

From,
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THE GREAT MIGRATION

Great Day in the Morning! It's here! Our time has come! We are leaving... We are leaving our homes, pulling up stakes to move on. We look up at the high southern sky and remember all the sunshine and the rain and we feel a sense of loss, but we are leaving... We scan the kind black faces we have looked upon since we first saw the light of day, and, though pain is in our hearts, we are leaving. We take one last furtive look over our shoulders to the Big House... where the Lord of the Land lives, and we feel glad, for we are leaving..."

—Richard Wright

A young black man on a moonless night in the late 19th century watches from behind the drapery of tangled wisteria vines in a copse on the outskirts of a rural village in Georgia or Mississippi or Texas, while members of the local white community prepare to administer that particular brand of retribution known as the justice of "Judge Lynch." The youth knows simply by being there his life is in danger. But the curiosity that accompanies his natural intelligence keeps him from turning and disappearing into the night. He recognizes the accused: a black sharecropper and his young wife, known in the colored community as honest, hardworking folk. What they are accused of is unclear. The husband may have been mistaken for someone who somehow offended a white woman. The wife's crime seems nothing more than being married to him. The youth in the shadows recalls there was talk in town recently that the husband had muttered a weak protest when the planter whose land he worked blatantly cheated him. There was also talk that this black man, against all odds, was on the verge of purchasing his own small parcel of prop-

erty. There was at least one man in the crowd, the planter's elder son, who had publicly made lewd remarks about and to the attractive young wife. There was a rumor this son once visited the sharecropper's shack when the husband was in the field, but was sent packing by a glowing fire iron. Which is what the white boy is brandishing now.

In horror the husband struggles against a dozen of his captors, while another dozen strip the wife, force her to her knees, face in the dirt, torture and rape her. The husband, too, is stripped, then castrated. Their screams are met with jeers and laughter. Finally, both are strung up from an old magnolia tree just ending its bloom. The hanging technique is inefficient. The victims gasp and kick until they are doused with kerosene and set aflame. Members of the mob take target practice, firing several rounds into the swinging bodies. When motion finally ceases, a deputy sheriff orders the bodies cut down, dismembered, and torched. Afterward, a father asks his young son, no older than ten, if he would like the black man's silver-capped tooth as a souvenir. None wear hoods or masks. There is no need. It is a tight-knit community. The young black man, paralyzed where he stands, silently gagging on the scent of oversweet blossoms and burning flesh, unable even to blink as he watches the bodies smolder on a bed of rotting magnolia petals, will never tell. He knows the same awaits him if he does. But he will never forget. And if the opportunity ever arises, he will get out and go far, far away. To the new Canaan, the Promised Land. The North.

This is a composite sketch of a lynching based on many documented accounts that appear in a variety of sources, including *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (NAACP), *The Tragedy of Lynching* by Arthur F. Raper and *The Anti-Lynching Movement: 1883-1932* by Donald L. Grant. Every atrocity mentioned in the above sketch was witnessed and recorded, many of them in several incidents.

While many were lynched without trials for various alleged crimes, including murder and rape, some blacks were lynched simply for spitting on the sidewalk, for harboring a fugitive, for looking at a white woman or for failing to address a white man or boy as "sir."

The hangings, burnings, tortures and maiming of human beings on a regular basis in a section of America, often with political approval, is one of the primary factors that led to the Great Migration, a period in the early 20th Century when hundreds of thousands of blacks moved from the rural South to the urban centers of the North.

Not all attacks on African Americans were as cruel or as blatant as the one cited above, but the conditions that condoned such extremism were firmly in place. To understand what created this climate one has to examine the political, social, economic, and psychological profiles of the post Civil War South. After the war, Reconstruction was launched. Northern opportunists known as carpetbaggers poured into the South to make a quick buck and to reshape the sociopolitical sys-

tem. For the most part, they reaped what they could and sowed very little, aside from the seeds of resentment in a population that already felt defeated and besieged. Federal troops occupied the land, maintaining order and enforcing the law, much of it new and foreign to a people raised from the cradle to believe the black race was inferior and existed only to serve whites. By Constitutional Amendments and Acts of Congress African Americans could now vote, own property, and hold office.

But in the highly contested presidential election of 1876, the Republican, Rutherford B. Hayes, though losing the popular vote, was declared victor by the electoral college. In a deal with the Democrats, (the majority of whom were Southern), the Republicans sold out the Black South for the Presidency. Hayes agreed to withdraw all Federal troops if the Democratic South supported his election. It was a done deal. In 1877 Reconstruction was over.

Repeal of progressive laws on state and federal levels returned the bulk of power to Southern white leaders. Resident whites once again knew they ruled, and this time it was with a vengeance, for they saw blacks as the cause of the hardships imposed on them by the North.

African Americans needed constant reminders that they were second-class citizens. The reminders came in the form of beatings, public humiliation, "Jim Crow" or segregation laws, and, of course, lynchings.

In less than 30 years, 1889 to 1918, over three thousand people were lynched in this country; nearly 80% were black and almost 90% were in the South. In 1872 (during Reconstruction) there were 12 recorded lynchings in the former Confederate States. In 1892 there were accounts of up to 255 lynch victims in the same region.

