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"It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing": Langston Hughes's Musical-Poetic Fusion of the Vernacular and Literary Traditions

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by
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Introduction--"Begin the Beguine"

Early in his literary career, Langston Hughes was faced with a question that occupied his writing and led to an important innovation in American literature: how could Hughes describe the experiences of African-Americans while using the forms and traditions of a Western (i.e., predominantly Anglo-American) literary culture which often sought to exclude, even negate, the very experiences and oral traditions which he sought to express? Hughes's desire to create an individual poetic voice which could present the African-American community as a whole soon led him to modify traditional Western literary forms by incorporating African-American oral and vernacular forms into his poetry; Hughes felt that African-Americans simply could not be represented by traditional Western forms, since the creators of those literary forms (and, by extension, the forms themselves) often did not account for African-American experiences.[1] Hughes realized that, in order for him to be able to represent life as he saw it within the African-American community, he would need to incorporate African-American vernacular forms of art into his poetry. Towards that end, Hughes began using African-American musical forms in his poetry as a means of creating a distinctly African-American poetic voice.

Hughes understood the intimate connection between African-American musical forms and the African-American vernacular tradition. After all, African-American musical forms such as the blues and jazz were developed as an outgrowth of the African oral tradition in order to enable African-Americans, many of whom had historically been prohibited from learning to read and write and thus could not participate in a literary mode of creation, to express themselves creatively. As he explained in his seminal essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes felt that the blues and jazz best exemplified the spirit he wished to express:

> 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. . . . [J]azz 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. (228)

Hughes realized that African-American musical forms, especially the blues and jazz, were created as a response to the many different problems that Negroes encountered in America. Hughes also understood that the driving rhythm and the "double consciousness" at the heart of these musical forms help express a sense of resilience in the face of life's problems; through the blues and jazz, African-Americans are able to assert themselves artistically in a musical form which allows for individual expression, yet simultaneously manages to nurture a sense of community. Therefore, by using these musical forms as a resource for his poetry, Hughes could develop an individual voice on the written page while providing African-Americans with a collective voice.

Because I've studied jazz as a musician, I've always been aware of Hughes's fusion of music and poetry, but I didn't really understand the musical inspiration well enough to explain how Hughes was using it on the written page. I felt that I needed to understand the music and the history behind it before I could read and understand the poetry on Hughes's terms. Therefore, I concentrated on listening to the blues, be-bop, and hard bop so that I could hear what Hughes heard when he was writing.

The first step involved listening to various recordings of the blues, be-bop, and hard bop and trying to identify some common concepts and structures within the music. Each chapter of this thesis begins with a basic explanation of some of these concepts and structures in the music; Hughes himself often provided a description of what the music "did," and I often followed his suggestions in listening to the music for myself. However, Hughes rarely provided explicit commentary on the larger meanings behind the blues and jazz, so I often referred to LeRoi Jones's Blues People; although its findings are disputed by some, this book provided me with a great deal of insight into the social and political ramifications of African-American music.[2] Since African-American music is often a response to whatever is going on at the time, I realized that in order to understand the blues, be-bop, and hard bop I would need to learn a little African-American history

from each musical period. The incidents and trends mentioned within each historical synopsis were chosen because Hughes alludes to them, explicitly or implicitly, in his musical-poetic collections.

After listening to the music, reading about it, and developing an understanding of its socio-historical context, I began to read Hughes's poetry while listening to the music in my mind. In addition to describing the blues and jazz as musical forms, Hughes often provided suggestions for how his musical poetry should be read, so I often read according to his suggestions. It wasn't long before I began to *hear* Hughes's poetry as I read, and I began to think about how to discuss Hughes's poetry in musical terms. I decided that I had to develop a vocabulary based on music in order to discuss Hughes's poetry, and although this caused a great deal of difficulty for me, it was really the only way to indicate and describe the fusion of music and poetry which Hughes sought to create.

I found that Hughes's poetic career parallels that of a developing musician, beginning with his early attempts to capture the blues in his poetry. The poems from The Weary Blues suggest a classically trained musician who has just discovered the expressive possiblitites of the blues, but has not yet mastered the techniques necessary to release that expressiveness--Hughes hasn't learned the "blue notes" yet, and therefore his "playing" (i.e., his poetry) generally lacks the depth of feeling that is essential to the blues.[3] With Fine Clothes to the Jew, Hughes has begun to find the blue notes, and his poetry indicates that he is learning how to play the blues in writing, but he doesn't use the notes consistently and effectively. Occasionally, he finds the notes and makes them ring, but more often than not Hughes is still struggling, still trying to figure out how to use the blues on the written page.

Shakespeare in Harlem represents Hughes's mastery of the blues, both structurally and conceptually, and with this collection Hughes's poetic abilities finally match his understanding of the blues. Hughes realized that presenting the structures of African-American music in his poetry wasn't enough to provide a complete representation of African-American life; the poetry lacked

"soul." Therefore, he began to incorporate the African-American rhetorical practice of *Signifying* in order to comment on Anglo-Americans and their attitudes towards African-Americans. *Signifying* is an African-American rhetorical practice of verbal indirection that encompasses a wide variety of sub-practices, including: "playing the dozens" (to trade insults about each other's relatives, usually mothers, in an attempt to provoke an angry reaction), "loud-talking" (to talk to someone about a third party, without addressing that third party directly, with the intent to be overheard), and "woofing" (self-aggrandizement). *Signifying* is a means of indirect communication that often seeks to exploit the difference between the denotative meaning of a word (or situation) and its meaning within a specific context; in other words, *Signifying* often uses verbal or dramatic irony to play on the multiple meanings which a word (or situation) might have as opposed to the intended meaning of the word (or situation).[4] Beginning with Shakespeare in Harlem, Hughes's use of *Signifying* became increasingly apparent as he repeatedly modified traditional Western poetic forms to suit his own particular aesthetic philosophies; with this collection, Hughes finds an effective blues voice, and that discovery enables him to present African-American life from an African-American perspective while allowing him to maintain a sense of individuality.

After Hughes showed that he had "paid the dues" by playing the blues effectively in Shakespeare in Harlem, he began to incorporate the greater complexity of jazz, which had become the newest form of musical expression within the African-American community, into his poetry. With the collection Montage of a Dream Deferred, Hughes captures the seemingly erratic rhythms and the screaming solos of bebop, which suggested a sense of unrest and anger within the African-American community concerning their second-class status in American society. However, in addition to responding to the surrounding environment, the sounds of bebop indicated the increasing complexity of African-American music, which had quickly developed from the long-suffering, put-upon nature of the blues into the defiant and subversive call for change in American society that bebop embodied. As the anger and frustration of bebop developed into the nationalistic

pride of hard bop, Hughes adapted his poetry once again to represent the musical forms which he felt were essential to an understanding of African-American culture. However, with Ask Your Mama, Hughes changes his techniques of musical representation so that he no longer acts as a poet attempting to capture the sense of a musical form on the written page; instead, Hughes creates a musical setting for his poetry, thus changing his function from that of a poet writing about music to that of a soloist whose words become notes within a musical performance.

In order to become this sort of a musician-poet, Hughes had to once again incorporate *Signifying* into his poetry in order to give his jazz poetry some "soul." His use of *Signifying* also enabled him to reflect the increasingly confrontational attitudes among jazz musicians, whose music reflected these attitudes. Several poems within Montage of a Dream Deferred offer an indirect commentary on Anglo-American attitudes towards African-Americans, but the collection Ask Your Mama suggests a much more outspoken attitude as Hughes's poetry, which may be read as imaginary lyrics for a hard bop composition, reflects the tensions and impatience of an African-American community which could no longer passively accept their less-than-equal status in American society. Thus, Ask Your Mama represents the culmination of Hughes's attempts to fuse the vernacular arts of music and *Signifying* with the literary art of poetry as he sought to provide the reader with an understanding of the music while creating an African-American voice in American literature.

Chapter 1--Finding the Blue Notes: Hughes's Search for a Poetic Voice

The blues are considered to be a distinctly African-American musical form, produced by Africans who were forcibly brought to America to be used for slave labor; these transplanted Africans were subjected to systematic and institutionalized forms of racism and degradation which threatened to destroy not only their culture but also their very identities as human beings. These African slaves responded to this destructive environment by opting to create a form of art which would enable them not only to endure their environment, but would also provide them with a means of transforming their negative experiences into something more positive and life-affirming; this desire to create a life-affirming form of art led to the creation of the blues. Because they have developed from an oral tradition, it is difficult to provide accurate dates for the blues' development as a musical form, but W. C. Handy, often known as "the father of the blues," began transcribing blues songs around 1910, and blues recordings had become quite popular by the late 1920s.

The blues developed from many different styles of music, most notably the work songs and spirituals, which were created by African slaves in America. The blues combine elements from both of these earlier musical forms, but the blues also manage to change them into something which is different from either work songs or spirituals.[1] Singers of work songs and spirituals were (and still are) often able to transform their earthly experiences into something more bearable by singing through their troubles, keeping their minds occupied with singing rather than dwelling on their pain. The blues serve a similar purpose, and they seem to have developed from a combination of the very mundane and earthy concerns associated with the shouts and work songs of the South and the promise of a better day associated with the spirituals.

Several elements that are common to work songs (also known as shouts) and spirituals developed into important elements of the blues. The first--and the most important--element involves the concept of singing about one's problems in order to transform those problems into something more bearable. The blues singer often achieves this effect through the use of verbal or dramatic irony; by singing about one's troubles while retaining an ironic sense of humor about

those troubles, also known as "laughing to keep from crying," the singer can transform feelings of depression (i.e., "the blues") through song into feelings of happiness. This dual nature, which is at the heart of the blues, creates a "double consciousness" within the music that becomes a source of personal power, a survival mechanism, enabling the singer to sing his or her troubles away. Langston Hughes understood that the blues had a very therapeutic effect for the singer, and he also realized that the blues are not a form of self-pity, but rather an assertion of one's own resiliency in the face of adversity:

> The blues are mostly very sad songs about being without love, without money, or without a home. And yet, almost always in the blues, there is some humorous twist of thought, in words that make people laugh. They have a very definite lyric pattern, the blues, one long line which is repeated, then a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes, but not often, instead of being repeated, the second line is omitted. The music is slow, often mournful, yet syncopated, with the kind of marching bass behind it that seems to say, "In spite of fate, bad luck, these blues themselves, I'm going on, *on!* I'm going to get there." One very beautiful old blues, *Trouble in Mind*, has the refrain, "The sun's gonna shine in my back door some day." That's the way the blues are, about trouble, yet looking for the sun. (Hughes, Famous Negro Music Makers 94)

As an avid listener and student of blues and jazz music, Hughes realized that, by using the blues as a foundation for his poetry, he could describe and comment on the poverty and misery suffered within the Negro community without stripping his personae of their dignity.

A second important element of the blues involves the concept of a shared identity, which is often created by a sense of shared suffering or commiseration between the singer and audience, as well as among the audience members themselves. As the blues singer sings about his or her troubles, which often deal with common problems such as poverty or relationships gone sour, many of the audience members find that they have had similar experiences, and through these

shared experiences the audience members identify with the singer's blues. By identifying with the singer's blues, the audience members can identify more closely with each other and with the singer, creating a sense of shared identity. Thus, the blues as a musical form provided Hughes with a means to describe African-Americans and their common experiences in a form and voice that was considered distinctly African-American. It is quite likely that by writing blues poetry, which can be seen as a form of singing the blues, Hughes also sought to exorcise some of his own pain as he sought to express his sense of an African-American community.[2]

In addition to the important conceptual elements of a "double consciousness" and the idea of a shared identity, several structural elements also descended from work songs and spirituals to the blues. The first of these elements involves the driving rhythm of work songs and spirituals--although some blues songs involve rhythmic variations, the vast majority use a relatively simple, unchanging rhythm, which is representative of the resilient spirit of the blues. Another important element which continued from work songs and spirituals into the blues, but especially into jazz (an extension of the blues in the same manner that the blues are an extension of work songs and spirituals), is the call-and-response structure, whereby the musician will sing a line and the audience will provide a response. In the blues, one form of the call-and-response structure can be seen in the verses--the long line which is repeated acts as a call, and the third line of the verse acts as a response. Finally, the improvisatory nature of the work songs survived in the blues and began to thrive in jazz; similar to the manner in which workers would sing improvised verses which were followed by a set chorus, early blues performers often improvised verses over a simple guitar or harmonica accompaniment. This simple form of improvisation eventually developed into the much more complex improvisation of jazz; for instance, a jazz performer may modify a certain musical phrase repeatedly as he or she changes certain notes or the tempo, or each member of the band may follow a pre-arranged progression of musical chords as each performer plays a different series of notes within that chord.[3] This improvisatory element enables the blues

or jazz performer to "speak" as an individual while retaining a larger sense of his or her place within the community. While these particular musical elements might not be exclusive to African and African-American music, they are certainly characteristic of the African-American musical forms of work songs, spirituals, blues, and jazz; therefore, in his attempts to create an African-American poetic voice on the written page, Hughes sought to incorporate these various structural and conceptual elements into his poetry.

