

LANGSTON HUGHES'S EXPERIMENTAL AND REVOLUTIONARY
THEATRE: "WATER DRAWN FROM THE WELL OF THE
PEOPLE" AND "GIVEN BACK TO THEM IN A CUP OF BEAUTY"

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As a war correspondent covering the Spanish Civil War in 1937, Langston Hughes developed a strong affinity with the idea of art for the people. At that time, Hughes had the opportunity to meet writers who shared this affinity from all over the world including the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, the Mexican writer Octavio Paz, and Spanish poets such as Rafael Alberti. In one report from Spain to newspapers in the United States, Hughes quotes Alberti, who served as spokesperson for the Alianza of Spanish Writers. These writers established a sort of manifesto defining the purpose of art:

What the members of the Alianza want to do is make art life, and life art, *with no gulf between the artists and the people*. After all, as [Federico García] Lorca said, "The poem, the song, the picture is only water drawn from the well of the people, and it should be given back to them in a cup of beauty *so that they may drink—and in drinking, understand themselves*." Now our art is at the service of the Republic to help win the war, since we do not want the books we write to be burned in public squares by Fascists, or blown into bits on library shelves by bombs, or censored until all their meaning is drained away. That is why we artists help to hold Madrid against Franco.¹

Alberti's and García Lorca's words summarize what art, and specifically theatre, meant to Hughes.² Hughes's concept of theatre was inextricably

¹ Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1986), 387. Emphasis mine.

² At the time of his stay in Spain, Hughes was translating the *Gypsy Ballads*, by Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca, who was assassinated by Franco's troops in 1936. Hughes was also familiar with Lorca's plays such as *Blood Wedding*. Many similarities can be found between Hughes's and Lorca's lives and works. Both of them were poets and playwrights, and researched and recuperated the folklore of their respec-

linked to his concern for social justice and racial issues in regard to the African American community and other oppressed peoples around the world. Parallel to his concern for social justice was Hughes's ceaseless experimenting with new theatrical forms that could accommodate his social endeavor in reaching the common people and helping them fulfill their needs and hopes. Both his concern for social and racial issues and his incessant experimentation with new theatrical styles situates Hughes as a revolutionary artist, forerunner of the Black Theatre Movement in the 1960s.

Only recently has Hughes's theatrical work begun to receive the same kind of critical analysis accorded his better-known poetry for its revolutionary nature in dealing with social and racial issues. In 1979, Amiri Baraka had already suggested that Hughes's work should be examined again so that he could be reintroduced "as a national resource" in order to find out "how deep and important [he] is."³ In 1987, Arnold Rampersad in his article "Future Scholarly Projects on Langston Hughes," urged scholars to continue conducting projects on many different aspects and works by Hughes, which had not yet been carefully examined; among them, Rampersad mentioned Hughes's "Marxism, or international radical socialism, because Hughes was so far to the left politically for a good part of his life, and was so brilliant and prolific as a propagandist for the far left,⁴ that his Marxism should be seen separately

tive communities. Hughes incorporated African American music in most of his plays and Lorca recuperated traditional songs that he used to play at the piano with a famous actress and singer of his time, La Argentinita. Both founded theatre groups to take theatre to the people—Lorca, with his group "La Barraca," took plays to the Spanish people living in villages; Hughes founded three theatre groups in various black neighborhoods as will be examined later.

³ Amiri Baraka, "Restaging Langston Hughes's *Scottsboro Limited*: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 10 (July/August 1979): 66-67. Baraka refers specifically to *Scottsboro Limited* (1932), which he was interested in staging at the time, asserting that his approach would be "to align *Scottsboro* with contemporary issues of police brutality, with the question of framing blacks for crimes they have not committed," concluding that the play could serve as a "weapon" (68, 67). Baraka also calls attention to the two different African American traditions that run parallel, one revolutionary and another one of capitulation, noting that it is crucial to differentiate both trends and asserting that Hughes belongs to the first one (69).

⁴ Hughes defined himself as a propaganda writer: "I am . . . primarily a . . . propaganda writer; my main material is the race problem." Quoted in Susan Duffy, ed., *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes* (Carbondale: Southern University Press, 2000), 4.

from, for example, his anticolonialism, which is also a form of radicalism."⁵ Furthermore, both scholars Baraka and Rampersad have recognized the need to reprint Hughes's plays, especially the ones written in the 1930s, such as *Don't You Want to Be Free?*,⁶ and it was just recently that four of Hughes's agit-prop plays—*Scottsboro Limited*, *Harvest*, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, and *The Organizer*—were reprinted with a thoughtful introduction and analysis by Susan Duffy.⁷ The critical study *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist in the Protest Tradition* by Joseph McLaren examines the plays by Hughes written between 1921 and 1943, covering a wide range of his political plays and analyzes them individually in depth.⁸ Finally, volume 5 of Hughes's *Collected Works*, edited by Leslie Sanders, focuses on the plays written by Hughes before 1942.⁹

Each of these studies highlights the political and social significance of Langston Hughes's theatrical work. The analysis conducted in Duffy's and McLaren's more recent critical works—as pointed out by Baraka and indirectly by Rampersad—demonstrates that Hughes's plays were actually revolutionary, having taken their main issues and content from the African American tradition and from the black community's experience and social problems. Breaking with inherited stereotypes about blacks, Hughes defended the need to create an authentic black theatre away from white-imposed models and experimented with new theatrical forms and styles that would set the basis for the African American revolutionary theatre of the 1960s.