The reason for the dramatic increase is that lynching proved to be an efficient method of intimidation. The economy of the South was still primarily based on farming. Cotton was king; tobacco prince. A system of share cropping evolved in which blacks supplied most of the labor and whites reaped most of the rewards. White landowners rented fields to blacks in exchange for a portion of their crops. They also supplied their tenants with tools, seed, and the essentials for survival—until the crop could be harvested. They did so at such high

rates that tenants were forced to mortgage next year's crop for that winter's necessities. In essence, slavery was reestablished economically. "False pretense laws" were passed making it impossible for a person in debt to leave his county of residence. There was an unspoken code among white planters and businessmen not to hire a black man in debt to another planter. When blacks did earn more than they owed, they were often paid in "Scrip", i.o.u.'s that could be exchanged for goods locally, but rarely in cash—so they had no traveling money. Those who tried to leave were arrested on petty charges and sent to state prisons that made huge profits by leasing convicts to private employers. Many were sent to forced labor camps such as the wood cutting camps of Texas, where less than half the prisoners survived their two-year sentences.

Blacks were virtually trapped in the rural South of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The federal government, for the most part, had turned its back on them after Reconstruction. Congress and the Supreme Court continuously blocked legislation designed to help blacks. In 1883 the Court ruled that the 1875 Civil Rights Act—which prohibited discrimination in public places and on public transportation—was unconstitutional. A southern filibuster in the Senate killed the

Lodge Bill, designed to guarantee black voting rights, which were being steadily eroded by poll taxes, property qualifications, literacy and competency tests. ("Grandfather clauses" exempted most poor uneducated whites from taking the tests). In the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision of 1896, the Supreme Court supported the practice of "Separate but equal" accommodations, thus condoning "Jim Crow" legislation.

That blacks were eager to leave the South was evident as early as 1879 when an exodus to Kansas was organized by "Pap" Singleton in Tennessee. Thousands joined him. In response white planters armed themselves and tried to "close" the Mississippi by blockading river landings. Federal troops threatened to intervene, and the blacks were allowed to migrate. But there was little advantage to living in Kansas, and the migration ended almost as abruptly as it had begun. Many put their remaining hope in rumors of a better life that trickled down from the North.

Opposition to lynching helped to unify northern black leaders. They realized they could not rely on the government or courts to right racial wrongs. They must wage the struggle for equality themselves.



Drawing by Gloria Wilder.

The sun died in the sky; a night wind muttered; the woods poured forth the hungry yelping of hounds, the darkness screamed with thirsty voices. . . And then they had me. —*Between the World and Me*, Richard Wright

To achieve this goal, the brilliant black leader W.E.B. Du Bois and others founded the Niagra Movement in 1905. At a Niagara Falls, Canada conference, the group developed strategies to combat racial injustice in general and the problem of lynching in particular. As a direct result of this conference, the NAACP was established in 1909. During the same period two African-American newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Chicago Defender*, were launched. Both fought vigorously for the rights of African Americans. But spreading their new creed of black assertiveness to the South was difficult. Many southern blacks were illiterate (educational opportunities for southern blacks were meager at best). Those who could read knew that being caught with a copy of *The Chicago Defender* was reason enough for a beating or lynching. But in 1915, history and nature combined to give southern blacks the opportunity they'd been hoping for.

At the same time, World War I erupted in Europe (1914), a boll weevil infestation and flooding in the South wiped out much of the cotton crop. The war in Europe ended immigration, and led to an unprecedented demand for the products of Northern industries. With little work in the South and labor shortages in the North, blacks had there chance. Industries sent agents south of the Mason-Dixon line to recruit black workers, and for the first time some southern white planters were glad to let them go, particularly when they discovered they could sell recruiting licenses to the Northerners.

The North wasn't the new Canaan many blacks had hoped for. They were given the worst jobs in industry and crowded into city ghettos. Jim Crow was alive in spirit, if not in the laws. But still they migrated by the thousands because, as deplorable as conditions were, they were better than lynch mobs and serfdom in the South.

There were rays of hope. New York City had desegregated its theaters as early as 1912. Public school doors were open to black children, and the voting booth was open to their fathers—with no taxes and no tests. More than anything else educational opportunity and a voice in the political process offered possibilities of economic and social improvement undreamed of in the South.

So the migration continued. In 1910 about one million blacks, or 11 percent of the total African-American population of the United States lived outside the South. By 1920 the figure was up to 15 percent. It climbed to 21 percent in 1930. In New York City during the same period, the African-American population soared from under 92,000 to over 328,000, making it the largest black urban population in the world. In Harlem alone the black population sky-rocketed from under 70,000 in 1920 to over 175,000 in 1930.

When America entered the war officially, the black man answered his nation's call. Over two hundred thousand African Americans joined the United States Expeditionary Force. Spurred by the democratic rhetoric filling the newspapers, they entered the Armed Forces full of hope: If they served their country well, they would be rewarded with respect and opportunity. Instead they received the lowli-

est assignments in the military. They built the roads for the army, cut the wood, dug the trenches, and buried the dead. Those who were allowed to fight were among the most decorated and honored troops in the entire war—by the French government. White American officers ignored, belittled, and even denied black achievements, and upon the insistence of the US military black soldiers were not allowed to be honored or march in the Victory Parade in Paris when the war ended.

