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Langston Hughes: Poetry and Resistance in the Capitalist Desert (2)

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"'Contempt of court!' bangs the Chairman."

(CW 7:158, cited in Scott 139)

- "You figure the Constitution has fallen down on you?"

  "I do," said Simple. "Just like it fell down on that poor Negro lynched last month. Did anybody out of that mob go to jail? Not a living soul! But just kidnap some little small white baby and take it across the street, and you will do twenty years. The F.B.I. will spread its dragnet and drag in forty suspections before morning. And, if you are colored, don't be caught selling a half pint of bootleg licker, or writing a few numbers. They will put you in every jail there is!" (CW 7, 134)

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In the 1940s, because of attacks from both right-wing reactionaries and the Communist Party, Hughes returns to his themes and style of the twenties with *Shakespeare in Harlem*, a collection of poems published in 1942 that deals with the blues and black struggles. The majority of the poems in *Shakespeare in Harlem* take up jazz, love, folk dialect, and Harlem daily life. Under pressure from both the left and right, from publishers and the black intelligentsia, Hughes returns to what he has done before—unable to find a new voice, yet.

In search of a wider audience, in 1943, he creates two fictional characters that become new voices for Langston Hughes: Jesse B. Semple in prose and Alberta K. Johnson in poetry, who confront the Depression, directly, and speak in deceptively simple and popular language. In the *Chicago Defender* newspaper in February 1943, Jesse B. Semple, known as Simple, speaks for the first time in Hughes' new newspaper column. And Madame Albert K. Johnson enters the scene in the summer of 1943, in the Hughes' "Madame" poems. By introducing Jesse B. Semple, his fictional Harlem Everyman as narrator of many of his newspaper columns, Hughes is appropriating the voice of a man he met in a Harlem bar. When Hughes asked the man, who makes cranks for the war effort, what the cranks are for, he simply replies, "Cranks, just cranks."

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His girlfriend replies, "You must know what the cranks are for, you've been working in that war plant long enough" (Rampersad II, 61). But the man replied, "Cranks, just cranks," and Hughes finds a way to show his brothers that they are more than just cogs in the American economic machine; they have a voice, and a right to know where they fit into this vast machine (Rampersad II, 61). Hughes creates a worker, who hangs out at Paddy's Bar and Grill in Harlem, who is sometimes a simpleton, and sometimes asks just the right questions. "Simple" asks the questions that can embarrass the white boss who rules him. Here is Jesse B. Semple asking his boss for better pay:

"What did he say then?"
"He said, 'You talk like a red.'

"I said, 'What do you mean, red?'

"He said, 'You know what I mean—*red, communist*. After all this country has done for you Negroes, I didn't think you'd turn out to be a red.'

“I said, ‘In my opinion, a man can be any color except yellow. I’d be yellow if I did not stand up for my rights.’

“The boss said, ‘You have no right to draw wages and not work.’

“I said, ‘I have *done* work, I do work, and I will work—but also a man is due to eat for his work, to have some clothes, and a roof over his head. For what little you are paying me, I can’t hardly keep body and soul together. Don’t you reckon I have a soul?’ I said.

“Boss said, ‘I have nothing to do with your soul. All I am concerned about is your work. You are talking like a communist, and I will not have no reds in my plant.’

(CW 7:156, cited in Scott 137-138)

These so-called Simple columns made Hughes a more popular writer than ever before and spawned several volumes such as *Simple Speaks His Mind, Simple Takes a Wife*, and *Simple’s Uncle Sam*, which became required reading for blacks all over the country, north and south. With wry humor and naïve insights, Hughes fashions a character, who speaks simply and naively about black people’s daily lives in America. Hughes becomes, at last, a popular writer in his own country.

This new character of Simple is Hughes’ answer to the repression, the attacks, the vigilantism, and the rejections—all the intimidating terrors of critics who rejected and ridiculed his revolutionary work of the 30s. Instead of writing angry poems, Simple answers those who have terrorized Hughes. Hughes realizes that his poetry of the 30s could incite anger and rage; but Simple’s new and subtler voice can induce thought and reflection among blacks, and perhaps even whites. He wants blacks to understand the impact of the war on their lives. He wants them to question the basis of white authority.