When examining Hughes's theatre work, it is important to keep in mind the main social issues confronting the United States. Hughes began to write plays in the 1920s, the era now known as the Harlem Renaissance, one of the most prolific periods in the African American artistic tradition, and a time when Harlem had become the meeting place for a diverse black population—not only blacks emigrating from the rural South, but also from the Caribbean and various African countries. It was

⁵ Arnold Rampersad, "Future Scholarly Projects on Langston Hughes," *Black American Literature Forum*, 21, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 308.

⁶ Rampersad, "Future Scholarly Projects": 311.

⁷ Duffy, ed., *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes*.

⁸ Joseph McLaren, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist in the Protest Tradition, 1921-1943* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997).

⁹ Leslie Sanders, ed., *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 5, *The Plays to 1942: Mulatto to The Sun Do Move* (Columbia, MI: The University of Missouri Press, 2002), 575.

also a time of black nationalism, led by Marcus Garvey, and, according to Henry L. Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, a period in which “*black artists laid the foundation for the representation of their people in the modern world*, with a complexity, and a self-knowledge that have proven durable even as the African American condition changed with the unfolding of the twentieth century.”¹⁰ However, the creation of Harlem as the dwelling place of *exotic culture* as perceived by the white population was, according to Nathan Irvin Huggins,

as much a service to white need as it was to black. So essential [had] been the Negro personality to the white American psyche that black theatrical masks had become, by the twentieth century, a standard way for whites to explore dimensions of themselves that seemed impossible through their own *personae*. The blackface minstrel show stylized a Negro character type that black men used to serve as a passport through white America. *Yet, the mask demeaned them while it hid them.*¹¹

Huggins’s statement poses a dilemma the African American artist had to face at the time of the Harlem Renaissance: either create a commercial art addressed to white audiences, imitating their models and, consequently, perpetuating the black stereotypes created by whites; or experiment with new artistic forms that incorporated their own experiences and tradition as African Americans and addressed mainly black audiences.

In order to understand the specific circumstances faced by African American artists during the Harlem Renaissance regarding the perpetuation and/or destruction of old stereotypes based on the expectations of the Euro-American population, it is essential to understand how black stereotypes originated and were preserved throughout history. In “One Hundred Years of Negro Entertainment,” Allan Morrison recalls that it was black slaves who provided the music in the plantations to entertain their masters, and this servant-master relationship of black performers to white audiences continued for many years in many different forms. Moreover, blacks had been caricatured as irresponsible banjo-

¹⁰ Henry L. Gates Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1997), 936. Emphasis mine.

¹¹ Nathan I. Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 11. Emphasis mine.

playing and dancing types lacking depth and dignity. Later, Euro-Americans demanded that African Americans use an idiom that was racially degrading.¹² In the North American tradition, then, African American entertainers “had been forced to sell [their] wares to prejudiced audiences, to use a racial idiom and, even more damaging psychologically, to be [racial buffoons] rather than [human beings].”¹³ This was the tremendously heavy legacy full of preconceived ideas and assumed roles that blacks were carrying upon their shoulders, which inevitably made them face a terrible dilemma. How could artists be themselves when what was required from them was a shallow mask that satisfied white preconceptions of their behavior and persona? On the other hand, as artists began to offer new and more accurate images of black people, away from old stereotypes, the use of black vernacular in their works might be misunderstood as a stereotype and caricature. Hughes underscores this issue in *Simply Heavenly* (1957), when Mamie angrily replies to another character who calls her a “disgraceful stereotype”:

MAMIE: Mister, you better remove yourself from my presence before I stereo your type Why, it’s getting so colored folks can’t do nothing no more without some other Negro calling you a stereotype. Stereotype, hah! If you like a little gin, you’re a stereotype. You got to drink Scotch. If you wear a red dress, you’re a stereotype. You got to wear beige or chartreuse. Lord have mercy, honey, do-don’t like no blackeyed peas and rice! Then you’re a down-home Negro for true which I is—and proud of it. (*MAMIE glares around as if daring somebody to dispute her. Nobody does.*) I didn’t come here to Harlem to get away

¹² This refers to the speech that was mostly used by illiterate members of the African American community and was considered by Euro-Americans bad spoken English, since it did not comply with English standard grammar, syntax and intonation. Therefore, whites associated *bad spoken English* with the black community as a comic trait to be used when portraying black characters. That speech was the black vernacular that writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston had begun to incorporate in their writing during the years of the Harlem Renaissance, and in the 1960s was going to be raised by African American artists to the higher status of new language, Black English, as a genuine expression inextricably linked to the African American tradition and culture.

¹³ Allan Morrison, “One Hundred Years of Negro Entertainment,” in *Anthology of the Afro-American in the Theatre: A Critical Approach*, ed. Lindsay Patterson (Cornwell Heights, PA: The Publishing Agency, Inc., 1978), 3, 5, 10.

from my people. I come here because there's more of 'em. I loves my race. I loves my people. Stereotype!¹⁴

Langston Hughes did not hesitate, though, and chose the rhythms of the language spoken by common people as well as the rhythms of spirituals, jazz, and the blues to create an authentic style that belonged to the African American community. Hughes, then, had started to incorporate into his theatre what might have been considered at the time a perpetuation of stereotypes. However, he had begun to deconstruct the traits of those stereotypes and dignify them as essential components of the African American tradition, i.e., black vernacular.