Black soldiers had also gained a sense of confidence in their ability to fight for what was right. They believed they had fought overseas "to make the world safe for democracy." They expected those democratic principles to apply at home, too.

But in America little had changed. The only place black troops were afforded a hero's welcome was New York City. In the South, African-American veterans placed themselves in danger if they wore their uniforms in public. Some were hung with their uniforms on.

The economy was on the down swing with the end of the war, and the labor force greatly swelled by returning veterans. This led to escalating tensions between blacks and whites competing for the same jobs. Six months after the Armistice that ended W.W.I., these tensions exploded into race riots in 26 cities. The period was dubbed the "Red Summer" of 1919. The worst rioting occurred in Chicago and Washington DC. Evidence implicates whites as the instigators. But the "new Negro" was more militant than his forebears and fought back with energy and conviction. He was in the North to stay.

The northern white world was beginning to take more notice of blacks. Elected officials had to pay attention to their new black constituents—if they wanted to be reelected. Out of this reality emerged the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill of 1922. L. C. Dyer was a white United States Congressman from St. Louis. His district had become primarily black during the Great Migration. Fearing that he might lose his seat to a black political rival, he sponsored legislation that would win him African-American support. The bill required federal officers to protect citizens from lynch mobs; failing to do so would result in fines and/or imprisonment. The bill also made participation in a lynch mob a felony, and forced the county in which the lynching occurred to compensate the victim's family with cash—\$10,000.

The bill passed the House of Representatives, reflecting an awareness that blacks had increasing political clout at the polls and that women—who were finally allowed to vote—were more sympathetic to the African-American cause. But the Dyer's bill died on the Senate floor to the drone of another long-winded southern filibuster.

The migration continued until the Great Depression. After the stock market crashed in October, 1929, there was little work to attract blacks to the North. But when the economy retooled for World War II, African Americans were again invited to the North and the migration resumed.

ROOTS OF

The term blues is old. The English used it centuries before the first colonists settled in America. When they were down-and-out, Englishmen would say the "Blue Devil has me" in his grip. Americans later shortened this to "the blues has got me" or "having the blues." But the original expression survives in the mascots of some old southern schools, such as Duke University (Durham, North Carolina), whose mascot is the Blue Devils.

THE BLUES

The blues has deep roots. Black slaves from West Africa brought elements of the blues to America. Slave "ring shouts" and "work songs" are ancestors of the blues. These elements were mixed with other musical forms in the great melting pot of the New World: English ballads and hymns and the mournful songs of Celtic minstrels—Irish and Scottish traveling musicians who sang about the unfortunate and powerless. European church music provided the model for the keys, chords and chord changes that would support the blues. But although its chord structures grew out of church music, the blues became known not as God's music, but as "the Devil's Music"—among African-Americans.

But this wasn't necessarily negative. Unlike traditional Christians, Africans believed religious devotion and having a good time were closely linked. African Americans retained this attitude. Thus, it was possible for black musicians to shift from preaching to picking their guitars, and back again.* Thanks to this easy mingling of the sacred and the secular (worldly), elements of Negro spirituals filtered into the blues, and the so-called "Devil's Music" found its way into black churches.

However, before the Civil War "Slave Codes"—laws which applied only to blacks—prohibited African Americans from assembling, unless it was for church services, where white supervision was mandatory. After the War, blacks were free to congregate outside of their churches. They mingled at fairs, parties, barn raisings, weddings and later, juke joints and barrelhouses. These gatherings allowed African-American musicians to develop the secular (non-religious) side of black music: the blues, ragtime and jazz.

The blues scale is a West African scale which corresponds to the European scale at all points except for two notes, the 3rd and the 7th, which are "flatted" (that is bent to produce a lower pitch). They came to be known as "blue notes."

It's believed that the repeated phrases and the call-and-respon-

es of slave work songs gave the blues its three-line format. Here's an example from a 20s blues.

*I'm going to the river, take a great big jump,
I'm going to the river, take a great big jump
I used to be a wise man, but a woman made me a chump.*

This structure is called an AAB pattern. The first line is repeated, and the third line rhymes with and comments on the first two lines.

In the Twenties, blues songs contained four such stanzas. Today's blues usually have three verses with an instrumental break between the second and third. Blues songs are based on three chords, also known as "church" chords: the tonic (I chord), the subdominant (IV chord) and the dominant (V chord) or dominant seventh (V7). If you know the key, then you know the chords. In the key of C, the I chord is C-E-G (C major). The IV and V chords are built on the 4th and 5th tones of the C major scale, respectively—F-A-C (F major) and G-B-D (G major).

ACTIVITIES:

1. Ask your music teacher to play I-IV-V progressions on the piano until your ear learns to recognize the chord changes. Then listen for the I-IV-V progression in blues and rock songs.
2. Write your own blues lyrics (three verses), using the lyrics quoted in this article as well as Langston Hughes's blues poems as models. Compose a I-IV-V progression to go with your lyrics.

*In black culture there remains a close tie between the two worlds—the sacred and the secular—even to this day. Al Green is both an ordained Baptist reverend and a revered Rhythm and Blues man. Rock and Roller Little Richard has switched from sermonizing to singing rock more than once.

