

Langston Hughes – Patternmaster

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In memory of Octavia E. Butler

Abstract: In the US academy Langston Hughes is considered a great ‘folk poet’. This specialist sort of literary designation is not wrong; the problem is that it has come to replace the more historically accurate and generalist description of Hughes as one of the most well-rounded writers and intellectuals of the twentieth century. Outside the United States, Hughes is usually ranked alongside Eliot and Yeats, both in terms of overall intellectual influence within the English language and literature tradition and for his catholic literary output over the course of four decades of work. The thesis here is that the downgrading of Hughes in the US academy, from world-class writer and intellectual to ‘Negro folk poet’, is not only symptomatic of the endurance of white racial oppression in US society, but also extremely costly for students and scholars of American literature who have thus far been made familiar with only a fraction of his writings.

Keywords: African American literature, the blues, socialism, US academy, white racial oppression

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For those who have read the work of the late, great novelist Octavia Butler, this term ‘Patternmaster’ is quite familiar.¹ It comes from her first novel *Patternmaster* and you can find the felicitous concept in the rest of her novels under different names and valences. One of the more recent goes by the name of ‘shaper’ – the key term of her *Parable* series, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. At the end of *Patternmaster*, the lead character Teray has finally discovered ‘the Pattern’. Butler’s description:

Teray, seemingly bodiless, only a point of light himself in this mental universe, discovered that he could change his point of view without seeming to move. He was suddenly able to see the members of the Pattern not as star-like points but as luminescent threads. He could see where the threads wound together into slender cords, into ropes, into great cables. He could see where the cables joined, where they coiled and twisted together to form a vast sphere of brilliance, a core of light that was like a sun formed of many suns . . . Because Teray was doing something he had never done before, he first had difficulty understanding that the sphere of light was not a thing that he had to travel to, but a thing that he was part of. He could not travel along the thread of himself. He was that thread. Or at best, that thread was a kind of mental limb, a mental hand that Teray discovered possessed a strong instinctive ability to grasp and hold.²

In Butler’s conception, a Patternmaster is ‘that core where all people come together’. By arguing that Langston Hughes was a ‘Patternmaster’, I don’t think I’m saying anything controversial. The real controversy about Hughes is the way he has been treated in the US academy. But first, let me just review briefly the basic facts of his life and work, which establish his status as Patternmaster.

Hughes in the US Pattern

First, I will take the ‘cords’ or ‘ropes’ and then I will move on to the ‘great cables’. Hughes is known in the US mainly as a folk poet, meaning that he wrote and published poetry in a vibrant popular language that everyday people could understand, precisely because it was their language he was always using. But this is just one cord – his blues poetry. Hughes was also a playwright, a musicologist, a popular historian, a novelist, a folklorist, a journalist, a translator, an editor, a mentor, a lecturer, an anthologist, a songwriter and a teacher. And had it not been for the blundering stupidity of white racial oppression – the enduring Jim Crow laws and customs of the land – he would have been probably one of the most famous Hollywood screenwriters. In the 1930s and ’40s, Hughes proposed many screenplays for Hollywood

studios; each was based on the unique philosophy of African American everyday life, what we know as ‘the blues’. But they were systematically rejected because of intense pressure from white racist and anti-communist groups operating in the country. In fact, Hughes was ‘blacklisted’ in the US many years before white radical artists became targets of government repression. Hughes referred caustically to this experience as a case of ‘literary sharecropping’.

You can see a clear parallel today, I think, with many people acting surprised that the Bush administration is wire-tapping everyone and threatening to fire academics who are critical of this government’s policies; yet just decades ago, the then government was wire-tapping Dr Du Bois, Malcolm X and Dr King, among hundreds of other African American political leaders, artists and activists. Hughes in the 1930s and ’40s was a prime lesson in what Frederick Douglass always warned about: that when the citizens of a society condone and enforce the oppression of a specific group of people, the door is left open for the oppression of everyone else the government does not like. Being part of a forgetful society, many people in the US today do not draw the obvious connections between the persistence of white racism and the entrenchment of reactionary forms of political repression, embodied by the new ‘homeland security’ apparatus.

