

*Langston Hughes, Chicago, and Modernism**Anita Patterson*

Langston Hughes's association with Chicago as a transnational nexus for modernism was clearly marked in November 1926, when he published four poems in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine. Although strictly speaking he never resided in Chicago for any significant length of time, his visits to the city were frequent and extended, beginning as early as 1918 and continuing throughout his life. In what follows I will consider how geo-cultural contexts in Chicago figured in the development of Hughes's various engagements with modernism, producing a dynamic tension in his writings between nationalism and internationalism. As we shall see, Hughes's jazz and blues poetry of the 1920s should be regarded in light of his response to formal innovations by Carl Sandburg and other Chicago Renaissance poets as well as "high" modernists such as T. S. Eliot; and his neglected involvement with Ezra Pound's imagist poetics during the 1930s was brought about by Sandburg's influence and the prior example of Jean Toomer, as well as Hughes's interest in and correspondence with Pound himself. Finally, I will consider how Hughes's literary collaboration with Chicago luminaries such as Richard Wright and his mentorship of Gwendolyn Brooks played an important role in the creative flowering of the Black Chicago Renaissance.

"Chicago," writes Liesl Olson, "was an extremely important site of modernist literary production . . . , at the center of an unfolding dialogue among writers, critics, institutions, and artists . . . producing work that was well informed of the most avant-garde expressions in Europe as well as the vernacular cultures of America."¹ The city's centrality as a crossroads for the avant-gardes is underscored by the presence of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, founded in 1912 by Harriet Monroe, whose extensive and lasting influence made it the most important of the modernist little magazines. In the eclectic pages of *Poetry*, the line between what later became known as two opposed literary camps, the Chicago Renaissance and so-called high modernism, was blurred. Early issues feature works by modernist

expatriates such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and H. D., as well as those by Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, and others. In March 1926, Witter Bynner, a poet and president of the Poetry Society of America, which awarded Hughes a prize that same year, sent four blues poems by Hughes to Monroe – “Suicide,” “Hard Luck,” “Po’ Boy Blues,” and “Red Roses” – who published them in the November issue.

In the 1920s, urban blues, ragtime, syncopated vaudeville music, and minstrel songs, as well as symphonic jazz, would all have been popularly regarded – in broad generic terms – as “jazz” in America. Despite the fact that Pound and Hughes appear to represent two opposed ideological and aesthetic stances, in a letter written to Hughes on July 8, 1932, Pound singled out Hughes’s blues poetry for high praise, saying, “I think you were dead right in starting with the blues.”² Hughes’s “The Weary Blues,” a poem that was awarded first prize in *Opportunity* when it was published there in May 1925, questions the misleading assumption that his realist commitments foreclose the possibility of modernist tendencies in his poetics, and explores concerns that are shared by T. S. Eliot, including the cultural crisis brought about by mechanization and the commodification of musical performance for mass consumption.³ Brent Hayes Edwards has remarked on a “struggle with the poetics of transcription” when, by setting the language of a blues verse in quotation marks, Hughes calls attention to his written medium; and this lyric practice of self-reflexivity, which is also attained, as Michael Borshuk puts it, through Hughes’s “distancing” use of the first-person pronoun, is a common characteristic of high modernist poetics.⁴ David Chinitz has shown how Hughes’s blues poems in *Poetry* also exhibit self-reflexivity by taking advantage of a fuller range of effects that are particular to the print medium. Insofar as the blues lyrics themselves are unmediated, this deliberate formal simplicity implicitly questions the need for originality in the conception of literary value, much in the same way Eliot did in his landmark 1919 modernist polemic “Tradition and the Original Talent.”⁵

Despite the fact that jazz on Chicago’s South Side was integral to economic and political activities designed to improve the standard of living and political influence of the Black community, the cultural synthesis that produced Chicago jazz during this era emerged in cabarets frequented by middle-class white Chicagoans, and, as William Howland Kenney contends, jazz became a “major musical expression of white sensibilities.”⁶ This white Chicago jazz scene is another illuminating context that helps to explain why, when Hughes called for an awakening of Black consciousness by invoking “the blare of Negro jazz bands” in his 1926 *Nation* essay,

“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (*CW IX*, 36), jazz poetry had already been taken up by many Chicago Renaissance and high modernist avant-gardists. As Borshuk (*Swinging*, 3–7, 56–60), Ryan Jerving, Robert O’Brien Hokanson, and others including myself have argued, Hughes’s jazz poetics should also be regarded in light of his response to their formal innovations.⁷

