THIRD EDITION

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY

THEORY & CRITICISM

LANGSTON HUGHES
1902–1967

The most celebrated African American writer of the first half of the twentieth century, Langston Hughes was a poet, playwright, and fiction writer who also worked tirelessly to promote black literature and, more generally, the status of black people in American society. Associated with the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes was interested in the relation of literature to the other arts; but he was particularly concerned with bridging the gap between "high" culture and the life of his people.

Hughes was born in Missouri and spent an impoverished childhood living with various relatives after his father, discouraged by American racism, moved to Mexico shortly after his birth. His mother was a Langston, born of a family that had played a prominent role in the fight against slavery. Among Hughes's Langston relatives were a veteran of John Brown's famous raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 and a congressman from Virginia during the Reconstruction years. Hughes's life stabilized on joining his remarried mother in Cleveland when he was thirteen. After a successful four years at an integrated high school, he went to Columbia University for a year (1921–22) but dropped out.

Over the next four years, Hughes traveled widely, held a number of menial jobs, and published poetry in the journals that constituted the literary portion of the Harlem Renaissance—the outpouring of work in all the arts by young blacks during the 1920s and early 1930s. Hughes's work was included in Alain Locke's famous anthology *The New Negro* (1925), which announced the movement, and Hughes knew—and collaborated with—almost all the major figures of the Harlem Renaissance, though he did not himself spend much time in New York during the 1920s. His first book of poems, *Weary Blues*, was published in 1926, the same year he wrote the essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and enrolled in Lincoln University, the all-male black college in southeastern Pennsylvania from which he received his B.A.

During the 1930s Hughes was desperately poor, living on funds provided by patrons or on the earnings he could garner from poetry readings. Increasingly involved in radical causes, he wrote plays in support of the Scottsboro Boys (nine young black men from Alabama accused of raping two white women), spent almost a year in Russia, and served as a war correspondent during the Spanish Civil War. After World War II he taught at various universities, was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee as a suspected Communist, and lived to champion some of the young writers of the 1960s Black Arts Movement. Whether or not Hughes was a homosexual is a matter of dispute among scholars; not surprisingly, given the times and his position as a prominent representative of his race, Hughes was secretive about his sexual desires and experiences. Hughes's poetry remains his claim to fame since his death, but growing attention has been paid by critics to his fiction (both novels and short stories), plays, and nonfiction prose, which includes many essays of social advocacy and extensive travel writings in addition to his autobiographies.

His biographer Arnold Rampersad calls our selection, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), the "finest essay of Hughes's life." It was written for the *Nation* as a solicited response to an essay by George Schuyler called "The Negro-Art Hokum," which argued that the idea of a separate black American culture and aesthetic was untenable. Hughes's reply succinctly captures the varied pressures under which the African American artist labors. First and foremost, perhaps, is the problem of a heterogeneous audience. The Negro (to use Hughes's term) poet knows that both black and white people are potential readers of his work. Yet those two

audiences have very different expectations and demands. To complicate matters even further, Hughes's ever-present sensitivity to class deprives him of any simple image of the black audience. "High-toned" blacks are mostly terrified by the artist, afraid that he will endanger their desperate hold on respectability. "O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," Hughes imagines them saying. The "low-down folks," on the other hand, "are not ashamed of [the artist]—if they know he exists at all." Whereas "the better class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone." But it's hardly a happy situation for the writer caught between an anxious and an unaware black audience.

Meanwhile, "'Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,' say the whites." The Negro writer can win acclaim and fortune in the white world so long as he does nothing to disturb the whites' comfort, their conviction that they are good, enlightened people. The temptations created by these constraints are obvious. Just as the modernist artist often set out deliberately to shock and outrage the bourgeoisie, so the black artist will be tempted merely to shake the patronizing white audience out of its complacency.

Hughes intimates, without quite saying it directly, that the best work will please neither the black nor the white audience. (His example is Jean Toomer's *Cane*.) And like many modernists, he believes that such problems are best solved by developing an indifference to all audiences—by cultivating an art that is true to itself: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." Bravely and defiantly, Hughes proclaims that it "doesn't matter" if neither white nor colored audiences "are pleased" by this work. "Free within ourselves" and building "our temples for tomorrow," the younger artists are already creating "an honest American Negro literature."

Out of what material is that literature created? Here Hughes raises another recurring problem for African American writers. Despite his line about expressing "our individual dark-skinned selves," Hughes actually looks toward the collective experience of the black folk as the "great field of unused material ready for his art." Anticipating the black power movement of the 1960s, Hughes responds to America's persistent racism by insisting that "'I am a Negro—and beautiful.'" The black artist should "interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people." Hence the essay's essential move: the repudiation of a black middle and upper class that has alienated itself from the black folk; Hughes will celebrate the common people. The problem, of course, is that Hughes himself is not of the folk, and to "interpret" their "beauty" is not identical with "expressing" his own "dark-skinned" individuality. There is a sizable gap between the "they" who "furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist" and the artist who belongs more obviously with the classes Hughes wishes to repudiate.