Hughes was a Patternmaster because he was always reminding Americans of these things, of what happens inside the US ‘Pattern’. For example, in the 1940s, Hughes popularised the term ‘Hitlerism at home’ to remind Americans during the second world war that you could not really fight fascism in Europe while maintaining racial apartheid at home. This toxic contradiction would end up exploding in everyone’s face, as he warned prophetically in his magisterial volume *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, which anticipated by two decades the momentous Black urban rebellions of the late 1960s. ‘What happens to a dream deferred?’ Hughes wrote famously in that poem. ‘Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over – like a syrupy sweet?’ The poem’s last line contains the prophecy: ‘Or does it explode?’³

Another hallmark of the Patternmaster is the ability not to predict but, rather, to prophesy. The difference is that instead of merely predicting bad things to come, which are obvious anyway to anyone watching events, a true prophet shows people how to avoid catastrophe. One example; housing prices in the US today are 55 per cent higher than they were five years ago. A prophetic analysis will tell you not only that, once this giant bubble bursts, millions of Americans will soon be bankrupt and without homes but that the reason for the bubble in the first place is the racial resegregation of our cities, and that, if this catastrophe is to be prevented, the resegregation of schools and neighbourhoods must be ended.

In terms of prophecy, Hughes's famous essay of 1926 'The Negro artist and the racial mountain', published when he was only 24, established one of the 'great cables' of the African American literature tradition. Forty years later, the writers of the Black Arts Movement read that essay as if it had been written just the day before. Amiri Baraka, for example, has said that Hughes's essay changed fundamentally the way he approached writing and inspired him in 1965 to build the Black Arts Reparatory Theater/School in Harlem.

Similarly, Melba Joyce Boyd shows in her study of Detroit's poet laureate Dudley Randall, *Wrestling with the Muse*, that Hughes was 'a symbol of affirmation for the Second Renaissance as he published with Randall's Broadside Press and collected the poetry of the upcoming era in *New Negro Poets USA* (1964)'.⁴ Boyd argues convincingly that 'the interconnectedness of the decades was personified by the interactions and activities of Langston Hughes'. I would add to Boyd's assessment by suggesting that this *interconnectedness* of which she speaks was Hughes acting as Patternmaster: his weaving together of all the threads that have made the African American tradition one of the world's most lasting, powerful and influential, *in spite of* the disrespect it continues to receive at home.

In my forthcoming book on Hughes, I emphasise the ways he was received in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. In a word, Hughes was treated like a god. When he visited Cuba in 1930, for instance, everyone came out to see him, and the impact of his meeting with Cuba's national poet, Nicolás Guillén, was profound. According to Guillén, it changed the way he wrote poetry.⁵ So what does Hughes say in this essay that shocked the world? In fact, he says a very simple thing. 'To my mind', he wrote, '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!"'⁶

Hughes's words seem now a matter of common sense, but break them down closely and you get to the core of the US Pattern – a Pattern that is being imposed today in the Arab world through brute military force and, very possibly, during the next few years in Iran also. More to the point, as historian Greg Grandin reminds us in his excellent new book, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, this US imperialist racial Pattern, diagnosed by Hughes in the 1920s and '30s, was tried out systematically in Latin America during the 1980s. 'Reagan's Central American wars can best be understood as a dress rehearsal for what is going on now in the Middle East', he writes. 'It was these wars where the coalition made up of neoconservatives, Christian evangelicals, free marketers, and nation-

alists that today stands behind George W. Bush's expansive foreign policy first came together.'