The most obvious problem that Hughes encountered in presenting a musical form such as the blues on the written page is that the blues are to be sung, not read. Generally speaking, blues lyrics must be sung and performed to music in order to be fully expressed, since the music is often very important to the mood being portrayed, as is the voice of the singer. For instance, a blues that reads like a sad lament might be put to a driving, danceable rhythm and may be played and sung in a very joyful mood, which would help to offset any sadness to be found in the lyrics. The reverse is also true; even though the Mississippi Sheiks' arrangement of "Sittin' on Top of the World" is played to a slow, mournful rhythm, the singer describes his happiness at having lost his latest lover. In other words, the musical accompaniment often helps contribute to the irony that helps create the "double consciousness" of the blues' lyrics.

Hughes was aware of this musical element of the blues; therefore, he didn't try to write authentic blues songs. Instead, he seems to be more concerned with capturing the spirit of the blues, as Steven Tracy explains:

> . . . his artistic attitude seems to revolve around the blues as a central resource for his literary art as opposed to finely wrought literary art in themselves. Hughes was much better at using the blues as a resource for his art than he was at producing a poem attempting to approximate authentic folk blues lyrics, because he tried to make those poems of his generally representative and quaintly humorous in a sad way. ("To the Tune" 79)

Hughes seemed to believe that he could capture the spirit of the blues by writing about the songs,

as well as writing poems that read like blues lyrics, even though there would be no musical accompaniment. (He did make sound recordings later, though, which feature selections from his work.) While he realized that he couldn't represent the music directly in his poetry, Hughes often attempted to suggest the sound of the blues through the use of common blues rhythms and structures, and even in poems that didn't resemble the blues structurally, he often borrowed concepts from the blues to create a blues-inspired poetry; by using the blues as his chosen mode of expression, Hughes shows his understanding of the intimate connection between the blues and African-American culture. Similar to the manner in which a blues musician creates a community consciousness while singing about his or her individual concerns, Hughes's blues-inspired poetry, which he published between the 1920s and the 1940s, enabled him to communicate the concerns of the African-American community while maintaining his own individual poetic voice.

Hughes's first collection of poems, The Weary Blues, was published in 1926, and the title alludes to the African-American musical forms which would begin to exert an increasing influence on his poetry. The poems of this collection exhibit Hughes's preoccupation with presenting a variety of African-American experiences. However, many of the poems from this collection read like still-life portraits of African-Americans and their experiences, because the people that Hughes tries to present in the poems don't speak for themselves; instead, they are often represented by an external voice that adheres to a traditional literary style, as in the case of "Poem [4]":[4]

> Ah,
> My black one,
> Thou art not beautiful
> Yet thou hast
> A loveliness
> Surpassing beauty.
>
> Oh,
> My black one,
> Thou art not good
> Yet thou hast
> A purity
> Surpassing goodness.
>
> Ah,

My black one,
Thou art not luminous
Yet an altar of jewels,
An altar of shimmering jewels,
Would pale in the light
Of thy darkness,
Pale in the light
Of thy nightness. (1-21)

Although this is an extreme example of Hughes's early struggles to represent African-Americans through poetry, it illustrates Hughes's attempts to legitimize African-Americans and their experiences by presenting them in the forms and language of the dominant (i.e., Anglo-American) culture, which emphasizes a literary mode of expression. Hughes's traditional Western literary influences are made apparent by his use of archaisms such as "thou" and "thy." In addition, the speaker tries to create in the reader an appreciation of the subject's beauty by insisting that the subject has "A loveliness / Surpassing beauty" (5-6), despite the fact that he or she doesn't necessarily fit traditional Western definitions of beauty. This attempt to redefine traditional Western ideas of beauty recalls Shakespeare's Sonnet #130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"), which reacted against traditional definitions of beauty in a similar manner. However, as he reacts against traditional Western concepts of beauty in his poetry, Hughes has done nothing to redefine those concepts because the subject's beauty is defined in traditional Western terms. In this particular case, the result is an objectification of the very people he sought to represent--the third-person perspective suggests a sense of detachment from the subject, as though viewing him or her from a distance, and therefore the reader feels no sense of identification with the person being described. If the reader identifies with anyone in this poem, the reader identifies with the unidentified third-person speaker, who speaks in a traditional Western voice without establishing the community consciousness which African-American forms of art seek to nurture.

Not all of Hughes's early efforts to represent African-American experiences in an African-American voice were as unsuccessful as "Poem [4]"; however, many of the poems within The Weary Blues seem to present "Negroes" as a kind of museum piece--something to be admired and

appreciated, but something to be appreciated from a distance. Even "The Weary Blues," the centerpiece of the collection, suggests this same sort of detachment from the subject:

> *Dron*ing a *drowsy* *sync*opated *tune,*
> *Rock*ing back and *forth* to a *mel*low *croon,*
>   I *heard* a *N*egro *play.*
> *Down* on Lenox *A*venue the *oth*er *night*
> By the *pale* dull *pal*lor of an *old* gas *light*
>   He *did* a *lazy sway* . . .
>   He *did* a *lazy sway* . . .
> To the *tune* o' *those Weary Blues.*
> With his *e*bony *hands* on each *i*vory *key*
> He made that *poor* piano *moan* with *mel*ody.
>   O *Blues*!
> *Sway*ing to and *fro* on his *rick*ety *stool*
> He played that *sad* raggy *tune* like a musical *fool.*
>   Sweet *Blues*!
> In a *deep* song *voice* with a *mel*ancholy *tone*
> I *heard* that Negro *sing*, that *old* piano *moan*--
>   "Ain't *got* nobody in all this *world,*
>   Ain't got *no*body but ma *self.*
>   I's *gwine* to quit ma *frown*in'
>   And put ma *trou*bles 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 satis*fied.*
>   *Got* the Weary *Blues*
>   And *can't* be satis*fied*--
>   I ain't *hap*py 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 *sing*er stopped *play*ing and *went* to *bed*
> While the *Weary Blues* echoed *through* his *head.*
> He *slept* like a *rock* or a *man* that's *dead.* (1-33)

Hughes's attempts to connect with the reader are more effective with this poem because he manages to suggest the sound of the blues through his description of the music and through his use of meter; in other words, Hughes uses the structures of the blues as a means of creating a shared identity with the reader. He describes the sound of the blues by calling it a "drowsy syncopated tune" (1) and a "sad raggy tune" (13), but he also represents the sound of the blues in his poetry by carefully manipulating the meter to suggest the rhythm of the blues. As the italicized type shows,

Hughes uses four strong beats in lines 1 and 2, establishing a sense of a steady rhythm for the reader which is reinforced in lines 4 and 5 and carries throughout the rest of the poem. The unstressed syllables need not be evenly distributed, provided that the singer (or the reader) maintains the rhythm suggested by the stressed syllables, which is known in musical terms as "staying on the beat." Also, not all of the lines require four stresses; instead, the fourth beat may be implied, which represents the singer's "carrying" of a note for two beats instead of one. This metrical structure is strongly suggestive of the 4/4 time signature, the most commonly used time signature in the blues, and by using this metrical structure Hughes immerses the reader more completely in the music, not only by describing the music but also by allowing the reader to hear and feel its rhythm.

With "The Weary Blues," Hughes manages to connect the reader more effectively to his sense of an African-American community than in the case of "Poem [4]" because he uses the four-beat rhythm of the blues and provides a vivid description of the sounds of an evening spent in a Harlem blues bar, but the third-person perspective still prevents the reader from identifying with the piano player in the poem. In addition, the blues song that Hughes includes as part of the poem is set off in quotation marks, which seems to further separate the reader from the blues being sung; because the reader depends upon the speaker of the poem to describe the blues, the reader is unable to fully experience the music. Therefore, the reader cannot fully understand the implications of the music being described, cannot really "hear" the music, because although Hughes suggests the sound of the blues rather effectively, he limits their expressive potential by inserting a third-person mediator to describe the music and report the lyrics. This third-person perspective stifles the sense of a shared identity that is essential to the blues and distances the reader from the experiences which Hughes is attempting to describe, since the blues are an extremely personal and intimate musical form. Finally, the poem itself doesn't really indicate the "double consciousness" of the blues, because the poem ends without any sort of ambiguity; the singer simply goes to bed after singing about his "Weary Blues," without any indication of irony or "laughing to keep from

crying." In other words, there are no "loose ends" within the poem because the singer gets rid of his "weary blues" by the physical act of going to bed, instead of achieving a metaphysical transformation of his troubles by singing the blues. Generally speaking, the blues are much more open-ended than this poem, because blues lyrics often lead to an unresolved situation that remains unresolved at the end of the song, with the listener facing the same sort of uncertainty, frustration, and confusion, combined with a sense of hope and possibility, that confronts the singer and allows for the "double consciousness" at the heart of the blues.

The Weary Blues indicates Hughes's difficulties in translating a musical form to the written page, because even though Hughes has figured out how to use the rhythm of the blues, he has yet to figure out how the melody or the lyrics work on the page. Often, the reader feels separated from the people that Hughes represents in these poems, because Hughes represents them using a third-person voice instead of allowing them to present themselves. Generally speaking, African-Americans do not have a voice within the collection because they are not allowed to speak for themselves or share their experiences; in this sense, Hughes has prevented the reader from being able to identify with them. Therefore, his poetry lacks one of the essential elements of the blues, the idea that the singer must sing about his or her own experiences in his or her own voice in order to create a shared identity. To return to the musical metaphor, The Weary Blues indicates that Hughes has heard the blues and realizes that they will help him to represent African-Americans in their own voice, but he hasn't yet discovered how to play the blue notes in his poetry because his classical training (i.e., the Western literary tradition, which insists on the primacy of the written word) prevents him from being able to find those "notes," such as the use of an African-American first-person voice to sing the blues, on the written page.

Hughes's next collection of blues-inspired poetry, Fine Clothes to the Jew, was published in 1927, and with this collection Hughes shows that he has begun find the blue notes. However, while he has begun to develop techniques allowing him to translate the blues to the written page, his poetry suggests that he's still having difficulties with the translation. Many of the poems in this

collection have been written from a first-person perspective, which helps to facilitate the blues' sense of a shared identity, and Hughes uses vernacular language (dialect) much more frequently within the collection to suggest that his subjects are speaking for themselves. Additionally, several of the poems read like blues songs that have been directly transcribed onto the written page, rather than the indirect representational style Hughes used in "The Weary Blues." In fact, most of the poems within Fine Clothes to the Jew offer much more successful representations of African-American experiences than those offered within The Weary Blues.

With Fine Clothes to the Jew, the people that Hughes sought to represent begin to speak for themselves and tell their own stories without the interference of a third-person speaker, and this more direct presentation makes for a much more effective means of describing African-Americans' experiences. However, Hughes hasn't quite captured the spirit of resiliency inherent in the blues; many of the poems sound like instances of self-pity, as in "Dressed Up":

> I had ma clothes cleaned
> Just like new
> I put 'em on but
> I still feels blue.
>
> I bought a new hat,
> Sho is fine,
> But I wish I had back that
> Old gal o' mine.
>
> I got new shoes,--
> They don't hurt ma feet,
> But I ain't got nobody
> For to call me sweet. (1-12)

The third-person poetic voice that dominated The Weary Blues has been removed and replaced with the first-person perspective of the singer; therefore, the reader/listener has an easier time identifying with the singer because he or she hears the singer's blues first-hand, without the interference of a third-person mediator. In addition, Hughes has begun to indicate his realization that in order to accurately represent African-American life, in order to give his poetry the "soul" that it lacked, he would need to turn to other vernacular forms in addition to music, which included

the use of dialect spellings. The use of non-standard spellings and grammar suggest that Hughes is not interested in writing from a traditional Western literary perspective--he wants to provide African-Americans with their own distinctive voice, and during the 1920s the average Negro blues singer tended to live in a rural setting and spoke a vernacular form of English (hence the non-standard spelling and grammar in an attempt to represent a Southern, African-American dialect).

In "Dressed Up," Hughes shows a realization that in order to represent the blues on the written page, the blues poems must be written from a first-person perspective, and he handles this aspect of the poetry well. However, this poem does not suggest the "double consciousness" at the heart of the blues, because in this particular poem the singer has not been able to escape his pain at all. Initially, the singer tries to rid himself of his pain by having his clothes cleaned, but he tells his audience "I still feels blue" (4). He then proceeds to buy a new hat and shoes, but his new outfit has not helped him to forget the source of his pain, which still lingers at the end of the poem: "I ain't got nobody / For to call me sweet" (11-12). The singer has not moved past his pain at all, and instead dwells on it throughout the poem; the spirit of resiliency at the heart of the blues is missing from this poem, suggesting that although Hughes has done a better job of representing an African-American voice, he still has not mastered the translation of the blues into poetry.

Despite the problems that Hughes encountered with representing an oral form on the written page, he does begin to achieve success with some of the poems in Fine Clothes to the Jew. For instance, "Hard Luck" suggests not only the structure and sound of the blues, but also includes the blues concept of a shared identity. In addition, the "double consciousness" at the heart of the blues is suggested by the final two lines, which provide a wry commentary suggesting the dire financial straits that the singer is currently enduring:

> When hard luck overtakes you
> Nothin' for you to do.
> When hard luck overtakes you
> Nothin' for you to do.
> Gather up yo' fine clothes
> An' sell 'em to de Jew.

