

2009

"Ain't You Heard"?: The Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes

Kristin Taylor
Columbus State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/theses_dissertations



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation


Taylor, Kristin, "'Ain't You Heard'?: The Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes" (2009). *Theses and Dissertations*. 96.

https://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/theses_dissertations/96

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at CSU ePress. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CSU ePress.

**"AIN'T YOU HEARD"?:
THE JAZZ POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES**

Kristin Taylor



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
LYRASIS Members and Sloan Foundation

<http://archive.org/details/aintyouheardjazz00tayl>

“Ain't you heard”?:
The Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes
by
Kristin Taylor

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements of the CSU Honors Program

for Honors in the degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in
English Literature,
College of Arts and Letters,
Columbus State University

Thesis Advisor Yorin Kogi Date 6/8/09
Committee Member Carmen Skaggs Date 6/8/09
Committee Member Julie Giff Date 6/8/09
CSU Honors Program Director Phyllis M. Hill Date 6/8/09

“Ain't you heard”?:

The Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes

Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day—night, day—night, day—forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power.

—The Big Sea

Introduction

It all began with a piano bench. At the age of four, I sat next to my first piano teacher, as she told me the names of the keys. “This is C, D, E . . .,” she said, her finger touching each key, moving through the entirety of a C-major scale. Afterward she asked, “Now, which one is F?” Though I touched the incorrect key, A instead of F, I remember being fascinated by the realization that I could create music by depressing those keys, making little wooden hammers strike strings in the piano's hidden belly. That fascination never left me. Thirteen years later, during my senior year of high school, I received an acceptance letter from the Berklee College of Music in Boston – one of the world's premier institutions for the study of contemporary music and jazz. Despite receiving a generous partial scholarship, I elected, because of the high cost of tuition and of living in Boston, to complete my core courses at Columbus State University, and after two years, I intended to transfer to Berklee. However, when I took my first upper-level English course in the Fall of 2006, where I read Winnifred Eaton's autobiography, *Me: A Book of Remembrance*, and composed in response to Eaton's text an autobiographical literary critical essay – a piece of writing that catalyzed my journey toward self-integration after enduring a

devastating traumatic experience – I discovered the transcendence that can result from the intersection of life, literature, and criticism. At that point, I decided to obtain a degree in English Literature, but I had yet to discover how I would connect my study of literature to my musical background; in fact, I began to think the former would preclude the latter.

When I took African-American Literature II with Dr. Norcen Lape in the Spring of 2007, I was reintroduced to the poetry of Langston Hughes, a poet typically associated with the Harlem Renaissance and known for his poetry drawn from African-American folk idioms, such as the blues and jazz; in fact, he is often credited with being one of the first – if not *the* first – jazz poet. During the course, Dr. Lape explained to me that while many critics have explored Hughes's jazz poetry, acknowledging that much of his poetry does, indeed, sound jazzy, none had yet to elucidate the musical qualities of his jazz poetry, to communicate how Hughes translated a musical form to the page without losing its inherent qualities in the process. She suggested that my musical background might give me greater insight into the musicality of Hughes's jazz poetry than most critics possess and said I should consider writing my term paper on the topic – a project that later developed into this honors thesis.

In working on my term paper, I began to look at Hughes's traditionally canonized poetry, such as “The Weary Blues” and “Jazzonia,” but I quickly became focused on one of his latest poetry collections, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), featuring the often-anthologized poems “Dream Boogie,” “Theme for English B,” and “Harlem.” I soon realized that Hughes intended the collection to represent the poetic equivalent of a musical jam session – an innovative technique he outlines in his headnote to the collection. I immediately became fascinated with this idea and then with my attempts to explain how Hughes sets up the collection as a jam session. The more I analyzed the collection, the more I began to see its inherent jazzy

qualities and, later, the way in which individual poems in *Montage* also maintained the rhythms, structures, and idioms of jazz.

As I began to compose the paper, I realized not only that I had found a way to marry my musical background with my study of literature, but I also saw that through my knowledge of music, I could create a very unique niche for myself in the realm of literary criticism. As Dr. Lape would later say in her comments on my essay, “I’ve been looking around for an explanation like that for sometime now. Your analysis is seriously impressive.” I had tapped into an unexplored reservoir of knowledge vis-à-vis Hughes’s jazz poetry – one that changed my own approach to literary criticism as well as my perception of Hughes. In short, I fell in literary love, for Hughes had united his appreciation for music with his work as a writer – a concoction that ultimately transformed African-American literature.

While Hughes never studied music formally or played a musical instrument, his love of jazz grew deep like the rivers. Of course, Hughes was a prolific jazz writer, yet he not only wrote individual jazz poems, but he also wrote two collections of poetry specifically focused on jazz. One, which I have already mentioned, is *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, a collection that Hughes said was influenced by “what [he] heard at Minton’s in Harlem—a young music coming out of young people—Billy—the male the female of them—the Eckstine and the Holiday—Charlie Christian and Dizzy and Tad and the Monk” (Hughes, “Jazz” 213). Hughes dedicated his second collection of jazz poetry, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961), to Louis Armstrong whom Hughes described as “the greatest horn player of them all” (*Ask*). Importantly, the collection was heavily influenced by his attendance at the 1960 Newport Jazz Festival (a festival he attended regularly, even serving as an official for some time), where “musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie, Gerry Mulligan, and Louis Armstrong,” as well as “the Horace Silver Quintet, the Canadian pianist Oscar Peterson, the singer Dakota Staton, the jazz vocal trio of Lambert,

Hendricks, and Ross, and Ray Charles and his group” performed (Rampersad, Vol. II 314-15). Hughes also wrote children's literature that focused on the subject of jazz, such as *The First Book of Jazz* (1954), *The First Book of Rhythms* (1954), and *Famous Negro Music Makers* (1955), suggesting that jazz was so important to Hughes that he insisted upon sharing it with the emerging generation of young African-Americans. Hughes also performed his poetry to the musical accompaniment of jazz musicians. In what has come to be known as poetry-to-jazz readings, Hughes worked alongside such famous figures as Leonard Feather, “the bassist Charlie Mingus and the pianist Phineas Newborn” (Rampersad, Vol. II 279). He even recorded poetry-to-jazz albums, such as *The Weary Blues with Langston Hughes*, “produced by the jazz scholar Leonard Feather for MGM” (280). Thus, we can see that Hughes's focus on jazz in his writing is a direct reflection of his love for jazz in the performative sense. Still, Hughes's extensive use of jazz in his writing speaks to more than a mere appreciation of jazz for its alluring aural qualities.

The twofold purpose of this thesis is to explain both *why* Hughes continually returned to the idioms of jazz in his poetry and *how* Hughes was able to capture those musical idioms through the written word. The first of these purposes is dependent upon an in-depth analysis of the debates during the Harlem Renaissance that centered on how African Americans should represent themselves in art, for it is during this time period that Hughes began writing jazz poetry and proclaimed that the use of jazz in art was an integral part of fulfilling his artistic vision. One of the greatest African-American literary patriarchs, Alain Locke, was highly influential in initiating these artistic debates when he published *The New Negro* (1925) – a debate that W. E. B. Du Bois furthered with his speech, “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926). While Locke longed to bring together black and white members of the intelligentsia, and Du Bois found his ideal in propagandism that elevated the black race, both men ultimately believed in the promise of so-called high art to bring relief from race issues, suggesting that by giving white audiences cultured

and upper-class portrayal of blacks in art (including the visual arts, as well as literature and music), whites would come to respect the African-American race. Thus, to Locke and Du Bois, art could, in turn, help to correct the malicious mistreatment of black Americans.

Hughes, however, saw an inherent flaw in Lockean and Du Boisian logic – a flaw he addresses in his essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926). Hughes disapproved of any respect garnered for blacks through artistic portrayals that overlooked lower-class African Americans. Hughes could not have been more unconcerned with white perceptions of African-American art, and he certainly did not agree with Locke and Du Bois that art could solve the race problem – a conviction he comments upon in his short story, “The Blues I’m Playing.” Instead, Hughes’s aesthetic ideal was centered on depicting the life of the black lower classes and on trying to capture the idioms of their art, particularly their music, in his own art. Because of this aesthetic vision, jazz emerged as one of the primary sources from which Hughes drew artistic inspiration.

I will accomplish my second purpose – to define *how* Hughes was able to capture the musical idioms of jazz through the written word – with a close reading of Hughes’s collection of jazz poetry, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. The collection fulfills its goal to echo the musical jam session poetically through its Modernist dialogic structure, featuring different speakers who collectively provide a composite portrait of 1940s Harlem. Further, all of the poems focus on the impact of the deferred African-American dream – a motif that Hughes verbally riffs upon throughout the collection, just as jazz musicians would improvise upon a main musical motif throughout a jam session. From the outset of the collection, Hughes relies upon the various forms of jazz, such as boogie-woogie and bebop. I will show how Hughes relies upon these forms of jazz rhetorically and thematically, and by transcribing the collection’s opening poem, “Dream Boogie,” into rhythmic dictation, I will demonstrate musically how Hughes remains true

to the qualities of jazz, even as he captures them through the language of poetry solely. Finally, moving beyond the silent page to the spoken word, I will analyze one of Hughes's poetry-to-jazz recordings (“Dream Montage,” which features Hughes himself reading several of his poems from *Montage* to the musical accompaniment of Charles Mingus and Leonard Feather) to shed light on the jazzy nature of the poems within *Montage* structurally, aurally, and thematically.

I: Representing African Americans:

Aesthetic Ideologies in the Harlem Renaissance

From a modern perspective, the Harlem Renaissance is so often associated with jazz that it is almost as though the two have always gone hand-in-hand. One mention of the 1920s invokes images of Harlem cabarets, house-rent parties, black pianists improvising syncopated rhythms, and Louis Armstrong performing with his iconic trumpet. Yet ironically, many key figures of the Harlem Renaissance actually shied away from jazz – one of its strongest opposers being Alain Locke. Many critics and historians credit the publication of Locke’s anthology, *The New Negro* (1925), with catalyzing the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, as historian Nathan Huggins asserts, Locke’s work on the volume “made him the father of the New Negro and the [. . .] Harlem Renaissance” (qtd. in Rampersad, Introduction xi). The pivotal role of Locke’s text is even further emphasized by the fact that to writers of the day the movement was known as the “New Negro Renaissance”; the Harlem Renaissance is a term that has only been applied in retrospect when considering how the movement was centralized within Harlem.

The New Negro pulls together “essays, stories, poems, and artwork by older as well as younger writers, white as well as black, into a book that defined with incomparable clarity and flair the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance” (Gates and McKay 955). It is the forum in which Locke voiced his opinions on which types of art fulfilled his New Negro criteria – opinions that

are represented not only by his famous introductory essay to the anthology, “The New Negro,” but also by the pieces he chose to comprise the volume. Locke’s essay is, in essence, the spark that ignited the debate on how blacks should represent themselves in art – a debate we have come to associate with the Harlem Renaissance. However, in reading *The New Negro*, we learn that Locke was resistant to jazz, maintaining that it undermined the New Negro agenda because of its negative associations with lower-class life, primitivism, and even sexual promiscuity. By analyzing Locke's anthology, we can examine his artistic vision and better understand his opposition to jazz.