Roots of the Blues —by Atwood Gaines



A Classic Blues singer performing with a jazz combo. Notice there is no drummer. The Hatch-Billips Collection Research Library, NY

DAT FEEL GOOD ACHE- DA BLUES

Southern Negroes sang about everything. Trains, steamboats, steam whistles, sledge hammers, fast women, mean bosses, stubborn mules... They accompan[ie]d themselves on anything from which they [could] extract a musical sound or rhythmic effect, anything from a harmonica to a washboard.

— W.C. Handy

People don't cry from listening to the blues; they let the guitars and harmonicas cry for them. Ironically, playing or listening to blues makes people happy, flushes sadness out of their systems, like a hard rain clears the sky. An old bluesman wrote: "I sing these blues to give my poor heart ease."

By the turn of the century folk or rural blues existed in the South, but few people had heard of it. The blues had never been published or recorded. It was usually performed on rickety old guitars by southern black musicians (many of whom were blind) at folk dances, on street corners, in train stations. In 1903, the African-American band leader, W.C. Handy, encountered the blues at a Mississippi train station. In his autobiography, he writes:

"A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly,

*Goin' where the Southern cross' the
Dog (where two train lines meet)*

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind..."

Six years later, Handy transformed the music into what became the first published blues, "Memphis Blues."

The type of blues Handy heard at the train station is called "Delta" blues, after Mississippi's Yazoo Delta where it probably originated, or simply rural blues. Delta Blues is true folk music—a spontaneous musical response to a rural people's environment.

Handy published "Memphis Blues" in 1912, three years after composing it for a Memphis Mayoral race.✦ Shortly afterward, he was finagled by two white businessmen into selling the copyright for \$100. "Everybody connected with the 'Memphis Blues' has made more money from it than I," he says in his autobiography. In those days it was almost impossible for a person of color to break into the publishing and recording industries.

The rural blues came North after World War I with the Great Migration. In New York, it merged with jazz to become "city blues" or Classic Blues.

The first blues record sold to African-Americans (some others for European-American audiences had been recorded) was Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" recorded in 1920 in New York with Perry Bradford and his Jazz Hounds. Bradford arranged Mamie's recording contract—it took persistence. Mamie was Black.

"Phonograph officials... had been threatened by some southern and northern reactionaries to boycott their products—phonograph machines and records—if they had any truck with colored girls in the recording field," explains Bradford in his autobiography *Born With the Blues*. "I'd walked out two pairs of shoes going from one studio to another." He finally persuaded the head of Okeh Records, Mr. Fred Hager, to give Mamie and the Jazz Hounds a chance. "The Crazy Blues" was an instant hit, selling three million records—a huge number at the time. The success of Mamie's recording led to the development of "race" records, recordings made for the new-found black audience, and paved the way for the success of other female blues singers, including Ida Cox and Bessie Smith.

Mamie's blues, known as city blues or Classic Blues, was a smooth, polished blues, very different from the blues Handy heard at the train station. Classic Blues is closer to jazz than true blues. The musicians who backed city blues singers were usually jazzmen. Typically, Classic Blues was performed with a small jazz combo, which included horns, but not drums. Jazz greats Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong (trumpet) and Benny Goodman (clarinet) can be heard on blues recordings of Bessie Smith in the 1920s. Armstrong plays on Smith's classic rendition of W.C. Handy's *St. Louis Blues* (1925).

The rural blues form reached New York in 1923, with Ma Rainey (the first woman to sing blues professionally), Ida Cox and Bessie Smith.

These Mothers of the Blues infused the city blues with "field holler" or "shout" blues. Thanks to them, the Classic Blues became earthier, raunchier—more like blues. These women also influenced the jazzmen with whom they performed. Fletcher Henderson learned to play the blues from Bessie Smith, through him and others, the blues became a cornerstone of jazz, which was still a new musical form. Many 20's jazz songs use blues chord progressions, some are even called "blues," like Jelly Roll Morton's "Blue Blood Blues," "West End Blues" and "Winin' Boy Blues." Through their tours and recordings, these blues queens influenced other performers, unlike folk bluesmen whose styles rarely influenced anyone beyond their county lines. The Classic Blues was largely performed by women and sung from the woman's point of view. These blues women had new experiences to relate in their songs, they sang of hard times in the city rather than the country.

New Orleans Jazz migrated North when Storyville—the red-light/nightclub district of New Orleans—was closed by the United States Navy during W.W.I. Storyville guitarists, horn players and drummers packed up and headed to St. Louis, Chicago, Harlem. In the North, they encountered other forms of black music. The mixing of these musical styles produced still newer forms.

The Classic Blues craze faded out after the stock market crash in 1929. But a new form of urban blues emerged during the Depression, the Chicago Blues.

In Chicago, New Orleans drummers joined Delta bluesmen and provided the backbeat for what became the Chicago Blues. (The New Orleans horn players who migrated to the Windy City, however, gravitated toward Chicago's jazz scene.) The Chicago Blues outlasted

the Depression, and in the late forties, Chicago Blues great Muddy Waters✦ transformed the rural blues of the Mississippi Delta where he was born (a tradition in which a single performer plays acoustic guitar and sings) into a hard-edged, electric band music of enormous power and vitality. His music and his band—which consisted of an electric guitar, bass, drums and harmonica or horn—are the models for all forms of popular bands today, whether they play Rock, Blues, Alternative, Country or Grunge. As Muddy later said, "Blues had a baby, and they named it Rock and Roll."

