

The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain

LANGSTON HUGHES

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 Chesnut 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 I expect to see the work of a growing school of colored artists who paint and model the beauty of dark faces and create with new technique the expressions of their

own soul-world. And the Negro dancers who will dance like flame and the singers who will continue to carry our songs to all who listen—they will be with us in even greater numbers tomorrow.

Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. I am as sincere as I know how to be in these poems and yet after every reading I answer questions like these from my own people: Do you think Negroes should always write about Negroes? I wish you wouldn't read some of your poems to white folks. How do you find anything interesting in a place like a cabaret? Why do you write about black people? You aren't black. What makes you do so many jazz poems?

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, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. Yet the Philadelphia clubwoman is ashamed to say that her race created it and she does not like me to write about it. The old subconscious “white is best” runs through her mind. Years of study under white teachers, a lifetime of white books, pictures, and papers, and white manners, morals, and Puritan standards made her dislike the spirituals. And now she turns up her nose at jazz and all its manifestations—likewise almost everything else distinctly racial. She doesn't care for the Winold Reiss portraits of Negroes because they are “too Negro.”(8) She does not want a true picture of herself from anybody. She wants the artist to flatter her, to make the white world believe that all Negroes are as smug and as near white in soul as she wants to be. But, to my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering “I want to be white,” hidden in the aspirations of his people, to “Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful”?

So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, “I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,” as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features. An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose.

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing Water Boy, and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean

Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty.(9) 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.

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.

P O E T R Y
I N A M E R I C A

To Certain Critics

COUNTEE CULLEN

Then call me traitor if you must,
Shout reason and default!
Say I betray a sacred trust
Aching beyond this vault.
I'll bear your censure as your praise,
For never shall the clan
Confine my singing to its ways
Beyond the ways of man.

No racial option narrows grief,
Pain is not patriot,
And sorrow plaits her dismal leaf
For all as lief as not.
With blind sheep groping every hill,
Searching an oriflamme,
How shall the shepherd heart then thrill
To only the darker lamb?

The Weary Blues

LANGSTON HUGHES

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.

With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.

O Blues!

Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.

Sweet Blues!

Coming from a black man's soul.

O Blues!

In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—

"Ain't got nobody in all this world,

Ain't got nobody but ma self.

I's gwine to quit ma frownin'

And put ma troubles on the shelf."

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more—

"I got the Weary Blues

And I can't be satisfied.

Got the Weary Blues

And can't be satisfied—

I ain't happy no mo'

And I wish that I had died."

And far into the night he crooned that tune.

The stars went out and so did the moon.

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.

One-Way Ticket

LANGSTON HUGHES

I pick up my life
And take it with me
And I put it down in
Chicago, Detroit,
Buffalo, Scranton,
Any place that is North and East—
And not Dixie.

I pick up my life
And take it on the train
To Los Angeles, Bakersfield,
Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake,
Any place that is
North and West—
And not South.

I am fed up
With Jim Crow laws,
People who are cruel
And afraid,
Who lynch and run,
Who are scared of me
And me of them.

I pick up my life
And take it away
On a one-way ticket—
Gone up North,
Gone out West,
Gone!

Harlem

LANGSTON HUGHES

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?

kitchenette building

GWENDOLYN BROOKS

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong
Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a man.”

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

Mothers

NIKKI GIOVANNI

the last time i was home
to see my mother we kissed
exchanged pleasantries
and unpleasantries pulled a warm
comforting silence around
us and read separate books

i remember the first time
i consciously saw her
we were living in a three room
apartment on burns avenue

mommy always sat in the dark
i don't know how i knew that but she did

that night i stumbled into the kitchen
maybe because i've always been
a night person or perhaps because i had wet
the bed
she was sitting on a chair
the room was bathed in moonlight diffused through
those thousands of panes landlords who rented
to people with children were prone to put in windows
she many have been smoking but maybe not
her hair was three-quarters her height
which made me a strong believer in the samson myth
and very black

i'm sure i just hung there by the door
i remember thinking: what a beautiful lady

she was very deliberately waiting
perhaps for my father to come home
from his night job or maybe for a dream
that had promised to come by
"come here" she said "i'll teach you
a poem: *i see the moon*