In “The New Negro,” Locke’s views on art are largely integrationist. He bemoans “the fact that the more intelligent and representative elements of the two race groups have at so many points got quite out of vital touch with one another” as “the most unsatisfactory feature of our present stage of race relationships” (988). He considers uniting white and African-American intelligentsia to be a pivotal component in finding a solution to the race problem. Later in the essay, he asserts “that the trend of Negro advance [as] wholly separatist” is impossible, concluding that “the choice is not between one way for the Negro and another way for the rest, but between American institutions frustrated on the one hand and American ideals progressively fulfilled and realized on the other” (990). Locke believed that placing the race problem within the larger context of societal issues allowed “race pride to be a healthier, more positive achievement,” rather than one that wallowed in Old Negro stereotypes reinforced by Uncle Tom caricatures and minstrelsy (991). Ultimately, Locke entrusted the emerging artists with carrying out the New Negro agenda and creating a place for blacks in American society at large – a place he believed could only be created by putting the “Negro’s” proverbial best foot forward so as to be accepted by the white masses.

Although the ideas of Locke's essay are integrationist in theory, when put into practice, they actually become assimilationist. As the works within *The New Negro* anthology demonstrate, the poetry Locke deemed appropriate must be "Negro" enough in content to appeal to white audiences interested in race issues, but not so "Negro" as to leave the white reader with a negative view of African-American culture that could undermine Locke's agenda. Many of the poems portray the African-American experience idealistically, featuring characters or speakers who prosper despite obstacles, who find harmony in relationships with whites or overcome racism with passive resistance, and who look optimistically – at times naïvely – toward the future. Further, Anglo forms and traditions strongly overpower the poems, and when the anthologized writers do draw on traditionally black forms, it tends to be forms like the spirituals or the black sermon. Few works in the volume mirror the folk idiom of jazz because of its association with primitivism and unlearned improvisation at the time. Even when jazz does make an appearance, it is always in sublimated forms and with a white audience in mind.

Looking in the "Negro Youth Speaks" section of the anthology, we find James Weldon Johnson featured. *The New Negro* contains his poem, "The Creation," which mirrors the form of the black sermon – a folk idiom that would presumably not threaten white audiences and is, therefore, not a threat to the New Negro agenda either.¹ In fact, as many critics point out, while Johnson used colloquial forms and speech patterns in writing "The Creation," he refused to use dialect because he found it comic and derogatory. Works by Countee Cullen in the anthology draw on Anglo forms and idioms, such as the sonnet and the ballad. His poem, "Tableau," with

¹ In "The Negro Spirituals," an essay from *The New Negro*, Locke venerates the form of the spirituals and explains that they "have escaped the lapsing conditions and the fragile vehicle of folk art, and come firmly into the context of formal music" (199). He goes on to say, "In its disingenuous simplicity, folk art is always despised and rejected at first; but generations after, it flowers again and transcends the level of its origins" (199). Ironically, while Locke could have this type of insight into the value of the spirituals and the continuation of their form, he never extends this insight to jazz – the folk art of his lifetime that he plays a part in "despis[ing] and reject[ing]" – which, of course, has since "flower[ed] again and transcend[ed] the level of its origin," just like the spirituals (199).

its ballad stanzas, portrays a “black boy and [a] white” (line 2) who are able to walk together, “[l]ocked arm in arm” (1), “[o]blivious” (9) to those who are “[i]ndignant that these two should dare / [i]n unison to walk” (6-8). Cullen’s poem is a prime example of the type of idealism found in *The New Negro*. Considering the historical backdrop of lynchings and Jim Crow during the Harlem Renaissance, the very idea that the boys could be “oblivious” to “indignant” onlookers seems absurd (9.6). The anthology also features poems by Claude McKay, none of which contain the primitivism that will later pervade his novel, *Home to Harlem* (1928), which demonstrates the effects of the rhythmic surges of African music and dance and of instinctual – even animalistic – sexual urges. Instead, we are presented with poems such as “White Houses,” a sonnet with a speaker who exclaims:

Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,
 Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,
 And find in it the superhuman power
 To hold me to the letter of your law!
 Oh I must keep my heart inviolate
 Against the potent poison of your hate. (lines 9-14)

These lines can be interpreted on two levels. One can certainly argue that the poem has an underlying subversive message – that the poet is forced to suppress violence so as to protect himself from the white man. But there is also a second, more literal reading that suggests the speaker chooses to exemplify passive resistance for the greater good, even if it requires self-sacrifice. This double-voiced strategy allows him to craft a poem that provokes a white readership, but not too much as the speaker is willing to repress his anger for the sake of social acceptability. In this regard, Cullen hints at the assimilationist philosophy of Booker T. Washington, who in his famous “Atlanta Exposition Address,” urged his fellow African

Americans to “mak[e] friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom [they] [we]re surrounded” and told whites that by doing the same, they could “be sure in the future, as in the past, that [they] and [their] families [would] be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen” (595-96). As Washington romanticizes the conditions of slavery in his speech and argues for passivity, it is clear how McKay's use of Washingtonian philosophy – coupled with his use of the Anglo sonnet form – would certainly stay within the paradigms of the New Negro agenda.

When reading Hughes’s poetry in the volume, the agenda guiding Locke’s editorial decisions are of particular significance. Adhering to Locke’s standards of high art, Hughes’s featured poetry includes works such as “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921), “Jazzonia” (1923), and “I, Too” (1925). Hughes, who had a very deep appreciation for the work of Walt Whitman, particularly *Leaves of Grass*, draws on an Anglo, Whitmanesque tradition in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.”² The speaker transcends time and space to represent the collective voice of blacks throughout history and uses the world’s rivers to assert the proud, unwavering place of the Negro. Looking back over the course of history, the speaker says:

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young,
 I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
 I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
 I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
 went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy
 bosom turn all golden in the sunset. (lines 4-7)

² Aboard the *S.S. Malone*, the ship on which Hughes worked as he sailed toward Africa for the first and only time in his life, Hughes decided to throw a box of his books into the sea because “they seemed too much like everything [he] had known in the past [. . .], like too much reading all the time when [he] was a kid, like life isn’t, as described in romantic prose” (Hughes, *Big Sea* 97). But Rampersad tells us that in an earlier draft of *The Big Sea*, Hughes admitted he “saved his copy of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, saying, ‘I had no intentions of throwing that one away’” (Vol. I 72).

What is noticeably absent from this journey through time, however, is the association that many of these rivers have with slavery. The white man took him from his “hut near the Congo” and sold him into slavery; Pharaoh forced him to “rais[e] the pyramids” above the Nile, and he watched the Mississippi “turn all golden” while in a state of captivity (4, 6, 7). In an instance of Lockean idealism, the speaker autonomously asserts in the final line of the poem that his “soul has grown deep like the rivers” (10). Hughes's opts for a Romantic, Transcendental speaker, who, while focusing on his race's inherent connection to nature, never explains to us the cost at which his soul has grown so deep – the awful circumstances from which he has drawn his inner-strength. Unlike the Romantics, his strength is not drawn solely from nature, but also from the ability to transcend unspeakable communal trauma, which these rivers represent.

“I, Too,” rings with a similar idyllic message. Despite the fact that the speaker is “the darker brother” (line 2), he boldly asserts in the first line, “I, too, sing America” (1), again drawing on the Anglo tradition of Whitman, who proclaimed in “Song of Myself,” “I celebrate myself, and sing myself” (line 1). In the beginning of “I, Too,” the speaker portrays how the white man is ashamed of him: “They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes” (lines 3-4). But in the second stanza, the poem takes a swift turn as the speaker announces his hopeful vision for the future, saying, “Tomorrow, / I'll be at the table / When company comes” (8-10). The speaker foresees that the shame will no longer be on the black man but on the white man for failing to see for so long “how beautiful I am” (16). As the poem closes with the line, “I, too, am America,” he asserts his place as not only one who sings of America but who actually comprises it (18). He is no longer a figure in the background, confined to the metaphorical hidden kitchens of American society, but a person prominently and proudly displayed in the foreground. But again, in the vein of the New Negro agenda, although the message of “I, Too” is a beautiful one of hope, it is one that envisions a very quick and seamless

transformation from a state of racial prejudice to racial acceptance, even if “[t]omorrow” is not meant to be interpreted as a literal passage of time (8).

The only anthologized poem by Hughes that focuses on jazz, “Jazzonia” maintains an obvious Anglo influence and is noticeably different from most of Hughes's other jazz poetry.

“Jazzonia” describes a jazz performance, as Hughes writes in the second stanza:

In a Harlem cabaret
Six long-headed jazzers play
A dancing girl whose eyes are bold
Lifts high a dress of silken gold. (lines 3-6)

Although the speaker describes jazz, the stanza is not jazzy. Its AABB rhyme scheme and adherence to iambic tetrameter more closely resembles a poem that might be attributed to someone like Cullen, who was known for drawing on Anglo poetic forms, than the type of work that is typically associated with Hughes. Granted, there are some jazzy qualities to the poem, as Hughes verbally improvises upon the poem's opening lines, “Oh, silver tree! / Oh, shining rivers of the soul,” interspersing variations on them between the longer stanzas of the poem (1-2). For example, after the second stanza (quoted above), Hughes writes, “Oh, singing tree! / Oh, shining rivers of the soul!” (7-8), and later after the fourth stanza, he writes, “O, shining tree! / Oh, silver rivers of the soul!” (14-15). Looking at the various presentations of this couplet, we can see that Hughes uses and reuses the adjectives “silver,” “shining,” and “singing” in different ways as the poem progresses. Because these couplets appear as interjections between the larger stanzas, one can imagine them as they might be heard in a jazz performance: the band would play the verse of the song (the stanzas), and a single musician might play an improvised musical riff (the couplets) between those verses, and of course, because the riff is improvised, while it may be similar to the previous one, it will never be exactly the same. We can see this quality in the slight verbal

variation Hughes employs in the couplets throughout “Jazzonia.” But even this type of poetic improvisation is tame for Hughes, and the poem overall lacks the qualities of jazz that Hughes's jazz poetry is typically known for – inherent jazz rhythms, the use of black vernacular, and urban locale.

While it is interesting enough to consider the message of Hughes's anthologized poems, what is even more telling in Hughes's case are his poems that are absent from the anthology – works like “Danse Africaine” (1922) and “The Weary Blues” (1925), both of which were published prior to or in 1925, the same year *The New Negro* was published. In contrast to works like “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “I, Too,” and “Jazzonia,” the poems “Danse Africaine” and “The Weary Blues” focus on primitive representations of black music or on lower-class African-American folk culture as reflected in the forms of the blues and jazz – characteristics that would unquestionably challenge Locke's criteria for New Negro art. While one cannot say for certain if Locke purposefully chose to exclude Hughes's folk poetry in the anthology, I would argue that historical evidence points toward this conjecture. David Levering Lewis informs us that Locke's publication of *The New Negro* is the product of his work on a Harlem edition of *Survey Graphic* magazine, entitled “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro” (*When Harlem* 115). Contemporaneous to Locke's work on the *Survey Graphic*, *Opportunity* magazine publicized that they were going to sponsor a literary contest. When winners were announced at the 1925 *Opportunity* dinner, Hughes's “The Weary Blues” won in the category of poetry (114). Thus, while it is impossible to determine if Hughes ever submitted poems like “Danse Africaine” to either of these magazines, I would maintain that it is possible that Hughes at least submitted “The Weary Blues” to both, considering that both magazines were considering submissions simultaneously. What's more, Arnold Rampersad informs us that “Langston made sure that Locke had almost a complete file of his poems for the special Negro number of the *Survey Graphic*” (Rampersad, Vol. I 101).