Jew takes yo' fine clothes,
Gives you a dollar an' a half.
Jew takes yo' fine clothes,
Gives you a dollar an' a half.
Go to de bootleg's,
Git some gin to make you laugh.

If I was a mule I'd
Git me a waggon to haul.
If I was a mule I'd
Git a waggon to haul.
I'm so low-down I
Ain't even got a stall. (1-18)

The stanzaic structure mimics the traditional structure of the blues--a long line which is repeated (the call line) and then followed by a third rhyming line (the response line)--but Hughes breaks each line into two parts so that a three-line blues verse becomes a six-line stanza. Hughes also manages to suggest the shared identity of the blues by using both a first- and second-person perspective. These perspectives suggest that the singer is singing directly to the audience, or "calling" to them, as an invitation to understand his or her problems before relating a final joke which the audience members appreciate because they have begun to identify with, or "respond" to, the singer's woes. Finally, Hughes manages to suggest the "double consciousness" of the blues in the final two lines through the use of wry humor as he suggests that, although the singer is not a mule, he or she might have a better life if he or she were because right now the singer "Ain't even got a stall" (18).

"Hard Luck" shows that Hughes was beginning to understand how to capture the blues on the written page, and it is important to note some of the techniques he used to accomplish this feat. A subtle but important difference between traditional blues songs and Hughes's blues poetry is in the stanzaic structure, because Hughes often breaks blues lines into two parts[5], as he did with "Hard Luck." This stanzaic structure adds to the dramatic tension within the poem as the singer begins by singing, "When hard luck overtakes you" (1), leaving the audience members in suspense as they wait to hear what advice the singer might have to offer about dealing with hard luck. However, rather than offering any helpful advice, the singer disappoints the audience members by

telling them "Nothin' for you to do" (2). This anti-climactic call and response between the first line and the second line contributes to the sense of "double consciousness," since the second line becomes an ironic response to the first line.

Another subtle technique Hughes uses in his blues poetry is found in the slightly modified repetition of the call lines in each stanza. The last stanza of "Hard Luck" contains an example of this modification as line 16 repeats line 14, but without the repetition of the word "me." This slightly modified repetition indicates the improvisatory element of the blues by suggesting that the singer is changing the repeated lines as he or she sings them for the audience. David Chinitz argues convincingly that Hughes often used this technique not only to suggest an improvisatory element but also for its poetic possibilities.[6] However, in the case of "Hard Luck," the modified repetition is used only once, so it would appear that Hughes is simply suggesting that the singer is improvising.

Fine Clothes to the Jew suggests that Hughes was beginning to find the blue notes, and he was beginning to understand how to include them in his poetry. He had begun developing techniques which allowed him to suggest the "double consciousness" of the blues in his poetry, such as his use of ironic, "open" endings and the changes in stanzaic structure. He also resorted almost exclusively to a first-person perspective in his poetry, suggesting that in order to create in the reader a sense of identification with the people he sought to represent, he needed to allow them to speak for themselves--he couldn't allow an external third-person voice to come between the singer-storyteller and the audience. These important developments in Hughes's poetic technique begin to appear in Fine Clothes to the Jew, but they appear sporadcially and inconsistently in the collection--some of his blues poetry works like the blues, and some of it fails. Although Hughes had begun to show an understanding of how to translate music to the written page, it took him another fifteen years to publish a collection which showed that he had mastered the techniques of representing the blues in poetry.

In the early 1940s, Hughes published Shakespeare in Harlem, his most effective use of a

blues aesthetic, and with this collection Hughes also begins to incorporate other elements of the African-American vernacular and oral tradition into his poetry. Hughes realized that capturing the structures of the blues on the written page provided an incomplete representation of African-Americans; he needed to include the "soul" that the vernacular tradition provided. The rhetorical practice of *Signifying* is the most notable of African-American vernacular elements that Hughes uses in his attempt to create a distinctly African-American, blues-influenced form of poetry that presents the African-American values of a strong community and cooperation (as opposed to Anglo-Americans' belief in rugged individuality), and an appreciation of life's ironies and paradoxes (instead of insisting on the dichotomies which characterize Western thought). In this collection, Hughes *Signifies* on traditional Western literary forms by changing the forms to suit his particular wishes, similar to a jazz musician's revision of a musical standard (i.e., John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" or Miles Davis's "I Loves You Porgy"). By *Signifying* on these Western literary forms, Hughes comments on their inadequacy in helping him achieve an African-American form of expression because these forms have virtually excluded African-American experiences.

The title of the collection itself, Shakespeare in Harlem, suggests Hughes's desire to create an African-American perspective by revising Anglo-American forms and concepts in his poetry. For most readers of the English language, Shakespeare represents the epitome of Western poetry, but Hughes felt that Western poetry and Shakespeare excluded an African-American perspective. Therefore, Hughes decided that he needed to show the world how Shakespeare might have written had he lived in twentieth-century Harlem rather than in sixteenth-century London. By transplanting Shakespeare and taking him to Harlem, Hughes *Signifies* on traditional definitions of literature and implicitly suggests that if Shakespeare had lived in Harlem, his poetry might have presented a perspective similar to that of Hughes's work and might have used similar forms. Within the collection, Hughes *Signifies* on Western literature by modifying traditional poetic structures in order to give expression to an African-American community that had long been overlooked by most Western (i.e., Anglo-American) readers. As he had done with The Weary Blues and Fine

Clothes to the Jew, Hughes used the blues as a source of poetic inspiration, and this collection contains Hughes's most effective blues poetry. The increased effectiveness of Hughes's blues poetry can be traced, at least in part, to his inclusion of other elements of the African-American oral and vernacular tradition, such as *Signifying,* in his representation of the "soul" of African-American life.

Many of Hughes's blues poems in Shakespeare in Harlem exhibit the concepts of a "double consciousness" and a shared identity, as well as the poetic techniques he developed to suggest the structure of the blues, but the poem "Love Again Blues" provides a particularly good example of Hughes's use of these concepts and structures:

> My life ain't nothin'
> But a lot o' Gawd-knows-what.
> I say my life ain't nothin'
> But a lot o' Gawd-knows-what.
> Just one thing after 'nother
> Added to de trouble that I got.
>
> When I got you I
> Thought I had an angel-chile.
> When I got you
> Thought I had an angel-chile.
> You turned out to be a devil
> That mighty nigh drove me wild!
>
> Tell me, tell me,
> What makes love such an ache and pain?
> Tell me what makes
> Love such an ache and pain?
> It takes you and it breaks you--
> But you got to love again. (1-18)

As with "Hard Luck," Hughes uses six-line stanzas to represent the three-line verses of the blues, and he also modifies the repetition of the first and second line in each stanza in order to suggest the improvisatory nature of the blues. Once again, he uses the first-person perspective to increase the sense of a shared identity as the singer complains that he or she feels like life is worthless, and that his or her troubles seem to keep piling up. The audience members may begin wondering what could have brought the singer to these depths of depression, but in another form of the call-and-

response structure of African-American music, the next verse responds to that implicit question by suggesting that the singer's most recent relationship has just ended badly. This suggestion is confirmed in the next verse as the singer asks, "What makes love such an ache and pain?" (14). This question constitues an explicit call from the singer for some kind of response, hopefully in the form of an answer, but most of the audience members are probably wondering the same thing since they've endured similar pain; the call receives no response, which seems to suggest that sometimes there are no answers to life's questions. Therefore, the singer resolutely accepts his or her fate, stating that love "takes you and it breaks you-- / But you got to love again" (17-18).

Because the singer does not describe specific details of his or her failed relationship, the listener can easily identify with the singer's general sense of pain; after all, most people have suffered through the end of a relationship at one time or another, and those people can recognize the apparent futility of searching for love because it can cause "such an ache and pain." However, those that recognize this futility would also recognize the irony implicit in the ending, because after singing about the pain that love can cause, the singer is already thinking about looking for love once again. This ironic ending suggests the singer's resiliency, but it also provides a wry sense of irony shared by the audience since most audience members have been involved in multiple relationships, no matter how badly some of them may have ended, and they didn't let the pain of a break-up keep them from finding love once again. With this poem and others within the collection, Hughes shows a comprehensive understanding of the tenets of the blues and the techniques necessary to represent this musical form on the page.

Hughes didn't just write blues poems for the collection, though. He also included poems that were inspired by the blues, and he captured the "soul" of the blues through *Signifying*. For instance, Hughes included a set of seven poems in the collection which he entitled "Seven Moments of Love: An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues." The title itself shows a wry sort of African-American vernacular humor by referring to the mini-collection as an "Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues," which is a *Signification* on the traditional literary forms of the sonnet and the sonnet

sequence. In this particular mini-collection, Hughes shows himself to be so comfortable writing blues poetry that he has decided to modify or revise traditional poetic forms such as the sonnet from a blues singer's perspective.

The subject matter of Hughes's "un-sonnet sequence" is the same as that of many traditional sonnet sequences--namely, the nature of love--but Hughes treats the subject with the much more ironic tone of African-American vernacular speakers and singers, not with the tone of traditional Western poets, who drew their ideas about the sonnet form from writers such as Petrarch and Spenser. In traditional sonnets, the speaker, who is usually a male, idealizes his would-be lover's beauty and often professes his undying love for her in rather erudite and intricately rhymed lines; in addition, the speaker often describes the cruelty and coldness of this would-be lover, since she repeatedly rebukes his advances. Hughes reacted against these traditional sonnets by creating a set of poems which resemble sonnets in form and content but change their form and content in such a way that Hughes's "un-sonnets" seem much more representative of African-American life as he knew it, without the idealizations of life and love that traditional sonneteers espoused, but rather with a blues sensibility. Whereas many sonnet sequences follow the beginnings and growth of a relationship (George Meredith's "Modern Love" is a notable exception), Hughes's "un-sonnet sequence" begins, in a manner similar to that of the blues, at what appears to be the end of a relationship.

“Seven Moments of Love” chronicles the changing emotional states of a man whose wife has left him, and in the first poem of the sequence, "Twilight Reverie," the singer of the sequence describes his feelings of pain and anger upon discovering that his wife has left him. By "Supper Time," the second poem in the sequence, the singer begins to miss his wife because she is no longer there to fix supper for him and because he'll have to take a reduction in pay if he's no longer married. As "Bed Time" arrives, the singer indicates that he is becoming increasingly miserable because he has no means to distract himself from the loneliness he feels, and although he states defiantly that he sleeps much better now that his wife has left, the last line betrays his feelings of

loneliness. This loneliness returns at "Daybreak" when the singer is rudely awakened by his alarm clock instead of his wife, a loneliness which is only made worse by the feelings of isolation he feels at being an African-American in a society dominated by Anglo-Americans. On "Sunday," the singer enjoys his freedom from church and continues to insist that he doesn't miss his wife, yet he mentions that his house is extremely quiet now and that he wouldn't mind having some friends over to make some noise; unfortunately (for them or for the singer?) they are all married, which means that they won't be able to come to his place. The singer ends the poem by stating that they should envy him, since he doesn't have to be anywhere now and he's free to do what he wants. "Pay day" arrives, and the singer is glad that he doesn't have to share his paycheck with his absentee wife; furthermore, he doesn't plan to continue payments for their furniture or their rings, and he plans to move into a smaller place in order to save money. These everyday details of life were often ignored by traditional Western sonneteers in favor of "more significant" themes, but Hughes shows that such seemingly mundane activities as waking up and paying bills also have special significance, especially when those activities which were previously taken for granted, such as a gentle wake-up in the morning, no longer take place.

Finally, the singer responds to a "Letter" from his wife, suggesting he shares her hopes for reconciliation by promising to try to change his ways, paying for her bus ticket and offering to meet her at the bus station. However, the singer doesn't seem desperate to have her back:

> Sure, I missed your trunk--but I didn't miss you.
> Yal, come on back--I know you want to.
> I might not forget and I might not forgive,
> But you just as well be here where you due to live.
> * * * * * *
> I can't get along with you, I can't get along without--
> So let's just forget what this fuss was about. (8-11, 14-15)

Although the singer seems pleased that his wife is returning, he also seems ambivalent about the idea of reuniting with her. While the singer's reaction may simply be false bravado, this is hardly the reaction a listener would expect upon hearing the first six "un-sonnets," because the singer repeatedly has alluded to feelings of loneliness; in a traditional sonnet, the reader would expect to

encounter a much more intense expression of joy and elation at the prospects of a reunion than the singer of Hughes's final "un-sonnet" offers. Thus, Hughes suggests the blues sensibility of these "un-sonnets," each of which suggests a variety of swiftly changing moods as the singer sings himself through the confusion and pain of the often-contradictory thoughts and feelings occasioned by the departure (and return) of his wife. To be sure, the singer misses the conveniences his wife offers such as warm dinners, quilts, and gentle wake-up calls in the morning, but does the singer miss *her*? This question is left unresolved, and the listener is left as unsure as the singer about what will follow the couple's reunion.