Muddy Waters's Chicago Blues was a direct influence on fifties and sixties rockers, from Chuck Berry to the Animals, the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton. In fact, the Muddy Waters Blues Band accompanied Chuck Berry on his first record, a slow blues number called "Wee Wee Hours." Muddy's band also played on the flip side, which featured a novelty tune with country overtones called "Maybelline." It was the flip side that became the hit. Hundreds of thousands of copies sold in 1955. With the release of Chuck Berry's "Maybelline," Rock and Roll was officially born.

✦ Ironically, Handy's candidate, who was running on a reform ticket, won. The Memphis crowds loved the music, which African Americans at the time called the "Devil's Music" because of its association with red-light districts. In a review of Handy's *Blues (An Anthology)* in 1926, Langston Hughes wrote: "The blues are pictures of the life from which they come: the life of the levees, of the back alleys, of dissolute streets, the red light districts and the cabarets of those with not even a God to look to."

★ Muddy Waters is known as "the father of electric blues."

Dat Feel Good Ache—Da Blues —By Ahwood Gaines



LANGSTON HUGHES

+ POETRY

= THE BLUES

And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed.
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.

The Weary Blues. Langston Hughes

When we analyze and weigh the most innovative voices of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes—alongside Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer—remains at the axis. Where Countee Cullen and Claude McKay embraced the archaism of the Keatian Ode and the Elizabethan sonnet, respectively, Hughes grafted on to his modernist vision of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, and Alain Locke, as well as the Chicago Renaissance (Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg). So, as the other voices grew silent during the Great Depression of 1929—with modernism and imagism having taken a firm hold and reshaped the tongue and heart of American poetry—the 1930s found a prolific Hughes. From the outset, an American-ness had been at the center of Hughes's work, which is one of the reasons he has endured. Even his benchmark poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," plumbs the "muddy bosom" of the Mississippi after its narrator praises the Euphrates and the Congo (i.e., after taking readers on a tour through African heritage, the poem focuses on racial tensions in America).

Like Walt Whitman, the pulse and throb of Hughes's vision is driven by an acute sense of beauty and tragedy in America's history. Arnold Rampersad says in *The Life of Langston Hughes* that "On a visit to Kansas City he became aware of yet another aspect of black culture on which he would draw later as an artist and an individual. At an open air theater on Independence Avenue, from an orchestra of blind musicians, Hughes first heard the blues. The music seemed to cry, but the words somehow laughed." Where Whitman had embraced the aria of the Italian opera (horizontal music), Hughes's divining rod quivered over the bedrock of the blues (vertical music). The short lines of the blues poems create a syncopated insistence and



Langston Hughes, 1939. Photograph by Carl Van Vechten. The Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Collection, Yale University.

urgency. Art has to have tension. It is the simultaneous laughter and crying that create the tension in Hughes's blues poetry. As Hughes writes in "Homesick Blues": "Homesick blues is/A terrible thing to have./To keep from cryin'/I opens ma mouth an' laughs.

In "Midwinter Blues" we find the same tension:

*Don't know's I'd mind his goin'
But he left me when the coal was low.
Don't know's I'd mind his goin'
But he left when the coal was low.
Now, if a man loves a woman
That ain't no time to go.*

Hughes also incorporates a **jagged lyricism** and modulation into his poetry by using short lines—a modern feeling that depends on a vertical movement which sidesteps contemplation, but invites action/motion. There is confrontation in the blues. Stephen Henderson states in **Understanding the New Black Poetry**: "In oral tradition, the dogged determination of the work songs, the tough-minded power of the blues, the inventive energy of jazz, and the transcendent vision of God in the spirituals and the sermons, all energize the idea of Freedom, of Liberation, which is itself liberated from the temporal, the societal, and the political."

Hughes seems to have set out to take poetry off the page and toss it up into the air we breathe; he desired to bring poetry into our daily lives. In essence, he wanted his blues chants to parallel the improvisation in the lives of African-Americans.

To fling my arms wide

*In the face of the sun.
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.
Rest at pale evening...
A tall, slim tree...
Night coming tenderly
Black like me.*

Hughes speaks here about daring joy to enter black life. The poem, "Dream Variations," is more than the speaker daydreaming about bringing images of nature into Harlem (the first black metropolis of the modern world): this is celebration and revolution in the same breath. Hughes addresses the future, forging through imagery and metaphor the possibility of a new black culture in literature, music and the arts.

ACTIVITIES:

1. Find examples of tension in the following blues poems by Hughes: "The Weary Blues," "Blues Fantasy," "Hey! Hey!" "Young Gal's Blues," "Misery," "Hard Daddy," "Bad Man," "Bound No'th Blues," "Po' Boy Blues."

2. Compare the first and second stanzas of "Dream Variations." (The second stanza is quoted in the article.) Notice that the variations in the second stanza are similar to variations in jazz improvisation, except instead of varying notes, Hughes varies words and moods. The basic idea or theme of the poem is retained in the second verse, and many of the same words are used, but the changes make the second verse more active, more aggressive than the first. How?

3. Read a sampling of Carl Sandburg's poems. What similarities do you see between Sandburg and Hughes? What differences?

4. What does the writer of the article mean by "jagged lyricism"? Find examples of jagged lyricism in Hughes's poems.

5. Explain what the writer means when he says Hughes's short lines "sidestep contemplation, but invite action"?

6. Explain what the writer means by the statement, "There is confrontation in the blues." Is there confrontation in Hughes's poetry?