Thus, the fact that all of Hughes's aforementioned works were already published or being composed by 1925 (Hughes began working on "The Weary Blues" in 1923) makes one hypothesize that works like "Danse Africaine" or "The Weary Blues" did not appear in *The New Negro* because they were contrary to New Negro philosophy. Any editor will find that his work is guided by his own agenda, and Locke would be no exception. With that in mind, analyzing some of Hughes's absent poems can give us greater understanding as to why they do not fit in with the New Negro agenda.

The most obvious connection between all of Hughes's non-anthologized poems is that they draw on black folk idioms like the blues and jazz and even the musical influence of the primitive – all of which contradict New Negro philosophy. As we have seen, even when jazz does make an appearance in *The New Negro*, as it does with "Jazzonia," it is in sublimated forms and with a white audience in mind. It is easy to understand Locke's resistance to jazz based on the way many whites perceived it during the Harlem Renaissance. For example, an article from the *New York Times* in the 1920s states: "Jazz is to real music exactly what most of the 'new poetry,' so-called, is to real poetry," going on to say that "both were the work 'not of innovators, but of incompetents'" (qtd. in Rasula 170). This idea of jazz being associated with a lack of education is echoed again when Jed Rasula points out, "It was also widely assumed that black musicians had no formal training, and improvisation was regarded as the last resort of those who could not read music" (158). The fact that the New Negro agenda is centered on the role of the black intellectual explains why Locke was so reluctant to accept jazz and its associations with ignorance. Still, despite his opposition, it would be nearly impossible for Locke to exclude jazz completely from his anthology, considering that it was published during the height of the Jazz Age. Locke carefully navigates this dilemma by distinguishing cultured jazz of high society of which he approves from jazz of the low-down folks, which he believes contradicts the New

Negro agenda. But in so doing, he diminishes the importance of an inherently black art form and ultimately constructs an entire ideology that appropriates Anglo forms and appeals to the white majority.

In an essay from the *The New Negro* anthology entitled “Jazz at Home,” J. A. Rogers echoes New Negro philosophy when he says that “[m]usically jazz has a great future” because “[i]t is rapidly being sublimated” by “famous jazz orchestras,” and that while the “pioneer work in the artistic development of jazz was done by Negro artists [. . .], difficulties of financial backing” means jazz has “had to yield ground to white orchestras of the type of the Paul Whiteman and Vinecent Lopez organizations that are now demonstrating the finer possibilities of jazz music” (221). He goes on to quote Serge Koussevitzky, the conductor of the Boston Symphony at the time: “Jazz [. . .] is an important contribution to modern musical literature” (221). And later Rogers says about jazz venues:

The cabaret of better type provides a certain Bohemianism for the Negro intellectual, the artist and the well-to-do. But the average thing is too much the substitute for the saloon and the wayside inn. The tired longshoreman, the porter, the housemaid and the poor elevator boy in search of recreation, seeking in jazz the tonic for weary nerves and muscles are only too apt to find the bootlegger, the gambler and the demi-monde who have come there for victims and to escape the eyes of the police. (223)

Clearly, Rogers has expressed an appreciation for jazz only when it is in upper-class venues, even leaving it to “white orchestras” to “demonstrat[e] the finer possibilities of jazz music” and using the voice of a white orchestra conductor to validate jazz’s artistic value (221). Rogers looks down upon the lower classes, who would seek amusement from jazz in non-cultured venues, ironically overlooking the fact that it is those low-down folks who created jazz.

Considering that Rogers's essay adheres to Locke's agenda, it gives us a clearer perspective through which to view Hughes's jazzier poems that did not appear in *The New Negro* anthology.

“Danse Africaine,” for example, turns to the primitive that Rogers eschews from its very opening, as Hughes writes:

The low beating of the tom-toms,

The slow beating of the tom-toms

Low . . . slow

Slow . . . low—

Stirs your blood.

Dance! (lines 1-6)

The imperative in the sixth line – “Dance!” – speaks to the animalistic lack of control that such ancestral music was believed to impose upon the listener. Hughes positions the line in such a way that it seems as though the tom-tom music itself is the one issuing the command. As we read the poem, we are drawn further and further inward – both literally with Hughes’s indented lines as well as metaphorically, as the tom-tom music permeates the listener until it reaches his core. When this permeation is complete, we not only reach the imperative of the sixth line, when the listener is forced finally to concede to his primitive impulses, but we also arrive at the furthest indented line of the poem, which is positioned very near to the middle – the literal center – of the poem on the page. Further, one is unable to overlook the sensual imagery and hypnotic rhythm of the third and fourth lines, underscoring the intrinsic connection that the primitive was believed to have to the sexual. By the time the “night-veiled girl” who “[w]hirls softly” enters the poem, the sexual is no longer implied, but explicit (7,8). As the poem closes, Hughes’s lines mirror the continued music:

And the tom-toms beat,

And the tom-toms beat,

And the low beating of the tom-toms

Stirs your blood. (12-15)

Since the tom-tom music has already made its impact on the speaker, we are left with the impact of the music extending to the reader, as Hughes uses the second-person pronoun “your,” for the first time in the poem (15). Ultimately, Hughes suggests that the music’s impact is pervasive enough to continue beyond the poem’s composition and the act of reading it, for even as our blood is stirred in the final line and we close the book of poetry, we imagine that somewhere within its pages, the tom-tom is still beating, still asserting its power in our core. For Locke, however, promoting the connection of primitive music to animalistic instinct would only undermine the New Negro agenda of making a respected place in society for the black intellectual.

“The Weary Blues,” now one of Hughes’s most anthologized poems, works against the New Negro agenda by presenting the idea that an intellectual could be drawn in helplessly by the blues. As the title suggests, the poem draws on the musical form of the blues while also using the vernacular so as to portray the life of a common “Negro” musician as he is seen through the eyes of the poem's speaker. James Smethurst points out that there are inherent separations between the speaker and the musician, the first being a result of the fact that “the black folk voice of a blues singer is framed by the slightly colloquial, but more or less ‘standard’ English of a somewhat alienated African American intellectual (121). Consider the opening lines in which the speaker says:

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,

Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,

I heard a Negro play.

Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
 By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
 He did a lazy sway . . .
 He did a lazy sway . . .

To the tune o' those Weary Blues. (lines 1-8)

There is a bluesy feel even to the intellectual's retrospective account of the musician's performance, almost as if he is attempting to parrot the blues idiom, but as Smethurst maintains, there is certainly a " 'standard' English" quality to the speaker's words (121). The speaker does not use the vernacular like the musician, who says, "Ain't got nobody in all this world, / Ain't got nobody but ma self" (lines 19-20). Further, while the speaker is obviously influenced by the blues, he does not replicate the authentic blues form the musician uses in his performance.

Steven Tracy, critic of Hughes's blues poetry, portrays just how closely the musician's song adheres to the blues, usually a twelve-bar form in 4/4 time with a I, IV, V, I chord progression. Analyzing the second instance of the musician's use of the blues in lines 25-30, Tracy writes:

C
 1 2 3
 I got de weary blues
 4 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3
 And I can't be satisfied

F
 4 1 2 3
 Got de weary blues
 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3
 And can't be satisfied

G
 4 1 2 3
 I ain't happy no mo'

C
 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
 And I wish that I had died. (Tracy 76-77)

One can see that, true to the blues, Hughes employs both the twelve-bar form (with the twelve repetitions of the 1, 2, 3, 4 sequence of beats) and the I, IV, V, I chord progression (as found in the movement from the C chord to F, then G, and back to C for the final two bars). It should be noted that we can never know for certain which chords Hughes intended to accompany the poem – if any; however, Tracy provides us with a generalized example of how the poem *could* be chorded (since C major is the most basic musical key signature, in the example, he uses C, F, G, C, which is the most basic blues chord progression). Through Tracy's example, we can understand how the blues musician remains true to the blues form, while the speaker has only provided a pale imitation.

The second separation between the speaker and the musician is that “the speaker of the poem is both an insider and an outsider” (Smethurst 121). He is an outsider because, as we see from the opening of the poem, the speaker is not the musician himself – only his observer; as he says in the third line, “I heard a Negro play.” But much like the speaker of “Danse Africaine,” he is drawn further and further inward by the musician’s song as the poem progresses, and he eventually becomes an insider, for his perspective merges with that of the musician. Smethurst observes that “. . . the speaker enters into the music and is by the end of the poem so bound up with the bluesman that the speaker is inside the singer’s bedroom (and head) after the show is over” (121). The speaker’s insight into the musician’s psyche is demonstrated by the poem’s final lines, when the speaker has clearly moved from relaying what he observed during the musician's performance to relaying what he imagines the musician does after the performance: “The singer stopped playing and went to bed / While the Weary Blues echoed through his head. / He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead” (lines 33-35). The degree to which the musician permeates the speaker’s mind is also revealed in the influence of the blues on his retrospective account of the performance.

When we consider “The Weary Blues” in conjunction with Locke’s agenda, it is likely that the use of folk culture and the glorification of a lower-class musician in Harlem would be enough to undermine the New Negro agenda. After all, Locke maintains that portraying the African-American experience in a way that is palatable to white audiences “should in turn prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships” (“New” 993). But the poem poses an even greater threat – possessing the dangerous ability to draw in Locke’s intelligent reader, turning him away from the call for high art and interracial connections amongst the intelligentsia as they are presented in *The New Negro*, just as the blues has possessed the poem’s speaker.

With a similar mindset as Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois weighed into this aesthetic debate with his speech, “The Criteria of Negro Art,” given at a dinner hosted by the NAACP in 1926. Like Locke, Du Bois was concerned with the perception whites had of African Americans, particularly the degree to which black art was often considered inferior simply because of the color of the artist’s skin. But more importantly, he was concerned with the degree to which African Americans judged their own art by white standards and needed the approval of white critics in order to validate the work of a black artist. Du Bois calls for approval of the artist for his own sake: “Thus it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before” (“Criteria” 782). With unmistakable echoes of Keats, Du Bois lists the first of these methods as Truth, which he says should be used “not as a scientist seeking truth, but as one upon whom Truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding” (782). The second method is Goodness, which is used “not for sake of an ethical sanction but as the one

true method of gaining sympathy and human interest” (782). With these definitions in mind, Du Bois then famously proclaims:

Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. (782-83)

What Du Bois disapproves of is the unjust disproportion between the amount of art that favors whites and the amount that favors blacks. Du Bois wants art that favorably represents African Americans; he wants for blacks the same rights to propaganda that allows people to “believe white blood divine, infallible and holy” (783). He entrusts the “new young artists” with “fight[ing] their way to freedom” through propagandism – by no longer allowing their “worst side” to be “shamelessly emphasized” (783). Of course, to define art as propaganda is to sacrifice authenticity, but for Du Bois, the loss is less important than what he feels is gained from casting the African American solely in a positive light.

