

# Langston hughes and the ideological racial mountain



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In an essay entitled, “ The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” African-American poet Langston Hughes discusses the importance of creating a black voice in a predominantly white America. Hughes strived to do this in his own work, as he used the rhythmic styles of jazz and bebop in his poetry to speak about the African-American experience. His essay is a critique of black artists that do not follow this trend and choose instead to focus on ‘ universal’ subject matter—‘ universal’ in this context meaning ‘ white.’

Although he does not mention the word ideology, his argument relies heavily on the concept, as he dissects the artistic consequences of “ the mold of American standardization” (“ The Negro Artist” 55), a mold that is created by ideological beliefs about race. Furthermore, an Althusserian reading of this essay reveals how the African-American population is systematically ‘ other-ized’ not only by the white population, but by members within the African-American community as well. Hughes’s poetry, specifically his series *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, exemplifies his desire to break out of the ideological beliefs constructed to silence his community.

Hughes’s essay begins with his disappointment in a fellow artist who said to him, “ I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet” (“ The Negro Artist” 55).

Hughes interprets this statement to mean that the writer subconsciously wishes to “ be white,” following a logical path that says to want to write like any other poet of the time is synonymous with wanting “ to write like a white poet” (Hughes 55). In his essay, it is clear that Hughes is acutely aware of the fact that in order to be a commercially successful artist in the early twentieth century, one must appeal to the white community. He also understands that in order to succeed in this, one must “ be as little Negro

and as much American as possible” (“ The Negro Artist” 55). By writing the word ‘ American’ rather than ‘ white,’ Hughes is commenting on the bitter reality that to be white is to be ‘ normal’ in his society—an ideological belief that stems from the fact that the white population is in control of education, government, and culture in America. Althusser defines ideology as “ the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 693). In the context of Hughes’s argument, the real conditions of existence are that the African-American population is systemically oppressed and underrepresented, while the imaginary relation is the belief that this is due to ‘ whiteness’ being seen as “ a symbol of all the virtues” (“ The Negro Artist” 55). This belief is constantly reaffirmed because of one’s tendency to “[behave] in such and such a way, [adopt] such and such a practical attitude, and... [participate] in certain regular practices... on which ‘ depend’ the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject” (Althusser 696). This means that people choose, sometimes unconsciously, to enact behaviors that trap them within ideology. For example, it is clear that the family of the unnamed poet described in Hughes’s essay chooses to exist within racist ideology:

The father... is the 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,

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“ Don’t be like n-” when the children are bad. A frequent phrase from the father is, “ Look

how well a white man does things.” (“ The Negro Artist” 55)

By living life in accordance with the guidelines set forth by white Americans, the family is suppressing their African-American roots and, in Hughes’s opinion, stifling their son’s potential as an artist. It is for this reason that Hughes is critiquing those who give in to the “ urge within the race toward whiteness,” (“ The Negro Artist” 55) since he believes artists are responsible for the creation of a uniquely African-American cultural voice that is independent of the pre-existing dominant white American culture.

By controlling education, white Americans are able to perpetuate their own narrative and continuously reify beliefs that trivialize black culture and black art. That is why Hughes believes that “ the low-down folks,” or “ the so-called common element” are more likely to produce a “ truly great Negro artist” (“ The Negro Artist” 56) than middle- and upper-class African-Americans; he reasons that an African-American who has been educated by white American standards is incapable of “ interpreting the beauty of his own people” because “ 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” (“ The Negro Artist” 56). Contrarily, according to Hughes, “ common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child” and as a result, “ they accept what beauty is their own without question” (“ The Negro Artist” 56). Hughes comments on the problematic nature of American education in

his poem “ Theme for English B.” The speaker of the poem is attempting to write “ a page” (“ Theme” 3) that is “ true” (“ Theme” 5) as an assignment for an instructor assumed to be white, and in doing so tackles issues of race in education. He briefly references the issue of underrepresentation in the line, “ I am the only colored student in my class,” (“ Theme” 10) which was not uncommon in his time as the minority of African-Americans were able to get an education, much less a college degree. In this sense, the speaker of the poem is extremely privileged, even though he is alone in the world of academia. Hughes ironically makes the speaker relatable to all readers by listing interests that are universal, writing “ I like to eat, sleep, drink and be in love. / I like to work, read, learn, and understand life,” (“ Theme” 21-22), followed by the assertion “ I guess being colored doesn’t make me not like / the same things other folks like who are other races” (“ Theme” 25-26). In addition, Hughes acknowledges how white ideology permeates education in the lines, “ instructor. / You are white– / yet a part of me, as I am a part of you. / That’s American” (“ Theme” 30-33). Although at first glance it seems as though Hughes is discussing the idea of the American “ melting pot,” an Althusserian reading of the poem can also suggest that the white professor and his ideals are becoming ingrained in the black student.