Hughes was showing in 1926 that the US Pattern had been taken over by ruling-class capitalist elites, most of them neo-Confederates coming directly from the old slave-owning class of Southern planters. Following the old US racial Pattern, they had successfully turned civil society into a wholly racialised social order. Today, with the benefit of the African American civil rights movement's great moral critique of white supremacism, many folk will recognise instantly the truth of Hughes's historic statement, yet it should be noted that this was not something talked about openly in the 1920s. Recall that Dr Du Bois – another great Patternmaster – had said twenty years earlier that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the colour line, but that few had listened. Du Bois warned again and again that if the US 'White Pattern' was not immediately and aggressively *de-racialised*, the whole world might end up bent on destruction in violent racial warfare, having emulated closely the dyspeptic yet hegemonic US model of racial rule and social control. Today few people would disagree, I think, with the idea that this Du Boisian prophecy is closer than ever to becoming a historical reality. Pursued to the end, any racial logic can lead to mass extermination – witness the US in Vietnam formerly and in Iraq today. Or, closer to home, witness the way the white government tossed overboard the black poor of New Orleans and abandoned them to the winds and waters of the hurricane. It scarcely seemed worth picking up the dead, the dying or the survivors afterwards.

What Hughes was saying in 1926, then, is that racial identity is far worse than anti-democratic. It is a lethal trap for ordinary working people, because it is an *artificial* identity, something whispered constantly by those in power to all the people below: go ahead and become white, lose your original identity and adopt this other identity we've already set up for you. After all, we know what's best and this whiteness, you'll come to love it. And anyway, your original identity is savage and uncivilised. Just look at all the great works of art, they were made by European Christians. The darker-skinned peoples of the world – the heathens you come from – have produced nothing of value.

In this revolutionary essay, what Hughes forced to the surface was a taking of sides. This is another hallmark of the Patternmaster: she or he shows you that the world is complicated indeed, but in the end you will always see, if you look close enough, only two forces fighting it out: those competing monotonously for self-enrichment and the rest who want to co-operate with each other to make things better and more interesting for everyone. 'I'm so tired of waiting, aren't you', Hughes wrote in the early 1920s, 'for the world to become good and beautiful

and kind? Let us take a knife and cut the world in two and see what worms are eating at the rind.’⁷

Some of the ‘great cables’ of the revolutionary African American Pattern come into view in both this poem and ‘The Negro artist and the racial mountain’ essay. The first is a rejection of fake white identity, which Hughes always associated with the political machinations of the neo-confederate US capitalist class. (Today its members are called in a kind of technocratic euphemism ‘neocons’.) Take his poem ‘White Man’, whose uncompromising tone is set by its deceptively simple opening: ‘Sure I know you! You’re a White Man. I’m a Negro.’ Rarely, if ever, anthologised or even noted by American poetry teachers, its trenchant clarity is, perhaps, too much for some. It builds, from the basic opposition between ‘the best jobs’ that ‘leave us the garbage cans to empty and the halls to clean’, through ‘the big house at Palm Beach’ offset by the ‘back alleys/And the dirty slums’, to the leech-like siphoning off of black creativity: ‘Let Louis Armstrong play it – And you copyright it’. And then, cunningly, with the pent-up force of Hughes’s litany behind it, it twists the ‘smart guy’ round to face reality. ‘I hear your name ain’t really White Man. I hear it’s something Marx wrote down fifty years ago – that rich people don’t like to read. Is that true, White Man? Is your name in a book called the Communist Manifesto? C-A-P-I-T-A-L-I-S-T? Are you always a White Man? Huh?’⁸

Establishing the Black superstructure

Yet there is much more work to do after this originary rejection, Hughes always insisted. Next is rediscovery of an authentic working-class identity, which has been submerged beneath the weight of the heavy, artificial, pro-corporate one. For Hughes, this process is very complex and will be different for each individual. And here is where all the ‘cords’ or ‘ropes’ come in: to discover your authentic working-class identity, you have to have cultural forms with which to do it. The beauty and pleasure of it is that these forms are already there: you just have to focus your mind on them. As Butler says in *Pattern-master*, you *are* the thread. Importantly, the threads are never spun from some pure cloth. Today’s multiculturalists might embrace Hughes as an exemplar of their discourse, yet the historical record indicates that it’s the other way around: Hughes invented American multiculturalists.