Thus, jazz, with all its negative stereotypes, certainly would not align with Du Bois's call for propaganda, just as it does not align with Locke's New Negro agenda. Du Bois's distaste for jazz is evident in the comments he made about his daughter's beau, who was a jazz musician. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Du Bois, David Levering Lewis informs us that Du Bois's daughter, Yolande, was deeply in love with the jazz musician, Jimmie Lunceford, yet Du Bois objected to Yolande's marriage to him. As Lewis summarizes the situation:

[Du Bois said,] 'I am not taking Jimmie very seriously' [. . .]. Lunceford might develop into 'a fine man but that is yet to be learned.' In any case, such a union

was unthinkable. 'Nothing,' she [Yolande] was told, was more 'disheartening and idiotic than to see two human beings without cultivated tastes, without trained abilities and without power to earn a living locking themselves together and trying to live on love. (*Biography* 108)

Instead, Du Bois longed for Yolande to marry (and she did) Countee Cullen who, unfortunately for Yolande, was actually homosexual (108). In Du Bois's marital preferences for his daughter, we can perhaps find links to his artistic preferences. Indubitably, he associated jazz with the lower class and ignorance – both of which contradicted his call for propaganda.

Hughes entered the debate in 1926 when he published his famous essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in *The Nation*. Not only does this essay present Hughes’s aesthetic view, which stood in stark contrast to that of Locke and Du Bois, but it also explains Hughes’s decision to use jazz so copiously in his poetry. In the essay, Hughes develops the extended metaphor of the racial mountain, which he defines as the “urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible,” and he maintains that it is this mountain that “stand[s] in the way of any true Negro art in America” (1311). According to Hughes, the racial mountain has its most prominent hold on the middle and upper classes of African Americans. For these groups, he says, “white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues,” so it becomes “difficult [. . .] for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty” (1311). For Hughes, good art cannot be propaganda, as it is for Du Bois, and thus, by its very nature, it cannot represent the upper classes and the intelligentsia, as it does for Locke.

In creating his aesthetic ideologies in opposition to Locke and Du Bois, Hughes sought to forge his own identity as an African-American artist. Both Locke and Du Bois were great

literary patriarchs for Hughes and were influential parts of his childhood. As Hughes would later recall, “My earliest memories of written words [. . .] were those of W. E. B. Du Bois and the Bible” (qtd. in Rampersad, Vol. I 19). When Hughes, beginning to flower in the literary success of his youth, had the opportunity to meet Du Bois, Hughes was “terrified” (53). He recalls wondering, “What would I say? What should I do? How could I act—not to appear as dumb as I felt myself to be?” (qtd. in Rampersad Vol. I 53). We also know that when Locke “asked to visit Hughes, the young poet declined fearfully because he did not think he was prepared for such distinguished company” (Miller 29). Still, Hughes went on to create an artistic ideology in which he separated himself completely from Locke and Du Bois.

Seeing no hope of overcoming the racial mountain amongst the middle and upper classes, Hughes turns to “the low-down folks, the so-called common element” who “do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else” (“Negro Artist” 1312). Hughes writes:

These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself. (1312)

Thus, Hughes sees in the lower class the hope of those who are not ashamed of their blackness, and in that hope lies the future of black art and the advancement of the African-American race. Like the writings of Locke and Du Bois, Hughes’s essay becomes a call to action in which he, too, charges the younger generation of black artists with the task of advancing his artistic vision. But Hughes also includes himself in the movement he initiates: “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. [. . .] We

build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves” (1314). His use of “we” underscores the reasons why we can view “The Negro Artist” as an explanation of Hughes’s reasoning behind his own art.

Jazz became for Hughes the means of fulfilling his own artistic vision. In “The Negro Artist,” Hughes calls jazz “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 . . .” (1314). Considering how Hughes viewed jazz, it is no wonder that it takes on such a pivotal role in his poetry. Although such folk art was often condemned by black intellectuals, such as Locke and Du Bois, Hughes saw writing the lower class’s music into poetry as a way to open the door for greater acceptance of jazz. As Hughes himself said in an article in the *Toronto Star*, “Jazz gives poetry a much wider following and poetry brings jazz that greater respectability people seem to think it needs. I don’t think jazz needs it, but most people seem to” (qtd. in Rampersad, Vol II 280). This statement also aligns perfectly with Hughes’s proclamation in “The Negro Artist”: “Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectual until they listen and perhaps understand” (1314). Thus, if Hughes would be able to convince “the colored near-intellectual” (a thinly veiled reference to Locke and Du Bois) of the value of jazz, he believed it would be through his own jazz poetry (1314).

In “The Blues I’m Playing,” one of Hughes’s short stories from *The Ways of White Folks*, Hughes “attempts to penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectual” as he vies for the acceptance of folk idioms in art through a fictionalized portrayal of the divergent views of high and low art as they were debated in the Harlem Renaissance (1314). Many critics argue that “The Blues I’m Playing” is Hughes’s critique of the artist-patron relationship. Indeed, the story portrays the artist-patron relationship in a manner so reminiscent of his own relationship with

Charlotte Osgood Mason that the similarities are hardly coincidental. *The Ways of White Folks* was originally published in 1934 – a mere three years following the final termination of his four-year relationship with Mason in 1931. Seemingly, the separation from Mason afforded Hughes the distance necessary to write critically about the exploitative nature of Mason as a patron, while still allowing him to hide himself (and Mason) behind his art, recreating the dynamic of their relationship only in fictitious terms.³ I would also propose that the story can be interpreted as Hughes's commentary on the artistic debates taking place during the Harlem Renaissance, even allowing him to advance his own aesthetic vision more unabashedly through fiction than he could in essays such as “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” I will argue that in “The Blues I'm Playing,” Hughes embodies his own aesthetic ideals within the character of Oceola (his literary proximate) and places her in contradistinction to Mrs. Ellsworth, who represents the “colored near-intellectual[s]” like Locke and Du Bois (Hughes, “Negro Artist” 1314). This interpretation also accounts for the manner in which Hughes gives Mrs. Ellsworth an artistic ideology that is the antithesis of Mason's – an artistic move that many critics have attempted to explain, while usually concluding that it is merely an act of distancing on Hughes's part.

In *The Big Sea*, we learn that Hughes's and Mason's relationship, like Oceola's and Mrs. Ellsworth's, ended because of divergent aesthetic views, but unlike Mrs. Ellsworth, who wants to “sublimate” Oceola (Hughes, “Blues” 112) – in essence drawing her closer to white standards of art – Mason wanted Hughes to draw his inspiration from Africa rather than from African-American folklore, which Hughes resisted:

She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive.

But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me.

and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro

³ Even in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, where Hughes discusses his relationship with Charlotte Osgood Mason, he never actually refers to her by name, always protecting her anonymity.

—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. And I was not what she wanted me to be. (*Big Sea* 325)

Interestingly, Mrs. Mason's ideology actually aligns more closely with that of Anne Carraway in “Slave on the Block,” another story from *The Ways of White Folks*. Unlike Mason, however, who appropriated the artistic focus of the artists she supported – imposing her own artistic ideals of primitivism upon their art – Anne is herself an artist who feeds her obsession with the primitive by “cop[ying]” Negro art in her own artistic creations (Hughes, “Slave” 19). For example, she hires a black boy named Luther to be a servant in her home with the sole intention of making him the object of her painting of a slave on the block, waiting to be sold. She is fascinated with Luther because he is “a boy as black as all the Negroes they’d ever known put together” and, therefore, has a connection to the primitive (20). Thus, the fact that Hughes chose to create a direct parallel between the character, Anne, and his patron, Mason, makes it seem all the more significant that he reverses the ideological standpoint in the case of Mrs. Ellsworth in “The Blues I’m Playing.” If Mrs. Ellsworth and Oceola personify the divergent voices of the Harlem Renaissance debates, while also speaking to the problematic nature of the artist-patron relationship, the reversal of the patron figure's aesthetic ideology can be viewed in an entirely new light – as allowing Hughes to conflate two types of social commentary within one story. In “The Blues I’m Playing,” Hughes is able to draw attention to what he believes is the inherent flaw in Locke's and Du Bois's aesthetic ideals: the notion that art can resolve the race problem.

Hughes creates the analogy between Mrs. Ellsworth and the “colored near-intellectuals” and Oceola and himself through his carefully chosen artistic preferences of the two fictional characters. Predictably, Mrs. Ellsworth's artistic tastes lean toward the classical end of the continuum, and she abhors Oceola's equally predictable love of jazz and the blues, viewing her

patronage of Oeeola as a way of sublimating Oeeola's primitive tastes in music and, ultimately, Oeeola herself. As Hughes puts it:

Mrs. Ellsworth [. . .] still believed in art of the old school, portraits that really and truly looked like people, poems about nature, music that had soul in it, not symphony. And she felt the dignity of art. Was it in keeping with genius, she wondered, for Oeeola to have a studio full of white and colored people every Saturday night [. . .] and dancing to the most tomtom-like music she had ever heard coming out of a grand piano? ("Blues" 110-111)

One can truly see the manner in which this passage mirrors the debates of the Harlem Renaissance as it contemplates the role of the African-American artist and what type of art is appropriate for the emerging young artisan who shoulders the responsibility of representing the black race. Certainly in Mrs. Ellsworth's views of "the dignity of art," one can hear echoes of Locke and Du Bois (110). To be "in keeping with genius" (110) is to align one's self with the Lockean vision of reuniting "the more intelligent and representative elements of the two race groups [who] have at so many points got quite out of vital touch with one another" ("New" 988), and thus, Oeeola's "tomtom-like music" would counter that vision ("Blues" 111). And in the mention of "portraits that really and truly looked like people [and] poems about nature" (110), we hear the voice of Du Bois, who holds as supreme "the work of propagating and encouraging Beauty" ("Truth" 307).

In fact, contrary to the Lockean and Du Boisian visions, Oeeola is herself a literal representation of the type of "low-down folks" whom Hughes validates in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." Early in the story, Mrs. Ellsworth interviews Oeeola to determine whether she wants to act as her patron, and Hughes recounts for us snippets of that conversation, which gives us a clear picture of Oeeola's family background and upbringing. Hughes writes:

Born in Mobile in 1903. [. . .] Papa had a band [. . .]. Used to play for all the lodge turn-outs, picnics, dances, barbecues. You could get the best roast pig in the world in Mobile. Her mother used to play the organ in church, and when the deacons bought a piano after the big revival, her mama played that, too. Oceola played by ear for a long while until her mother taught her notes. (“Blues” 104)

We later read that “she and her mama and step-papa settled down in Houston. Sometimes her parents had jobs and sometimes they didn’t. Often they were hungry [. . .]” (104). From these passages, we see that Oceola’s mother and step-father are, indeed, from the “so-called common element” (“Negro Artist” 1312), as Hughes calls the lower class. They are certainly “not afraid of the spirituals” – a quality Hughes venerates in the “low-down folks” – in light of the fact that her mother plays the organ in church and we later learn that Oceola “played for a church choir” (“Negro Artist” 1312; “Blues” 105). Further, jazz, as embodied in Oceola, is quite literally the child of “the so-called common element” – an unmistakable echo of Hughes’s statement that “jazz is their child” as he discusses the “low-down folks” (“Negro Artist” 1312).