In this sense, Langston Hughes's theatre had commenced to raise black consciousness through an art that attempted to go beyond the issue of *double consciousness* raised by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903.¹⁵ In his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes agreed with Du Bois's concept of *double consciousness* and asserted that African Americans came to judge themselves by Western standards rather than recognizing their own unique beauty. Consequently, African Americans themselves drew a color line, which became a very high mountain for the "would-be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people."¹⁶ Hughes had made the decision to climb that mountain in order to portray real characters (rather than stereotypes) that did not follow Western standards and represented the great variety of people and cultural richness found within the African American community.

Fortunately, the complexity of urban pluralism of the 1920s in Harlem enabled the African American community to appreciate the diversity of black life (artists, businessmen, musicians, students, laborers, and so on) and helped leaders, scholars, and artists develop "race consciousness."¹⁷ Intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes were urging black artists to be honest with their art and

¹⁴ Langston Hughes, *Simply Heavenly*, in *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, ed. by Webster Smalley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 125-26.

¹⁵ See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1969), 45.

¹⁶ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*, ed. by Patricia Hill Liggins (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998), 899, 900.

¹⁷ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 304. Larry Neal in the 1960s asserted that the Black Arts Movement represented "the flowering of a cultural nationalism that [had] been

with themselves. The three of them agreed that theatre was the most appropriate venue for creating a genuine black art, which needed to be extracted from the African American community's life and experience rather than from the tradition of the Western stage. Locke declared that black dramatic art,

must have the courage to be original, to break with established dramatic conventions of all sorts. It must have the courage *to develop its own idiom, to pour itself into new molds; in short, to be creatively experimental . . .* Art must serve Negro life as well as Negro talent serve art. And no art is more capable of this service than drama. Indeed the surest sign of a folk renaissance seems to be a dramatic flowering . . . Obviously, though, it has not yet come. *For our dramatic expression is still too restricted, self-conscious and imitative.*¹⁸

On the one hand, Locke was indicating that black theatre artists were restricted as long as they kept imitating Western artistic patterns at the moment, and, on the other, he was encouraging African American artists to experiment with new theatrical forms.

Through his influence as editor of the NAACP journal, *The Crisis*, Du Bois, who had also been calling for a new theatre, founded the Krigwa (*Crisis* Guild of Writers and Artists) that sponsored a playwriting competition and helped develop the Krigwa Players, a little theatre company.¹⁹ In a 1926 issue of the journal, Du Bois established the goals that the new African American theatre should pursue:

[T]he plays of a Negro Theatre must be 1. About us.

suppressed since the 1920's." He referred to the Harlem Renaissance as a failure for not addressing itself "to the mythology and the life styles of the Black community" (Quoted in Freda L. Scott, "Black Drama in the Harlem Renaissance," *Theatre Journal* 37, no. 4 [December 1985]: 426). However, although it is true that the achievements by African American playwrights during the Renaissance have not received the same attention as poets have, those playwrights did voice the spirit of the African American community, and Hughes's plays are a clear proof of it.

¹⁸ Alain Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," in *Anthology of the Afro-American in the Theatre: A Critical Approach*, 24. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹ Scott, "Black Drama in the Harlem Renaissance," 433.

That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors today. 3. For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.²⁰

Moreover, Du Bois advocated that artists might use propaganda if they wanted to, but, above all, he insisted that they be sincere and true.

Agreeing with Du Bois's conception of a new African American theatre, Hughes pointed out one more aspect to be taken into account: consideration of social class within the black community. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes argued that it was probably the common people who would give the world a truly African American artist, since it is the common people who are neither afraid nor ashamed of their folk tradition, and are not afraid nor ashamed of being themselves.²¹ It is precisely the common people that Boyd, one of the characters in Hughes's *Simply Heavenly*, turns to for inspiration: "Just making some notes for a story I might write—after observing life in Harlem over the weekend."²² Boyd is just one of the common people that shapes this play, as Hughes himself states in his "character notes": "The characters in *Simply Heavenly* are, on the whole, ordinary, hard-working lower-income bracket Harlemites."²³ They represent the same characters that can be found in most of his theatre work and who are elevated to the category of complex characters, as explained by Hughes himself in the stage directions of *Tambourines to Glory* (1958): "On the surface [it is] a simple play about very simple people. Therefore, all of its performers should be sensitive enough to appreciate the complexities of simplicity. All of them should be lovable, except BUDDY—whom one should love, too, in spite of one's better self."²⁴ Thus, Hughes elevates simple and ordinary people

²⁰ Quoted in Scott, "Black Drama in the Harlem Renaissance," 433.

²¹ Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 900.

²² Hughes, *Simply Heavenly*, 149.