*the moon sees me
god bless the moon
and god bless me"*

i taught it to my son who
recited it to her
just to say we must learn
to bear the pleasures
as we have borne the
pains

Thataway

KEVIN YOUNG

Was walking. Was
walking & then waiting
for a train, the 12:40
to take us thataway.
(I got there early.)
Wasn't a train
exactly but a chariot
or the Crescent Limited come
to carry me some
home I didn't yet
know. There were those
of us not ready till good
Jim swung from a tree
& the white folks crowded
the souvenir photo's frame—
let his body blacken,
the extremities
shorn—not shed,
but skimmed off
so close it can be shaving
almost. An ear
in a pocket, on a shelf,
a warning where a book
could go. So
I got there early.
See now, it was morning
a cold snap, first frost
which comes even
here & kill the worms
out the deer. You can
hunt him then
but we never did want,
after, no trophy
crowned down
from a wall, watching—
just a meal, what
we might make last
till spring. There are ways

of keeping a thing.
Then there are ways
of leaving, & also
the one way. That
we didn't want.
I got there early.
Luggage less sturdy
(cardboard, striped, black)
than my hat. Shoebox
of what I shan't say
lunch on my lap.
The noise the rails made
even before the train.
A giant stomach growling.
A bowed belly. I did
not pray. I got there
early. It was not
no wish, but a way.

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry he home

Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry he home

I looked over Jordan and what did I see
Coming for to carry he home
A band of angels coming after me
Coming for to carry me home

Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home

If you get there before I do
Coming for to carry me home
Tell all my friends I'm coming too
Coming for to carry me home

Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home

Negro Migration

TYEHIMBA JESS

The North lies
waiting with its concrete,
hustler mouth, with electric
boulevard pickpocket hands,
with its iced breath
of tenement dreams.

The North lies
with its clutch of factory
smoked paychecks and
its diamond toothed
stock holder grin, salivating
for strikebreaker sweat.

The North awaits, its veins
sprawled and redlined
and gerrymandered,
dancing to Red Summer
Blues with a pistol on its hip
and Birth of A Nation rattling
through its brain.

The North lies waiting
in its kitchenette coldwater
flat, its colored-only
YMCA, its Harlem/
Southside Chi/East St. Louis
alleyways. It took off
its white hood and raised
a billy club in celebration
against Detroit/Philadelphia
darkness. The North lies
guttered in lay-away
fine print, sings its down-home
gospel of pawn broker receipts,
its morning work song of
cross-town subway number
runner rush. It's got a walk
that leans to the sound
of desegregated sidewalks.
It drives a hot road

car bought with cold cash.
It's got a jingle singing
'bout Saturday night
in its pocket, a fold
in its wallet, and a
3 piece suit that washes
a man clean of sharecropped
hunger. It's got a black pearl
necklace of washerwoman knees
and it knows how to paint itself
one stroke at a time into
burning trash can lullabies
of doo wop. Its got liquor
store eyes full of worry,
a throat of storefront churches
to hum each worry
into moan. It left a cotton
field down south, along with
a warrant for arrest
and a promise to never
come back. It looks
in the mirror each day,
slips into its fresh,
ironed uniform
of tattered hope, and
tells the world
how its gonna work
itself past everything
it was ever told it should
and couldn't be
before it struts out
the door, deep in
every footstep
a music it claims
for its own.