While Hughes embodies his artistic ideal within Oceola, we see a clear critique of – even pointed jabs at – the artistic philosophies of Locke and Du Bois through the character of Mrs. Ellsworth. One of the first examples of this type of critique appears through Mrs. Ellsworth’s decision to become Oceola’s patron because the “Negro girl had been highly recommended to her by Ormond Hunter, the music critic” (Hughes, “Blues” 100). In fact, Mr. Hunter’s white, and therefore supposedly more valid, opinion of Oceola even means that “there had been no doubt” about the decision of patronage on the part of Mrs. Ellsworth (100). Her unquestioning reliance upon the white artistic perspective parallels the way in which Hughes critiques many of his contemporaries for their longings to be white – a word that “comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues” (“Negro Artist” 1311) – and to uphold white aesthetics in their art.

Through this section of “The Blues I’m Playing,” Hughes exposes and comments upon an inherent flaw in the Du Boisian logic of “Criteria of Negro Art.” In his speech, Du Bois claims that, artistically, blacks should not care for the opinions of white critics, yet paradoxically, he longs to create art that is propaganda so as to better the perception of his race in the eyes of whites. When one juxtaposes these two elements of Du Bois's speech, one sees that Du Bois employs circular reasoning, for, logically, if Du Bois was not concerned with white standards, he would also not be concerned with assimilated propaganda. In other words, Du Bois was still held back by the racial mountain, as Hughes would say, continuing to succumb to white standards. Through Mrs. Ellsworth's unfaltering faith in Mr. Hunter solely because he is white, Hughes, in essence, draws attention to Du Bois's homage to the racial mountain.

Furthering his critique, Hughes sheds more light on this type of Du Boisian circular reasoning through the sources Mrs. Ellsworth consults to educate herself on Negro life, such as “a book called ‘Nigger Heaven’” by Carl Van Vechten and “Thomas Burke on Limehouse” (“Blues” 106, 108). Ironically, both of these works are written by white authors who attempt to portray minority life. Hughes makes the point that as Du Bois advocates for portrayals of black life that are mere propaganda, he makes it impossible for whites to have an accurate perception of African-American existence, impossible for blacks ever to be accepted for who they truly are; ultimately, it is a false portrayal that is no different from those Mrs. Ellsworth gains from her own white-authored sources of propaganda. Hughes, however, like Oceola, believes in the promise of realistic portrayals of African-Americans – of the artist “who is not afraid to be himself” (“Negro Artist” 1312). As he says in *The Big Sea*, “[M]ost of the good ones [black artists] have tried to be honest, write honestly, and express their world as they saw it,” rather than “writ[ing] to amuse and entertain white people, and in so doing distort[ing] and over-color[ing] their material, and [leaving] out a great many things they thought would offend

their American brothers of a lighter complexion” (227). As far as Hughes is concerned, he would rather the African-American not be accepted at all than to be accepted on false terms. Thus, it is these “good” artists who, for Hughes, hold the key to the hope of blacks one day being accepted for who they truly are (227).

Throughout the short story, Hughes continually links Mrs. Ellsworth's ideas of art to the stars and a movement upward – no doubt a metaphor for high art. At one point, Hughes writes:

[. . .] She [Mrs. Ellsworth] wished she could lift Oceola up bodily and take her away from all that, for art's sake.

So in the spring, Mrs. Ellsworth organized weekends in the up-state mountains where she had a little lodge and where Oceola could look from the high places at the stars, and fill her soul with the vastness of the eternal, and forget about jazz. Mrs. Ellsworth really began to hate jazz—especially on a grand piano. (“Blues” 111)

As we see Mrs. Ellsworth try to overpower Oceola's artistic autonomy, we see that she wishes to “lift Oceola up bodily” – to force her into upward movement that allows her to transcend the low-down art, which Mrs. Ellsworth believes is below Oceola (111). Oceola's art, however, is described by Hughes as being grounded and a part of the earth, and this is what allows her music to become transcendent. He writes: “In her playing of Negro folk music, Oceola never doctored it up, or filled it full of classical runs, or fancy falsities. In the blues she made the bass notes throb like tom-toms, the trebles cry like little flutes, so deep in the earth and so high in the sky that they understood everything” (113). Mrs. Ellsworth is so focused on putative standards of art – with a concern for how Oceola will be perceived (by whites) – that Mrs. Ellsworth is always looking to the stars in the hopes that she will make Oceola a more sublimated artist. One even gets the sense that Hughes is punning on the word “star,” related to Mrs. Ellsworth's desires to

make Oceola a musical “star” and, thereby, a permanent testament to her patronage. But in the midst of Mrs. Ellsworth's flights of fancy, she tries to dis sever art's connection to life, both in a general aesthetic sense and for Oceola. But being grounded, Oceola does not make this mistake: “Oceola's background was too well-grounded in Mobile, and Billy Kersands' Minstrels, and the Sanctified churches where religion was a joy, to stare mystically over the top of a grand piano like white folks and imagine that Beethoven had nothing to do with life, or that Schubert's love songs were only sublimations” (114). Ultimately, Oceola realizes that even the classical music Mrs. Ellsworth forces upon her is grounded in reality and has a connection to life – an understanding Mrs. Ellsworth never achieves.

In other works as well Hughes advances his sense of Oceola's low-down art being grounded. In *Famous Negro Music Makers*, he quotes Serge Koussevitzky, who says, “Jazz comes from the soil, where all music has its beginning” (168). In the excerpt from Hughes's autobiography, *The Big Sea*, which I have quoted as the epigram to this thesis, we see that Hughes talks about the strength of black music coming from “its rooted power” (209). Although both of these works were published after *The Ways of White Folks*, it is important to recognize that Hughes carries this theme throughout not only “The Blues I'm Playing,” but also throughout the body of his works. As the short story draws to a close and Oceola claims her autonomy once and for all, Hughes writes about the music that overtakes Mrs. Ellsworth's voice: “Oceola made the bass notes throb like tomtoms deep in the earth” (“Blues” 123). Again, we are reminded of how Oceola's art is a part of the earth, and perhaps it takes on an even greater importance here – at the moment when Oceola refuses to succumb to the white normative standards. As Oceola plays the blues –

O, if I could holler

sang the blues,

Like a mountain jack,

I'd go up on de mountain

sang the blues,

And call my baby back. (123)

– Mrs. Ellsworth “rise[s] from her chair” and says, “And I [. . .] would stand looking at the stars” (123). As Mrs. Ellsworth “rises,” we see yet another upward movement through which she attempts to distance herself from Oecola's grounded jazz and blues. Further, as Stephen Tracy points out, Mrs. Ellsworth's final response “violates the true words [sic] lyric not only in spirit, but in form,” for her line “doesn't rhyme, as do the lines of the song [. . .]. Ellsworth's line is clearly de-contextualized, underseoring how foreign the tradition and the spirit are to Ellsworth” (“Blues” 18). Clearly, Hughes, through his knowledge of the blues, is able to use a deviance from the musical form to show the inherent disconnection between Mrs. Ellsworth's and Oecola's views of art. But what's more, Mrs. Ellsworth's final line echoes Du Bois's closing to “Criteria of Negro Art”:

I had a classmate once who did three beautiful things and died. One of them was a story of a folk who found fire and then went wandering in the gloom of night seeking again the stars they had once known and lost: suddenly out of blackness they looked up and there loomed the heavens; and what was it that they said? They raised a mighty cry: “It is the stars, it is the ancient stars, it is the young and everlasting stars!” (784)

The fact that Hughes closes his story by aligning Mrs. Ellsworth's voice yet again with that of the “colored near-intellectuals” speaks to the degree to which Hughes truly wanted the short story to comment upon the debates of the Harlem Renaissance (“Negro Artist” 1314). As Tracy points out, “Mrs. Ellsworth has the last word in Hughes's story,” but she does not ultimately get the

final say (“Blues” 18). Having reclaimed her voice, we know that Oceola will escape the binding grasp of Mrs. Ellsworth, instead going forth to proclaim the truth of her own artistic vision. As Hughes writes earlier in the story, “Oceola hated most artists, too, and the word *art* in French or English. If you wanted to play the piano or paint pictures or write books, go ahead! [. . .] And as for the cultured Negroes who were always saying art would break down color, art could save the race and prevent lynchings! ‘Bunk!’ said Oceola” (“Blues” 113). Oceola separates herself from Mrs. Ellsworth, and we imagine that it is her low-down idea of art – that anyone who is true to life is also true to art – that she will carry with her. And we cannot help but to think of Hughes, separating himself from people like Locke and Du Bois who believed “art could save the race” (113). Like Oceola, Hughes also declares “Bunk!” when he seeks to break the cycle of Du Boisian circular reasoning by creating art that centered on folk idioms and fulfilled his own artistic vision – without caring what white audiences thought (113). As Hughes would later say about his poetry collection, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, “My second book is what I personally desired it to be [. . . even] if the poems which it contains are low-down, jazzy, cabaret-ism, and utterly uncouth. [. . .] I have never pretended to be keeping a literary grazing pasture with food to suit all breeds of cattle” (“To the Editor” 73).

Seeking to change the staunch convictions of black intellectuals was not Hughes’s only motivation for using jazz in his poetry, however. Instead, Hughes realized that jazz stemmed from a very rich African-American musical tradition that was representative of the historical legacy of black Americans, of the beginning of their journey from Africa to their modern place in the Harlem Renaissance. In “That Sad, Happy Music Called Jazz,” one of the many articles on black music that Hughes wrote for *The Chicago Defender*, Hughes defines this tradition, asserting that “[j]azz is such happy music because it was born out of such great sadness” (216). Hughes then begins to chronicle the birth of this jazzy child of the low-down folks, describing

the precursors to jazz that were apparent in the music slaves played in Congo Square – a place where slaves were bought and sold, dehumanized and objectified before white men, but what Hughes calls “one of the saddest happy places in the world” where “many [slaves] forgot their bondage,” even if only temporarily (216). He asserts that “the rhythms of Congo Square in New Orleans became the first sad-happy rhythms destined to set the tempos of American jazz” (216). Through this portrayal of Congo Square, Hughes explains the inherent duality and oxymoronic nature of jazz, describing the manner in which, despite “all its gaiety,” it also remembers the communal traumas of captivity in Africa, the Middle Passage, and the dismal existence of slavery (216). Hughes goes on to explain that the music of New Orleans led to “the field hollers of the plantations, the work songs of the Southern roads and the Mississippi levees, the religious spirituals and jubilees” until years later, we finally arrived at the blues, the immediate precursor to jazz (216). Hughes then writes: “It is this combination of sadness and laughter that gives jazz its unique quality, that roots its deep syncopations in the human soul, that keeps it from ever being a frivolous or meaningless music or merely entertainment, no matter how much it is played for fun” (217). Through Hughes's statement, we get at the very essence of his devotion to jazz in his artistic vision. Ultimately, as Hughes shows, jazz, by its very nature, is never propaganda; it is never the politicized portrayal of solely the elite or the intellectual. Instead, it is always the pure representation of the black aesthetic, of the black legacy, necessarily rooted in the low-down folks. When Hughes draws upon jazz, he invokes this legacy and its binary nature with careful nuance. Unlike Locke and Du Bois who promote literature as propaganda, advocating only for the singular voice of the assimilated African-American success story, Hughes's agenda is multi-voiced, both happy and sad, for he, as a poet, recognizes what any musician would: the value of multiple voices, of both melody and harmony.