²³ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁴ Hughes, *Tambourines to Glory*, in *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, ed. Smalley, 184.

to the status of protagonists in his stories.²⁵

Langston Hughes was especially eager to witness the creation of a new African American theatre as stated in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain": "[W]e have an honest American Negro literature already with us. Now I await the rise of the Negro theatre."²⁶ He regarded art in general as the best vehicle for the black artist to "give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears."²⁷ Hughes vindicated the African American folk and musical traditions as a distinctive part of the new black art. Jazz, then, became to him an essential component of his writing: "I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world . . . ; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile."²⁸ Not only did Hughes include blues and jazz music in his theatrical pieces, but at times he also gave them a quality and/or pace associated with jazz. For instance, in one of the stage directions in *Scottsboro Limited*, Hughes writes: "*It is the courtroom and the black prisoners come forward before the Judge. The trial is conducted in jazz tempo: the white voices staccato, high and shrill; the black voices deep as the rumble of drums.*"²⁹ Jazz, the blues, spiri-

²⁵ On the same line and following Hughes's artistic foundations, the African American artists of the 1960s considered that art and artist should be committed and address the mass, as Amiri Baraka has observed when referring to that period: "We wanted an art that was mass aimed, that could leave the libraries and academies and coffee shops, and *speak directly to the people* We wanted an art that was oral, one meant to be listened to, one that could be performed on the backs of trucks, in playgrounds . . . , right on the sidewalks. *A mass art and anti-elitist art.*" Amiri Baraka, "Black Theater in the Sixties," in *Studies in Black American Literature*, vol 2, *Belief vs. Theory in Black American Literary Criticism*, ed. Joe Weixlmann and Chester J. Fontenot (Greenwood, Florida: The Penkevill Publishing Co., 1986), 232. Emphasis mine.

²⁶ Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 901.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 900.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 901, 902.

²⁹ Langston Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, in *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes*, 41. Allen Woll asserts that Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps "attempted to rectify the new white domination of a black musical theatre with their own black revue, *Cavalcade of the Negro Theatre*, which would tell the true story of the Afro-American contribution to American entertainment." (Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989], 23).

tuals, and gospel, as well as dancing are an integral part of most of Hughes's plays.³⁰ Hughes, then, was using the rhythms, pace, and vernacular familiar to a large part of the black community.

As I observed above, Hughes believed that African Americans needed neither to be ashamed nor afraid of being black for there was beauty they should seek and find within themselves, as he himself had done: "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful!"³¹ In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes foretold the development in the 1960s of a black aesthetics that underlined the importance for black artists to be themselves:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.³²

Together with Du Bois and Locke, Hughes had begun to open the door to what could be called a *black aesthetic*, anticipating the 1960s motto of *Black Is Beautiful*, as Amiri Baraka has acknowledged.³³

In his constant quest for a black aesthetic, Hughes turned to and praised the beauty found in African American experience and tradition,

³⁰ In *Tambourines to Glory*, we can find spirituals such as "When the Saints Go Marching In" (199); blues and spirituals such as "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" (546), and "Go Down Moses" (545) are equally present in *Don't You Want to Be Free*, "A Poetry Play. From Slavery through the Blues to Now—and then some! With singing, Music and Dancing"; or in *The Sun Do Move*, "A Music Play" that also includes religious music, just to give a few examples.

³¹ Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 902.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Baraka points out that "among the most sensitive, [Hughes] shows in the development of his verse an earlier 'Black is Beautiful,' 'African consciousness' period as well as a later, more sharply international and anti-imperialist period in almost exact reflection of the heaviest (social) spirit of his times." Baraka, "Black Theater in the Sixties," 227.

considering common people the source of the rich material African American artists needed to create their art. Consequently, he sought the same people as the best possible audience to whom that art could be offered. Like Alain Locke, Hughes realized that one of the best vehicles to maintain a close connection between artist and audience was the performing arts. This is why, since the 1930s, Hughes had attempted to create a popular theatre himself, and in 1965 he still defended the need of such theatre against the "controlled commercialism of Broadway."³⁴ He urged black artists to use the richness of music and dance encountered in African American culture, insisting that African American directors, producers, and actors should make use of plays written by African American playwrights, and proposing the creation of a "National Afro-American Theatre."³⁵

Hughes's defense of a theatre for the people and his emphasis on the interaction between the artist/actors and the audience follows what Errol Hill traces as "participatory patterns" (the relationship between presenter and receiver), found in the black church services, the music hall, the small-town storyteller, or the festivals and carnivals within the African American community, to mention just a few.³⁶ Margaret

³⁴ Hughes wrote a poem called "Note on Commercial Theatre" in which he underlined how North American commercial theatre preserved white superiority and white models that did not suit the needs nor the experience of the African American community:

You put me in *Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones*
And all kinds of Swing Mikados
And in everything but what's about me—
But someday somebody'll stand up and talk about me,
And write about me—
Black and beautiful—
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 190.

³⁵ Hughes, "The Need for an Afro-American Theatre," in *Anthology of the Afro-American in the Theatre*, 163, 165. See also Langston Hughes, "Negro Theatre Groups Should Aid and Develop Negro Playwrights," The Harold-Countee Cullen Memorial Collection (Atlanta: The Atlanta University Center Woodruff Library, Archives Department, n.d.). In this article, Hughes encourages the use of little black theatres that should present African American plays, rather than staging European-American plays that offered a "psychology alien to anything average colored folks know or do" (2).