Jazz appealed to Hughes, as it did to many of his white contemporaries, because the music affirmed a global, cosmopolitan outlook while at the same time nurturing his engagement with vernacular resources. The presence of “Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret” (*CP*, 60) among the blues poems collected in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, suggests that Hughes’s poetics bridges the divide between, on the one hand, local or vernacular cultures circumscribed by the boundaries of race or nation and, on the other hand, the cosmopolitan formal and linguistic innovations associated with transnational mobility (Edwards, *Practice* 64). The poem demonstrates how, like Eliot, his fellow Missourian, Hughes led the life of an expatriate in Paris at a formative moment in his coming-of-age as a poet. Like Eliot, even before he visited Paris, Hughes was drawn to the poetry of Jules Laforgue, as shown by the poems collected in the section of *The Weary Blues* titled “The Black Pierrot.” For both poets, a main source of Laforgue’s appeal was his involvement with lowbrow cultural forms and a cherished vernacular tradition of song and legend (Patterson, *Transnational*, 95–103).⁸ Viewed in these terms, Hughes could even be considered a “quintessential” American modernist poet (Borshuk, “Noisy Modernism,” 5), whose work fits with Matthew Hart’s conception of “synthetic vernacular discourse” and his account of modernism as a transnational formation that displaces the vernacular while affirming it, confounding the boundaries between the local and the global, or between “low” and “high” language.⁹

It is widely known that the 1930s was a decade that saw Hughes’s alignment with radical socialism, as well as his staunch opposition to racial violence, imperialism, and fascism, culminating in the militant verse of his year in the Soviet Union. But his continuing engagement with Chicago and high modernism during this period warrant closer scrutiny. Hughes’s correspondence with Pound was initiated by Pound in December 1931 after an article by Pound appeared alongside Hughes’s poem “White Shadows” in the September 15, 1931, issue of *Contempo*, a journal published by students at the University of North Carolina. After a failed attempt to send *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* to Pound indirectly through the journal *Indice* in response to Pound’s remark that he

could help to have Hughes's work "noticed" there, Hughes re-sent the books, along with *Scottsboro, Limited*, directly to Pound in June 1932. Acknowledging receipt, Pound offered an extended commentary on Hughes's work the following month. Their regular communication continued until it was interrupted in 1935, and did not begin again until the two men had their first and only meeting at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in 1950. Despite their occasional misreadings of each other's poetry and widely different political agendas, their letters suggest, as Jonathan Gill has argued, that their work should be regarded "as more than merely analogues or allied projects, but as something approaching a single literary enterprise."¹⁰

Hughes's correspondence with Pound began during a time when Hughes was deepening his connections with *Poetry* magazine and the city of Chicago, the same year that saw the appearance of *Not without Laughter*, a novel that offers a realistic portrayal of the tragic unattainability of the American dream in light of the Black experience in Chicago. Two months prior to his receipt of Pound's first letter, Hughes published three poems in the October issue of *Poetry*. Although one of them, "Lover's Return" (*CP*, 125), was a blues poem, the other two marked a new departure in Hughes's style: "Dying Beast" and "God" are short poems with muted rhymes, more in keeping with Pound's imagist poetics than with 1920s jazz modernism (*CP*, 139, 140). Hokanson has observed how, in *Montage*, Hughes adapted the structure and allusive techniques of bebop to build a long modernist poem out of short poems, including one that is reminiscent of Pound's imagism. The figurative technique and "detached poetic perspective" of "125th Street" – "Face like a chocolate bar / full of nuts and sweet. // Face like a jack-o'-lantern, / candle inside. // Face like a slice of melon, / grin that wide" – recall Pound's best-known imagist poem, "In a Station of the Metro," a version of which appeared almost two decades earlier in *Poetry* (Hokanson, "Jazzing It Up," 75; *CP*, 407). Like Hughes, Pound also centers his poem around the image of faces on a crowded street: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough."¹¹

Much has been written about Pound's poem, which was published in the magazine's second issue and in effect launched imagism, a modernist movement in poetry associated with brevity and visual immediacy and inspired by Japanese and Chinese verse. But we have yet to understand how Hughes revises and critiques the perspectivism of Pound's imagist poetics, in "125th Street" as well as other poems Hughes composed in the 1930s and 1940s such as "Black Workers," "History," "Snail," "Enemy,"