II. Montage of a Dream Deferred:

A Poetical and Musical Analysis

Hughes's jazz-centered artistic vision outlived the Harlem Renaissance. Many critics even claim that Hughes's 1951 book-length poem, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, represents the epitome of his jazz poetry. But the collection also emphasizes the importance of multiple voices, for the collection, in a truly Modernist way, features different perspectives and speakers who should be read as in dialogue with one another and who collectively portray the full picture of 1940s life in Harlem. John Lowney explains that “[b]y the 1940s,” Harlem “was of course no longer the center of refuge and hope associated with the New Negro Renaissance. Although still a major destination for poor migrant blacks during the Great Depression, Harlem had become better known nationally as an explosive site of urban racial conflict” (362). Yet Hughes realized that to portray this conflict fully, he could not rely upon one poetic voice solely – especially not the poetic voice that would appeal to whites. Instead, as Ya Salaam points out, *Montage* “serves as a sounding board for the articulation of people who are usually voiceless” – African Americans who are overlooked by the white majority, the lower-class blacks who are overlooked by members of their own race. Through these multiple voices, Hughes is able to provide a cross-section of postwar Harlem life – a technique that accounts for the montage of the collection's title.

Montage's multi-voiced structure reflects its jazzy structure, for just as the speakers respond to each other, so too are jazz musicians in constant musical conversation with fellow band members, collectively creating the entire experience of a jam session. In fact, Hughes even prefaced the collection with the following headnote:

In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed – jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and be-bop – this

Take it away!

Hey, pop!

Re-bop!

Mop!

20

Y-e-a-h!

“Dream Boogie,” prepares the reader for the remainder of the poetry collection because, as many critics point out, it poses a question, both rhetorically and musically, upon which the poems throughout the collection will be based: “Ain’t you heard / The boogie-woogie rumble / Of a dream deferred?” (lines 2-4). This motif is the musical theme to which the imaginary musicians will return in various improvised forms and to which the poems will return in both their thematic material and diction in various syntactical forms.

As the poem's title implies, “Dream Boogie,” draws primarily upon the form of boogie-woogie, which is “a jazz piano idiom featuring a recurring *ostinato* of rolling eighth-notes in the bass under improvised figures in the treble” (Borshuk 74). During an *ostinato*, a pianist would roll eighth notes between alternating fingers in the left hand. In terms of its structure, boogie-woogie is one of the earliest forms of jazz – a link between ragtime (which is closely related to the blues) and bebop. Unlike boogie-woogie, bebop is a more Modernist form of jazz, characterized by dissonant chord structures and the singing of bebop syllables, sometimes referred to as “scatting jazz.” Hughes uses bebop syllables such as “*Oop-pop-a-da! / Skee! Daddle-de-do! / Be-bop!*” in the poem “Children's Rhymes” (lines 25-27) and “*De-daddle-dy! / De-dop!*” in “What? So Soon!” (lines 10-11). Within the first stanza of “Dream Boogie,” Hughes establishes the characteristic rhythm of boogie-woogie. The syllable counts for lines one through four are five, three, seven, and five, respectively. However, since boogie-woogie is written in measures that adhere to a 4/4 time signature, the varying syllable count forces the lines of poetry to be read in syncopated rhythm so as to fill the entire four beats of the musical

measure that each line of poetry more or less represents. Adopting Tracy's method of analyzing the beats per measure and hypothetical chord structure of "The Weary Blues," I have created an approximate rhythmic dictation of "Dream Boogie":⁴

The image shows a rhythmic dictation of the poem "Dream Boogie" by Langston Hughes. It consists of six staves of music in a 4/4 time signature, with lyrics written below the notes. The lyrics are: "Good Morn ing Dad dy' Aint you heard The Boo die-woo zie rum No Of a dream de ferred Lis ten close ly You! hear their feet Hear ing out and hear ing out a You think it's a hap py beat? Lis ten as it close ly Aint you heard Some thing a get north like a What did I say Sure Im na ppy Take it a way Hey Pop! Re Pop! Mop Yeah!"

Although Hughes never studied music formally, being a jazz connoisseur allowed him to give his jazz poems an inherent jazzy rhythm and lyrical quality that even Hughes himself could not have explained musically. In a recording of Hughes reading "Dream Boogie," he does not adhere to a musical meter or to musical rhythms as a jazz musician would (Hughes, "Dream"). Nevertheless, his poem actually has the potential to do both, which my rhythmic dictation demonstrates, because Hughes internalized the qualities of jazz. For example, we see that each stanza of the poem equals four 4/4 measures of music, showing that "Dream Boogie" can be read

⁴ I am grateful to Drs. Lisa Oberlander, Ronald Sherrod, and Carmen Skaggs for helping me put "Dream Boogie" into rhythmic dictation.

with a strict musical meter. The poem also relies upon the boogie-woogie rhythm throughout. By translating Hughes's poetic jazz into musical jazz, we can, in a sense, decipher his methodology to see just how expertly Hughes did the opposite, translated the musical jazz he heard into poetic jazz on the page.

While the majority of the stressed syllables in "Dream Boogie" fall on the strongest beats within the measures, beats one and three, the unstressed syllables are not given equal rhythmic value as the stressed syllables. In terms of poetics, stressed and unstressed syllables receive a different accented emphasis, but not different length values. Yet by building the boogie-woogie rhythm into the poem, Hughes is able to stray from this poetic convention to capture the rhythmic qualities that are characteristic of boogie-woogie. Throughout the rhythmic dictation, we see the most basic boogie-woogie rhythm recurring – a passage of repeated dotted-eighth sixteenths, as in line three. Not coincidentally, Hughes establishes this boogie-woogie rhythm in a line of the poem that refers to boogie-woogie explicitly. We can then see Hughes return to the dotted-eighth sixteenth rhythm throughout the poem, such as in line eight, ten, and twelve, for example. For a pianist, the boogie-woogie rhythm would serve as the left-hand *ostinato*, which would act as the chordal foundation for improvisations made by the right hand. Then with the poem's rhythm established, Hughes is able to "'improvise' on that rhythm" with the "disruptive variations that follow" (Borshuk 79). For example, the indented and italicized lines eight, nine, and fourteen stray from the rhythm as established in the first stanza.

The rhyme scheme of "Dream Boogie" also aids in poetically creating the musical qualities of boogie-woogie. In the first stanza, Hughes establishes an ABCB rhyme scheme with the words "daddy," "heard," "rumble," and "deferred" (lines 1-4). The second stanza relies upon the same rhyme scheme initially with the ABC portion assigned in lines one through three also appearing in lines five through seven. However, by ending the seventh line with a dash, Hughes

extends the boogie-woogie rhythm established in the first stanza (musically reflected by the half rest in the poem's rhythmic dictation), paving the way for the change in rhyme scheme, as we see it in the indented lines, eight and nine. Musically speaking, lines eight and nine serve as a jazz break, "a very brief syncopated interlude, usually of two to four bars, between musical phrases—often improvised in unwritten jazz" (Hughes, *First* 49). Just as a jazz break comes between musical phrases, Hughes places his poetic jazz break between stanzas. Due to the jazz break, the rhyme scheme of stanza two becomes ABCDB, but the poetic improvisation can only be recognized because the rhyme scheme established in the first stanza has been altered.

The third stanza strays slightly both from the rhyme scheme established in the first stanza and its altered form in the second stanza. With the ABC portion of the rhyme scheme established in lines ten through twelve, the word "deferred" is expected to end line thirteen to keep the ABCB rhyme scheme. However, Hughes employs yet another jazz break in line fourteen, but this time never returns to the anticipated B portion of the rhyme scheme. Musically speaking, Hughes has posed a musical question that he leaves unresolved, and rather than returning to the boogie-woogie rhythms already established, Hughes turns to the poetic equivalent of a musical improvisation in stanza four and ends the poem with bebop syllables.

As the poems progress, the tension that builds from the unanswered question of "Dream Boogie" only builds, and bebop plays a very pivotal role in Hughes showing the consequences of social injustice – of the African-American dream continuing to be deferred. As John Lowney explains of *Montage*, there is an inherent connection between "bebop's dissonance and Harlem's growing frustration" (370). Lowney paraphrases Eric Lott, who explains that "bebop was [. . .] aggressively modernist in a way that earlier forms of African American music had not been. Not only was its 'relationship to earlier styles one of calculated hostility,' its social position apart from both the black and middle class and any white mainstream consensus 'gave aesthetic self-

assertion political force and value” (365). Hughes echoed this underlying message of bebop when he wrote:

That is where Bop comes from – out of them dark days we have seen. That is why Be-bop is so mad, wild, frantie, crazy. And not to be dug unless you have seen dark days, too. That's why folks who ain't suffered much cannot play Bop, and do not understand it. They think it's nonsense—like you. They think it's just crazy crazy. They do not know it is also MAD crazy, SAD crazy, FRANTIC WILD CRAZY—beat right out of some bloody black head! That's what Bop is.
(qtd. in Lowney 368).

Thus, we can see how Hughes's use of bebop is a means of remaining true to his artistic vision – to challenge the racial mountain.

Further, bebop itself becomes one of the voices in the dialogic structure of *Montage*, articulating unspeakable communal traumas. Indeed, whenever bebop syllables appear in the collection, at first glance, they are seemingly unrelated to the text at hand. However, it soon becomes apparent that the bebop syllables take the place of ideas that cannot be fully expressed in standard words, just as jazz musicians can portray inexpressible emotional burdens through music. Consider “Children's Rhymes,” for example, in which disillusioning statements about the reality of being black in 1940s America – “*I know I can't / be President*” (lines 8-9) and “*We knows everybody / ain't free*” (lines 15-16) and

What's written down

for white folks

ain't for us a-tall:

“Liberty And Justice—

Huh—For All.” (lines 20-24)

– are followed by a string of bebop syllables:

Oop-pop-a-da!

Skee! Daddle-de-do!

Be-bop!

Salt' peanuts!

De-dop! (lines 25-29).

In “Children's Rhymes.” Hughes seems to exhaust the extent to which he could portray the dark irony that lies beneath the African-American experience. Even the very idea that the poem will focus on children's rhymes and the time of childhood as an idyllic experience, as the title suggests, is undercut by the fact that African-American children are reminded from an early age of the limitations that are imposed upon them by the color of their skin. Indeed, by the end of the poem, it seems that Hughes has few coping mechanisms other than those of the jazz musician, so he turns to bebop syllables, seemingly as meaningless as “peanuts” (line 28), but actually a portrayal of the “MAD crazy, SAD crazy, FRANTIC WILD CRAZY” that would deny any child freedom because of melanin (Hughes qtd. in Lowney 368).