³⁶ Errol Hill, "Black Theatre in Form and Style," *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 10 (July/August 1979): 30.

Wilkerson, has equally highlighted the essential part played by the audience since it effects personal and social change.³⁷

What Hill and Wilkerson observed in 1979 had already been recognized and put into practice by Langston Hughes since the 1930s. This may be observed in plays such as *Harvest*, in which the author states that “[t]his play should give the effect of a mass play. It is suggested that the audience as well as the stage be used”³⁸; or in the prologues to some of his plays, such as *Tambourines to Glory*, in which the actors address the audience; or in *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in which the idea is “to cause the audience to feel that they, as well as the actors, are participating in the drama.”³⁹ That the African American community as audience was always in Hughes's mind is obvious in his attempt to provide first-hand experience, as expressed in his more than sixty plays. Furthermore, his search for a popular and revolutionary theatre is made evident in his incessant experimenting with new forms and styles—many drawn from African American folk and musical traditions. Both content and form have proven Hughes's faithfulness to his idea of an African American artist being true to himself and his community as well as to his commitment to social justice.⁴⁰

Hughes's experience as a reporter and his relationship with various writers during the Spanish Civil War had a profound impact on his later theatrical works. In 1937, after returning from Spain, Hughes decided to take theatre to the community rather than to the commercial theatres.⁴¹ With the assistance of Louise Thompson Patterson, he founded the Harlem Suitcase Theatre—an important proletarian organization created especially for labor audiences with the support of the North

³⁷ Margaret Wilkerson, “Redefining Black Theatre,” *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 10 (July/August 1979): 33.

³⁸ Hughes, *Harvest*, in *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes*, 68.

³⁹ Hughes, *Tambourines to Glory*, 268.

⁴⁰ During the 1920s and 1930s white playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill who wrote on black subjects, such as *Emperor Jones* (1920)—on which Hughes would later write a satiric parody called *The Em-Fuehrer Jones* (1938), but Hughes thought that those playwrights “could not think black” and, therefore, could not truly comprehend the black experience (quoted in McLaren, *Langston Hughes*, 2). Consequently, Hughes was always anxious to see on stage black plays written by black artists.

⁴¹ Spanish poet and playwright García Lorca had made a similar decision during the years of the Second Republic in Spain, just before the Spanish Civil War. See note 1.

American Communist Party to promote interracial plays.⁴² The theatre opened with Hughes's play *Don't You Want to Be Free?* Two years later, following the demise of the Suitcase Theatre, Hughes founded the New Negro Theatre in Los Angeles; and some time after that, he founded another community-based theatre in Chicago, the Skyloft Players. In Chicago, Hughes actually became involved in the theatre productions presented by the Skyloft Players—as production director, in their casting or arranging rehearsal and performance schedules.⁴³ Therefore, he participated in almost every activity related to theatre, including acting if we take into account his poetry-performances, accompanied by a jazz or blues pianist.⁴⁴ Faithful to the conception of the black aesthetic he had

⁴² In a sense, Hughes continued a tradition that had already been started by the Lafayette Players at the turn of the century (1908). Anita Bush was in charge of it and opened another unit in Chicago and Washington D.C. after 1918. The Lafayette Players contributed enormously to the development of black actors by helping them to appear in a number of significant dramatic roles. Prior to the foundation of this group, no significant performing roles could be found on Broadway. Unfortunately, according to Sister M. Francesca Thompson, “the Black writer did not keep pace. It would have benefited both actors and writers if the progress made by the actors had been paralleled by a similar progress among Black playwrights.” Thompson considers that the demise of this theatre group was due to the dilemma actors were facing: “[P]laying white roles and playing roles written by black writers. It was not possible to continue trying to please two such divergent audiences” (Sister M. Francesca Thompson, O.S.F., “The Lafayette Players, 1917-1932,” in *The Theater of Black Americans*, ed. Errol Hill, vol. 2 [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980], 18, 25, 26, 30). The Lafayette Players had stopped their theatrical activity by 1932. However, from 1935 to 1939 African Americans had another opportunity not only to act, but also to direct and write plays thanks to the black theatre units created by the Federal Theatre Project, one of the pivotal developments in black theatre history. For the first time, this project made drama available to the masses, and theatre was taken directly to the people (Ronald Ross, “The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre,” 1935-1939,” in *The Theater of Black Americans*, 34, 36). Moreover, the project contributed to the development of African American theatre in its attempt to support black playwrights expressing their experiences in their own vernacular (Floyd Gaffney, “Black Theatre: Commitment and Communication,” *The Black Scholar* 1 [June 1970]: 10). Hughes, on the other hand, did not participate in the project with his plays, but worked on his own for community-based little theatres.

⁴³ McLaren, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist*, 117, 141, 148.

