
MODERNISM IN THE BLACK DIASPORA Langston Hughes and the Broken Cubes of Picasso

by Seth Moglen

In the spring of 1934, Langston Hughes published a poem called “Cubes” in the *New Masses*, the premier literary journal of the American anti-capitalist Left. Hughes had recently returned home from a year spent in the Soviet Union and, at the time of the poem’s publication, he was at the height of his commitment to the revolutionary socialist movement. He was also thinking with particular intensity about the relationship between the expansion of capitalism and the spread of a racially based European imperialism. Like many of Hughes’ poems from the mid-1930s, “Cubes” is centrally concerned with this connection between capitalism and empire—with the global system that had, over several centuries, produced the African diaspora. Within the context of these political concerns, “Cubes” offers a revelatory exploration of the international aesthetic transformation that we have come to call modernism. The poem is at once an innovative modernist experiment and a powerful critique of modernism from a black diasporic perspective. “Cubes” suggests that the revolutionary aesthetic practices of the early 20th century were symptomatic expressions of an expanding system of racial and economic exploitation. But the poem demonstrates that these practices could also provide artists in the African diaspora with an indispensable means of understanding, and thereby resisting, that system of exploitation. Before developing this argument, I want to contextualize my reading by describing briefly some of the idiosyncrasies of the scholarship on Langston Hughes and U.S. modernism. As we’ll see, this history tells us important things about the ways in which this literary field has been structured—and how a reading of “Cubes” can alter our understanding of modernism itself.

As far as I know, “Cubes” has never been written about: it has been ignored equally by Hughes scholars and by students of modernism. The poem’s neglect reflects the peculiar history of U.S. scholarship about the artistic revolutions of the early 20th century. As critics now widely recognize, modernism was canonized in the United States during the Cold War in ways that were politically narrow and racially exclusionary. When an influential version of the movement was consolidated in the 1940s and 1950s, scholars generally assumed that African Americans had not contributed to its development.¹ This racially exclusionary view was so entrenched that, when African-American literary studies blossomed in the 1960s, most students of black culture accepted the notion that modernism’s formal practices and social concerns were largely alien to black writers of the early 20th century. Indeed, they frequently defined the distinctive features of African-American culture in explicit opposition to

an artistic movement that was presumed to be inherently racist and primitivist.² Into the 1980s, the scholarship on Langston Hughes generally reflected these oppositions. Those critics who rightly celebrated Hughes as a writer working in the black vernacular tended to assume that his commitment to the idioms of black working-class speech and to the popular musical forms of jazz and the blues must place him outside the modernist tradition.³ Similarly, the relatively small number of scholars who acknowledged and celebrated Hughes' socialist politics generally assumed that the poet's radicalism put him at odds with a literary tradition understood to be apolitical or actively conservative.⁴ In this context, critics inevitably had difficulty making sense of a poem like "Cubes"—a poem that clearly reflects Hughes' militantly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist sensibility but that also stands as a manifesto of black modernism.

In more recent years, an emergent "new modernism studies" has expanded and diversified our understanding of this complex literary movement, dissolving some of the misconceptions that prevented critics from grasping the modernism of writers such as Langston Hughes. This revisionary scholarship has had a number of goals, but canon expansion has been the most central. Critics have sought to explore the meanings and uses of modernism for women writers, for working-class authors and writers on the Left, and for writers from racially subordinated groups.⁵ In this altered context, some recent criticism has started to consider how Hughes' political radicalism and his commitment to the black vernacular carried him—not outside this artistic movement—but rather, into the development of a distinctive populist and revolutionary version of modernism.⁶

While the new modernism studies has valuably prised open an exclusionary canon, however, the gain in critical breadth has sometimes come at the cost of analytical precision. One strong impulse in recent scholarship has been the tendency to employ "modernism" as a period term: many recent critics have come to use the word "modernism" to mean "modern" literature, the literature corresponding to the period of "modernity." According to this usage, all writers working in the early 20th century, for example, seem to become "modernists."⁷ This terminology has the obvious appeal of inclusiveness: it encourages us to tear down the partitions that have often separated consideration of those writers traditionally recognized as participants in the avant-garde from their contemporaries. But there are serious disadvantages to this usage as well. Above all, it obscures the formal particularities that distinguish the revolutionary experiments that some (but not all) early 20th-century writers understood themselves to be collectively engaged in and that the word "modernism" has sought, retrospectively, to identify. This inattention to form is not, of course, accidental. Many revisionary scholars today associate a careful consideration of form with an older critical "formalism" that did, indeed, often mask elitist social attitudes. To ignore the formal considerations that distinguish modernist writing from other literary practices is thus often imagined to be politically progressive because it enables the inclusion of writers who have been marginalized on the basis of such "formalist" arguments.