The Great Migration

JACQUELINE WOODSON

I knew the story long before I knew
the reason for my mother leaving South Carolina. Her black pumps,
leather and new, bought a size too small—A sale
or vanity—(She's gone now too late for the asking)

One shoe and then the other and then the first again and then and then
small steps

onto a bus already filled with The Leavers
people heading north from a South Carolina slipping
like silk from their mouth *You got people up there* and
Where y'all planning to stay and the quiet *Yes, Ma'ams* from children
New York a dream in the palms of sweaty hands, the pinch
of too tight shoes. A fierce wave
Goodbye to ol' Jim Crow
I knew the story long before I knew

The story—My mother's brown hands
on her purse, her three children left behind
for now her forehead pressed
against the Trailways window.

I don't know the story, never asked
Did you ever consider not coming back for us It was a story
I didn't want to know.

How did she come to believe in a place
she'd never seen? When did she know that home
wasn't home anymore? I thought I knew

the story.

Blackbottom TOI DERRICOTTE

When relatives came from out of town,
we would drive down to Blackbottom,
drive slowly down the congested main streets
 -- Beubian and Hastings --
trapped in the mesh of Saturday night.
Freshly escaped, black middle class,
we snickered, and were proud;
the louder the streets, the prouder.
We laughed at the bright clothes of a prostitute,
a man sitting on a curb with a bottle in his hand.
We smelled barbecue cooking in dented washtubs,
 and our mouths watered.
As much as we wanted it we couldn't take the
chance.

Rhythm and blues came from the windows, the
throaty voice of
 a woman lost in the bass, in the drums, in the
 dirty down
 and out, the grind.
"I love to see a funeral, then I know it ain't mine."
We rolled out windows down so that the waves
rolled over us
 like blood.
We hoped to pass invisibly, knowing on Monday
we would
 return safely to our jobs, the post office and
classroom.
We wanted our sufferings to be offered up as
tender meat, and our triumphs to be belted out in
raucous song.
We had lost our voice in the suburbs, in Conant
Gardens,
 where each brick house delineated a fence of
 silence;
 we had lost the right to sing in the street and
 damn creation.

We returned to wash our hands of them,
to smell them
whose very existence
tore us down to the human.

Time Is Gettin' Harder

LUCIOUS CURTIS

Times is gettin' harder
Money's gettin' scarce

Soon as I gather my cotton and corn
I'm bound to leave this place

White folks sittin' in the parlor
Eatin' that cake and cream
Nigger's way down to the kitchen
Squabblin' over turnip greens

Times is gettin' harder
Money's gettin' scarce

Soon as I gather my cotton and corn
I'm bound to leave this place

Me and my brother was out
Thought we'd have some fun
He stole three chickens
We began to run

Times is gettin' harder
Money's gettin' scarce

Soon as I gather my cotton and corn
I'm bound to leave this place

Living for the City

STEVIE WONDER

A boy is born in hard time Mississippi
Surrounded by four walls that ain't so pretty
His parents give him love and affection
To keep him strong movin' in the right direction
Living just enough, just enough for the city

His father works some days for fourteen hours
And you can bet he barely makes a dollar
His mother goes to scrub the floors for many
And you'd best believe she hardly gets a penny
Living just enough, just enough for the city

His sister's black but she is sure not pretty
Her skirt is short but, Lord, her legs are sturdy
To walk to school she's got to get up early
Her clothes are old but never are they dirty
Living just enough, just enough for the city

Her brother's smart, he's got more sense than many
His patience's long but soon he won't have any
To find a job is like a haystack needle
'Cause where he lives they don't use colored people
Living just enough, just enough for the city

Living just enough for the city
Living just enough for the city
Living just enough for the city

His hair is long, his feet are hard and gritty
He spends his life walkin' the streets of New York city
He's almost dead from breathin' in air pollution
He tried to vote but to him there's no solution
Living just enough, just enough for the city

I hope you hear inside my voice of sorrow
And that it motivates you to make a better tomorrow
This place is crelu no where could be much colder

If we don't change the world will soon be over
Living just enough, stop giving just enough for the city