What are some of these forms? First, there is the spoken word or the ‘talking book’ – that is, vernacular expression: song and poetry. Hughes would be very pleased, I think, by the whole culture of hip-hop music, even all the nasty and negative rap that parents don’t like their kids listening to or watching in videos. Take Hughes’s poem ‘Bad Man,’

where he writes in the voice of what's referred to today as a 'thug'. 'I'm a bad, bad man cause everybody tells me so, I'm a bad, bad man, everybody tells me so. I take ma meanness and ma licker everywhere I go. I beats ma wife an' I beats ma side gal too. Beats ma wife an' Beats ma side gal too. Don't know why I do it but it keeps me from feelin' blue. I'm so bad I don't even want to be good. So bad, bad, bad I don't even want to be good. I'm goin' to de devil an' I wouldn't go to heaben if I could.'⁹

Next to this poem is one called 'Black Gal', in which he writes in the voice of a woman worker from Harlem: 'It's always been a workin' girl. I treated Albert fine. Ain't cut him wid no razor, ain't never been unkind. Yet it seems like always men takes all they can from me, then they goes an' finds a yaller gal, an' lets me be. I dressed up Albert Johnson. I bought him suits o clothes an' soon as he got out de barrel then out ma door he goes. Yet I ain't never been no bad one. Can't help it 'cause I'm black. I hates them rinney yaller gals an' I wants ma Albert back. Ma little short, sweet brownskin boy – Oh, God, I wants him back!'¹⁰

And then in the same volume is 'Hard Daddy', where Hughes writes in the voice of a young black woman: 'I went to ma daddy, says Daddy I have got the blues. Went to ma daddy, says Daddy I have got the blues. Ma daddy says, Honey can't you bring me no better news? I cried on his shoulder but he turned his back on me. Cried on his shoulder but he turned his back on me. He said a woman's cryin's never gonna bother me. I wish I had wings to fly like the eagle flies. Wish I had wings to fly like the eagle flies. I'd fly on ma man an' I'd scratch out both his eyes.'¹¹

A few poems later in the volume comes 'Workin' Man': 'I works all day wid a pick an' a shovel. Comes home at night, it ain't nothing but a hovel. I calls for ma woman when I opens de door. She's out in de street, ain't nothing but a 'hore. I does her good an' treats her fine, but she don't gimme lovin' cause she ain't the right kind. I'm a hard workin' man an' I sho pays double cause I tries to be good an' gits nothing but trouble.'¹²

Hughes caught all kinds of hell in 1927 for publishing these poems. First there was the volume's title – *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. Many American Jews called the title 'anti-Semitic', despite the fact that the expression was an explicit reference not to Jewish people but rather to the unfortunate choice faced by many unemployed Black Harlemites between selling your best clothes to any of the local pawnshops, which were then owned mainly by Jewish American merchants, or being evicted. In terms of the volume's content, the *Amsterdam News* labelled Hughes a 'sewer dweller', while another Black newspaper attacked him by saying that he was now 'the Poet Low Rate of Harlem'. Yet today almost every Hughes scholar has recognised these poems as being some of the best he wrote. Why were they so important? Because,

like Butler's Patternmaster, they bring into view a whole mental universe where people are seen, as Butler puts it, 'as points of light constantly changing in shape, color, and size, reacting as individuals change their thoughts, their emotions, their actions'. This is why, for every poem written in the voice of a man, there's a poem written in the voice of woman and, for every adult voice, there is a young person's voice, and so on. The genius of these blues poems is that when you follow closely the arrangement of them, you see that certain people are closer to each other in the Pattern while others are much farther apart. And, by calling them all into existence at once, as Hughes did, people can start to change their viewpoints: for example, they might see that a working man and a working woman are closer together in the Pattern than a hustler and a working woman. Today all this might seem obvious, but before Hughes wrote these poems nobody had ever done it – had brought everyone together in the same talking book.