In "Seven Moments of Love," Hughes not only modified the content of traditional sonnets, but he also modified the traditional sonnet form. "Twilight Reverie," the first "un-sonnet," provides an example of this modified form:

> ***Here*** I ***set*** with a ***bit***ter old ***thought***,
> ***Some***thing in my ***mind bet***ter I for***got***.
> ***Set***ting here ***think***ing ***feel***ing ***sad***.
> Keep ***feel***ing like ***this*** I'm gonna ***start*** acting ***bad***.
> Gonna ***go*** get my ***pis***tol, I said ***for***ty-***four***--
> Make you ***walk*** like a ***ghost*** if you bother ***me*** any ***more***.
> Gonna ***go*** get my ***pis***tol, I mean ***thir***ty-***two***,
> And ***shoot*** all ***kinds*** o' ***shells*** into ***you***.
> ***Yal***, here I set ***think***ing--a ***bit***ter old ***thought***
> About ***two*** kinds o' ***pis***tols that ***I*** ain't ***got***.
> If I ***just*** had an ***Owl*** Head, old ***Owl*** Head would ***do***,
> Cause I'd ***take*** that ***Owl*** Head and ***fire*** on ***you***.
> But I ain't ***got*** no ***Owl*** Head and ***you*** done left ***town***
> And ***here*** I set ***think***ing with a ***bit***ter old ***frown***.
> It's ***dark*** on this stoop, ***Lawd***! The ***sun's*** gone ***down***! (1-15)

Structurally, this poem resembles traditional sonnets, but Hughes makes some significant modifications to the original sonnet form. The most obvious modification is in the length of the poem--although some of the poems within "Seven Moments of Love" are in fact fourteen lines in length, this particular poem contains fifteen lines, as opposed to the traditional fourteen-line sonnet, and other poems within the mini-collection contain only thirteen lines. Hughes has also modified the meter of the traditional sonnet; the lines are not written in iambic pentameter, but are instead suggestive of the 4/4 time signature of the blues. Finally, rather than using a traditional

sonnet rhyme scheme such as Shakespearean or Spenserian, Hughes uses rhymed couplets to suggest a less "literary" sonnet, a sonnet which derives its stanzaic structure more directly from African folktales and the blues than from traditional sonnets[7]. Through these modifications, Hughes suggests that the sonnet form as canonized in Western literature isn't always adequate as a representation of life; he seems to say, "Life doesn't adhere to the cookie-cutter form of a sonnet, so why should my poetry? Life is more like the blues, surviving in the face of adversity and improvising with what you've got, so that's what I want to represent."

Yet despite these differences in form, Hughes insists on drawing comparisons between this poem and traditional sonnets by calling it an "un-sonnet," indicating that although the poems in this sequence do not fit the traditional definition of a sonnet, they are an equally valid form of literary expression. Hughes also draws attention to the poems' form and the source of their inspiration by stating that they have been written "in Blues," suggesting that the fluid, improvisatory nature of the blues provides a more accurate portrayal of life than the rigid form of the sonnet. By drawing attention to the poems' form, Hughes *Signifies* on traditional poetic forms and indicates his belief that the blues are a legitimate art form, and that both the blues and his representations of the blues in poetry must be judged on their own terms, rather than those arbitrarily established by the dominant (i.e., Anglo-American) culture.

The poems of Shakespeare in Harlem represent the culmination of Hughes's search for a written voice which could speak for the orally-based African-American community, a search that began with "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." The Weary Blues indicates that Hughes understood that the blues were an excellent resource and an effective means for communicating his ideas, but the collection also indicates that Hughes simply hadn't worked out the difficulties of representing the blues on the written page while retaining their distinctly African-American spirit. His next collection, Fine Clothes to the Jew, suggests that Hughes was not only beginning to understand the concepts of the blues and how to use them in his poetry, but the collection also shows that he was beginning to develop poetic techniques that would allow him to represent the blues directly on

the page. Finally, with Shakespeare in Harlem, Hughes shows his maturity as a blues poet; Hughes managed to work out the difficulties of presenting an oral (and aural) medium such as the blues on the written page because he found ways to use the African-American vernacular language, especially *Signifying*, in his poetry. This growing maturity as a musician-poet was to carry over into Hughes's next musical-poetic endeavor, the use of be-bop music in the late 1940s and early 1950s poems of Montage of a Dream Deferred.

Chapter 2--Be-bop: "The Boogie-Woogie Rumble of a Dream Deferred"

During the 1920s, at about the same time that blues recordings were becoming popular in America, a parallel form of music known as jazz began to develop. This style of music relies much more heavily on instrumental prowess to achieve musical expression--whereas the blues are sung, jazz is *played*. Jazz is indeed based on the blues, yet "the blues form is simply a frame for the musical picture, a mold into which the jazzman pours his creative energy. The melody, harmony, and rhythm can become infinitely complicated, depending upon the performer's sophistication. Hence playing the blues is still an acid test for a jazzman" (Stearns 105). In other words, the blues serve as a foundation for many jazz tunes, but jazz tends to go beyond the blues in search of a more complex mode of expression. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Hughes turned to jazz as a musical resource for his poetry. Published in 1951, Montage of a Dream Deferred, which was Hughes's first collection of poetry inspired predominantly by jazz, indicates that Hughes's skills as a poet were developing in a manner similar to that of a musician; after Hughes had "paid his dues" by learning to play the blues in his poetry in order to show the resiliency of African-Americans and the diversity of life within their community, he built upon the techniques he had developed in order to express the spirit of the next major movement in African-American music, which had begun to direct the course of jazz music in the 1940s: the be-bop movement, also known simply as "bop."

The structures and concepts which are essential to the blues also serve as a foundation for many jazz tunes; jazz musicians may be described as *Signifying* upon the blues as they modify blues structures and concepts to suit their own particular vision. For instance, jazz involves the concept of a shared identity, but rather than sharing an identity with the audience members as blues performers often hope to do, jazz musicians often strive to reach a shared consciousness among the members of the band, pushing each other to new heights of artistry. By creating a solid musical foundation, the band as a whole encourages each musician to search for individual musical expression in the form of instrumental solos. However, as an individual musician struggles to find his or her "voice," that musician is also responsible for supporting the other members of the band

in their quest for expression. Therefore, jazz seeks to develop a community consciousness, but on a smaller scale than that of the blues; each be-bop combo becomes a self-sufficient community unto itself, enabling its members to express themselves with an individual voice as they simultaneously concern themselves with the welfare of the community.

A second conceptual element which continued into jazz from the blues involves the transformation of human emotion through the creation of music. However, the emotions and the "double consciousness" which had found expression in the blues had become much more complex by the time bop arrived on the musical scene; as a whole, the African-American community was becoming restless due to the frustration of living in a society that continued to deny African-Americans an equal status. The 1920s and '30s witnessed a large migration of African-Americans from rural areas in the South, where they suffered not only economically but also psychologically from "Jim Crow" laws and the fear of lynchings by the ever-present Ku Klux Klan, to the cities of the North in hopes of a better life (Franklin 472). Harlem became the ultimate destination for many of these pilgrims, but the economic prosperity which they had hoped to find in the North simply didn't exist because America was in the midst of the Great Depression, and the segregation which they had hoped to escape simply sprang up in forms different from those encountered in the South. Fortunately, World War II helped to bring the country out of the Great Depression by stimulating the American economy and putting people to work when many of the government's social programs had failed to relieve the economic hardships within the country (Franklin 576-579; 592-595); poems from Montage of a Dream Deferred, such as "Green Memory" and "Relief," suggest that this economic recovery was felt within the African-American community.

At the same time that World War II was revitalizing the American economy, though, many African-American soldiers were being called upon to sacrifice their lives in fighting a fascist regime that insisted on racial purity, even as their own country continued to relegate them to a second-class status (even going so far as to segregate black soldiers from white soldiers in the military); this irony was certainly not lost on African-Americans (Franklin 589-591; 597). Many within the

African-American community developed an "us against them" mentality concerning Anglo-Americans (Franklin 499), a mentality which was reciprocated by many Anglo-Americans. This defiant attitude was reflected in the be-bop movement, which was in some cases a direct reaction to the painful history which African-Americans had endured; for instance, among younger jazz musicians, there was a desire not to appear too eager to entertain their predominantly white audiences, because to do so could be seen as "Uncle Tomming."[1] Therefore, while bop was a revolution within the world of music, it also signalled a larger dissatisfaction within the African-American community concerning their status in American society and a belief among African-Americans that, despite their second-class status, their culture and its products were equally as valid as those of Anglo-Americans; in fact, some be-bop musicians saw their movement as a means of reclaiming jazz as a distinctly African-American musical form.[2]

Be-bop was "a sudden eruption within jazz, a fast but logical complication of melody, harmony, and rhythm. . . . The sounds of bop were literally unheard of and, accordingly, controversial" (Stearns 218). The advent of bop was a liberating experience for some players, and a frightening form of rebellion for others.[3] Musically speaking, some of the changes included supplanting refrains in favor of longer solo lines (although occasionally a repeated musical phrase, or "riff," would be used), "breaking" those solos without warning to create a sense of dissonance and unrest within the music, and replacing the driving beat of the bass drum with the lighter sense of rhythm provided by the cymbal, which gave the string bass more responsibility in maintaining the rhythm. Whereas earlier musical ensembles such as blues and swing bands often rehearsed their compositions as a group in order to achieve a sense of harmony and a common musical theme, be-bop combos relied much more heavily upon improvisation to achieve their musical expression. This improvisational element added excitement to a musical form which, in the eyes of many "boppers," had become complacent and boring, and it allowed for greater variety within the music as various collections of soloists played from their own individual perspectives to contribute

to the expression of a common musical theme.

Langston Hughes responded to the complex implications of be-bop by using it in his poetry and prose to express the hope and frustration African-Americans encountered while living a dream deferred. He showed his understanding of the music and its message through the voice of his most famous character, Jessie B. Simple, in a sketch entitled "Bop":

> "It all sounds like pure nonsense syllables to me."
>
> "Nonsense, nothing!" cried Simple. "Bop makes plenty of sense."
>
> "What kind of sense?"
>
> "You must not know where Bop comes from," said Simple, astonished at my ignorance.
>
> "I do not know," I said. "Where?"
>
> "From the police," said Simple.
>
> "What do you mean, from the police?"
>
> "From the police beating Negroes' heads," said Simple. "Every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club says, 'BOP! BOP! . . . BE-BOP! . . . MOP! . . . BOP!'
>
> "That Negro hollers, "Ooool-ya-koo! Ou-o-o!'
>
> "Old cop just keeps on, 'MOP! MOP! . . . BE-BOP! . . . MOP!' That's where Be-Bop came from, beaten right out of some Negro's head into them horns and saxophones and piano keys that plays it. Do you call that nonsense?"
>
> "If it's true, I do not," I said.
>
> "That's why so many white folks don't dig Bop," said Simple. "White folks do not get their heads beat *just for being white*. But me--a cop is liable to grab me almost any time and beat my head--*just* for being colored."
>
> (The Best of Simple 118)

In bop music, Hughes found a new source of poetic inspiration which allowed him to continue to

create a distinctly African-American poetic voice and enabled him to express the anger and frustration felt by African-Americans who saw that their share of the American dream was repeatedly being deferred. However, Hughes realized that, while bitterness is certainly part of living a dream deferred, resiliency is also a necessary part of that life, and in Montage of a Dream Deferred Hughes indicates that happiness and love, emotions which would be impossible without a certain strength of spirit, are equally important aspects of life within the African-American community.

This complex blend of happiness and misery, love and hate, frustration and contentment, which first found expression in the "double consciousness" of the blues, continues in jazz; with Montage of a Dream Deferred, Hughes indicates bebop's expansion of the blues' function as a survival mechanism for listeners and performers into an implicit call for change in the social and economic conditions which Hughes describes in the collection. In a prefatory note to the collection, Hughes outlines the be-bop aesthetic he was using in his poetry:

> In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed--jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and be-bop--this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and disctortions of the music of a community in transition. (Collected Poems 387)

Various critics have suggested reading the collection as one long poem, and Hughes himself repeatedly suggested that the collection was "peculiarly unified" (Collected Poems 6). Reading the collection in this way emphasizes the rhythmic and musical qualities which Hughes mentioned in the preface, because while several of the individual poems are suggestive of the be-bop sound, the collection as a whole reads like "one long interrelated poetic jam session" (Dickinson 91). Montage of a Dream Deferred is set in Harlem, which Hughes often used as a microcosm of the

African-American community at large, and this setting suggests the smaller sense of community which bop sought to nurture.[4] The various poetic "solos" and "riffs" in the collection are used, both individually and through their juxtaposition within the collection, to express the theme of a dream deferred and to help explain be-bop's significance within the African-American community; the wide variety of experiences and attitudes described in these solos and riffs also expresses the diversity of life within the African-American community.

