

THE NEGRO ARTIST AND THE RACIAL MOUNTAIN BY LANGSTON HUGHES

INTRODUCTION

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Langston Hughes was a leader of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. He was educated at Columbia University and Lincoln University. While a student at Lincoln, he published his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926), as well as his landmark essay, seen by many as a cornerstone document articulation of the Harlem renaissance, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.”

Earlier that year, Freda Kirchwey, editor of the *Nation*, mailed Hughes a proof of “The Negro-Art Hokum,” an essay George Schuyler had written for the magazine, requesting a counterstatement. Schuyler, editor of the African-American newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier*, questioned in his essay the need for a separate African-American artistic and literary tradition.

Understanding a fellow African American poet’s stated desire to be “a poet—not a Negro poet,” as that poet’s wish to look away from his African American heritage and instead absorb white culture, Hughes’ essay spoke to the concerns of the Harlem Renaissance as it

celebrated African American creative innovations such as blues, spirituals, jazz, and literary work that engaged African American life. Notes Hughes, “this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this 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.”

His attention to working-class African-American lives, coupled with his refusal to paint these lives as either saintly or stereotypical, brought criticism from several directions. Articulating the unspoken directives he struggled to ignore, Hughes observes, “‘Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,’ say the Negroes. ‘Be stereotyped, don’t go too far, don’t shatter our illusions about you, don’t amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,’ say the whites.”

Hughes’ early poetry often explored domestic and musical themes—particularly jazz—in African American life, and his work grew increasingly political as the Great Depression wore on and his interest in Marxism deepened.

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, “I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,” meaning, I believe, “I want to write like a white poet”; meaning subconsciously, “I would like to be a white poet”; meaning behind that, “I would like to be white.”⁽¹⁾ And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever

be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this 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.

But let us look at the immediate background of this young poet. His family is of what I suppose one would

call the Negro middle class: people who are by no means rich yet never uncomfortable nor hungry—smug, contented, respectable folk, members of the Baptist church. The father goes to work every morning. He is a chief steward at a large white club. The mother sometimes does fancy sewing or supervises parties for the rich families of the town. The children go to a mixed school. In the home they read white papers and magazines. And the mother often says “Don’t be like niggers” when the children are bad. A frequent phrase from the father is, “Look how well a white man does things.” And so the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money. The whisper of “I want to be white” runs silently through their minds. This young poet’s home is, I believe, a fairly typical home of the colored middle class. One sees immediately how difficult it would be 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. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns.

For racial culture the home of a self-styled “high-class” Negro has nothing better to offer. Instead there will perhaps be more aping of things white than in a less cultured or less wealthy home. The father is perhaps a doctor, lawyer, landowner, or politician. The mother may be a social worker, or a teacher, or she may do nothing and have a maid. Father is often dark but he has usually married the lightest woman he could find. The family attend a fashionable church where few really colored faces are to be found. And they themselves draw a color line. In the North they go to white theaters and white movies. And in the South they have at least two cars and house “like white folks.” Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art (if any), and an Episcopal heaven. A very

high mountain indeed for the would-be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people.

But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority—may the Lord be praised! The people who have their nip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let’s dance! 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. Whereas the better-class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone when he does appear. And they are not ashamed of him—if they know he exists at all. And they accept what beauty is their own without question.

Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their “white” culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites

in this country, with their innumerable overtones and undertones, surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears. But let us look again at the mountain.

A prominent Negro clubwoman in Philadelphia paid eleven dollars to hear Raquel Meller sing Andalusian popular songs. But she told me a few weeks before she would not think of going to hear “that woman,” Clara Smith, a great black artist, sing Negro folksongs.

(2) And many an upper-class Negro church, even now, would not dream of employing a spiritual in its services. The drab melodies in white folks’ hymnbooks are much to be preferred. “We want to worship the Lord correctly and quietly. We don’t believe in ‘shouting.’ Let’s be dull like the Nordics,” they say, in effect.