One of the most prominent themes of the Montage of a Dream Deferred series, as well as of the “ The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” essay is that of African-American culture and its relation to white America. For example, in the poem “ Dream Boogie,” Hughes uses the rhythm of the uniquely African-American bebop style of music while discussing the issue of voicelessness. The upbeat tone of the poem is a reference to minstrel culture

perpetuated by the white community, as African-Americans were encouraged to be larger-than-life performers with exaggerated movements and facial expressions in order to entertain white audiences. In order to discuss the problematic nature of this arrangement, Hughes ironically pairs the happy rhythm of bebop music with lines like, “ Good morning, daddy! / Ain’t you heard / The boogie-woogie rumble / Of a dream deferred?” (“ Dream Boogie” 1-4). He also uses dashes in order to signify interruptions in speech, as African-Americans were discouraged from voicing their complaints regarding their status within the greater American culture. For example, an interruption in the black cultural narrative can be seen in the lines, “ Listen to it closely: / Ain’t you heard / something underneath / like– / What did I say?” (“ Dream Boogie” 5-9). The italicized lines show a resistance towards voicing concern and a stifling of one’s thoughts, which is representative of black America as a whole. These lines are immediately followed by the stanza, “ Sure, / I’m happy! / Take it away!” (“ Dream Boogie” 15-17), which signifies a continuation of a performance regardless of the fact that it facilitates voicelessness. In this piece, the performance represents the continuation of a complacent existence within white ideology.

Furthermore, “ Dream Boogie” is paired with several others in the series, which is symbolic of the seemingly endless and inescapable ‘ performance’ that the African-American community must participate in in order to be accepted. In “ Boogie: 1 A. M.” Hughes repeats the introduction of “ Dream Boogie” almost exactly, with only a few adjustments, as he writes, “ Good evening, daddy! / I know you’ve heard / The boogie-woogie rumble / Of a dream deferred” (“ Boogie: 1 A. M.” 1-4). Appearing later in the series, this

poem is used to express the notion that, by this point, the complaints of the African-American community have finally been heard. However, no action is taken to rectify them yet, as the bottom half of the poem is another perpetuation of the performance: “ Trilling the treble / And twining the bass / Into midnight ruffles / Of cat-gut lace” (“ Boogie: 1 A. M.” 5-8). There are no consequences for ignoring ‘ the dream deferred’ until the poem “ Nightmare Boogie,” in which the speaker gets a glimpse of a black culture in “ a dream” (“ Nightmare Boogie” 1) where he says he sees “ a million faces / black as me!” (“ Nightmare Boogie 3-4). However, the repercussions of ignoring the dream deferred appear in the following few lines, as the dream transforms into “ A nightmare dream,” (“ Nightmare Boogie” 5) in which, “ Quicker than light / All them faces / Turned dead white” (“ Nightmare Boogie” 6-8). By attempting to live as a black person within a white-dominated culture, the speaker is denied the experience of existing within a community of like-minded and supportive individuals. This poem is a continuation of an assertion that Hughes makes in his essay:

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!” (“ The Negro Artist” 59)

In both his essay and his poetry, Hughes is attempting to call to action the black artists of his time and to convince them to participate in the creation of an African-American identity, free of white ideology.

Perhaps the poem that most accurately depicts the tendency to remain within the confines of an oppressive ideology is Hughes's "Motto." The speaker represents the majority of African-Americans and depicts the harsh realities of navigating life as a black person in a white America. The poem reads like a life lesson, as the speaker explains, "I play it cool / And dig all jive / That's the reason / I stay alive" ("Motto" 1-4). Although Hughes is criticizing this lifestyle, he is simultaneously acknowledging its importance, as choosing whether or not to subscribe to the white ideology of the time period was quite literally a life-or-death decision. The final lines of this poem, "Dig And Be Dug / In Return," ("Motto" 5-9) are a timeless justification for ideology that remains relevant in modern times, as oppressed groups are constantly encouraged to take the path of least resistance, even in the face of blatant discrimination.

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