In a manner similar to his repeated use of bebop syllables, Hughes calls upon the elements of boogie-woogie established in “Dream Boogie” – including, as Lowney points out, “the boogie-woogie rhythm” – in five other boogie-woogie poems before *Montage* ends (371). At times, the diction of Hughes's boogie-woogie poems blatantly describes the characteristics of boogie-woogie music. For example, in the first stanza of “Easy Boogie,” Hughes writes:

Down in the bass

That steady beat

Walking walking walking

Like marching feet. (lines 1-4)

Hughes employs yet again the boogie-woogie rhythm of dotted-eighth sixteenths in the third line. Note how “Walking walking walking” of line 3 has the same rhythm as “boogie-woogie rumble” of line 3 in “Dream Boogie,” which also uses the dotted-eighth sixteenth note rhythm. Further, all four of the lines quoted above describe an *ostinato*, the left-hand bass part that a jazz pianist would employ in a boogie-woogie piece (Hughes, *First* 27). Later in the poem, Hughes writes, “Riffs, smears, breaks” (line 9). Not only does the line serve as a poetic example of a jazz break – indented further than the other stanzas, as the jazz breaks were in “Dream Boogie” as well – but it also literally states the musical qualities that a jazz break would have.

At other times, Hughes returns to the elements of boogie-woogie in ways that are not so explicit, instead, relying upon poetic improvisation by using diction from the preceding boogie-woogie poem(s), a technique Meta Du Ewa Jones classifies as “the poetic equivalent of a musical riff” (81). In this way, the boogie-woogie poems serve as an intertextual call and response from one boogie-woogie poem to the next (Borshuk 86). In “Easy Boogie,” Hughes writes, “Hey, Lawdy, Mama / Do you hear what I said?” as a manner of riffing upon the rhetorical question posed to the daddy of “Dream Boogie,” this time referring to the mother instead (lines 10-11). In “Boogie: 1 a.m.,” however, Hughes directly calls upon the textual melodic structure established by the rhetorical questioning of the daddy in “Dream Boogie” by saying: “Good evening, daddy! / I know you've heard” (lines 1-2). By the time we reach “Boogie: 1 a.m.,” the perception of the musical question presented in “Dream Boogie” has changed, for the speaker of “Boogie: 1 a.m.” is certain that African-Americans have now “heard / [t]he boogie-woogie rumble / [o]f a dream deferred” (“Dream Boogie” lines 2-4). With the appearance of *Montage's* final boogie-woogie poem, “Dream Boogie: Variation,” African-Americans realize they are a “few minutes

late / [f]or the Freedom Train” (lines 11-12). By this point, Hughes has prepared readers for the appearance of what is arguably the most well-known poem in *Montage*, “Harlem,” which alters the course of the poetic montage and the musical jam session.

In “Harlem,” Hughes poses his famous rhetorical question: “What happens to a dream deferred?” (line 1). But because the poem is often canonized without its original context within *Montage*, most readers do not realize that this question comes as a result of the original rhetorical question posed in “Dream Boogie.” Ultimately, the question only begets more questions:

Does it dry up
 like a raisin in the sun?
 Or fester like a sore—
 And then run?
 Does it stink like rotten meat?
 Or crust and sugar over—
 like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
 like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (lines 2-11)

Of course, the raisin, the meat, and the syrupy sweet all provide an image of decay, and the heavy load is described as nothing less than burdensome. In each of these images, the African-American must succumb silently to the effects of his dream being deferred, hearkening back to the veneration of passivity in poems from *The New Negro*. Yet Hughes predicts that what African Americans have tried to repress has manifested itself, instead, in tension that can no

longer be sublimated – an idea that is reflected in the poem's repeated use of questions. Hughes introduces one tension-building inquiry after another, while never answering any of them. The tension reaches its climax in the poem's final question, when Hughes asks, “*Or does it explode?*” (line 11). The poem's last query presents an entirely different effect of the deferred African-American dream, one that brings with it all the devastating impacts of Freud's theories of the return of the repressed – that what has been shoved from the collective African-American psyche in an act of self-preservation will invariably manifest itself in some other form. In a community like 1940s Harlem, “marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections,” Hughes predicts that the effects of prolonged repression could be devastating (*Montage* 387).

Musically speaking, through improvisation that has taken place throughout the jam session, the original musical question has become more complex, as have the questions regarding the deferral of the African-American dream throughout black American history. Many critics point out that by the time *Montage* ends, rather than resolving the tension created by the initial rhetorical question, the same question posed in “Dream Boogie” ends *Montage*. Hughes writes in “Island,” the collection's final poem: “Good morning, daddy! / Ain't you heard?” – a verbatim repetition of the collection's opening lines (lines 11-12). Ultimately, Hughes has brought us full circle. In a musical sense, we could say that by the time the jam session ends, the musicians have not resolved the dissonance of suspended jazz chords – an atonal technique common in Modernist forms of jazz, such as bebop. Similarly, the black community has found no resolution to the original question Hughes poses regarding the deferral of the African-American dream.

While all of the poems in *Montage* do not have an obvious musical undertone, each poem plays an integral part in completing both the artistic montage and the musical jam session of the collection. Contributing to the recurring motif of the deferred African-American dream, many of

the poems portray African-Americans facing the deferral of their dream on a personal level.

Perhaps the strongest example of this is the famous poem, "Theme for English B," in which the first-person speaker, often thought of as Hughes himself, is a black student in the class of a white English professor. The student speaks of the deferred African-American dream in terms of the racial discrimination he faces. Hughes writes:

So will my page be colored that I write?
 Being me, it will not be white.
 But it will be
 a part of you, instructor.
 You are white—
 yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
 That's American.
 Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
 Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
 But we are, that's true!
 As I learn from you,
 I guess you learn from me—
 although you're older—and white—
 and somewhat more free. (lines 27-40)

In the idea of the speaker and the professor both being a part of each other, we think of the transcendental oversoul and are reminded of the Whitmanesque speaker of Hughes's earlier poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "I, Too." Yet there is a more subversive message that lies just beneath the surface of the words in "Theme for English B" than existed in his earlier poems, and it seems as though Hughes may even be mocking his earlier idealistic Whitmanesque

portrayals of African-American reality, which he has since replaced with a more cynical, less assimilated outlook.

In fact, the poem can also be read as a critique of the American melting pot. As Jemie says, in the case of both the speaker and the professor, “neither group relishes the idea” that their “experiences interpenetrate, are defined one by the other” (75). Yet as Lowney points out, even though their experiences overlap,

the “writer” of this “theme” cannot fully identify himself with the intellectual worldview of his instructor” and ironically, “the formal discourse of this composition distances him from Harlem as well [. . .]. While the poem establishes a “common ground” between student and instructor in the music of “Bessie, bop, or Bach,” its subtle conclusion underscores how the interdependency of ‘we two’ is hardly based on social equality. (377)

Indeed, as Lowney goes on to say, “the accentuation of ‘I guess’ and ‘somewhat more free’ is too ironic to ignore” (377). Ultimately, Hughes shows the flaws of an assimilationist philosophy, contesting the ideologies of Locke whose approval of conflating Anglo forms with African-American poetic content aligns with the problematic idea of the melting pot. Further, Hughes proves, yet again, that Du Boisian propaganda is not an answer to the race problem. Instead, he allows the voice of this student, a realistic portrayal of the life of a black student in white academe, to resonate amongst other voices in *Montage*, portraying the African-American existence without propaganda.

Through these personal portrayals, Hughes is able to transform the abstract concept of racial injustice into tangible mistreatment that affects African-Americans in very real, personal ways. Musically speaking, all of these portrayals complete the jam session by serving as textual improvisation upon the main musical theme, as presented in “Dream Boogie” – the deferred

African-American dream. Just as the artistic montage is incomplete without all the seemingly unrelated pictures, and the jam session is incomplete without each of the musical movements, so is Hughes's poetic *Montage* incomplete without both abstract and personal portrayals of the deferred African-American dream. Similarly, the merging of the personal and the abstract contribute to Hughes's sense of vocal multiplicity.

Hughes's involvement in poetry-to-jazz readings also reflects his multi-voiced artistic vision; that is, he valued jazz's musical voice as much as he valued its poetic voice. Poetry-to-jazz readings allowed him to bring the two voices together – putting them in dialogue with one another – as he read his poetry to the accompaniment of jazz musicians. But his readings also elucidate how Hughes viewed the relationship between jazz as music and jazz as poetry. In a compilation entitled “Dream Montage,” Hughes reads four of *Montage's* final poems, “Good Morning,” “Harlem,” “Same in Blues,” and “Comment on Curb,” to the accompaniment of Leonard Feather and Charles Mingus.⁵ Analyzing the correlations between the poems, Hughes's reading, and the musicians' performance helps to shed light on the way in which Hughes viewed the relationship between his spoken-word poetry and musical jazz.

“Dream Montage” begins with Hughes reading “Good Morning.” The percussion enters, followed by the double bass, which plays the bass line that serves as the foundation for the main musical theme. Nine seconds into the piece, the main musical theme, comprised of smooth, swung jazz, begins when Hughes says the word “colored,” musically underscoring the importance of the poems' racial message (line 4). The main theme continues and is nearly unaltered until Hughes changes his verbal rhythm when he reads the indented lines, “wondering / wide-eyed / dreaming” (lines 18-20). At this point, the musical accompaniment gradually moves away from the main theme throughout the remainder of the poem and completely stops by the

⁵ See Appendix I for the complete text of the poems.

time Hughes says “gate,” musically underseoring the meaning of “bars / at each gate” (lines 24-25).

As Hughes begins his reading of “Harlem,” the musical accompaniment has completely abandoned the main musical theme, posing a musical question to imitate Hughes’s rhetorical question, “What happens to a dream deferred?” (line 1). Just as Hughes builds upon that rhetorical question with additional ones, so do the musicians build upon the musical question they just presented. The musicians riff and vary the musical structure in accordance with the nature of the questions Hughes poses. After the question, “Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?,” the pianist releases the damper pedal, altering the smooth, resonant nature of the music that has characterized the majority of the piano part since the poem’s first rhetorical question; the pianist then augments the rhythm slightly before returning to the original music at hand (lines 2-3). As Hughes says, “And then run?,” the piano player slightly varies the melodic line with an improvised run that moves toward the treble (line 5). After posing the question, “Does it stink like rotten meat?,” the lower brass improvises a glissando, which is a synesthetic representation of the smell of “rotten meat” (line 6). When Hughes asks the question, “Or crust and sugar over — / like a syrupy sweet?,” the woodwind plays an improvised segment over the other musical instrumentation (lines 7-8). Moving toward the lines, “Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load,” the musical accompaniment builds tension through the use of dissonant chord structures, first with the piano and then with the other instruments as well (lines 9-10). The tension intensifies until the music calls for some type of release. Rather than resolving the musical tension by returning to the tonic chord, the musicians end the reading of “Harlem” with an explosion of brass, improvisation by the percussionist, and dissonant tone clusters on the piano, all of which coincides with Hughes asking, “*Or does it explode?*” (line 11). In this way, the musical

accompaniment predicts the impending explosion that will come about if the tension of the deferred African-American dream is left unresolved.