The road for the serious black artist, then, who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high. Until recently he received almost no encouragement for his work from either white or colored people. The fine novels of Chesnutt go out of print with neither race noticing their passing. The quaint charm and humor of Dunbar’s dialect verse brought to him, in his day, largely the same kind of encouragement one would give a sideshow freak (A colored man writing poetry! How odd!) or a clown (How amusing!).(3)

The present vogue in things Negro, although it may do as much harm as good for the budding colored artist, has at least done this: it has brought him forcibly to the attention of his own people among whom for so long, unless the other race had noticed him beforehand, he was a prophet with little honor.

(4) I understand that Charles Gilpin acted for years in Negro theaters without any special acclaim from his own, but when Broadway gave him eight curtain calls, Negroes, too, began to beat a tin pan in his honor.(5) I know a young colored writer, a manual worker by day, who had been writing well for the colored magazines for some years, but it was not until he recently broke into the white publications and his first book was accepted by a prominent New York publisher that the “best” Negroes in his city took the trouble to discover that he lived there. Then almost immediately they decided to give a grand dinner for him. But the society ladies were careful to whisper to his mother that perhaps she’d better not come. They were not sure she would have an evening gown.(6)

The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. “O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,” say the Negroes. “Be stereotyped, don’t go too far, don’t shatter our illusions about you, don’t amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,” say the whites. Both would have told Jean Toomer not to write “Cane.” The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read “Cane” hate it. They are afraid of it. Although the critics gave it good reviews the public remained indifferent. Yet (excepting the work of Du Bois) “Cane” contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson, it is truly racial.(7)

But in spite of the Nordicized Negro intelligentsia and the desires of some white editors we have an honest American Negro literature already with us. Now I await the rise of the Negro theater. Our folk music, having achieved world-wide fame, offers itself to the genius of the great individual American Negro composer who is to come. And within the next decade

NOTES

- (1) Hughes is likely referring to Countee Cullen (1903-1962), a classically trained African American writer whose poems largely adhered to European traditions of form and meter.
- (2) Raquel Meller (1888-1962), popular Spanish singer and actress; Clara Smith (1895-1935), African American blues singer who incorporated vaudeville and comedy routines into her shows, which often contained risqué sexual references.
- (3) Charles Waddell Chestnutt (1858-1932), prolific African American writer best known for his conjure tales and his novels of social purpose dealing with the psychological and social costs of the color line; Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), African American poet, novelist, and short story writer, was both praised and chastised for his dialect poems, which some critics felt reinforced popular stereotypes of a romanticized Old South.
- (4) Hughes is referring to what is now known as the Harlem Renaissance, a sociocultural movement of the 1920s that witnessed a florescence of African American literary, musical, and visual arts. During this period many whites, fascinated with African American art and culture, made trips to Harlem to experience its exciting nightlife.
- (5) Charles Gilpin (1878-1930) became the first African American to be widely recognized as a serious actor when he played the title role in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* in the early 1920s.
- (6) Hughes is likely referring to himself in this anecdote.
- (7) With its blend of short fiction, poetry, arcane line sketches, *Cane*, published in 1923, is considered one of the most stylistically sophisticated works of the Harlem Renaissance, but it offended some critics with its frank representations of sexuality and racial violence. Jean Toomer (1894-1967) considered *Cane* a swan song, a final mediation on his own conflicted relationship with African America and the rural South. After its publication, Toomer refused to be classified as a black writer. Paul Robeson (1898-1976), renowned African American singer, actor, and advocate for global human rights.
- (8) Winold Reiss (1888-1953), German artist whose portraits of African Americans were featured in Alain Locke's Harlem Renaissance anthology, *The New Negro*.
- (9) Bessie Smith (1894-1937), the "Empress of the Blues," made over eighty recordings during her short career; Rudolph Fisher (1897-1934), was a leading African American novelist, short story writer, and essayist during the Harlem Renaissance; Aaron Douglas (1898-1979), once referred to as the "Dean of African American painters," was encouraged by Winold Reiss to incorporate African motifs into his art.

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