and "One" (*CP*, 172, 179, 233–34). Despite Pound's proud claim to "literality" in *Cathay*, there is an implied figurative comparison of white and ghostly "faces in a crowd" to "petals on a wet, black bough" in his poem.¹² And whereas Pound's poem never questions the possibility or efficacy of East-West intercultural dialogue, Hughes's "125th Street" foregrounds how such figurative comparisons on the part of his observing speaker serve to obscure the humanity of the crowd in Harlem. The series of subjectively figurative distortions in Hughes's poem, especially the comparison of a grinning face to the slice of melon, dramatizes the use of a racist stereotype and failure to acknowledge the personhood of Blacks on a Harlem street. It is notable, moreover, that Hughes adapts this same technique and the dehumanizing figurative comparison of a face to a jack-o'-lantern in "Third Degree," a poem first published in 1946 and collected in *One-Way Ticket* (1949), which memorably protests racism in the context of police brutality and the tragic failure to foster interracial understanding: "Faces like jack-o'-lanterns / In gray slouch hats. // Slug me! Beat me! / Scream jumps out / Like blowtorch. / Three kicks between the legs / That kill the kids / I'd make tomorrow" (*CP*, 371).

The most obvious context for understanding Hughes's revisionary engagement with Pound's modernist imagism is the early imagist poetry of Carl Sandburg, who was described by Hughes in *The Big Sea* as a "guiding star" (*CW* 13, 29). It is widely recognized that formally experimental poems by Sandburg such as "Jazz Fantasia" encouraged Hughes to write poems that worked stylistically to breach cultural frontiers and explore the meanings of jazz as a metaphor for modernity. Nevertheless, more should be said about how Hughes's engagement with Sandburg's widely anthologized lyric, "Fog," which was first published in *Chicago Poems* in 1916, exemplifies the dense web of historical relations connecting the rise of urban realism, the rise of imagism, and Hughes's stylistic affiliations with both of these movements. Whereas Sandburg was, by his own account, inspired by Pound's experiments with Japanese haiku poetry and visual art, eagerly affirming the possibilities of East-West interculturality in "Fog," ten years later Hughes would publish "African Fog" in the New York *Herald Tribune*, an imagist poem that thematizes fraught global encounters. Here, the image of "fog" suggests how limited knowledge and racist judgments about the lack of civilization in Africa on the part of European and American "aliens" have impeded intercultural dialogue with Ghanaians in Sekondi: "In the thick white fog at Sekondi / Going out to take cargo / From anchored alien ships, / You do not know the fog / We strange so-civilized ones / Sail in always" (*CP*, 63).

Hughes was undoubtedly aware of the haiku-inspired elements of imagist poetics. In March 1923, he sent Countee Cullen a vaguely Japanese-sounding “Syllabic Poem” (“Ay ya! / Ay ya! / Ky ya na mina, / Ky ya na mina”) with the comment, possibly parodying an imagist manifesto published by Pound in the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*, that it represents “the poetry of sound, and . . . marks the beginning of a new era, an era of revolt against the trite and outworn language of the understandable” (quoted in *LLHI*, 64). In addition to Sandburg, Hughes would have known that Jean Toomer had also experimented with imagist poetics, especially during what is known as his “aesthetic period” from 1919 to 1921. In contrast to Toomer, who openly acknowledged his efforts to read and study works of Asian philosophy, religion, and poetry, Hughes would compose “Jitney,” an imagist poem published in *One-Way Ticket* that depicts gossiping women in a jitney cab traveling in the Black Belt of Chicago, where he humorously intimates the startling novelty and habitual confusion of Japanese and Chinese that characterized their flawed attempts at Afro-Asian interculturality: “Corners / O South Parkway! Eeeeeooooo! / Cab / 31st / 35th / 39th / 43rd / Girl, ain’t you heard / No, Martha, ain’t heard / I got a Chinese boyfriend / Down on 43rd / 47th / 51st / 55th / 63rd / Martha’s got a Japanese / Child, ain’t you heard” (*CP*, 731).

By April 1940, when Hughes published two more poems in *Poetry*, “Love Again Blues” and “Out of Work” (*CP*, 216–17), he had already begun to spend much more time in the city, partly as a result of his close friendship with Arna Bontemps, who had moved to the South Side in the mid-1930s to complete a PhD in English at the University of Chicago and serve as codirector of the “Negro in Illinois” study run by the Illinois Writer’s Project. When Hughes visited in 1935, he and Bontemps began work on a play, *When the Jack Hollers*, and Hughes returned the following year to continue the collaboration while also “prowl[ing] the streets of the South Side” and interviewing people who were present during the Chicago Riot of 1919 for a follow-up novel to *Not without Laughter* that was never completed (*LLHI*, 320–21).¹³ In the spring and summer of 1940, Hughes spent several months in Chicago, writing a musical review for the Negro American Exposition and awaiting the publication of *The Big Sea*; and, in November 1941, he returned yet again to stay in the city on a year-long Rosenwald Fellowship to write plays about Black heroes. This was, as Rampersad has observed, a “crucial period of assessment and reassessment” for Hughes, who “had stumbled and fallen so badly that he himself must have despaired at times of ever rising again” (*LLHI*, 384; 4). Suffering and hospitalized for gonorrhoea in January 1941, with medical bills piling up,