In the very first poem, entitled "Dream Boogie," Hughes immediately suggests the influence that bop music has on the collection; the poem also indicates that, contrary to the opinions of many, the beat of bop was not one of frivolity or of malice. In the same manner that the blues expressed the pain of the singers, be-bop expressed the dissatisfaction and restlessness of the players in a constructive manner by enabling them to focus their energy into their instruments to create the sound of be-bop:

> Good *morn*ing, *dad*dy!
> *Ain't* you *heard*
> The *boog*ie-woogie *rum*ble
> Of a *dream* de*ferred*?
>
> *List*en *close*ly:
> You'll *hear* their *feet*
> *Beat*ing out and *beat*ing out a--
>
> *You think*
> *It's a happy beat?*
>
> *List*en to it *close*ly:
> *Ain't* you *heard*
> *some*thing under*neath*
> like a--
>
> *What did I say?*
>
> *Sure*,
> I'm *hap*py!
> *Take* it a*way*!
>
> *Hey, pop!*
> *Re-bop!*
> *Mop!*

Y-e-a-h! (1-21)

As with his blues poems, Hughes's use of meter is suggestive of the rhythm of the music--in this case, a much lighter, freer sense of rhythm than the "drowsy syncopated tune" of the blues. The rhythm of be-bop music is generally much more complex than the simple 4/4 beat of the blues, even though bop frequently uses the 4/4 time signature as the basis for its rhythm. In a be-bop combo, the string-bass is the pacemaker--the bass player is responsible for the rhythm of the entire band, and even the drummer plays according to that pace, providing accents over the bassline being played. Often, the bass player will play a regular line of four or eight notes per bar, setting the rhythm and tempo, and the drummer will accent certain beats with the snare or bass drum, keeping a steady rhythm using the cymbals. Unlike earlier blues and jazz combos, however, the drummer has more freedom to improvise and becomes another soloist within the group, thus creating the more complex rhythms of be-bop.

Within the poem, the italicized voice, a be-bop musician, repeatedly interrupts himself or herself, "breaking" the solo (the lines of regular type) in order to respond to the unspoken thoughts of an implied speaker, who is most likely an Anglo-American and is represented by blank white space in the poem. This implied speaker is obviously unfamiliar with the music, because he or she says (although the reader is not privy to those words) that the lively rhythm of be-bop suggests a sense of happiness. However, the musician quickly and strenuously responds to these unwritten words by explaining that the rhythm of bop is *not* a "happy beat" (9). In the next stanza, after having played the lines "Listen to it closely: / Ain't you heard / something underneath / like a--" (10-13), the musician interrupts himself or herself once again in order to respond to the implied speaker, who still doesn't understand the music, by asking impatiently, "*What did I say*" (14)? The italicized voice continues to speak in an impudent manner to the audience (i.e., the listener who is unfamiliar with be-bop), *Signifying* on the implied speaker as he or she states sarcastically, "*Sure, / I'm happy*!" (15-16), when the music has already been shown to imply the sense of dissatisfaction within the African-American community. Through this use of a rather sarcastic

italicized voice to point out what is being left unsaid, Hughes suggests a subversive nature within bop music, and although the rhythm of be-bop is livelier and freer than that of the blues, underneath the lighter sense of rhythm provided by the cymbals one can hear "The boogie-woogie rumble / Of a dream deferred" (3-4).

In "Easy Boogie," the second of six "boogie poems" within the collection,[5] Hughes emphasizes the new rhythmic responsibilities that were delegated to the bass player in a be-bop combo:

> *Down* in the *bass*
> That *steady beat*
> *Walk*ing walking *walk*ing
> Like *march*ing *feet.*
>
> *Down* in the *bass*
> That *easy roll,*
> *Roll*ing like I *like* it
> *In* my *soul.*
>
> Riffs, smears, breaks.
>
> Hey, *Lawdy*, *Ma*ma!
> Do you *hear* what I *said*?
> *Easy* like I *rock* it
> *In* my *bed*! (1-13)

As with the blues, the bass's "steady beat / Walking walking walking / Like marching feet" (2-4) propels the music. In addition to propelling the music, however, the bass takes on a much more abstract role within the poem, as Steven Tracy explains:

> In "Easy Boogie" a man addresses a woman--"Hey, Lawdy Mama!" The speaker associates the recognition of the steady beat of the dream deferred with the vitality of the sexual act [in lines 10-13]. This sexual vitality, implicit in the word "boogie" . . . is also linked with the soul's aspirations through the repetition of sentence construction [in the first two stanzas]. The soul's dreams are seen as vital, lively, and life-giving. Thus through the repetition of phrases and structures, Hughes expands the importance of his words beyond their initial or superficial meanings.

("Midnight Ruffles" 63)

The repetition of a "boogie-woogie rumble" throughout the collection of poems suggests Hughes's belief in the resiliency of the people of Harlem. In this respect, the connection between be-bop and the blues can be made once again, since both forms of music are a sort of survival mechanism, although be-bop is a much more abstract form for declaring one's own defiance and survival. Similar to the driving rhythm of the blues which Hughes represented in his poetry, the "boogie poems" serve as a reminder that, despite the deplorable living conditions within Harlem, the people's spirit remains unbroken.

The "boogie poems" also serve as a riff within the collection, providing a musical foundation within the collection which enables individual voices to express themselves in the various solo poems. The soloists within Montage of a Dream Deferred describe a wide variety of experiences and deal with a variety of subjects, including: poverty ("Necessity," "Buddy," "Dime"), racism ("Parade," "Children's Rhymes"), World War II ("Green Memory," "World War II," "Casualty"), be-bop musicians ("Flatted Fifths," "Be-Bop Boys," "Motto"), human relations ("Sister," "Advice"), and dishonest landlords and policemen ("Ballad of the Landlord," "Café: 3 a. m."). By describing their various experiences in his be-bop poetry, Hughes provides African-Americans with a poetic voice that exhibits the diversity of life within Harlem (and, by extension, within the African-American community at large) and expresses the various emotions that life within Harlem might engender. Although the "boogie poems" indicate that Hughes realized the importance of rhythm in bop music as a means of establishing a musical setting for the collection, the solo poems show that he also realized the importance of individual expression within the context of that setting.

These solos do not exist simply for their own sake, however. Their importance can only be fully understood when one examines their position within the collection. The solos in Montage of a Dream Deferred often comment upon one another, changing the original structures to express an idea in a different manner, which is of course a basic element of jazz. The solo poems "Low to

High" and "High to Low" provide an excellent example of this interrelated nature. The speaker of "Low to High" resents successful Negroes because they haven't "thrown the ladder back":

> How can you forget me?
> But you do!
> You said you was gonna take me
> Up with you--
> Now you've got your Cadillac,
> you done forgot that you are black.
> How can you forget me when I'm you?
>
> *But you do.*
>
> How can you forget me,
> fellow, say?
> How can you low-rate me
> this way?
> You treat me like you damn well please,
> Ignore me--though I pay your fees.
> How can you forget me?
>
> *But you do.* (1-16)

The riff poem "Boogie: 1 a.m." immediately follows this solo; after the riff has been played, the voice of "High to Low" answers the previous solo, in a call and response between the two poems:

> God knows
> We have our troubles, too--
> Our trouble is you:
> You talk too loud,
> cuss too loud,
> look too black,
> don't get anywhere,
> and sometimes it seems
> you don't even care.
> The way you send your kids to school
> stockings down,
> (not Ethical Culture)
> the way you shout out loud in church
> (not St. Phillips)
> and the way you lounge on doorsteps
> just as if you were down South,
> (not at 409)
> the way you clown--
> the way, in other words,
> you let me down--
> me, trying to uphold the race
> and you--
> well, you can see,

we have our problems,
too, with you. (1-25)

This sort of call-and-response structure occurs often within jazz compositions, with one soloist answering the call provided by the earlier soloist. Such a structure can lead to competition between the two soloists, often referred to as "cutting heads," and this competitive spirit can be seen between the soloists of these two poems.

Although this competitive spirit often serves to push jazz performers to new heights of musical ability, soloists may also work to support one another within in a composition. Poems such as "Deferred" and "New Yorkers" indicate this supportive nature, and they show that while solos can often serve as a means of competition, they can also serve as a means of support. Because bop music is made up of a collection of individual voices that complement one another to create a musical whole, Hughes frequently uses multiple voices to suggest the variety of experiences within Harlem. Many of the poems within Montage of a Dream Deferred are indicative of this collective nature, with various individual voices being heard within each poem, as in "Deferred":

This year, maybe, do you think I can graduate?
I'm already two years late.
Dropped out six months when I was seven,
a year when I was eleven,
then got put back when we come North.
To get through high at twenty's kind of late--
But maybe this year I can graduate.

Maybe now I can have that white enamel stove
I dreamed about when we first fell in love
eighteen years ago.
But you know,
rooming and everything
then kids,
cold-water flat and all that.
But now my daughter's married
And my boy's most grown--
quit school to work--
and where we're moving
there ain't no stove--
Maybe I can buy that white enamel stove!

Me, I always did want to study French.
It don't make no sense--
I'll never go to France,
but night schools teach French.
Now at last I've got a job
where I get off at five,
in time to wash and dress,
so s'il vous plaît, I'll study French!

Someday,
I'm gonna buy two new suits
at once!

All I want is
one more bottle of gin.

All I want is to see
my furniture paid for.

All I want is a wife who will
work with me and not against me. Say,
baby, could you see your way clear?

Heaven, heaven, is my home!
This world I'll leave behind
When I set my feet in glory
I'll have a throne for mine!

I want to pass the civil service.

I want a television set.

You know, as old as I am,
I ain't never
owned a decent radio yet?

I'd like to take up Bach.

Montage
of a dream
deferred.

Buddy, have you heard? (1-52)

These individual voices within the poem work together, as a montage, in their expression of a common theme, which in this case involves listing a collection of their individual deferred dreams. Be-bop musicians collaborate in a similar manner when playing onstage, each playing their own instrument in their own style to give them a distinctive voice, and yet each voice contributes to the

common theme of the composition.

Hughes's use of multiple, overlapping voices runs throughout Montage of a Dream Deferred; many of the individual poems contain multiple voices in a manner similar to that of "Deferred." With the poem "New Yorkers," which features an older couple describing how they came to Harlem, Hughes indicates that the message of be-bop is not always one of frustration:

> I was born here,
> that's no lie, he said,
> right here beneath God's sky.
> *I wasn't born here, she said,*
> *I come--and why?*
> *Where I come from*
> *folks work hard*
> *all their lives*
> *until they die*
> *and never own no parts*
> *of earth nor sky.*
> *So I come up here.*
> *Now what've I got?*
> *You!*
>
> She lifted up her lips
> in the dark:
> The same old spark! (1-17)

In this particular poem, Hughes indicates that, despite the substandard living conditions which are described throughout the collection, anger and frustration are not the only emotional responses to living a dream deferred; love and happiness are also emotions experienced by the people of Harlem. Despite the couple's apparent poverty (the woman suggests that all they have is each other), this couple has not only survived, it has flourished, and the final line indicates that the man and woman have maintained the same love for one another that they felt at the start of their relationship. Therefore, even though the voices of Montage of a Dream Deferred often describe the frustration of life in Harlem, Hughes indicates that love is also an important part of both be-bop and living a dream deferred.

The solo poems within Montage of a Dream Deferred often indicate the "double consciousness" that first found expression in the blues and continued into be-bop. Hughes's solo

poems provide a variety of voices, and thus a variety of experiences, as he endeavors to describe life in Harlem. These voices can co-exist harmoniously to express themselves, as in the case of "Deferred" and "New Yorkers," they can interrupt one another to create a sense of unrest, as in the riff poem "Dream Boogie," or they may even *Signify* upon one another in separate solos, as in the case of "Low to High" and "High to Low." The entire collection of solo poems within Montage of a Dream Deferred indicates that, in spite of its many opportunities for individual expression, the underlying message of be-bop is one of community; for instance, even as the soloists of "Low to High" and "High to Low" air their differences with one another in a spirit of competition, they are encouraging each other to improve their attitudes towards one another. This dual nature of a be-bop solo reflects the "double consciousness" at the heart of African-American music, a "double consciousness" which allows for feelings of both bitterness and hope as the people within Harlem continue to wait for the promise of the "American Dream."

In Montage of a Dream Deferred, Hughes gives voice to African-Americans' frustration and anger concerning their second-class status in American society while indicating that, despite this frustration and anger, love and happiness are also part of life in Harlem. By using Harlem as a microcosm of the African-American community at large and by using the music of Harlem as a thematic and structural inspiration of the collection, Hughes exhibits a unique understanding of the social implications of bebop as he attempts to communicate to his audience the effects of living a dream deferred. No longer content with simply singing the blues in his poetry, Hughes attempted to capture the revolutionary nature of bebop in his poetry to show that a change was needed and to suggest that current conditions in the African-American community would not be tolerated much longer, as the poem "Harlem" suggests.

With poems such as "Dream Boogie," Hughes captures the rhythm of bebop and suggests its subversive nature. In addition to using the rhythm of be-bop to suggest a call for change, Hughes uses *Signifies* throughout the collection, particularly in poems such as "Dream Boogie." However, the *Signifying* that Hughes uses is done in a very indirect and subversive manner; the

most direct confrontation that occurs in the poem is the musician stopping his solo to ask, "*What did I say*" (14)? This is a rather indirect form of confrontation, even for *Signifying*, which strives for an indirect form of confrontation. Thus, Hughes's musical sensibilities and his African-American poetic voice do not achieve full expression in Montage of a Dream Deferred.

Similar to his struggles with capturing the blues on the written page, Montage of a Dream Deferred indicates the difficulties Hughes encountered with translating a complex musical style such as bebop to the written page. Although Hughes creates a quasi-musical setting through his prefatory note and the use of the "boogie poems," the collection does not consistenly suggest its musical inspiration because it doesn't consistently suggest the "soul" that *Signifying* provided Shakespeare in Harlem. Many of the solo poems within the collection read simply as poetry and do not reflect the musical inspiration behind their creation. Hughes's next collection, however, showed that he had become the musician-poet which he had attempted to be throughout his previous poetry; in Ask Your Mama, Hughes blends his understanding of African-American music, *Signifying*, and his own poetic sensibilities to create a collection of poetry which serves as a musical composition, rather than as poetry which merely suggests a musical inspiration.