And Hughes would continue to do this, perfecting his method along the way. He achieves this brilliantly in his first novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930) and also in his book of poems *Shakespeare in Harlem*, and then in his musicals such as *Little Ham* and *Don't You Want To Be Free?* In each of these works, you can see the whole Pattern and then make the choice individually as to which side you're going to take: with the hustlers and the schemers for personal power, or with the people who want to co-operate together to make the community a better place in which to live. What Hughes realised was that without the visual arrangement, in an avant-garde literary language, of a whole mental universe in which individual Black people could discover themselves in relation to each other – in other words, *without a Black superstructure* – the persistence of white racial oppression could be guaranteed. Without a cultural Pattern of their own making, people would remain lost. But Hughes never makes any moral judgements. Rather, he simply lays out the mental universe in which we all think through our individual choices.

A socialist mestizo

In the 1930s, several years after these blues poems were published, epochal events were happening across the globe. Capitalism was showing that it could not prevent another world war – in fact that it needed another world war just to stay in power. Moreover, it seemed clear to everyone paying attention that capitalism much preferred Hitler and fascism to socialism and working-class democracy. Although today in the US this fact has been largely forgotten, the first victims of Hitler's death camps were communists and socialists. And elements within the great powers, especially the US, initially supported the Nazis. Henry Ford, for example, admired Hitler and helped build up his war

machine. Hitler also admired Henry Ford and particularly the University of Michigan fight song ‘Hail to the Victors’. According to one historian, Hitler sent some of his Nazi Party people in charge of culture to the US where, among other things, they ended up copying ‘Hail to the Victors’, later using it as march music. The point is not that ‘Hail to the Victors’ is a fascist song, but that, in the 1930s, the world was split down the middle between fascism and socialism. It was the real beginning of the cold war, and Langston Hughes was at the heart of it and became a major player on the side of socialism. He lived in the Soviet Union for one year, during 1932–33, and then worked as a foreign correspondent in Spain during Franco’s massacre of the Spanish loyalists. He travelled to Cuba, Mexico and Haiti to meet with other socialist artists, such as Haiti’s Jacques Roumain. This led to Hughes producing the first English language translation of Roumain’s epic novel *Masters of the Dew*. Hughes was not alone, of course. But immediately after the war many in the US who had sided with socialism during the 1930s rejected it in favour of an ascendant US capitalism, which they often self-servingly, and wrongly it turns out, believed could provide democracy for all.

In 1953, Hughes was summoned to appear in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy and conducted by his lead attorney Roy Cohen. They threatened Hughes with severe punishment unless he said publicly that he no longer supported socialism. So he said that he used to be a communist but then gave it up. Hughes, at the same time, refused to name names. He walked away from the interrogation without suffering imprisonment or deportation, but he soon found that all the publishing companies that had brought out his work in the 1930s and ’40s were no longer interested. This led to a major change for Hughes, a brand new beginning.

What he did was to start writing for the African American press, the *Chicago Defender* in particular, which was at that time the third largest Black paper in the country. His column, called ‘Here to Yonder’, was an instant hit and for the next fifteen years, until he died, he made famous in it a character he invented called ‘Jesse B. Semple’ – or Simple. Hughes went on to publish five ‘Simple’ books before he died, as well as a musical play called *Simply Heavenly*. Many scholars think that Simple was Hughes’s most important contribution to world literature; without question, Simple saved Hughes’s literary career. What’s most amazing, though, is that Simple was a very political person and the things he used to say were as radical as Hughes’s communist poems of the 1920s and ’30s.

The first example is from a Simple column called ‘When a man sees red’, published in the *Defender* in 1947. The form of every Simple column was a back-and-forth dialogue between Simple, an African

American worker from Harlem, and a middle-class Black man named Boyd. They usually have their dialogues and debates over a few beers at a neighbourhood bar. As the column begins, Simple is telling Boyd about what had just happened to him at work.

‘The boss said, “You ain’t doing as much work as you used to do.”
 ‘I said, “A Dollar don’t do as much buying for me as *it* used to do, so I don’t do as much for a Dollar. Pay me some more money, and I will do more work.’”

‘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 had 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.”

‘I said, “It wasn’t so long ago you would not have no Negroes in your plant. Now you won’t have no reds. You must be color-struck!”