Aaron Douglas, *The Creation*, The Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

LANGSTON HUGHES + POETRY = THE BLUES —By Yusef Komunyakaa, the 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winning poet for *Neon Vernacular: New & Selected Poems*. Komunyakaa is Associate Professor in the Department of English, Indiana University; his other poetry books include *Magic City* and *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head*. Komunyakaa also edited *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, 1991.

✦ Cullen modeled his poetry on the verse of 19th-century poet British John Keats; McKay's models were the 17th-century Elizabethan poets, including William Shakespeare.

* According to Hughes's biographer Faith Berry, Hughes's high school English teacher (at Central High in Cleveland) "introduced her class to the Chicago school of poets: Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, and—the poet Hughes admired most, and eventually his greatest influence in the matter of form — Carl Sandburg."

* Modernist poets like T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound broke away from poetic traditions of the 19th century, such as rhyme and flowery language, the kind of poetry Countee Cullen and Claude McKay continued to write.

★ Imagism was a post-WWI literary movement that rebelled against 19th-century Romanticism and promoted the use of free verse and precise, concentrated imagery. The early poems of William Carlos Williams and the poetry of H.D. exemplify this tradition.

† The lines of Whitman's verse are very long, giving his poetry a horizontal feel. Hughes's lines are short, so the reader's eyes move quickly down the page, giving the poetry a vertical feel.

* In a review of W.C. Handy's *Blues (An Anthology)*, Langston Hughes says the blues grew out of "the racial hurt and the racial ecstasy," out of "trouble with incongruous overtones of laughter [and] joy with strange undertones of pain."

HUGHES'S INFLUENCE ON LATER POETS

Who are the rightful heirs to the Langston Hughes legacy? Amiri Baraka is one of the first names that light on the tongue, mainly because of his long allegiance to jazz and the blues through essays and poetry. But some would argue that his most successful poems are informed by his Black Mountain School* connection (but the poems in *The Dead Lecturer* are touched by a blues feeling). He says in his "Blues, Poetry, and the New Music" essay that "I begin with blues because it is the basic national voice of the African-American people. It is the fundamental verse form (speech, dance, verse/song) and musical form of the African-American slave going through successive transformations. . . ."◦ Undoubtedly, Baraka owes much to Hughes, as do many other voices—black and white. But some would say, "What about Sherley Anne Williams?" Just mentioning her name is enough to almost bring Hughes to life; her tribute to Bessie Smith underlines what Hughes was striving for in the blues idiom:

*She was looking in
my mouth and I knowed
no matter what words
come to my mind the
song'd be her'n jes as
well as it be mine.*

Sherley Anne Williams receives my vote. But one of the most recent voices associated with Hughes is Willie Perdomo. Claude Brown's blurb on the cover of Perdomo's book of verse, *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime* (the title is a Hughes line), proclaims the following: "Langston Hughes has been reincarnated and lives in Spanish Harlem. . ." True, some of the same anger is there; true, most of Perdomo's lines are short, with a similar jagged rhythm that is often linked to the blues; true, the urban subject matter might force the reader or listener to think of Hughes. But this young poet is merely a distant cousin of the man some called Poet Laureate of Harlem. Hughes's poetry is deeper than Perdomo's. Too many have confused Hughes's simplicity with that which is simple. In fact, his poetry is rather complex because it filtered through the lenses of insinuation and satire. The laughter fuses with the crying, and the synthesis is affirmation. This is what Albert Murray seems to address in *The Blues Devils of Nada*:

"As for the blues statement, regardless of what it reflects, what it expresses is a sense of life that is affirmative. The blues lyrics reflect that which they confront, of course, which includes the absurd, the unfortunate, and the catastrophic; but they also reflect the person making the confrontation, his self-control, his sense of structure and style; and they express, among other things, his sense of humor as well as his sense of ambiguity and his sense of possibility. Thus, the very existence of the blues tradition is irrefutable evidence that those who evolved it respond to the vicissitudes of the human condition not with hysterics and desperation, but through the wisdom of poetry informed by pragmatic insight."

★ The Black Mountain school refers to an artists colony in North Carolina during the fifties

◦ Hughes said much the same thing about jazz (see the first article in this issue, "When Harlem was Heaven")

Hughes's Influence on Later Poets—By Yusef Komunyakaa





Aaron Douglas, "Song of the Towers," from *Aspects of Negro Life*. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

RENAISSANCE VISIONS— THE ART OF AARON DOUGLAS

*All vital art discovers beauty and opens our eyes
to that which previously we could not see.*

—Alain Locke

School house doors were often closed to African Americans in the Jim Crow South. In 1916, for example, only nineteen blacks attended high school in all of North Carolina. The city of Atlanta did not have a single high school for African Americans. What schools

there were in the South primarily trained blacks for industrial work—a system designed to “keep the Negro in his place.” Without access to education, any talent that a southern black possessed was usually trapped inside of him or her—until the Great Migration unleashed some of it in the early decades of the 20th century.

In Harlem’s hot house of creativity, latent black talent burst into bloom like a strain of flower that had never before been allowed in the sun.