Chapter 3--Hughes's Hard Bop Aesthetic: Asserting the Value of African-American Culture

During the be-bop movement of the 1940s, jazz music began to separate into two styles, both of which were based on the style of one of be-bop's founding performers, Charlie "Bird" Parker. "Cool" jazz, also known as "West Coast jazz" due to its popularity among California-based, primarily Anglo-American performers such as Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan, and Chet Baker, developed from Parker's "oblique lyricism, gentle indirection, and almost apologetic nuances . . ." (Stearns 228). Cool jazz performers often exhibited a sense of stoic detachment in their music,[1] and this apparent lack of emotion is perhaps best displayed on Miles Davis's 1949 Birth of the Cool recordings, which feature Davis's "sober, airy, reflective style . . . featuring a quiet resonance, avoiding high notes, and favoring the medium register" (Bergerot and Merlin 15). A separate style of jazz developed from Parker's "tortured, searing, blasting beauty, [which is] reminiscent of the shouting congregations of the South" (Stearns 228), and in the 1950s this style of jazz, often called "East Coast jazz" due to its popularity among New York musicians, developed into hard bop.

The hard bop movement was seen as a reaction against the emotional restraint of cool jazz, and although cool jazz hadn't necessarily become the exclusive province of Anglo-American musicians, hard bop became known as a movement away from cool jazz in favor of a return to the African-American roots of jazz, particularly the blues and spirituals. This newest style of jazz "featured loud, full-voiced instrumental sound and emotional performances. It was the opportunity for musicians to return to the roots of African-American music, blues and gospel, but it was also their opportunity to renew their ties with black audiences, baffled by the avant-gardist aspects of modern jazz" (Bergerot and Merlin 34-36). In this way, hard bop expanded upon the function of be-bop similar to the manner in which be-bop had expanded upon the blues; whereas be-bop's revolutionary sound voiced a call for change in Anglo-American attitudes, hard bop's examination of its African-American musical roots helped to assert the value of African-American culture, in

spite of Anglo-American attempts to suppress or ignore that culture. In a sense, this examination of African-American culture and assertion of its value was done in Anglo-Americans' faces, rather than using the subversive, "behind the back" message of be-bop. Although Anglo-Americans and their culture were not consciously excluded from the hard bop aesthetic, no attempt was made to incorporate Anglo-American music into hard bop compositions; hard boppers sought to create music geared specifically towards African-American audiences by including musical elements from the blues and from spirituals. Unlike be-bop musicians, who had in effect isolated themselves from their audiences, hard bop musicians returned to the larger sense of community which the blues had sought to create, and by including familiar elements of the blues and of spirituals the musicians implicitly invited African-American audience members to participate in a musical "return to the roots" as a means of asserting the value of African-American culture.

Hard bop's "return to the roots" coincided with several trends in America and abroad which held particular significance for African-Americans, and Hughes alluded to several of these trends in his collection of poetry entitled Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz. One trend which occupied Hughes in the collection occurred across the Atlantic Ocean; anti-colonial sentiments in Africa rose to an all-time high, culminating in the independence of several African nations throughout the 1950s and '60s, including: Nigeria, Kenya, Guinea, Ghana, Algeria, and Egypt. The leaders of these various independence movements were often condemned in America due to their political affiliations and their anti-imperialist stances, but many African-Americans took pride in seeing Africans stand up for their rights. Hughes repeatedly alludes to the leaders of these various independence movements within Ask Your Mama, which suggests that he believed that the Africans' success in establishing themselves as independent nations might mean that African-Americans would soon receive the respect and equality which they deserved. In conjunction with the various independence movements within Africa, the approaching centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, which had effectively ended slavery in America in 1863, caused many African-Americans to evaluate their status and realize that, while they might not be slaves, they

certainly were not being treated with the respect due an American citizen.

African-Americans took a major step in receiving that respect with the 1954 case of *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka*, as the Supreme Court of the United States decided that the standard of separate-but-equal education in American schools was no longer constitutional; this decision mandated that African-American children must be allowed to integrate into Anglo-American schools "with all deliberate speed" (Williams 93). However, the decision met with widespread resistance from Anglo-Americans, particularly those in the South, resulting in a protracted process of integration which was often slowed down by state governments.[2] By the time Hughes published Ask Your Mama in 1961, African-Americans still encountered difficulties in enrolling in schools which had formerly been segregated (and, in effect, were *still* segregated), and even those students who integrated successfully often encountered resentment and hostility from Anglo-American students and faculty.

However, the Supreme Court decision was just the beginning for African-Americans as they began to assert their value within American culture and refused to settle for anything less. In 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for refusing to relinquish her seat on the city bus and move to the back; this incident marked the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott, which lasted for over a year and ended with a Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation on buses (Williams 88). While the Montgomery bus boycott was important in its own right as a step towards ending segregation in America, it also marked the beginning of Dr. Martin Luther King's nationwide campaign of nonviolent protest in an attempt to draw attention to the unjust treatment African-Americans received in "the land of the free," where "all men are created equal." Onwuchekwa Jemie has argued that, although Dr. King's campaign was still in relative infancy as Hughes was writing Ask Your Mama, Hughes appears to view Dr. King as a sort of tragically deluded hero who lives in a world of fantasy:[3]

> THE REVEREND MARTIN LUTHER
> KING MOUNTS HIS UNICORN

OBLIVIOUS TO BLOOD
AND MOONLIGHT ON ITS HORN. (517)[4]

However, when Hughes wrote Ask Your Mama, he had no way of knowing the outcome of Dr. King's campaign and whether or not it would succeed. Hughes simply appears to suggest that Dr. King's dream of an America without racism seems fantastic, as the image of the unicorn suggests, and Hughes apparently doesn't believe that such an ideal society can be achieved without violence, as the blood on the unicorn's horn indicates. The moonlight suggests an enveloping whiteness, which would of course suggest the negative image of Anglo-American culture and its attempts to "enlighten" African-American culture; however, the moonlight can also be a positive image indicating a time of rest and an ethereal peacefulness associated with nighttime. As most of Hughes's imagery does throughout Ask Your Mama, the moonlight suggests multiple possiblities for interpretation.

The Civil Rights movement showed that African-Americans were no longer content with passively waiting for a change in Anglo-American attitudes; African-Americans had begun to take action in order to secure their rightful place in American society, and Hughes sought to represent this collective change in attitude in Ask Your Mama. The hard bop aesthetic of a return to the roots, or rather a re-evaluation of those roots,[5] coincided with Hughes's own interest in asserting the value of those roots within the African-American community;[6] however, he changed his tactics in representing African-American music on the written page. Unlike his earlier collections of blues and be-bop poetry, Hughes did not attempt to represent the rhythms of hard bop in Ask Your Mama, opting instead to read the poems to the musical accompaniment he included alongside the poetry, as he explained to Nat Hentoff:

> [T]he music should not only be background to the poetry, but should comment on it. I tell the musicians--and I've worked with several different modern and traditional groups--to improvise as much as they care to around what I read. Whatever they bring of themselves to the poetry is welcome to me. I merely

suggest the mood of each piece as a general orientation. Then I listen to what they say in their playing, and that affects my own rhythms when I read. We listen to each other. (qtd. in Jemie 81)

Despite the fact that he chose not to represent the complex rhythms of hard bop directly in Ask Your Mama, Hughes has just described the essence of all jazz performance, which is the idea that each performer in the group has a particular series of ideas that he or she manages to weave into the fabric of the overall composition. In the case of Ask Your Mama, Hughes's "instrument" is his voice, and his "notes" are the words he reads from the page; for instance, the fact that every line of the collection has been written in capital letters suggests the "full-voiced instrumental sound" of hard bop (Bergerot and Merlin 34). Thus, Hughes becomes a musician who uses poetry as a mode of expression, rather than a poet who uses musical forms. With this sort of musician's mentality, Hughes manages to overcome the difficulties he encountered with translating music to the written page by actually using the written page to create a musical arrangement.

In addition to his use of African-American musical forms in Ask Your Mama, Hughes uses the rhetorical practice of *Signfiying* as a means of demonstrating the African-American origins of his collection. The title itself refers to one of the many subpractices of *Signifying* known as "the dozens," a sort of verbal sparring match that involves trading insults not about each other, but about each other's relatives, in an attempt to provoke an angry reaction through indirect conflict; by talking about somebody's mother, one implicitly insults that person without having said anything directly about that person. "The dozens" can be done in fun, but Hughes seems to take a much more aggressive approach to the game when dealing with Anglo-Americans:

AND THEY ASKED ME RIGHT AT CHRISTMAS
IF MY BLACKNESS, WOULD IT RUB OFF?
I SAID, ASK YOUR MAMA. (480)
* * * * * *
THEY ASKED ME AT THE PTA
IS IT TRUE THAT NEGROES--?
I SAID, ASK YOUR MAMA. (509)

The *Signifying* of Ask Your Mama is much more confrontational than that of Montage of a Dream

Deferred. In "Dream Boogie," for instance, Hughes suggests that be-bop contains a subversive message, which is hidden within the rhythm; in Ask Your Mama, however, the hard bop speaker/soloist uses his cultural heritage in order to directly confront the Anglo-American personae who ask such ignorant questions of him.

Of course, the Anglo-American personae in Hughes's collection have no idea that they've been *Signified* upon since "the dozens" isn't a part of their cultural heritage; after all, *Signifying* is an African-American cultural activity. In this way, Hughes suggests that, because they don't comprehend African-American culture, Anglo-Americans are incomplete and they can therefore be *Signified* upon with impunity; due to their cultural ignorance, Anglo-Americans become the butt of African-American jokes without even realizing it. The allusion to "the dozens," which is contained within the title of the collection itself, suggests that, similar to listeners of hard bop, readers of the collection must be familiar with African-American culture, or else they risk misunderstanding (or completely missing) the point of the collection.

Ask Your Mama was written in a free-associative style meant to represent the musical improvisations of a jazz performer, and this style of poety has led Jean Wagner to comment: "The esoteric character of much of this work is derived from the complex and highly personal manner of the poet's thought. . . . [A]s with Joyce, it can be sensed that the words summon one another and come together no longer at the bidding of a thought seeking vigorous expression, but on the basis of kindred sonority and structure" (465). Wagner's description suggests that, as a reader, he was not familiar enough with African-American culture to understand the cultural significance of Hughes's forms; in Hughes's words, he was "poetically un-hep" (526).[7] While Wagner notes accurately that Ask Your Mama contains some references which are very personal to Hughes, many of the "esoteric" allusions within Ask Your Mama refer to African-American cultural icons such as the river and the railroad (both of which represented freedom for African-American slaves in the South), Charlie "Bird" Parker (one of the founders of the be-bop movement), and the desire to move out of the city into the suburbs, all of which are encoded in vernacular speech, the blues,

be-bop, and hard bop. In addition, while it is true that Hughes often chooses words based on their "kindred sonority" in Ask Your Mama, it is more likely that Hughes envisioned himself as a jazz performer than as a literary descendent of James Joyce; Hughes is using language as his instrument in creating a jazz composition on the written page, rather than writing a stream-of-consciousness poem.

Hughes's use of "improvisational" verse, read to a musical accompaniment, resembles the way that a jazz musician improvises with a musical instrument according to the rhythms and chord structures played by the other members of the band:

> IN THE
> IN THE QUARTER
> IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
> WHERE THE DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER
> DUST OF DINGY ATOMS
> BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND.
> AMORPHOUS JACK-O'-LANTERNS CAPER
> AND THE WIND WON'T WAIT FOR MIDNIGHT
> FOR FUN TO BLOW DOORS DOWN.
>
> BY THE RIVER AND THE RAILROAD
> WITH FLUID FAR-OFF GOING
> BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING
> A WHIRL OF WHISTLES BLOWING
> NO TRAINS OR STEAMBOATS GOING--
> YET LEONTYNE'S UNPACKING. (477)

In these opening stanzas of "Cultural Exchange," the first of twelve different "moods" within Ask Your Mama,[8] Hughes mimics the opening notes of a jazz performance by using broken rhythms and an interrupted solo as he writes "IN THE / IN THE QUARTER / IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES." This sort of stuttering opening is a common feature of jazz performances; the instrumentalist focuses on a few specific notes, repeating and recombining them to establish a musical theme before moving on with the performance. Hughes returns to these specific "notes" time and again throughout Ask Your Mama as he repeatedly returns to one of the major themes of the collection: life for people who live in "the quarter of the Negroes."

While creating variations on this theme throughout the text, Hughes also uses words which

may sound similar to one another; for instance, in these first two stanzas, Hughes repeatedly uses alliteration and various constructions of a single word, such as in the line: "BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING." Similar to the manner in which Hughes mimicked the stuttering introduction of a jazz performance, the sonically related nature of Hughes's words mirrors a feature of jazz performances, known as a "run," whereby the musician plays a series of notes which are next to one another on the musical scale as a means of connecting one chord to another during a chord change. A close reading of Ask Your Mama reveals repeated instances of Hughes's conscious use of language as a jazz musician uses an instrument.