‘That got him. That made him mad. He said, “I have six Negroes working for me now.”

‘I said, “Yes, out of six hundred men. You wouldn’t have them if you could’ve got anybody else during the war. And what kind of work do you give us? The dirty work! The cheapest wages! Maintenance department – which is just another way for saying *clean up*. You know you don’t care nothing about us Negroes. You getting ready to fire me right now. Well, if you fire me, I will be a red for sure, because I see red this morning.”¹³

At this point, Boyd is alarmed and warns Simple about using this kind of language in the workplace, which gets Simple even hotter. ‘Is it red to want to earn decent wages? Is it red to want to keep your job? And not want to take no stuff off a boss?’ To which Boyd says, ‘Don’t yell at me. I’m not your boss. I didn’t say a thing.’ Simple shoots back, ‘Just because you are not working for white folks.’ Boyd replies: ‘There you go bringing up the race issue again. I think you are too race conscious.’ Simple says: ‘I am black, also I will be red if things get worse. But one

thing sure, I will not be yellow. I will stand up for my rights till kingdom come.'

Then, in prophetic mode, Hughes sets up an imaginary scene in front of HUAC: 'You'd better be careful,' says Boyd, 'or they will have you up before the Un-American Committee.' Simple fires back: 'I wish that old Southern chairman would send for me. I'd tell him more than he wants to know.' As Simple creates the scenario in the column, Hughes lays out a straightforward argument, with concrete examples and analogies, of the relations between anti-communism and white racism. Simple forces the committee to admit that anti-communism draws no distinction between African American labour organisers and white communists. 'You're both', the committee tells Simple. 'Why?' asks Simple. 'Because I want to drive a train?' 'Yes, because you want to drive a train! This is a white man's country. These are white men's trains! You cannot drive one. And down where I come from, neither can you ride in a WHITE coach.' This sets up Simple's brilliant riposte:

'You don't have any coaches for Red Russians,' I said.

'No,' yells the Chairman, 'but we will 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.

The other column I want to highlight is from the later Simple stories and is called 'Coffee break'. Like 'When a man sees red', it is about Simple's day at work. At work, Simple's boss keeps following him around, asking 'What does the Negro want?' Simple is annoyed and tells his boss to ask someone else because he is not 'The Negro'. His white boss persists. To get the boss off his back, Simple tells him a sarcastic joke from a Moms Mabley stand-up routine, about 'Little Cindy Ella' and her prom date with the president of the Ku Klux Klan. After wearing magic slippers that turn her into a blonde princess, Little Cindy Ella returns to her Black self at the midnight hour, landing her in jail. But Simple's clever parable of token integrationism passes right over the head of his white boss, who insists that Simple is not in jail, so what does he want now that he is no longer oppressed? 'To get out of jail,' he tells the boss.

'What jail?'

'The jail you got me in.'

'Me?' yells my boss. 'I have not got you in jail. Why, boy, I like you.'

I am a liberal. I voted for Kennedy. And this time for Johnson. I believe in integration. Now that you got it, though, what more do you want?’

‘Reintegration,’ I said.

‘Meaning by that, what?’

‘That you be integrated with *me*, not me with you.’

‘Do you mean that I come and live here in Harlem?’ asked my boss. ‘Never!’

‘I live in Harlem,’ I said.

‘You are adjusted to it,’ said my boss. ‘But there is so much crime in Harlem.’

‘There are no two-hundred-thousand-dollar bank robberies, though,’ I said, ‘of which there was three lately elsewhere – all done by white folks, and nary one in Harlem. The biggest and best crime is outside of Harlem. We never has no half-million-dollar jewelry robberies, no missing sapphires. You better come uptown with me and reintegrate.’

‘Negroes are the ones who want to be integrated,’ said my boss.

‘And white folks are the ones who do *not* want to be,’ I said.

‘Up to a point, we do,’ said my boss.

‘That is what THE Negro wants,’ I said, ‘to remove that *point*.’