Hughes strives to find a meeting place in African American music, especially jazz (but also the blues): "Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America." Music provides an entry point to the "Negro soul," offering themes to which "the Negro artist can give his racial individuality." Hughes hopes that jazz's merger of the folk and the artist can be reproduced in the other arts: theater, painting, dance. He believes that a "racial art" is already evident in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance.

Writing in 1926, Hughes is uneasy about "the present vogue in things Negro," and he is scathing in his 1940 autobiography about the whites who poured into Harlem in the 1920s to listen to black music in clubs (like the famous Cotton Club) that excluded black patrons and black employees (with the sole exception of the musicians). He knows that black artists want their voices to be heard and that they are, like all artists, hungry for acclaim as well as for an audience. But he worries about the price paid for gaining the attention of whites. The perils facing the black

artist are so many—from self-loathing to currying the favor of whites to providing a safe window on the exotic world of the racial other—that success depends on an honesty and fearlessness that are almost too much to ask. But these very difficulties point to another source of material for the African American artist, for "when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country with their innumerable overtones and undertones, . . . there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand." In calling on the African American artist to affirm his race, to cut loose from white standards and white ideals of high culture, and to explore the experience of the black folk and the realities of racism, Hughes enunciates a program for and vision of black literature that is taken up again during the civil rights and black power movements of the mid-1950s to the early 1970s.

"The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" Keywords: Aesthetics, Identity, Popular Culture, Race and Ethnicity Studies, Vernacular Language

The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets[1] said to me once, "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

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

For racial culture the home of a self-styled "high-class" Negro has nothing better to offer. Instead there will perhaps be more aping of things white

1. According to Hughes's biographer Arnold Rampersad, this is almost certainly Countee Cullen (1903–1946), one of the African American poets associated with the Harlem Renaissance.

than in a less cultured or less wealthy home. The father is perhaps a doctor, lawyer, landowner, or politician. The mother may be a social worker, or a teacher, or she may do nothing and have a maid. Father is often dark but he has usually married the lightest woman he could find. The family attend a fashionable church where few really colored faces are to be found. And they themselves draw a color line. In the North they go to white theaters and white movies. And in the South they have at least two cars and a house "like white folks." Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art (if any), and an Episcopal heaven. A very high mountain indeed for the would-be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people.

But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority—may the Lord be praised! The people who have their nip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance! These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself. Whereas the better-class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone when he does appear. And they are not ashamed of him—if they know he exists at all. And they accept what beauty is their own without question.

Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their "white" culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country with their innumerable overtones and undertones, surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears. But let us look again at the mountain.

A prominent Negro clubwoman in Philadelphia paid eleven dollars to hear Raquel Meller[2] sing Andalusian popular songs. But she told me a few weeks before she would not think of going to hear "that woman," Clara Smith,[3] a great black artist, sing Negro folksongs. And many an upper-class Negro church, even now, would not dream of employing a spiritual in its services.

2. Spanish singer (1888–1962) who made her highly successful New York debut in the spring of 1926 (with the New York Philharmonic). Andalusia is a region of Spain; Meller would introduce her Spanish songs by telling little stories about the folkways of the different regions from which they came.

3. African American blues singer (1894–1935) who performed regularly in Harlem throughout the 1920s.

The drab melodies in white folks' hymnbooks are much to be preferred. "We want to worship the Lord correctly and quietly. We don't believe in 'shouting.' Let's be dull like the Nordics," they say, in effect.

The road for the serious black artist, then, who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high. Until recently he received almost no encouragement for his work from either white or colored people. The fine novels of Chesnutt[4] go out of print with neither race noticing their passing. The quaint charm and humor of Dunbar's[5] dialect verse brought to him, in his day, largely the same kind of encouragement one would give a side-show freak (A colored man writing poetry! How odd!) or a clown (How amusing!).

The present vogue in things Negro, although it may do as much harm as good for the budding colored artist, has at least done this: it has brought him forcibly to the attention of his own people among whom for so long, unless the other race had noticed him beforehand, he was a prophet with little honor. I understand that Charles Gilpin[6] acted for years in Negro theaters without any special acclaim from his own, but when Broadway gave him eight curtain calls, Negroes, too, began to beat a tin pan in his honor. I know a young colored writer, a manual worker by day, who had been writing well for the colored magazines for some years, but it was not until he recently broke into the white publications and his first book was accepted by a prominent New York publisher that the "best" Negroes in his city took the trouble to discover that he lived there. Then almost immediately they decided to give a grand dinner for him. But the society ladies were careful to whisper to his mother that perhaps she'd better not come. They were not sure she would have an evening gown.