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People all over the country adopt the *Chicago Defender*’s Jesse B. Semple as their simple sage. In the very first column, Simple has to be convinced to join the U.S. war effort because the Nazis would install a curfew and make him go home at 9 p.m. The Nazis’ strict work ethic tells Simple’s audience about their own present working conditions. Although Hughes enrolls the black worker in the war effort, he uses Simple to point out the contradictions in the American economy, where blacks can make only survival wages. Through Simple’s down to earth reactions, Hughes reaches great numbers of black people for the first time—those in America, who work for the war machine, and those who live under the radar, earning meager wages for hard labor.

On April 26, 1947, in one of his early “Simple Speaks” columns, “When a Man sees Red,” Hughes imagines Jesse B. Semple appearing before the U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee. Simple asks the Chairman why he is not allowed to drive a train and why the only blacks he sees at the train station are sweeping the sidewalks. When the Committee Chairman accuses him of being a labor organizer and an international communist, Simple asks:

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“‘Why? Because I want to drive a train?’

“’Yes,’ yells the Chairman, ‘because you want to drive a train! This is a white man’s country. These is white men’s trains! You cannot drive one. And down where I come from, neither can you ride in a WHITE coach.’

“‘You don’t have any coaches for red Russians,’ I said.

“’No,’ yells the Chairman, ‘but we’ll have them as soon as I can pass a law.’

“‘Then where would I ride,’ I asked. ‘In the COLORED coach or in the RED coach?’

“‘You will ride nowhere,’ yells the Chairman, ‘because you will be in jail.’

“‘Then I will break your jail up,’ I said, ‘because I am entitled to liberty whilst pursuing happiness.’

“‘Contempt of court!’ bangs the Chairman.”

(CW 7:158, cited in Scott 139)

Folks read the Simple stories in the back rooms of general stores in the south—in smuggled copies brought down by train. Southern whites responded by banning the columns, which directly addressed southern and northern racial terrorism. Hughes, himself, and his characters in the column became national heroes for blacks and progressive thinkers, almost overnight.

When Hughes first comes to the attention of the arch-terrorist J. Edgar Hoover, Hoover assigns agents to compile records documenting Hughes’ life and communist connections. In the FBI file, we find a fantasy Hughes—telling us that he was married to June Croll, a white woman—not true—and besides, many critics believe Hughes was gay. The FBI reports claim that Hughes is 5’8”, when actually he was 5’4”. The file says that Hughes was an avowed member of the Communist Party—also not true. They claim that he called for a race war—not true—and that he went to Russia to study communism—also not true (Rampersad II, 92). Hoover’s fantasy Langston Hughes leads a far more exciting and suspect life than the real man.

In 1949, *Life* magazine publishes an article titled, “Red Visitors Cause Rumpus: Dupes and Fellow Travelers Dress up Communist Front.” In this article, *Life* claims that Albert Einstein, Paul Robeson, Leonard Bernstein, Dorothy Parker, Norman Mailer, Lillian Hellman, Susan B. Anthony, Arthur Miller, and Langston Hughes are all communist dupes and reds. *Life* runs a photo essay with pictures of all the famous writers who assemble at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel for the “Cultural and Scientific Conference” of the National Council of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions (Rampersad II, 167). Hughes is one of the sponsors of the conference, but does not speak—he lays low and lets other writers handle the running of the conference. The *Life* article is a culmination of right wing attacks on Hughes in major media—he was attacked for years, and now the magazine attaches him to every left-wing cause. And he is

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denounced in radio shows and articles from Gerald L.K. Smith to the *Readers Digest* (Rampersad II, 168).

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The *Defender* columns, featuring Simple's views and other timely insights from Hughes, put him on the map; but, ironically, it also brings him to the attention of the very committee before which his fictional figure appeared. The Simple-HUAC fantasy becomes a reality, when McCarthy's Senate Un-American Activities Committee calls Hughes to testify in Washington, D.C., about his early Red poems and his disrespectful Simple columns. The Senate Committee cites "Something to Lean On," among other Hughes' works as the reason for his hearing. In "Something to Lean On," the Committee Chairman, asks Simple:

"You figure the Constitution has fallen down on you?" "I do," said Simple. "Just like it fell down on that poor Negro lynched last month. Did anybody out of that mob go to jail? Not a living soul! But just kidnap some little small white baby and take it across the street, and you will do twenty years. The F.B.I. will spread its dragnet and drag in forty suspections before morning. And, if you are colored, don't be caught selling a half pint of bootleg licker, or writing a few numbers. They will put you in every jail there is!" (CW 7, 134)