Before W.W.I. black artists were rare. More African-American artists emerged during the Harlem Renaissance than in the previous one hundred and fifty years. The most important were painters Aaron Douglas, William H. Johnson, Archibald Motley, Palmer Hayden, Malvin Gray Johnson, sculptors Augusta Savage and Richmond Barthé and photographer James Van Der Zee.

Douglas’s work was the most influential, probably because it streamlined and combined African abstraction and modern European art styles, and brought to the mix an American Jazz-Age immediacy and relevance.



Aaron Douglas, *Building More Stately Mansions*. The Carl Van Vechten Gallery of Fine Arts, Fisk University, Nashville.

The geometrical arrangement of images in his paintings—a style influenced by the sharply defined, highly **stylized** and simplified forms of African art—reflect the industrial age: urban landscapes with rectangular skyscrapers soaring into the sky and intersecting one another in a network of patterns.

Almost single-handedly Aaron Douglas created an African-American style of art, which influenced the next generation of black artists, including Romare Beardon and Jacob Lawrence. *Opportunity* and *The Crisis* regularly featured his work. From these magazines Douglas's art reached the eyes of black artists, writers and intellectuals all across America.

Douglas was close to and influenced by the *Opportunity* magazine crowd—Charles S. Johnson, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, especially the latter. Locke—who was known as the “dean” of the Harlem Renaissance—encouraged black artists to turn to Africa for inspiration. This idea made sense to Douglas for several reasons. One, the

occasional black artist of the preceding century had imitated European art; therefore, there was no African-American style of art to build on—or rebel against. Turning to African art was a logical choice. Secondly, this was the age of Pan Africanism and Marcus Garvey; getting back to one's African roots was philosophically fashionable. Thirdly, African art traditions are rich and varied, and Douglas, as well as European artists like Picasso and Modigliani, found much to be inspired by in the ritualistic art of the Dark Continent.

Douglas's paintings were also influenced by other arts that thrived in Harlem: jazz, blues, dance, poetry. Lines, shapes and colors in his paintings are repeated and varied like jazz themes or blues riffs. The gestures of his figures often reflect the graceful, funky movement of jazz dancers. And his art is loaded with visual metaphors and symbols which *read* like painted poetry.

In several issues of *Opportunity* magazine, Douglas's drawings accompany Langston Hughes poems. Together the poems and draw-

ings create a unified piece of art—*drawing-poems*. In a letter Douglas wrote to Hughes regarding their collaboration, he said: “Let’s bare our arms and plunge them deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let’s sing it, dance it, write it, paint it...”

Let’s interpret some of Douglas’s art. First we’ll look carefully at a painting, describing what we see, then we’ll interpret it, searching for visual analogies (**connections**) and **contrasts** (as we did with Botticelli’s art in the *Romeo & Juliet and the Renaissance* issue of NEXUS).

Song of the Towers is part of a mural series called *Aspects of Negro Life*, painted in 1934 for the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. The series chronicles African-American history through the early years of the Depression.

DESCRIPTION

In *Song of the Towers* a jazzman playing a saxophone stands on a giant gear or cog. At the center of the painting is a miniaturized Statue of Liberty with circles of light emanating from it. New York City buildings thrust into the sky, creating a geometric, stylized pattern. A series of circles and waves cuts across these buildings. Smoke stacks puff gray plumes into the air. An apartment building with inviting windows nestles in the hub of the giant gear.

On the lower right, a man races up the gear, carrying a suitcase. He’s running from something. Green flames lick at his heels, and a gnarly green hand grabs at him from behind. Notice the man’s clothes are ragged, his pants torn at the bottom like a farm hand’s work trousers. Also, he’s barefoot. In **contrast**, the man playing the saxophone is well-dressed; he is as bold, alive and dignified as his music appears to be. A third man squats in the bottom left corner of the painting, wrapped in a twisted green streamer. A clawed, skeletal hand hovers over him. (Notice this hand is balanced pictorially by the fleshy hand in the opposite corner of the painting.) Do you see anything else that we’ve missed?

INTERPRETATION

What is the man on the right running from? His suitcase and ragged clothes tell us he’s from the country, probably a farm or plantation. He is undoubtedly fleeing from bigotry and terror in the South, as many blacks did during the Great Migration. The gnarly hand symbolizes this harassment. The green flames are a grim reminder that many blacks were burned alive.

Why does the painter depict the farm hand running on a giant gear? To answer this, ask yourself what the gear is associated with. Since the man is on the gear, he can be metaphorically connected to whatever the gear is turning. The giant gear symbolically turns the engines of America’s industries. During the Great Migration blacks left southern plantations to work in the factories of the North. The gear’s

size suggests the power of northern industry, as do the towering skyscrapers and the huge smoke stacks. In the early 20th century, southern blacks viewed the North as the Land of Promise. The farm hand is about to become a part of America’s industrial might. He, too, will be a gear in the great system, a human gear.

Or will he? Who is the man in the bottom left? Why is he dejected? He’s not running from lynch mobs or from Jim Crow like his counterpart in the opposite corner, yet he’s miserable. Perhaps the painting doesn’t depict three men, but only one man in different stages of his life? The man playing the sax was probably a migrant from the South at one time, since before 1910 ninety percent of blacks lived in the South. Does the man on the left represent the future of the jazzman and the fleeing farm hand? Remember, this painting was completed in 1934, during the Great Depression. Does the painting suggest a time line moving from right to left, from Great Migration to Jazz Age to Depression?