‘The coffee break is over,’ said my boss.¹⁴

In my research, I have not been able to find another use of this concept of *reintegration* – it is an original idea of Langston Hughes. And I would argue that it is another aspect of being a Patternmaster. Because if you look around today you see that millions of white youth are trying to reintegrate. It might appear silly, inauthentic and opportunistic a lot of the time – this so-called ‘wigger’ – but the underlying pattern is there: white youth might not understand consciously what they’re doing, but the result is reintegration. Their impulse is to become culturally black.

I think this, too, would have pleased Hughes. What would have angered him, of course, is the unending and massive super-exploitation of Black artists in the entertainment industry, who see but a tiny fraction of the billions of dollars a year in revenue that they generate with all their new verbal styles and techniques. Yet this is reversible – it could be ended by a national programme of reintegration: an end to redlining and gentrification and the grossly unequal funding of public schools. It could be ended by actually enforcing civil rights legislation and putting on the books new labour laws that protect African American creative artists.

The point is that it is the whole Pattern that counts: the undeniable fact – one that Hughes was always stressing – that America is culturally Indian and African, not white. And where you have reintegration, you have the mixing of Indian, African, and European: an original

‘American Mestizo’, as Boyd has pointed out in her work on Alice Walker.¹⁵

In this light, the one thing that always stood out about Langston Hughes was his optimism. I think this came from his Patternmaster approach to US society. His 1925 poem ‘Rising waters’ gives you a sense of why he was so optimistic, in the face of more state-sponsored white racial terror and apartheid. ‘To you’, he wrote, ‘who are the foam on the sea and not the sea – what of the jagged rocks, and the waves themselves, and the force of the mounting waters? You are but foam on the sea, you rich ones – not the sea.’¹⁶

Hughes and the academy

This brings us to the question of the critical treatment of Hughes in the US academy, for US literary scholars and critics have considered him foam on the sea, not the sea. If you go to the library, you will find sixteen new volumes called the *Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, published by the University of Missouri Press. It is truly a revolution in American culture: to have everything Hughes ever published in print all at once. Yet you will not find many scholarly books in this same area of the library that seek to understand and appreciate what he accomplished as a writer and an intellectual. In fact, there are only three or four.

To me, it has always seemed obvious that Hughes stands alone in American literature both for his eccentric and breathtakingly prolific literary output, as well as his profound influence on other writers and artists around the world. I do not think that Faulkner or Hemingway or Saul Bellow compare to Hughes. They might be great writers, but they’re not Patternmasters, because they lack that *interconnectedness*: the intellectual will to bring together all the main currents of history and society at once – which is not to say that we should stop reading and studying them. In fact, we should read them to find out what precisely stopped them from achieving what Hughes did.

My main argument is that Hughes’s achievements in literature can be understood in three ways, or through three main elements of his work. In my opinion, these three elements explain why he is better known and appreciated around the world than in the country of his birth.

First, he took sides politically, not because he thought politics was more important than art, but rather because he felt that art is much better when its techniques are linked to politics. In other words, political art is not about saying the right political things but, instead, doing the right things politically as an artist. There is a huge difference, because the latter approach is about expanding reading audiences, interesting young people in literature, building cultural institutions

and establishing bonds of solidarity between other peoples struggling for self-emancipation. For Hughes, this meant giving voice to the voiceless and making the invisible, visible. It also meant advancing new kinds of avant-garde literature, such as jazz poetry and what he later called 'rhythm writing'. It meant working with popular photography and a collage aesthetic, and experimenting with forms of surrealism and artistic preferences for sarcasm and parody found in the blues. It meant embarking on extensive lecture tours, mentoring young writers, anthologising other writers and teaching.