⁴⁴ Susan Duffy claims that Hughes was actually “in the vanguard of the ‘poetry-performance movement’” as early as 1927 (*The Political Plays*, 168). Hughes included poetry in plays such as in *Don't You Want To Be Free?*, described as a “poetry play,” in which piano music was required to accompany the performance of poems—as indicated in the stage directions (Langston Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *Black Theatre U.S.A.*, ed. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, vol. 2 [New York: The Free Press, 1996], 278). The development of this technique of reading poetry with the accompaniment of music, however, has often been attributed to the Beat poets of the 1950s.

defended and the idea of considering the people the main characters/agents of social change, Hughes had applied his theories to his playwriting and staging techniques. The range covered by his sixty-three plays shows Hughes's social, political, and racial commitment coinciding with his sympathies with the North American Communist Party. Such commitment is especially visible in the agit-prop plays he wrote in the 1930s.⁴⁵ In an essay on black theatre written in 1979, Errol Hill encouraged African American playwrights to seek new theatrical forms and styles that might need to abandon the proscenium stage in favor of a different pattern that could serve as a more relevant vehicle to portray the African American experience, emphasizing the participatory models of the African American tradition.⁴⁶ In his study, Hill overlooks the earlier experimental and revolutionary staging techniques and participatory models employed by Hughes. This can be observed in Hughes's stage directions for *Harvest*: "[I]t is suggested that . . . the old frame of proscenium be broken," and he adds that between scenes "a newspaper curtain might be used."⁴⁷ Four years later, in *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, Hughes employed the use of a bare stage while keeping the house lights on during the whole performance. Thus, four decades before Hill's encouragement of new theatrical techniques, Hughes had already begun to apply them.

Moreover, through Hughes's various journeys all over the world, he had been exposed to Russian theatre, Chinese and Japanese acting techniques, European plays by García Lorca and Bertolt Brecht, and

⁴⁵ See Susan Duffy's exhaustive study on Hughes's political plays, which also analyzes in depth the playwright's social and political commitment and support he received from the Communist Party during the 1930s. Duffy quotes Hughes's opinion on his political ideas given to the American Consul General at Shanghai in 1933:

Being a Negro I have been struggling for the emancipation of the Negroes and the oppressed masses and *will continue my struggle forever*. Communism aims at the emancipation of the oppressed masses but I still doubt whether or not complete freedom can be secured through the realization of communism. I do not claim to be a communist but I do not object to be regarded as a sympathizer because I sympathize with and support all Communist movements and also the oppressed people. After all I am a liberalist who is interested in communism and the struggles for the liberation of the oppressed.

Duffy, *The Political Plays*, 196. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁶ Hill, "Black Theatre in Form and Style," 29.

⁴⁷ Hughes, *Harvest*, 68.

North American theatre. Such exposure helped Hughes embrace innovative and avant-garde staging techniques that he combined with the elements found in the African American tradition without forgetting his commitment to social and racial issues. *Harvest* remains one of the best examples:

*This play should give the effect of a mass play. It is suggested that the audience as well as the stage be used, that runaways be employed, and that the old frame of proscenium be broken Between scenes, a "newspaper" curtain might be used, reproducing actual portions of the reporting of the strike. Bits from the strikers' handbills, or from the Vigilantes' and growers' advertisements could be flashed on the screen.*⁴⁸

Parallel to his innovative staging techniques, Hughes experimented with various theatre subgenres that ran from the historical and agit-prop (the most propagandistic pieces were written by Hughes in the 1930s) to tragedy, comedy, and satiric parody. In most of them, a wide range of the African American musical tradition is present.

Among the most political, agit-prop, and revolutionary are the plays written during the 1930s, the majority of which are intended to be didactic and mobilize the audience—*Scottsboro Limited*, *Harvest* (previously titled *Blood on the Fields*, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, *The Organizer*, and *Don't You Want to Be Free?*). Hughes includes blues and jazz in all of them, which according to Duffy, become "agents of social propaganda rather than mere social lament." And it is precisely the musical structure of these labor plays that makes them distinct from other labor plays written at the time.⁴⁹ Baraka, for instance, considers *Scottsboro Limited* one of Hughes's most revolutionary plays. *Scottsboro* is written in verse, and there are differences between black and white voices, giving the black ones a jazz-like and deep shade, whereas the white racist ones "are shrill and staccato"; also, the play is supposed to be performed on a bare stage.⁵⁰ This piece was based on the case of nine young black men who were accused of raping a white woman on a freight train, eight of whom were tried by a jury of southern whites and sentenced to death for the crime, but released years later when their innocence was proven.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Duffy, *The Political Plays*, 10.

⁵⁰ Baraka, "Restaging Langston Hughes," 65.

Like *Scottsboro*, *Angelo Herndon Jones* was inspired by a southern legal case. Jones was charged with inciting insurrection at an interracial rally and sentenced to 18 to 20 years. Further, *Don't You Want to Be Free?* was the play with which the Harlem Suitcase Theatre opened.⁵¹ This play incorporates poems by Hughes, spirituals, and blues from the African American tradition. It intends to show the trajectory of African Americans through history from slavery to the Harlem riots of 1935—which “foreshadows the urban upheavals of the 1960s.”⁵² The play criticizes European colonization and North American racism, and sends a message of unity between black and white workers. In the first actor's own words, the play is “about what it means to be colored in America.”⁵³ The staging, in McLaren's opinion, was influenced by Meyerhold's constructivist theatre, but Hughes only borrowed “the basic utilitarian concept of constructivism, which could be adapted to the limited economic resources of the Suitcase Theatre.” In addition to influences from Russian theatre, the play shows a complex structure that includes dance, speech, poetry, and song, unlike most conventional Western drama that follows a linear and more realistic style.⁵⁴ The staging of the play is sim-