and subsequently evicted from his apartment in Harlem for failing to pay the rent, Hughes had publicly repudiated his militant, radically socialist poem "Goodbye Christ" (*CP*, 166) when, in November 1940, it was attacked in the *Saturday Evening Post* by a nationally known evangelist leading an extremist right-wing group. Hoping to make a fresh start in Chicago after his poor publicity the previous year, Hughes was aided by Bontemps and his wife, who secured him a free room at the Good Shepherd Community Center (later renamed the Parkway Community House), located on South Parkway near the Grand Hotel. Within days of his arrival, Hughes founded a theater group called the Skyloft Players. He went on to write the group's first play, *De Sun Do Move*, and directed its premiere performance on April 24, 1942, the year before he started his weekly column, "Here to Yonder," for the *Chicago Defender* newspaper (*LLH* II, 32–34, 43, 55). He also composed a number of poems about Chicago that were collected in *One-Way Ticket* (1949), vividly rendering the harsh realities of segregation, discrimination, and socioeconomic inequality in the Black Belt, including "Juice Joint," "Northern City" (originally titled "Barrel House: Chicago"), "Migrant," "Summer Evening (Calumet Avenue)" (originally titled "Summer Evening: Calumet Avenue, Chicago"), and "Restrictive Covenants," which examines how white neighborhood groups forced Black Americans to live in impoverished areas in Chicago (*CP*, 362, 666–67, 369–70, 320, 361–62).

Scholars such as Steven Tracy and Robert Bone have drawn attention to the depth and extent of Hughes's contribution to the Black Chicago Renaissance, the creative flowering of literature and the arts in the city from the 1930s to the 1950s. Hughes's involvement is crucial to understanding his relationship with two key figures in the movement, Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks (Hricko, *Genesis*, 7, 63–67).¹⁴ Hughes first met Wright while visiting Bontemps in 1935, and the following year the three writers appeared together on a panel together at the National Negro Congress in Chicago (Bone and Courage, *Muse*, 163; *LLH* I, 324). After their initial meeting, Hughes would regularly drop in to see Wright at his home whenever he came to Chicago and, in August 1939, he and Wright published "Red Clay Blues" in *New Masses*, their only literary collaboration. As I have argued elsewhere, the style of this poem subverts stultifying critical binarisms that have pitted modern realism against modernist antirealism, vernacular tradition against the avant-garde, and political content against artistic form (Patterson, "Jazz," 661–62; *CP*, 212).¹⁵ The opening lines suggest, with eloquent simplicity, the transition from sacred to secular idioms, where syntax subsumes the act of praying in an

ornamental cadence (“Lawd”) designed to enhance the expression of personal, daily needs. The poem’s experimental line breaks self-reflexively call attention to the medium of writing and underscore poetic individuality through the rhythmic insistence on the desire for home: “I miss that red clay, Lawd, I / Need to feel it in my shoes. / Says miss that red clay, Lawd, I / Need to feel it in my shoes. / I want to get to Georgie caus I / Got them red clay blues” (*CP*, 212). Given this artfully concealed formal complexity, it should come as no surprise that the poem also establishes allusive connections, not only to Hughes’s modernist blues poems in *Poetry* magazine but to Wright’s unpublished first novel, *Lawd Today!*, which carried an epigraph to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.

Gwendolyn Brooks’s “Langston Hughes,” published in 1963, commemorates his profound influence on her coming-of-age as a poet: “In the breath / of the holocaust he / Is helmsman, hatchet, headlight.”¹⁶ Critics have noted Hughes’s role as an influential mentor to Brooks, from his warm words of encouragement at their first meeting in the Metropolitan Church in Chicago when Brooks was sixteen to his help in reviewing and publicizing her work to the “Langston Hughes two-room kitchenette party” Brooks threw for him in May 1949, when he left Chicago after a three-month appointment as Poet in Residence at the University of Chicago Laboratory School (*LLH* II, 117–18, 172).¹⁷ Although George Kent has observed the impact of Hughes’s blues poems, and particularly those presenting Black women who sing the blues, on poems such as Brooks’s “Queen of the Blues,” more should be said about how Hughes’s prior revisionary engagement with the high modernism of Eliot and Pound could have served as a model for Brooks (Kent, *A Life*, 161). In the early 1940s, Hughes paid a visit to the Chicago Poets’ Class, a South Side writers’ workshop held at the Parkway House and led by Inez Cunningham Stark, where Brooks and others explored modernist techniques they found in issues of *Poetry* magazine (Bone and Courage, *Muse*, 130). Hearing Brooks present “The Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” Hughes responded positively to her modernist formal experimentation (*LLH* II, 44). Despite the fact that the racist reactionary Allen Tate, in a preface to Melvin Tolson’s *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* that was first published in 1950 in *Poetry*, had championed Tolson’s “assimilation” of “Anglo-American” high modernist poetics and criticized the “folk” poetry of Hughes and Brooks for its “tragic aggressiveness,” Hughes would have had some comfort in knowing that, in the summer of 1956, Pound sent a letter from St. Elizabeth’s Hospital staunchly defending Hughes and attacking Tate’s “iggurunce” (*LLH* II, 234–35; Roessel, “A Racial Act,”

