanghai Jazz Scene” show Hughes to be unusually engaged with a world shaped by the struggle against fascism and empire. Together, they start to fill in the story of Hughes’s travels and the circulation of his work during the Cold War and beyond the McCarthy era. Writers and intellectuals in those locations and in other parts of the world embraced Hughes as intellectual comrade in their turn.

Where the first two parts largely concern the ways in which Hughes struggled to expand the meanings and possibilities of black writing while maintaining creative autonomy, Part III, on Hughes’s domestic and international “afterlives” considers the fruits of those efforts. Howard Rambsy II and Kenton Rambsy’s “Anthologizing Langston Hughes, 1923–2020” observes the overwhelming tendency among editors – including Hughes himself – to anthologize a relatively narrow range of his poetry. Using blended quantitative and qualitative methods, they argue about the limits of that tendency, and the ways it distorts many aspects of his long literary career. In this part, James Smethurst’s essay on Hughes’s complicated and often tense relationship to the Black Arts Movement sits alongside Dorothea Fischer-Hornung’s analysis in “Langston Hughes’s Jesse B. Simple Story Cycles in German Translation” of the translations and the circulation of those in Germany and Michelle Hartman’s account of the presence of Hughes’s poetry in the Arab world, including Arab-America in “Dreams Deferred in Arabic: Translating Langston Hughes

from the United States to Egypt.” Fischer-Hornung tracks changes in the translation of Hughes’s Jesse B. Semple in East and West Germany before and after German reunification, showing how Simple changes to suit the needs of contemporary readers. Simple also plays an important role in Etsuko Taketani’s “A Raisin in the (Fallen) Sun: A Nuclear Reading of the Black Pacific” in which he traces connections between the not-yet-exploded deferred dream of “Harlem [2]” (*CP*, 426) and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Focusing on the same poem, Hartman addresses the competing impulses at play for Arab-language translators who emphasize a relatively conservative framing of Hughes as ambassador for the American Dream and the Hughes whose notion of racial individuality still poses a challenge to desires for assimilation. Anthony Reed notices a similar tendency in the ways that poems from *Scottsboro Limited* (1932) circulate during the Black Lives Matter era. He argues that the poems become tantamount to internet memes, while the emphasis on dead rather than living bodies in the twenty-first century recapitulates activism around the Scottsboro trials. Gary Holcomb’s second essay, “Langston Hughes: Queer Harlem Renaissance Author,” takes as its starting point Hughes’s opaque appearance in Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring* (1932) and ranges across a wide selection of Hughes’s poetry and prose. Holcomb addresses the question that has most shaped Hughes reception since Isaac Julien’s 1989 film *Looking for Langston*: that of Hughes’s sexuality.

The contributors to this volume offer essays on the translation of Hughes’s writings into Arabic, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and other languages and national traditions. They engage his poetry, but also attend to his autobiographies, his novels, his plays, his short stories, and his journalistic writings. Hughes appears in the complexity he requires and deserves, with attention to the ways he balanced the need to support himself financially with his sometimes contradictory political commitments. Beyond living within contradictions, the traveling “Shakespeare of Harlem” made art from his attention to the ways ordinary people – the “low-down folk” he championed – navigated the conflicts between material needs and desires for better lives, for companionship, family, and camaraderie – in short, the ways they related to the difficult world around them. We hope that the Hughes who emerges from the essays in this volume can be the starting point for new scholarship on this quintessential twentieth-century Black modernist.

Notes

- 1 See Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage, 1998), and Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015).
- 2 Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," in *Essential Essays*, vol. 2, ed. David Morley (1995; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019): 83–94.