⁵¹ Slavery was one of the main topics dealt with in this theatrical piece. Another play that dealt with the issue of slavery was *The Sun Do Move* (1942), which was performed with *Mulatto* (1935) by the Skyloft Players. *The Sun Do Move*, however, “avoids didacticism and proletarian themes, evidence of waning radicalism in Hughes's 1940s plays.” But this play also offers innovative staging possibilities. The play is set in Tennessee at the time of the Civil War, and it could be staged “without scenery . . . in the style of a motion picture drama or radio drama with no break in continuity and no intermissions, the spirituals between scenes serving as transition music during blackouts.” Besides, according to McLaren, the Prologue follows Brechtian style in depicting the slave trade while addressing the audience (McLaren, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist*, 149, 150)—something that can also be observed in the Prologue to *Tambourines to Glory*, where Buddy talks to the audience and introduces himself as “the devil” (Hughes, *Tambourines to Glory*, 188). Another important play by Hughes written in 1943, was *For This We Fight* (1943), which according to McLaren offers a “more complex presentation of racial issues.” A play that also deals with the US Civil War and the differences black soldiers suffered in pay rations, promotions and prisoners exchange—issue that is also presented in the film *Glory* (McLaren, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist*, 157). *For This We Fight* was staged on 7 June, 1943 in Madison Square Garden as part of a “Negro Freedom Rally.” Considered a pageant by McLaren, he emphasizes that the play “uses black participation in the military and historical icons to critique Jim Crow” and “echoes the Frank Capra film *Why We Fight*, used by the War Department in training soldiers” (Ibid., 156).

⁵² McLaren, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist*, 125.

⁵³ Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free*, 268.

⁵⁴ McLaren, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist*, 121.

ple: a bare stage with a lynch rope “which hangs at the back, center, throughout the entire performance, and serves as a symbol for Negro oppression.” In a Brechtian manner, the house lights were to be kept on during the whole performance.⁵⁵ Finally, the audience, as in previous theatrical pieces, plays a fundamental role as their participation is required: “[T]he audience-space should still be employed for much of the action. Since the idea behind this type of production is to cause the audience to feel that they, as well as the actors, are participating in the drama.”⁵⁶ As in *Harvest*, close contact between actors and audience is effected by using the audience seating area in addition to the stage as acting space.

Another theatre subgenre used by Hughes is satiric parody or skit. Most of his skits were also written during the 1930s with the intention of satirizing white superiority as portrayed in US motion pictures.⁵⁷ These skits include *The Em-Fuehrer Jones*, *Colonel Tom's Cabin* (also called *Little Eva's End*, a parody on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), *Scarlet Sister Barry* (a parody of Julia Mood Peterkin's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about Sea Island African Americans, *Scarlet Sister Mary*), and *Limitations of Life* (1938, a parody on Fannie Hurt's novel and John M. Stahl's 1934 film melodrama *Imitation of Life*). As can be observed in the titles, there is a hint of Hughes's choice to reverse roles. Thus, in *Limitations of Life*, for instance, Audette (who is a blond maid) tells her mistress Mammy Weavers (a colored lady):

AUDETTE: Lawd, Mammy Weavers, ma little dauther's tryin' so hard to be colored. She just loves Harlem. She's lyin' out in the backyard in de sun all day long tannin' herself, every day, tryin' so hard to be colored.

MAMMY: What a shame, the darling's so fair and blue-eyed!⁵⁸

In *Colonel Tom's Cabin*, some reversal in the characters' features can be observed as well: “UNCLE TOM has a halo of snow white hair circling a bald pate . . . Only LITTLE EVA is abnormal. She is an overgrown adult in child's

⁵⁵ Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, 247.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 268.

⁵⁷ Hatch and Shine, *Black Theatre U.S.A.*, vol 1, 223.

⁵⁸ Langston Hughes, *Limitations of Life*, in *Black Theatre USA*, 225.

clothes, frills and ribbons. Also, alas, she is colored, with blond curls.”⁵⁹

Like social justice and race, humor plays an essential role in Hughes’s theatrical pieces. According to McLaren, “black humor in literature can be traced to vernacular rhythms, folk ironies, and satiric, comic riffs” that are found in the language used by black folks in the street.⁶⁰ Humor and black vernacular are widely used in Hughes’s plays, including *Little Ham* (1936, abbreviation for “Hamlet,” and also a biblical reference to Ham); *When the Jack Hollers* (1936, in collaboration with Arna Bontemps); *Joy to My Soul* (1937, a farce comedy); and *Simply Heavenly*.

However, if comedy occupies an important space in Hughes’s theatrical work, he also experimented with tragedy—*Mulatto* (1935) being the most popular. The play is set in the 1920s but mirrors social relationships during slavery. Robert, the main character who is a young mulatto, shows a rebellious attitude towards being confined by a racial definition:

CORA [Robert’s mother]: When the Colonel [Robert’s white father] comes back, in a few minutes, he wants to talk to you. Talk right to him, boy. Talk like you was colored, ‘cause you ain’t white.