237).¹⁸ The recognition of Brooks, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950, no doubt buoyed Hughes's hopes for racial progress in America, and suggested that their shared engagement with modernist experimentalism would ultimately be acknowledged and celebrated. As Hughes himself commented in a May 1, 1954, article in the *Chicago Defender*, "St. Louis, that old city of river boats and ragtime, jockeys and blues, diamond rings and glamorous women, Josephine Baker and T. S. Eliot, Old Man River and old Jim Crow, and a sun that 'do move.'"¹⁹

Notes

- 1 Liesl Olson, *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), xvii, 12.
- 2 David Roessel, "'A Racial Act': The Letters of Langston Hughes and Ezra Pound," *Paideuma* 29.1–2 (2000): 221.
- 3 Anita Patterson, "Jazz, Realism, and the Modernist Lyric: The Poetry of Langston Hughes," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61.4 (2000): 655, 664.
- 4 Brent Hayes Edwards, *Epistrophes: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 62; Michael Borshuk, *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 41.
- 5 David Chinitz, "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes," *Callaloo* 19.1 (1996): 182, 189; Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 60; Kristin Grogan, "Langston Hughes and the Exemplary Blues Poem," *Critical Quarterly* 61.1 (2019): 56–57.
- 6 William Howland Kenney, *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 67.
- 7 Michael Borshuk, "'Noisy Modernism': The Cultural Politics of Langston Hughes's Early Jazz Poetry," *Langston Hughes Review* 17 (2002): 4–7; Ryan Jerving, "Early Jazz Literature (And Why You Didn't Know)," *American Literary History* 16.4 (2004): 660, 662; Robert O'Brien Hokanson, "Jazzing It Up: The Be-bop Modernism of Langston Hughes," *Mosaic* 3 (1998): 64–65, 70; David Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 37; Steven Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 224–25; Anita Patterson, *Race, American Literature, and Transnational Modernisms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 109–15.
- 8 Arnold Rampersad, "Langston Hughes and Approaches to Modernism in the Harlem Renaissance," in *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations*, ed. Amritjit Singh, William S. Shriver, and Stanley Brodwin (Shrewsbury, MA: Garland,

- 1989), 63; Madhuri Deshmukh, "Langston Hughes as Black Pierrot: A Transatlantic Game of Masks," *Langston Hughes Review* 18 (2004): 4.
- 9 Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing but Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7, 9, 20.
- 10 Jonathan Gill, "Ezra Pound and Langston Hughes: The ABC of Po'try," *Paideuma* 29.1–2 (2000): 79.
- 11 Ezra Pound, *Lustra of Ezra Pound* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1917), 50.
- 12 Ezra Pound, *Cathay* (Elkin Matthews, 1915), 32.
- 13 Mary Hricko, *The Genesis of the Chicago Renaissance: Theodore Dreiser, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James T. Farrell* (London: Routledge, 2009), 80.
- 14 Steven Tracy, "Introduction," in *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. Steven Tracy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 4; Robert Bone and Richard A. Courage, *The Muse in Bronzeville: African American Creative Expression in Chicago, 1932–1950* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 240n8; Samuel A. Floyd, "The Negro Renaissance: Harlem and Chicago Flowerings," in *The Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey Jr. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 38.
- 15 Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 111.
- 16 Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 123.
- 17 George Kent, *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 27, 112; Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report from Part One* (Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1972), 69–71.
- 18 Allen Tate, "Preface to 'Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,'" *Poetry* 76.4 (1950): 217.
- 19 Langston Hughes, "In Racial Matters in St. Louis 'De Sun Do Move'" (1954), in *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture, 1942–62*, ed. Christopher De Santis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 67.