The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. "O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," say the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you," say the whites. Both would have told Jean Toomer[7] not to write "Cane." The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read "Cane" hate it. They are afraid of it. Although the critics gave it good reviews the public remained indifferent. Yet (excepting the work of Du Bois)[8] "Cane" contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson,[9] it is truly racial.

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

4. Charles Chesnutt (1858–1932), African American novelist who lived in Cleveland and published most of his work between 1890 and 1910.
5. Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), African American poet who died young of tuberculosis. He was a major influence on Hughes.
6. African American actor and theater manager (1878–1930). He played the title role in Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* in 1920, the first black actor to play the lead in a Broadway production. His all-black Lafayette stock company was based in Harlem.
7. African American writer (1894–1967). His book *Cane* (1923), a formally experimental mixture of poetry and prose, was a major landmark in the Harlem Renaissance.
8. W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), African American historian, sociologist, political activist, and author; the foremost black intellectual and academic of the first half of the twentieth century.
9. Paul Robeson (1898–1976), African American stage actor, singer, and political activist.

beauty of dark faces and create with new technique the expressions of their own soul-world. And the Negro dancers who will dance like flame and the singers who will continue to carry our songs to all who listen—they will be with us in even greater numbers tomorrow.

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

But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. Yet the Philadelphia clubwoman is ashamed to say that her race created it and she does not like me to write about it. The old subconscious "white is best" runs through her mind. Years of study under white teachers, a lifetime of white books, pictures, and papers, and white manners, morals, and Puritan standards made her dislike the spirituals. And now she turns up her nose at jazz and all its manifestations—likewise almost everything else distinctly racial. She doesn't care for the Winold Reiss[1] portraits of Negroes because they are "too Negro." She does not want a true picture of herself from anybody. She wants the artist to flatter her, to make the white world believe that all Negroes are as smug and as near white in soul as she wants to be. But, to my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering "I want to be white," hidden in the aspirations of his people, to "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful!"

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

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith[2] singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing Water Boy, and Rudolph Fisher[3] writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas[4] drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their

1. German-born painter (1886–1953), best known for his portraits of Native Americans and African Americans. He contributed most of the illustrations to Alain Locke's pathbreaking anthology *The New Negro* (1925).
2. African American singer (ca. 1894–1937), known as "the Empress of the Blues."
3. African American short story writer and physician (1897–1934), associated with the Harlem Renaissance.
4. African American artist and educator (1899–1979), the most significant visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance. Douglas studied with Winold Reiss, and his work was included in Locke's *New Negro*.

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

1926

LIONEL TRILLING
1905–1975

Lionel Trilling was a contemporary of the major theorists and practitioners of the New Criticism, including Robert Penn Warren, CLEANTH BROOKS, and WILLIAM K. WIMSATT JR. His first book, a study of the English poet-critic MATTHEW ARNOLD, was published in 1939, a year after Brooks and Warren's influential textbook of New Critical interpretation, *Understanding Poetry*. But in his teaching and writing, Trilling did not emphasize the explication of poems and other literary texts. While literature was his central field of interest, he was fundamentally an eloquent and wide-ranging cultural critic, not a close reader. In Trilling's view, the New Criticism excluded too much. It was narrowly academic, not historical, not worldly. Attentive to social and cultural issues, Trilling crafted and cultivated an identity for himself as an articulate generalist and elegant stylist whose essays—the essay became his preferred form—treated topics and themes in literature and criticism that led him toward general reflections on politics, education, psychoanalysis, and more.

For example, in his best-known book, *The Liberal Imagination*, an essay collection published in 1950, Trilling wrote literary criticism about American and English authors—Sherwood Anderson, HENRY JAMES, Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling, WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. He also examined the Roman historian Tacitus, SIGMUND FREUD, and the sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, and he explored still other social, cultural, and historical topics in "Reality in America," "The Function of the Little Magazine," "Art and Neurosis," "The Sense of the Past," "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," "Art and Fortune," and "The Meaning of a Literary Idea."

The Liberal Imagination was an extraordinary success, selling more than 70,000 copies in hardcover and more than 100,000 in paperback. This book and Trilling's other written work, his position at Columbia, and his network of friendships and connections with New York writers and critics, editors, and publishers transformed him by the mid-1950s into an exemplary public intellectual—in the words of the scholar John Rodden, "America's first academic celebrity in the humanities."

Lionel Trilling was born in New York City on July 4, 1905, the son of eastern European Jews: David W. Trilling, first a tailor and then a maker of men's fur-lined coats, and Fannie Cohen, who had been born and educated in London. Trilling recalled that when he was a child, his mother read to him from the works of English writers such as Dickens and Kipling, and throughout his career he felt a special