The Statue of Liberty stands at the center of *Song of the Towers*; it’s very small, which may imply that its promise of liberty for all has not yet been fulfilled. To blacks arriving from the South, the Statue of Liberty represented an emancipation from prejudice. The circles of light emanating from the statue spread freedom throughout the city and beyond. However, these circles do not reach the green flames and green hand in the bottom right corner. Why not?

The man with the sax is bold and jubilant, blowing jazz to the heavens. Clearly we are in the peak period of the Jazz Age. Notice that the jazzman’s proud, erect stance makes him look as important and powerful as the skyscrapers that surround him. Like these “towers,” he appears to be a pillar of the modern world. (Note, comparing the man to the buildings is a visual analogy.) Also, the man can be linked to the Statue of Liberty. He is a human version of what the Statue symbolizes—a free man expressing himself creatively and confidently. His saxophone can be thought of as his torch. Notice the sax shares the inner circle of light with the Statue of Liberty and actually touches the torch as if deriving strength from its flame. In the Twenties jazz signified liberation, freedom from troubles, freedom from oppression, convention and societal repression. [Even in our era, jazz has been a symbol of liberty, especially in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, where it was banned for years.]

Why is the painting called *Song of the Towers*. Can the painting be thought of as a visual song? Let’s look at another Douglas work, *Building More Stately Mansions*.

DESCRIPTION

Notice this work is painted in layers of brown that grow more transparent as the “stately mansions” recede. A pyramid rises majestically in the background; in front of it stands the carved head of a mighty Egyptian Pharaoh. In the middle area of the painting we encounter a pair of Greek or Roman columns, the swirling tower of an

Islamic mosque and European Gothic spires (note the rose window in the center steeple). In front of these stands the Arch of Triumph in Paris and 20th-century skyscrapers. Douglas places the newer architecture in the foreground and the older in the background, which suggests that the foreground represents the present and the background represents various stages of the past. Black workers trudge up a hill of rough-cut stone, carrying tools. At the top of this hill stands a proud Egyptian who gazes skyward while resting his hand on the shoulder of a little girl. He appears to be a guide. A little boy stands beside the girl; his right hand grasps a globe, which is mounted on a desk. A series of concentric circles radiate from the globe. Only the children, who both stand in the foreground, are dressed in modern clothes. How can we interrelate these images? Let's look for connections and contrasts.

INTERPRETATION

Since the little boy and girl are dressed in modern clothes, while the other figures are not (a contrast), we can surmise that the children are from the 20th century and the men are from the past. The further in the background a figure is placed, the more ancient he is (a visual analogy or connection). Instead of being engaged in hard labor, like the workers on the hill, the children appear to be mental workers (another contrast)—the desk-top globe suggests a classroom (another connection). The globe, of course, also makes us think of the world, past, present and future. Notice that the circles emanating from the globe (similar to the circles in *Song of the Towers*) encompass all the great ages and architecture of the past, thus linking the wonders of the past to the globe in the boy's hand (another connection).

Who built these "stately mansions"? Obviously the workers marching up the hill played a major role. They are evidently the boy and girl's ancestors.

Interestingly, the layers of the past appear to be aspects of the present. The modern skyscrapers and Arch of Triumph are superimposed on the Gothic Cathedrals of an earlier age, the Islamic mosque, the ruins of Greece or Rome, the statue of the Pharaoh and the pyramid.

The layered effect in the painting functions like a *dissolve* in cinema. In a dissolve filmmakers show overlapping images: usually the audience sees what has just happened in the film and what is about to happen at the same time, the old image fading as the new one comes into focus. In the painting, we see all the layers of the past simultaneously, superimposed on the present—like a kind of multiple dissolve. What does this suggest? Are these levels of the past, the layers of the little boy and girl's personal history? Notice that the men of the past climb the hill toward the children as if the children were their destiny (an analogy). Notice that while the men are on a hill, the children stand on level ground (a contrast). What does this suggest?

Black men helped build these great structures, but did they ever live in them? Will the children live in them?

We observed earlier that the boy holds the globe—the future. Through education the children can reach back across the ages and take ownership of their history. Through equal opportunity (remember, the children are standing on level ground instead of climbing a steep incline), they are able to move into the mansions their forefathers built.

Since the painting is called *Building More Stately Mansions*, we should ask what kind of mansions will the children build, and who will live in them?

Does our interpretation make sense? Can the painting be read in another way? With a lot of art, the point isn't to find one right interpretation, but to find a valid interpretation. This is achieved by considering all the elements in the painting and interrelating them—making connections and recognizing contrasts. An invalid interpretation is one that does not include all the painting's elements.

ACTIVITIES:

Using the same approach we've used, describe and interpret other art work in this issue.

*In 1920, 2.1 million black children between the ages of five and fourteen lived in the South. Only 36% of them attended school.



Aaron Douglas, *Ma Bad Luck Card*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. *Ma Bad Luck Card* first appeared in *Opportunity*, October 1926, with five other Douglas drawings, including *Play De Blues* and *On De Nothern Road*. The drawings are accompanied by five Langston Hughes poems, including *Hard Luck*.