Roy Cohn of the Senate Committee refused to negotiate with Hughes, and took his usual aggressive and bitter stance toward the black poet. Cohn, himself a closeted gay man, seemed incensed by Hughes' success and outward calm. By 1953, all Hughes' books had been pulled from State libraries, even ones that were not controversial. As Rampersad states: "Estimating that thirty thousand volumes were tainted by the left, McCarthy saw to it that several hundred books were removed. Many were reduced to pulp and eleven were actually burned; various programs were eliminated, and several libraries closed altogether." (Rampersad II, 211)

Although Hughes seemed calm, as he approached the hearing, he was trembling; and he had labored over his five page statement in which he denied ever being a member of the Communist Party. He claimed that his work was often misinterpreted. Hughes gave a bravura performance, deflecting Cohn and evading McCarthy's direct accusations. Hughes never invoked the Fifth Amendment, and he never gave up names of others. Hughes' approach was to tell the truth and to assert democratic values in a dignified manner.

In their pre-hearing meeting, Hughes even praised the values of democracy and accepted the legitimacy of the Congressional committee, itself. Once again, his tactic for confrontation was to avoid confrontation. Like the trickster Br'er Rabbit in *Uncle Remus*, Hughes knew the terrain from years of suppression, alienation, and intimidation. It was a similar tactic to the one he used when the subject of his sexuality was approached. He had evolved a set of maneuvers that accepted authority to its face, while living a secret life: he had used that elusive anti-terrorist tactic as a socialist, as a gay person, and as a black man in a white world.

Hughes and McCarthy seemed to have come to an understanding. "Good-Bye, Christ" was not read in open hearing and Hughes did not denounce his detractors—he even admitted that Senator Dirksen had treated him graciously. When Hughes returned home to New York, he noted that McCarthy finished the hearing with an almost secret wink at Hughes, signifying perhaps that each had got what he needed. McCarthy got to chastise Hughes, and Hughes retained his dignity.

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The right wing forces resumed their attacks on Hughes within a month, and he had to tread carefully after the hearing, refusing to endorse left wing causes. He removed his name from the anti-fascist league, where it had stood on the stationary with Pablo Picasso, Paul Robeson, Orson Welles, Eugene O'Neill and Dorothy Parker. Hughes avoided the public martyrdom that Robeson was forced to endure, and retained his place as a cultural icon.

Did Hughes sell out or did he elude the government's terrorist tactics? He had always survived, and he had always been forced by terror to be discreet and cautious, especially after the trip to the Soviet Union. Perhaps, in part, the new character of Simple embodies he new techniques of both evasion and directness, dealing with terror vicariously, through his naïve and aggressive fictional voices. Like Alberta K. Johnson, he throws his words back at his pursuers: "Madam, to you!"

Even after the McCarthy hearing, the terror does not let up. Although the government seems to relent, the right wing activists do not. Just as years before in Pasadena, when Hughes was picketed by fundamentalists, in 1960 Hughes was threatened with a bombing before a reading in Buffalo. Police watched anxiously, while the poet nervously read as the bomb scare was found to be false. A couple of weeks later in Grand Rapids, Michigan, white churchmen protested his appearance, and Hughes cancelled his reading (Rampersad II, 306).

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Such was the result of 40 years of dodging attacks, indirect censorship, and direct intimidation—even while he championed his race, and all manner of oppressed peoples—women, poor, gay, uneducated, prostitutes, and the underprivileged. He had become the friend and mentor to poets and writers all over the world. Hughes, like Robeson, was friend to creative minds and national spirits, but he faced a growing terror from his perch in Harlem. Hughes died in 1967, after a crowded and triumphal reading at Shakespeare & Company in Paris, where the crowd was so large that Hughes, himself could not get in. When he attempted to a move to the front, he told a member of the audience that he was Langston Hughes. The fan replied, "Yeah, and I'm Richard Wright!" Even at the end, he was not recognized.

The present day doesn't seem very different—so many people, like Cindy Sheehan and Salman Rushdie and James Baldwin and Angela Davis have lived under threat of exposure and loss of livelihood and life. We do know, however, that they all have been martyrs to a continuing U.S. campaign of terror. We will never know how Hughes and Robeson or Lenny Bruce and Billie Holiday would have thrived freed from the terrors induced by U.S. cultural myopia. We only know that each fought back in a life-long battle.

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Post-scriptum :

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