Second, he was a permanent persuader for a whole new concept of America. For Hughes, the American Pattern was not a white ethnic immigrant melting pot but, rather, a 'reintegrated' Indian, African and European motley mix of peoples, held together by our working classness, not some feudal 'race' concept. For the incontrovertible fact – and the one most disliked by US academics – is that Indians and Africans, the cultural foundation of America, were never immigrants. Yet we are still not there. You could even say that today we are farther away from this concept than when Hughes was first proposing it. Hughes argued consistently, from *The Ways of White Folks* to his last Simple stories, that the real tragedy of America is that its great human wealth has been sacrificed on the altar of Anglo-American capitalist profiteering, which has been made possible only because of the trickery of white-skin privileges. Thus he was always asking: when will working-class white Americans realise that their hopes and dreams can never be attained so long as they keep identifying politically with their ruling-class oppressors – by taking the baited hook of white identity – instead of with their working-class cousins of a darker hue? *What if all the workers were black and all the capitalists were white?* In this way, perhaps the reason that Hughes is loved more around the world than he is in the US is because much of the world has already come to his particular concept of the Pattern. They are still waiting in vain on white Americans to come to this same self-conscious understanding.

Third, Hughes's work cannot be easily categorised. In highly specialised academic departments such as in the US, his poetry gets taught far more often than his cultural studies projects or his writing workshops or his journalism or his novels. For example, his novel *Not Without Laughter* is rarely taught next to Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* or Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*. Many critics think that *Not Without Laughter* is a poorly constructed novel. And maybe it is, but there is writing in that novel – especially the scenes in dance-halls – that is spectacular and has never been surpassed, in my view, in terms of literary beauty and complexity.

What the writing of Hughes forces is a new kind of thought, and this is why I think his work has been so misrecognised in the US academy. Race is artificial, he argued, a social invention: it's our multiethnic

working classness that's the real social glue. Cultural identity is actually very opaque and to arrive at one, he maintained, you need to always think historically, to think of the present also as history. That means questioning the history we are taught and understanding clearly what has been happening to our brains under the current backward Pattern.

But, more than anything, Hughes's writing shows that there is more to reading and studying literature than the literary artefacts themselves. The writer is also a human being who lives in the world and works in the Pattern. It's a humbling concept of the writer and a very demystifying one. It is also one that animates and enlivens the study of art – that brings art into direct and antagonistic relation with the world in which we live and struggle everyday.

References

- 1 The present essay is based on a lecture given on 17 January 2006 at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, sponsored jointly by the English Department and Africana Studies. The lecture's occasion was the announcement of Jonathan Scott's new book on Langston Hughes, *Socialist Joy in the Writing of Langston Hughes*, forthcoming from the University of Missouri Press.
- 2 Octavia Butler, *Patternmaster* (New York, Warner, 1976), pp. 177–8.
- 3 Langston Hughes, 'Harlem (2)', *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad (New York, Vintage, 1994), p. 426.
- 4 Melba Joyce Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 177.
- 5 Nicolás Guillén, 'Conversación con Langston Hughes', in Guillén's *Prosa de Prisa: 1929–1972*, volume 1, edited by Angel Augier (La Habana, Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1975), pp. 16–19.
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- 7 Langston Hughes, 'Tired', *Good Morning Revolution*, edited by Faith Berry (New York, Citadel, 1973), p. 48.
- 8 Langston Hughes, 'White Man', *Good Morning Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 4–5.
- 9 Langston Hughes, 'Bad Man', *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, op. cit., p. 112.
- 10 Langston Hughes, 'Black Gal', *ibid.*, p. 121.
- 11 Langston Hughes, 'Hard Daddy', *ibid.*, p. 124.
- 12 Langston Hughes, 'Workin' Man', *ibid.*, p. 119.
- 13 Langston Hughes, 'When a man sees red', *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Early Simple Stories*, volume 7, edited by Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2002), pp. 156–8.
- 14 Langston Hughes, 'Coffee break,' *ibid.*, pp. 207–8.
- 15 Melba Joyce Boyd, 'The politics of Cherokee spirituality in Alice Walker's *Meridian*', in Wolfgang Karrer and Hartmut Lutz (eds), *Minority Literatures of North America* (Tubingen, Gunter Narr Verlag Press, 1990), pp. 115–127.
- 16 Langston Hughes, 'Rising waters', *Good Morning Revolution*, op. cit., p. 21.