Moving into the poem, “Same in Blues,” the musical accompaniment returns to the main theme established in “Good Morning.” In the indented, italicized riffs that refer to “Harlem,” the musical structure again parallels Hughes’s poetic language. When the idea of “traveling” is mentioned, the saxophone improvises a melodic structure that travels away from the established melody (line 6). After Hughes says, “my lovin’ days is through,” and presents the idea that there is “[a] *certain / amount of impotence in a dream deferred,*” the music stops briefly. It is not until Hughes states, “*There’s liable / to be confusion / in a dream deferred,*” that the music resumes (“Same in Blues” lines 18-21, 26-28). At this point, the music itself seems, in a way, confused and does not return to the main theme until Hughes moves toward the final poem, “Comment on Curb.” The track ends with a suspended jazz chord and Hughes’s repetition of the word “Harlem” – elongated with each repetition to serve as rhythmic augmentation and also to emphasize the increasingly problematic nature of the deferred African-American dream (“Comment” line 7). Just as Hughes’s poetic jam session in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* ends in an unresolved manner, so too do the musicians in Hughes’s poetry-to-jazz reading leave the suspended jazz chords unresolved, uniting the poetry on the page with the spoken word in both thematic intent and jazzy qualities. With questions begetting more questions, tension begetting more tension, Hughes reminds us that although art can be transcendent, it cannot solve the race problem – that even beneath happy jazz there is still a sad voice in Harlem asking, “What happens to a dream deferred?,” another voice responding, “Ain’t you heard?”

Epilogue

Unlike Locke and Du Bois who spoke in a singular voice, only portraying the assimilated and the intellectual, Hughes embraced vocal multiplicity. His artistic vision focused on lower-class blacks who shared a common characteristic: they were not afraid to be themselves. But this commonality did not keep Hughes from realizing their complexity – a complexity that required Hughes to write in multiple voices even when he portrayed a single group of people. Hughes could write in dialect when he captured the voice of the mother who tells her son, “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair” (“Mother” line 2). Yet he could also use standard English when he represented the voice of the poor and struggling college student in “Theme for English B,” and of course, he could portray the plight of the lower class through their own folk idioms.

What Hughes accomplished through his multi-voiced artistic vision is exactly what Zadie Smith, the award-winning Jamaican-English novelist and modern-day public intellectual, had in mind when she wrote “Speaking in Tongues,” in which she contests the idea that “[v]oices are meant to be unchanging and similar” (par. 4). Instead, she says, “In our artists we look for the many-colored voice, the multiple sensibility” and the ability to “speak simultaneous truths” (par. 26, 29). Her essay is, in essence, an analysis of Barack Obama’s success with the American people, which she attributes to his vocal multiplicity, his refusal to succumb to the erroneous “concept of a unified black voice” (24). This concept, she explains, “has filtered down [. . .] into the black community at all levels, settling itself in that impossible injunction ‘keep it real,’ the original intention of which was unification” (24). So, too, do we see that when Locke and Du Bois called for a “unified black voice,” they also longed for “unification,” not only amongst blacks, but between blacks and whites as well (24). But echoing what Hughes said nearly a century earlier, Smith goes on to point out that “unify[ing] the concept of Blackness in order to strengthen it” only “confined and restricted it” (24). In the case of Locke and Du Bois, they

“confined and restricted” black art in a way that actually reiterated white standards and gave whites a fabricated view of the black experience, which could only lead to fleeting and false unification, if it led to it at all (24). Yet Hughes recognized and sought to avoid the risks associated with a “unified black voice” when he centered his artistic vision on jazz, portraying the low-down folks through their own multi-voiced musical creation, telling the story of both their happiness and their sadness (24). The lower classes may not have spoken with voices that whites admired, but for Hughes, “speak[ing] simultaneous truths” was more important than gaining false unification: his unassimilated, complex truths provided the only hope of blacks being accepted for themselves – maybe not in his lifetime, but perhaps in the future (29). Until then, Hughes would continue to believe in “the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues,” and he would continue to say, “We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves” (“Negro Artist” 1314).

Appendix I

“Dream Montage”

“Good Morning”

Good morning, daddy!
 I was born here, he said,
 watched Harlem grow
 until colored folks spread
 from river to river
 across the middle of Manhattan
 out of Penn Station
 dark tenth of a nation,
 planes from Puerto Rico,
 and holds of boats, chico,
 up from Cuba Haiti Jamaica,
 in buses marked New York
 from Georgia Florida Louisiana Arkansas
 to Harlem Brooklyn the Bronx
 but most of all to Harlem
 dusky sash across Manhattan
 I've seen them come dark
 wondering
 wide-eyed
 dreaming
 out of Penn Station—
 but the trains are late.
 The gates are open—
 Yet there're bars
 at each gate.

“Harlem”

What happens to a dream deferred?
 Does it dry up
 like a raisin in the sun?
 Or fester like a sore—
 And then run?
 Does it stink like rotten meat?
 Or crust and sugar over—
 like a syrupy sweet?

 Maybe it just sags
 like a heavy load.

 Or does it explode?

“Same in Blues”

I said to my baby,
 Baby, take it slow.
 I can't, she said, I can't!
 I got to go!

*There's a certain
 amount of traveling
 in a dream deferred.*

Lulu said to Leonard
 I want a diamond ring.
 Leonard said to Lulu,
 You won't get a dadblame thing!

*A certain
 amount of nothing
 in a dream deferred.*

Daddy, daddy, daddy,
 All I want is you.
 You can have me, baby—
 but my lovin' days is through.

*A certain
 amount of impotence
 in a dream deferred.*

Three parties
 On my party line—
 But that third party,
 Lord, ain't mine!

*There's liable
 to be confusion
 in a dream deferred.*

From river to river,
 Uptown and down,
 There's liable to be confusion
 when a dream gets kicked around.

“Comment on Curb”

You talk like
they don't kick
dreams around
downtown.

*I expect they do—
But I'm talking about
Harlem to you!*

*Harlem,
Harlem,
Harlem.*

Works Cited

- Borshuk, Michael. *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006.
- Cullen, Countee. "Tablcau." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Macmillan, 1925. 130.
- Dickinson, Donald C. *A Bio-bibliography of Langston Hughes*. 2nd ed. Hamden: Archon, 1972.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. "Criteria of Negro Art." 1926. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd ed. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: Norton, 2004. 777-84.
- . "Truth and Beauty." 1922. Vol. 1 of *The Harlem Renaissance: 1920-1940*. Ed. Cary D. Wintz. New York: Garland, 1996. 307-08. 7 vols.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. "Harlem Renaissance: 1919-1940." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd ed. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: Norton, 2004. 984-93.
- Hughes, Langston. "Art and Integrity." 1945. *Langston Hughes and The Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics and Culture*. Ed. Christopher C. DeSantis. Urbana: Illinois UP, 1995. 200-202.
- . *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*. New York: Knopf, 1961.
- . *The Big Sea*. 1940. New York: Hill and Wang, 1968.
- . "The Blues I'm Playing." *The Ways of White Folks*. 1933. New York: Vintage, 1962. 99-123.
- . "Danse Africaine." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. New York: Vintage, 1994. 28.
- . "Dream Boogie." 1959. *The Voice of the Poet: Langston Hughes*. Random, 2000.

- . "To the Editor of *The Crisis*." 28 July 1928. Vol. 4. of *The Harlem Renaissance: 1920-1940*. Ed. Cary D. Wintz. New York: Garland, 1996. 73. 7 vols.
- . *Famous Negro Music Makers*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1955.
- . *The First Book of Jazz*. New Jersey: Ecco, 1982.
- . "I, Too." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Macmillan, 1925. 145.
- . "Jazz: Its Yesterday, Today, and Its Potential Tomorrow." 1956. *Langston Hughes and The Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics and Culture*. Ed. Christopher C. DeSantis. Urbana: Illinois UP, 1995. 212-214.
- . "Jazzonia." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Macmillan, 1925. 226.
- . *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. 1951. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. New York: Vintage, 1994. 387-429.
- . "Mother to Son." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. New York: Vintage, 1994. 30.
- . "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd ed. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: Norton, 2004. 1311-14.
- . "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Macmillan, 1925. 141.
- . "Slave on the Block." *The Ways of White Folks*. 1933. New York: Vintage, 1962. 19-31.
- . "That Sad, Happy Music Called Jazz." 1959. *Langston Hughes and The Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics and Culture*. Ed. Christopher C. DeSantis. Urbana: Illinois UP, 1995. 216-17.

- , "The Weary Blues." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. NewVintage, 1994. 50.
- , Leonard Feather, and Charles Mingus. "Dream Montage: Tell Me: Good Morning; Harlem; Same In Blues; Comment on Curb." *Our Souls Have Grown Deep Like the Rivers*. Los Angeles, 2000.
- Jemic, Onwuchekwa. *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York: Columbia UP, 1976.
- Johnson, James Weldon. "The Creation: A Negro Sermon." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Macmillan, 1925. 138-41.
- Jones, Meta Du Ewa. "Jazz Prosodies: Orality and Textuality." *Callaloo* 25.1 (2002): 66-91.
- Lewis, David Levering. *W. E. B. Du Bois, 1868-1919: Biography of a Race*. New York: Henry Holt, 1993.
- . *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- Locke, Alain. "The Negro Spirituals." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Macmillan, 1925. 199-210.
- . "The New Negro." 1925. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd ed. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: Norton, 2004. 984-93.
- Lowney, John. "Langston Hughes and the 'Nonsense' of Bebop." *American Literature* 72.2 (2000): 357-85.
- McKay, Claude. "White Houses." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Macmillan, 1925. 134.
- Miller, R. Baxter. "Langston Hughes, 1902-1967: A Brief Biography." *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*. Ed. Steven C. Tracy. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.

- Rampersad, Arnold. Introduction. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. 1925. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Macmillan, 1992.
- . Vol. 1 of *The Life of Langston Hughes*. 2nd ed. 2 vols. New York: Oxford UP, 2002.
- . Vol. 2 of *The Life of Langston Hughes*. 2 vols. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Rasula, Jed. "Jazz and American modernism." *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*. Ed. Walter Kalaidjian. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 157-76.
- Rogers, J. A. "Jazz at Home." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Macmillan, 1925. 216-24.
- Salaam, Kalamu Ya. "Langston Hughes: A Poet Supreme." *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*. Ed. Joanne V. Gabbin. Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 1999. 17-24.
- Smethurst, James. "Lyric stars: Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes." *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. George Hutchinson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 112-25.
- Smith, Zadie. "Speaking in Tongues." *The New York Review of Books* 56.3 (2009): 38 pars. 2 April 2009 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22334>>.
- Tracy, Steven C. "Blues to Live By: Langston Hughes's 'The Blues I'm Playing.'" *The Langston Hughes Review* 12.1 (1993): 12-18.
- . "To the Tune of Those Weary Blues." *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 69-93.
- Washington, Booker T. *Up from Slavery*. 1901. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd ed. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: Norton, 2004. 572-602.
- Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself." *Leaves of Grass: First and "Death-Bed" Editions*. Ed. Karen Karbiener. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004. 190-251.