In addition to writing the text of Ask Your Mama in a manner meant to approximate a jazz musician's performance, Hughes wrote a musical accompaniment to help him express the growing sense of pride and of impatience within the African-American community. This much more orchestrated arrangement suggests the increasing complexity of hard bop combos, which often included seven or eight different members as opposed to the trios and quartets of be-bop. Hughes constructed the overall composition by providing musical directions in the margins of the text as a means of suggesting a variety of moods, which the performers may then use to create a running commentary on Hughes's poetry. Throughout the collection, Hughes uses a variety of musical selections derived from African and African-American sources, including: spirituals such as "When the Saints Go Marching In" (481); Afro-Arabic music (487); various forms of jazz such as Dixieland (484), bebop (516-517; 524), and "post-bop" (512); traditional blues (516); gospel (504); and a variety of percussion instruments such as African drums and maracas (503). While using such diverse forms of music throughout the collection, Hughes also uses specific musical constructions for specific passages; for instance, each time that the phrase "ASK YOUR MAMA" is repeated, Hughes indicates that the musicians "may incorporate the impudent little melody of the old break, 'Shave and a haircut, fifteen cents'" (475) as a means of emphasizing the insolence associated with this phrase from "the dozens." Hughes's use of such a wide variety of Afrocentric musical forms within Ask Your Mama indicates the diversity of life and creativity among those

who live "in the quarter of the Negroes," at the same time using the hard bop aesthetic of a musical return to the roots of African-American culture.

Despite the wide variety of musical forms that Hughes uses, the blues remain at the musical heart of the collection, and Hughes repeatedly returns to them throughout the collection in the same manner that hard bop musicians returned to their own musical roots in their performances. Hughes explains in the beginning of the collection that "The traditional folk melody of the 'Hesitation Blues' is the leitmotif for this poem" (475) and includes the musical notation for the first twelve bars of the song. The lyrics of this song ask, "How long must I wait? Can I get it now--or must I hesitate?" By using this particular blues song as the musical leitmotif of the collection, Hughes suggests the musical foundation of hard bop (namely, the blues) and indicates the growing impatience among those who live "in the quarter of the Negroes":

> IN THE SHADOW OF THE WELFARE
> CHOCOLATE BABIES BORN IN SHADOWS
> ARE TRIBAL NOW NO LONGER
> SAVE IN MEMORIES OF GANGRENOUS ICING
> ON A TWENTY-STORY HOUSING PROJECT
> THE CHOCOLATE GANGRENOUS ICING OF
>   *JUST WAIT.*
> TRIBAL NOW NO LONGER PAPA MAMA
> IN RELATION TO THE CHILD,
> ONCE YOUR BROTHER'S KEEPER
> NOW NOT EVEN KEEPER TO YOUR CHILD--
> SHELTERED NOW NO LONGER
> BORN TO GROW UP WILD--
> TRIBAL NOW NO LONGER ONE FOR ALL
> AND ALL FOR ONE NO LONGER
> EXCEPT IN MEMORIES OF HATE
> UMBILICAL IN SULPHUROUS CHOCOLATE:
>   *GOT TO WAIT--*
> THIS LAST QUARTER OF CENTENNIAL:
>   GOT TO WAIT.
>
> *I WANT TO GO TO THE SHOW, MAMA.*
>   *NO SHOW FARE, BABY--*
>   *NOT THESE DAYS.*
>
> ON THE BIG SCREEN OF THE WELFARE CHECK
> A LYNCHED TOMORROW SWAYS. . . .
> WITH ALL DELIBERATE SPEED A
> LYNCHED TOMORROW SWAYS.

LIVING 20 YEARS IN 10
BETTER HURRY, BETTER HURRY
BEFORE THE PRESENT BECOMES WHEN
AND YOU'RE 50
WHEN YOU'RE 40
40 WHEN YOU'RE 30
30 WHEN YOU'RE 20
20 WHEN YOU'RE 10

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
WHERE THE PENDULUM IS SWINGING
TO THE SHADOW OF THE BLUES,
EVEN WHEN YOU'RE WINNING
THERE'S NO WAY NOT TO LOSE. (491-493)

In the right margin of the page, Hughes indicates that, after the words "*JUST WAIT*," the musicians should begin playing "Drums alone softly merging into the ever-questioning 'Hesitation Blues' beginning slowly but gradually building to up-tempo as the metronome of fate begins to tick faster and faster as the music dies" (492-493). This musical-poetic arrangement suggests a conscious attempt on Hughes's part to reflect the oral and performative nature of his poetry; with this arrangement, Hughes suggests that Ask Your Mama was meant to be *heard*, not read, and that, like the blues and jazz, the poetry derives its inspiration from oral, rather than literary, sources.

This passage also serves as an excellent demonstration of Hughes's poetic style, which is meant to approximate the style of an improvising jazz musician; the first line of the passage, "IN THE SHADOW OF THE WELFARE," echoes the previously stated theme of life in the quarter of the Negroes. This echo effect is similar to the manner in which a jazz musician will play variations on a musical theme so that although the sense is retained, the structure has been changed to suit the musician's purpose; in this case, Hughes closely associates public assistance in the form of welfare checks with life in the quarter of the Negroes, providing an obvious pun on the twenty-five cent coin. Onwuchekwa Jemie has suggested that this initial thought then leads Hughes to suggest that welfare has weakened the African-American community structure, the "tribe," by creating a society of people who are dependent upon assistance from the government and can no longer take care of their own children (Jemie 87). This thought leads Hughes to a mental association with

African-American children, and he contemplates life for these welfare babies by stating that life in the quarter of the Negroes forces them to grow up too quickly with too few quarters. Hughes finishes with a blues-inspired paradox as he suggests that welfare, although it seems to help those who receive it, simply perpetuates poverty within the community instead of truly helping its recipients: "EVEN WHEN YOU'RE WINNING / THERE'S NO WAY NOT TO LOSE."

Jazz musicians play their instruments in a similar manner, since a particular series of notes will create certain mental associations for the performer, who then follows these associations to the next series of thoughts in a free-associative, improvisatory manner. However, this passage also illustrates that, despite the apparently rambling nature of a jazz performance, the musician does have specific ideas in mind as he or she plays, even if those ideas and their associations are obvious only to the performer. For instance, the final lines of the passage repeated here reinforce the blues sensibility which is at the heart of Ask Your Mama, a sensibility which has become bitterly ironic in its expression of a "double consciousness" due to the continuing frustration associated with the leitmotif of the poem, "Hesitation Blues." In essence, Hughes transcribes the language of music into a written language throughout Ask Your Mama, acting as a sort of interpreter to deliver a message which was frequently lost on those who heard jazz musicians.

While celebrating African-American music and his vernacular heritage within Ask Your Mama, Hughes also celebrates the successes of various Africans and African-Americans. In "Cultural Exchange," Hughes alludes to various revolutionary figures who became prominent during the African independence movements of the 1950s and '60s, as well as various African-American authors and intellectuals; Hughes took great pride in these political and social leaders, and felt that their successes served notice to Americans that a positive change for the African-American community's status was inevitable. Hughes also shows his audience the progress which has already been made by alluding to celebrated African-American entertainers and athletes such as Leontyne Price, Louis Armstrong, Jackie Robinson, and Joe Louis; however, he is quick to point out in "Horn of Plenty" that despite their success in various endeavors, racist attitudes still prevail

in America which serve to tarnish any relative success enjoyed by African-American individuals:

> GOT THERE! YES, I MADE IT!
> NAME IN THE PAPERS EVERY DAY!
> FAMOUS--THE HARD WAY--
> FROM NOBODY AND NOTHING TO WHERE I AM.
> THEY KNOW ME, TOO, DOWNTOWN,
> ALL ACROSS THE COUNTRY, EUROPE--
> ME WHO USED TO BE NOBODY,
> NOTHING BUT ANOTHER SHADOW
> IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES,
> NOW A NAME! MY NAME--A NAME!
>
> YET THEY ASKED ME OUT ON MY PATIO
> WHERE DID I GET MY MONEY!
> I SAID, FROM YOUR MAMA! (499-500)

The speaker's enthusiasm for his success has obviously been dampened by the suspicious nature of Anglo-Americans who, according to Hughes's "Liner Notes," "wonder just how on earth a Negro got a lawn mower in the face of so many ways of keeping him from getting a lawn" (529). Rather than feel intimidated by the Anglo-Americans who attempt to put the speaker "in his place," however, the speaker indicates the indomitable sense of pride which enabled him to achieve this success in the first place as he *Signifies* on them; in the words of Ralph Ellison, the speaker has "changed the joke and slipped the yoke"[9] by using his African-American vernacular heritage as a means of fighting back against the Anglo-Americans' racist attitudes and asserting his right to enjoy the fruits of his success. The bitterly ironic nature of the phrase "ASK YOUR MAMA" becomes readily apparent in this context, as it provides a means for surreptitiously insulting the Anglo-American personae, who don't even realize they've been insulted.

Hughes's emphasis upon the value of his vernacular heritage can be seen in the very construction of <u>Ask Your Mama</u>, as Hughes attempts to fuse poetry (part of the Western literary tradition) with music and *Signifying* (from the vernacular tradition) in order to express the growing impatience within the African-American community. In previous collections of poetry, Hughes's work read as poetry which attempted to suggest (and, in some cases, represent) a musical inspiration; a musical accompaniment was feasible, but only as an added dimension. With <u>Ask</u>

Your Mama, Hughes achieves a synthesis of music and poetry which *requires* the suggested musical setting in order to be fully expressed. In this collection, Hughes's poetry may be read as imaginary lyrics to a hard bop composition as Hughes shows the value of certain aspects of African-American culture, such as the "double consciousness" of the blues or of *Signifying*, as a means of providing African-Americans with the strength of spirit necessary to succeed in a country which set up so many obstacles to prevent that success. However, rather than focus upon the obstacles as a blues musician might do, Hughes focuses on pride in the African-American roots, like a hard bop musician, and this pride is reflected in the variety of allusions to African and African-American culture and history as Hughes uses his hard bop poetry to nurture the larger sense of community that first found expression in the blues and continued into jazz.

Conclusion--"So What?"

The poetry of Langston Hughes, influenced as it is by the blues and jazz, represents a major step in the fusion of the vernacular arts of *Signifying* and music and the literary art of poetry. Hughes's inclusion of vernacular elements in his poetry enabled him to develop an individual voice while introducing elements of his own African-American vernacular culture into a genre which was largely dominated by Anglo-American writers. Many writers of the Harlem Renaissance criticized Hughes for emphasizing his vernacular heritage, suggesting that he should change his method of poetic presentation to a more literary style in an attempt to make African-Americans appear more respectable (i.e., more like Anglo-Americans). However, by including elements of his African-American culture in his poetry, Hughes was able to show that, although African-American forms of artistic expression may differ from those of Anglo-Americans, both forms of expresssion are equally valid.

In addition to allowing Hughes to assert the inherent value of his vernacular heritage, Hughes's conscious decision to use African-American music as a resource for his poetry enabled him to maintain a high level of creativity, because as attitudes and experiences within the African-American community shifted, the music changed to reflect these shifts. Thus, Hughes was able to rely upon the African-American community to provide him with new modes of expression as he sought to describe their expreriences in his poetry. Hughes's understanding of African-American music and his ability to transfer that understanding to the written page enabled him to outlast his contemporaries in the Harlem Renaissance and maintain his significance as a voice of the African-American community for nearly five decades.

The Weary Blues seems to suggest that Hughes initially had difficulty in reconciling African-American forms of artistic expression such as the blues with his own education in Anglo-American poetic forms. Hughes's next collection of blues poetry, Fine Clothes to the Jew, shows that Hughes had begun to develop the techniques necessary to represent the blues in his poetry, but the collection also shows that he had not yet mastered those techniques. Shakespeare in Harlem,

published fifteen years after Fine Clothes to the Jew, indicates that Hughes had finally developed an understanding of the blues, both structurally and conceptually, and had developed a poetic "bag of tricks" based on the African-American rhetorical practice of *Signifying* in order to capture African-American music on the written page and give it "soul." Hughes's combination of the blues and *Signifying* enabled him to create his most effectively sustained effort in representing an African-American voice on the written page.

Then, similar to a jazz musician, Hughes's command of the blues enabled him to change his style in order to accommodate his desire for a different form of expression, which resulted in Montage of a Dream Deferred. Rather than base his poetry upon the blues once again, Hughes sought to represent the changing attitudes within the African-American community that found expression in be-bop. However, similar to his early efforts in singing the blues in his poetry, Hughes's efforts to play be-bop on the written page were inconsistent; although Hughes effectively suggests the sound of be-bop in the riff poems, Montage of a Dream Deferred lacks "soul" because the *Signifying* which was featured so prominently in Shakespeare in Harlem has taken a back seat to Hughes's experiments with structure. Rather than thinking of himself as a musician, as he had begun to do with Shakespeare in Harlem, Hughes has reverted to thinking of himself as a poet attempting to present a musical arrangement. In a sense, Hughes is like a musician who can hit all the notes, but doesn't really "say" anything with his music. Despite the musical inspiration of Montage of a Dream Deferred, Hughes was still writing poetry which was consciously poetry--he still hadn't managed to fuse music *and* poetry.