ROBERT (*angrily*): And I’m not black either.⁶¹

Hughes shows mulattoes’ feeling of alienation because of their hybrid status which (according to some critics) mirrors Hughes’s own inner conflict.⁶² The tragic mulatto figure of this play has also been seen by Judith Berzon as a symbol of the “failure of the American myth of egalitarianism.”⁶³ *Mulatto* was produced on Broadway by Martin Jones—including sequences not written by Hughes—the year of the Harlem uprising, and was also staged in Europe (Paris, Rome, and Madrid) and various Latin American countries. It enjoyed 373 performances on Broadway, which made it the longest running play by an African American author until Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* reached Broadway in 1959.

⁵⁹ Langston Hughes, *Colonel Tom’s Cabin*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, ed. Sanders, 575.

⁶⁰ McLaren, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist*, 9.

⁶¹ Langston Hughes, *Mulatto*, in *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, ed. Smalley, 19.

⁶² McLaren, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist*, 61.

⁶³ Quoted in McLaren, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist*, 67.

Parallel to the use of tragedy to underscore social injustice and cruelty suffered by the African American community during slavery, Hughes ventured into the historical mode to criticize the abuse of power and betrayal of one’s community and principles in postcolonial societies. Thus *Emperor of Haiti* (originally titled *Drums of Haiti*, and then, *Troubled Island*) stands as the best example of this category. Although the play does not faithfully follow historical events, it draws upon the figure of Jean Jacques Dessalines and main episodes of the Haitian revolution.⁶⁴ The play presents the tension between the Africans and the mulatto elite, the tyranny of Dessalines once he is in power, the mulattoes’ betrayal, and Dessalines’s eventual murder. When Dessalines becomes Emperor of the island, he leaves his African wife for a mulatto woman and rejects an important element of African traditions—its drums:

Stop it! Stop it! The Empress don’t like drums!

Drums in the Court! The idea! Suppose we had guests from abroad, what would they think of us? They’d think we are all savages, that’s what. Savages! Here I am, trying to build a civilization in Haiti good as any of the whites have in their lands. Trying to set up a court equal to any Court in Europe. And what do I find—voodoo drums in the banquet hall.⁶⁵

Dessalines’s statement revises his former love of drums, when he was leading a black revolution: “Soon the drums of freedom will begin to sound.”⁶⁶ Consequently, the play shows Dessalines’ downfall as a result of having betrayed the ideals of revolution. *Emperor of Haiti* displays the abuse of power, treachery, and misguided love, all of which foreshadow dilemmas encountered in postcolonial societies.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Dessalines was one of the leaders of the African slave revolution at the end of the eighteenth century against French rule in San Domingo. After 12 years of war, black slaves defeated the French and formed the independent Republic of Haiti. For further information on the Haitian revolution, see C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Overture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).

⁶⁵ Langston Hughes, *Emperor of Haiti*, in *Black Heroes: Seven Plays*, Errol Hill, ed. (New York: Applause, Theatre Book Publishers, 1989), 54-55.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 29. Hughes actually uses African drums and dancing in his play *Don’t You Want to Be Free?* to underscore two important components of African American culture. Hughes, *Don’t You Want to Be Free?*, 269.

⁶⁷ McLaren, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist*, 106.

In sum, Langston Hughes's theatrical trajectory demonstrates that he actually set the foundations for the Black Arts and Black Theatre Movements of the 1960s. Thanks to these movements, the 1960s witnessed the rise of a new theatre aesthetic that left Western patterns behind and gave the black community as audience the most prominent role in the creation of a new black art. Echoing Hughes, Larry Neale wrote that the 1960s Black Arts Movement was "radically opposed to any concept of the artist that [alienated] him from his community," asserting that "Black art [was] the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept," which envisioned "an art that [spoke] directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America."⁶⁸ Using Ethreridge Knight's words, Neale recalls what was understood by *black aesthetic*, which simply highlights what Hughes had been reflecting upon in his various artistic expressions, but, particularly, in theatre: "Unless the Black artist establishes a 'Black aesthetic' he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live. The Black artist must create new forms and new values."⁶⁹ Or as Baraka pointed out in "The Revolutionary Theatre," "black theatre must force change . . . It is a political theatre, a weapon . . . It is a social theatre."⁷⁰ The manifesto that Neale, Knight, and Baraka were giving shape during the 1960s had already been put into practice by Hughes in his plays much earlier.

In conclusion, I would like to end with Gates's and McKay's words which closely connect Hughes's and the 1960s's conception of Black Art whose main goal was the African American community as a source and the main recipient of that art:

Langston Hughes . . . was far more the model for the artistic and intellectual creativity championed by the sixties than either W.E.B. Du Bois or, certainly, Ralph Ellison. Like Hughes, Black Arts workers wished to construct performances, essays, books, dramas and stories that would have the feel of the black majority. They wanted their work to be experimental, musical, vernacu-

⁶⁸ Larry Neale, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Gates and McKay, 1960.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1961.

⁷⁰ Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 1900.

lar in harmony with the "dream life" of the masses . . . Like Hughes, the Black Arts wished to give back, in newly creative form, the beauty it discovered in the Black majority . . . Like Hughes, the Black Arts deemed political as well as spiritual liberation and joy an essential part of its mission. To tell a black truth to white power was a central goal of the Black Arts.⁷¹

⁷¹ Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 1803. Emphasis mine.