With Ask Your Mama, Langston Hughes exhibits the end result of forty years' work, a collection which reads as poetry while maintaining the oral, performative aspect essential to African-American music and culture. Ask Your Mama represents Hughes's most successful fusion of his vernacular heritage and his literary education as the musical arrangement becomes an integral part of the collection, reinforcing the message which the poetry conveys and suggesting that audiences needed to listen more closely to African-American music because the music does not

exist merely for its own sake; the music contains an important message for those who "hear" it. Hughes heard this message, and used it throughout his career as a means of asserting the value of African-American culture in providing African-Americans with the strength of spirit necessary to survive, and even succeed, in a society which often sought to destroy and deny that culture.

However, the success of Shakespeare in Harlem and of Ask Your Mama in fusing the vernacular arts of *Signifying* and music and the literary art of poetry has gone largely unnoticed. Neither collection received high praise upon its publication; Dudley Fitts referred to Ask Your Mama as "stunt poetry, a night-club turn" (88). In the thirty years since Hughes's death, few scholars have discussed either collection in detail, opting instead to write about Hughes's earlier blues poetry or Montage of a Dream Deferred. In addition, most anthologies which contain excerpts from Hughes's work feature early blues poems such as "The Weary Blues," and those anthologies which feature some of Hughes's jazz poetry are generally limited to poems from Montage of a Dream Deferred such as "Dream Boogie" or "Harlem," neither of which can be fully appreciated without the musical-poetic context provided by their juxtaposition within the collection.

It is quite likely that the lack of scholarly attention to Hughes's two most successful collections is due to the critics' incomplete understanding of Hughes's aesthetic. Speaking from personal experience, it took me over a year to finally understand Ask Your Mama; I just wasn't ready for it until I developed an understanding of the African-American vernacular tradition and the socio-historical implications of the music. Hughes's poetry must be approached from a musical and vernacular perspective, rather than (or perhaps in addition to) a literary perspective, and most critics simply don't take the time to develop such an approach. A few critics have "caught on," like Onwuchekwa Jemie, and the poetry of Michael S. Harper suggests that Hughes's musical-poetic experiments were understood by some within the next generation of African-American writers, who have built upon Hughes's work and modified it to their own needs. However, for the most part, Hughes continues to be described as a quaint "folk poet," rather than as the writer whose experiments with representing the vernacular tradition on the written page influenced not only

subsequent African-American poets, but the "beat" poets as well. Like Ornette Coleman or Cecil Taylor, whose musical experimentations during the 1950s and '60s have only recently come to be appreciated by the general public, Langston Hughes has had to wait for his audience to understand just what he tried to accomplish and how he was able to do it. Judging by the recent growth of Hughes scholarship over the past decade or so, it appears that others may soon "dig" Hughes's work.

Notes

Introduction--"Begin the Beguine"

1. Arthur Davis suggests that this decision is perhaps best represented in Hughes's autobiography The Big Sea as a young Langston Hughes, bound for Africa on the S. S. Malone, throws all of his books overboard: "[t]his gesture symbolized his emancipation from the derivative world of book domination" (20).

2. In Shadow and Act, a collection of essays, Ralph Ellison includes a review of Blues People which he wrote for The New York Review. In this review, Ellison disputes many of Jones's assertions concerning the sociopolitical implications of African-American music, stating that "[t]he tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon [African-American] music is enough to give the blues the blues . . . . [T]he blues are not primarily concerned with civil rights or obvious political protest . . ." Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act (New York: Random House, 1953) 249, 257.

3. "Blue notes" are the basic building blocks of nearly all blues and jazz melodies. Although blue notes cannot be represented with traditional Western musical notation because they are not a part of the Western musical tradition, their existence is indisputable. In The Story of Jazz, Marshall Stearns describes this musical phenomenon:

> To be technical, two areas in the octave--the third and the seventh in the scale (E-flat and B-flat in the scale of C)--are attacked with an endless variety of swoops, glides, slurs, smears, and glisses. In other words, a singer, or instrumentalist, takes certain notes and cradles and caresses them lovingly, or fiercely. Of course, you have to know what you're doing. Way back in 1930, Rudy Vallee wrote with what might be called beginner's luck: 'I have played a certain note barbaric in quality on my saxophone very softly, and have watched its effect upon a crowd, the livening up of young legs and feet . . .' He had found one of THE notes, a blue note . . . . Where does blue tonality come from? It can't be found in Europe.

Something very much like it occurs in West Africa . . . . (7-8)

In other words, blue notes give blues and jazz compositions a very distinctive sound which could not be expressed, or even described, by traditional Western musical concepts.

4. For a much more comprehensive understanding of the term *Signifying*, cf. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 64-88.

Chapter 1--Finding the Blue Notes: Hughes's Search for a Poetic Voice

1. "Blues issued directly out of the shout [i.e., work song] and, of course, the spiritual. The three-line structure of the blues was a feature of the shout. The first two lines of the song were repeated, it would seem, while the singer was waiting for the next line to come. Or, as was characteristic of the hollers and shouts, the single line could be repeated again and again, either because the singer especially liked it, or because he could not think of another line . . . . The endlessly repeated line of the shout or holler might also have been due to the relative paucity of American words the average field Negro possessed, the rhyme line being much more difficult to supply because of the actual limitation singing in American imposed. The lines came more easily as the language was mastered more completely . . . . The blues is [also] formed out of the same social and musical fabric that the spiritual issued from, but with the blues the social emphasis becomes more personal, the "Jordan" of the song much more intensely a *human* accomplishment . . ." LeRoi Jones, Blues People: Negro Music in White America (New York: William Morrow and Compay, 1963) 62-63.

2. Richard Barksdale argues in his paper "Langston Hughes and the Blues He Couldn't Lose" that Langston Hughes had a preoccupation with the "tragic mulatto theme" due to his own mulatto ancestry, and the recent debate between Faith Berry and Arnold Rampersad concerning Hughes's sexuality has prompted Gregory Woods to re-read some of Hughes's poems based on the assumption that, through his poetry, Hughes also "sang the blues" about his homosexuality.

3. "The most apparent survivals of African music in Afro-American music are its rhythms:

not only the seeming emphasis in the African music on rhythmic, rather than melodic or harmonic, qualities, but also the use of polyphonic, or contrapuntal, rhythmic effects. . . . Another important aspect of African music found very readily in the American Negro's music is the antiphonal singing technique. A leader sings a theme and a chorus answers him. These answers are usually comments on the leader's theme or comments on the answers themselves in improvised verses. The amount of improvisation depends on how long the chorus wishes to continue. And improvisation, another major facet of African music, is certainly one of the strongest survivals in American Negro music. The very character of the first work songs suggests that they were largely improvised. And, of course, the very structure of jazz is the melodic statement with an arbitrary number of improvised answers or comments on the initial theme" LeRoi Jones, Blues People: Negro Music in White America (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963) 25-27.

4. Hughes often recycled titles for his poetry; in this case, Hughes had previously published three different poems under the title "Poem," and this was the fourth publication under that title. The notation is borrowed from Rampersad, who uses the same notation in The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes.

5. "Hughes's line breaks generally reflect such nuances of oral performance as breaths and vocal pauses, but he often turns them to still greater poetic advantage. Typically, Hughes will choose to end a line on a minor word. This strategy heightens expectations of the syntactical conclusion, paralleling a harmonic resolution in the music." David Chinitz, "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes," Callaloo 19.1 (1996): 186.

6. David Chinitz, "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes," Callaloo 19.1 (1996): 186-7.

7. For a brief discussion of the structure of African folktales, specifically the tales of the Signifying Monkey, cf. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 61-63.

Chapter 2--Be-bop: "The Boogie-Woogie Rumble of a Dream Deferred"

1. "[A]long came modern jazz [i.e., bebop] and there was indeed a change in the consciousness of black jazz musicians even though that of white cultural arbiters remained frozen. Many older players had been acutely conscious of the cultural value of what they were doing--and of the exploitation by whites of what they were doing--but they had often acted as entertainers because that's how they got paid. Now there was to be a different, sometimes abrasive, stance. As pianist-composer John Lewis observed: 'This revolution, or whatever you want to call it, in the 1940's took place for many reasons, and not only for musical reasons. . . . For the younger musicians, this was the way to react against the attitude that Negroes were supposed to entertain people. The new attitude of these young Negroes was: "Either you listen to me on the basis of what I actually do or forget it"'" Nat Hentoff, Jazz Is (New York: Random House, 1976) 259-260.

2. "The Negro music that developed in the forties had more than an accidental implication of social upheaval associated with it. To a certain extent, this music resulted from conscious attempts to remove it from the danger of mainstream dilution or even understanding" LeRoi Jones, Blues People: Negro Music in White America (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963) 188.

3. Louis Armstrong, one of the most popular jazz musicians of all time, complained of "boppers" by saying:

> . . . they want to carve [outperform with one's instrument] everyone else because they're full of malice, and all they want to do is show you up, and any old way will do as long as it's different from the way you played it before. So you get all them weird chords which don't mean nothing, and first people get curious about it just because it's new, but soon they get tired of it because it's really no good and you got no melody to remember and no beat to dance to. So they' re all poor again and nobody is working, and that's what that modern malice done for you. (Stearns 219)

4. In his book Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination, James De Jongh examines Hughes repeated use of Harlem throughout his poetic career as a representative example of the African-American community as a whole.

5. Montage of a Dream Deferred contains six poems, referred to by Steven Tracy as the "boogie poems," which feature a metric arrangement intended to evoke the rhythm of be-bop. In the order of their appearance within the collection, these poems are entitled: "Dream Boogie," "Easy Boogie," "Boogie 1 a. m.," "Lady's Boogie," "Nightmare Boogie," and "Dream Boogie: Variation." Each of these poems serves as a riff within the collection, returning the reader to the musical theme of "the boogie woogie rumble of a dream deferred."

Chapter 3--Hughes's Hard Bop Aesthetic: Asserting the Value of African-American Culture

1. "The term cool in its original context meant a specific reaction to the world, a specific relationship to one's environment. It defined an attitude that actually existed. To be cool was, in its most accesible meaning, to be calm, even unimpressed, by what horror the world might daily propose. As a term used by Negroes, the horror, etc., might be simply the deadeningly predictable mind of white America. . . . In a world that is basically irrational, the most legitimate relationship to it is nonparticipation" LeRoi Jones, Blues People: Negro Music in White America (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963) 213.

2. In an example of various state governments' attempts to subvert the *Brown* decision, Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas closed Little Rock public schools in 1958 while leasing the buildings--on a segregated basis--to the Little Rock Private School Corporation; however, the Supreme Court declared his arrangement to be unconstitutional, and in August 1959 he was forced to reopen the doors for Anglo- and African-American students alike. Juan Williams, Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965 (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) 118.

3. "[The unicorn] represents the vast faith which sustained Martin Luther King and his

followers in their massive programs of civil disobedience. The unicorn is King's belief that the deferred dream could be made reality, that racial justice, brotherhood, and peace were possible in America. . . . When King in his idealism and innocence mounts his unicorn, he appears suspended in air, above reality, for his dream-horse is invisible, inaccessible to the multitude. The image of the unicorn is deliberately ambiguous: King's idealism makes him a hero but also makes him blind to reality, 'oblivious to blood.' And, historically speaking, it was not long before he himself publicly admitted that his program was inadequate to demolish the stone walls of America's racist realities, and that his dream had turned into a nightmare" Onwuchekwa Jemie, Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia UP, 1976) 92.

4. For the purposes of this discussion, all passages from Ask Your Mama will be cited according to page numbers from The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, rather than according to line numbers.

5. "'Soul' music, as the hard bop style is often called, does certainly represent for the Negro musician a 'return to the roots.' Or not so much a return as a conscious re-evaluation of those roots. . . . It is as much of a 'move' within the black psyche as was the move north in the beginning of the century. The idea of the Negro's having 'roots' and that they are a valuable possession, rather than the source of ineradicable shame, is perhaps the profoundest change within the Negro consciousness since the early part of the century. It is a re-evaluation that could only be made possible by the conclusions and redress of attitude that took place in the forties" LeRoi Jones, Blues People: Negro Music in White America (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963) 218.

6. In "The Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes: A Reflection," Patricia Johnson and Walter Farrell, Jr. suggest that hard bop was the musical inspiration behind Hughes's Ask Your Mama, a suggestion which provided the basis for this chapter.

7. At the end of Ask Your Mama, Hughes included a set of "Liner Notes: For the Poetically Unhep," which provide a sort of argument, or summary, for each poem in the collection to help the

reader understand the poetry more fully. Although Hughes does not explain many of the allusions in these notes, the liner notes do offer a general orientation for the tone of each poem.

8. Ask Your Mama is a collection of twelve poems, which Hughes referred to as "moods." As with Montage of a Dream Deferred, the individual poems function as separate entities within a collection, but they also work together as pieces of an overall composition.

9. In his book Shadow and Act, Ellison included an essay, entitled "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in which he asserts the value of his African-American "folk" heritage because it can provide a "profound rejection of the image created to usurp [an African-American's] identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know [an African-American's] identity" Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act (New York: Random House, 1953) 55.

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