This view—let us call it "anti-formalist"—rests on assumptions that are highly problematic in literary-historical and political terms. In many cases, the anti-formalist

view stems, implicitly or explicitly, from the false presumption that left writers or authors from socially marginalized groups were less concerned with formal experimentation in general—and with modernist experiments in particular—than their traditionally canonized peers. (This presumption has, for example, characterized the scholarship on Langston Hughes, as I've suggested—and I will show, momentarily, the inadequacy of this perspective.) Alternately (or sometimes simultaneously), the anti-formalist view rests on the presumption that the formal practices that distinguish modernism from other literary traditions can be ignored because they are socially and politically inconsequential, mere superficial changes in literary fashion. This seems to me a serious error. These formal experiments were the urgent efforts of men and women to find strategies to represent and respond to the social forces that were—often catastrophically—transforming their lives. This was no less true for committed and self-conscious left modernists like Langston Hughes or Tillie Olsen than it was for more conservative and traditionally recognized figures like Eliot and Pound.

Of course, modernist formal practices are not inherently politically progressive (feminist, anti-racist, non-homophobic, anti-capitalist), any more than they are inherently conservative. What I am suggesting is that these formal practices are *politically significant*, although that significance varies. To ignore the particular technical experiments of previously marginalized writers is to ignore their understanding of the social crises that they faced—crises that they believed required enormous effort and ingenuity to represent. It is also to ignore the political alternatives—the social aspirations and yearnings—that were articulable for writers like Langston Hughes only through modernist forms. To grasp the distinctive representational experiments of writers recently incorporated into an expanded modernist canon is thus a precondition for fully grasping the political visions that had, until recently, been excluded from our literary tradition.

In a brief but evocative essay called "Cognitive Mapping," Fredric Jameson has offered a particularly fruitful starting-point for thinking about the historical conditions and political implications of modernist form. He proposes that modernism can best be understood as the effort to invent formal strategies adequate to representing the social order that comes into being with the transition from "market" to "monopoly capitalism." In this new stage of capitalism, there emerges an increasingly bewildering gap between individual "lived experience" and the vast new "economic and social form[s]" that structure the "social totality." This gap is produced in large measure by the staggering scale on which economic activity takes place in an era of expanding and intensifying imperialism. Jameson illustrates the cognitive difficulty faced by individual subjects by pointing to the discrepancy between a person's experience of "a certain section of London," for example, and the vast "colonial system of the British empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life" but is neither "accessible to immediate lived experience" nor "even conceptualizable for most people." Our "various modernisms" cohere, according to Jameson, in their attempt to invent new formal strategies capable of figuring this global economic and social system—a system that shapes every aspect of individuals' lives, even as it eludes their immediate lived experience and therefore defies earlier strategies of literary representation.⁸

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Jameson's formulations provide a valuable way of approaching "Cubes" because they resonate so powerfully with the vision of modernism that Hughes himself develops in this poem. Like Jameson, Hughes insists that this artistic movement cannot be understood outside the context of an expanding capitalist economic system that had become, in an age of intensifying imperialism, ever more global in scale. The interlocking systems of capitalism and empire were, according to Hughes, responsible both for the emergence of avant-garde aesthetic practices and for the enforced migrations and oppressions of the African diaspora. Hughes' assessment of modernism in "Cubes" is, accordingly, ambivalent. At one level, the poet offers a trenchant critique of modernist art as a "disease." The poem suggests that the revolutionary aesthetic practices of his generation—practices for which Picasso's cubism stands as symbol and model—should be recognized as symptomatic expressions of a global system of exploitation that was deforming the lives of people around the world. But this critique is offered from within this aesthetic movement itself, by a poet who clearly perceives himself as a participant in its formal revolution. For "Cubes" is not only a meditation on modernism: it is also a demonstration of its power. Through the development of what I will call a black vernacular literary cubism, Hughes provides in this poem a "cognitive map"—a "figuration," in Jameson's sense—of a system of exploitation so vast that individuals could perceive it only in fragments. In doing so, Hughes suggests that modernism is a "gift" as well as a "disease": that its formal practices may be uniquely capable of representing—and thereby enabling us to resist—the global economic and social order that has produced them.

In the opening stanza of "Cubes," Hughes offers a cubist portrait of the modernist moment:

In the days of the broken cubes of Picasso
And in the days of the broken songs of the young men
A little too drunk to sing
And the young women
A little too unsure of love to love—
I met on the boulevards of Paris
An African from Senegal.⁹

The stanza confronts us with a cluster of fragments whose relations to one another are initially obscure. Hughes calls our attention, first, to the distinctive representational practice of modernism—to "the broken cubes of Picasso"—and to the specific historical moment ("the days") in which that modernist technique was born. Second, he suggests that the revolutionary representational technique of avant-garde modernists like Picasso is somehow related to a widespread popular crisis in self-expression and affective connection. (This crisis is evocatively figured as a mixture of desire and impotence: while the "young men" are moved to sing and the "young women" want to love, intoxication makes their songs "broken" and insecurity breeds emotional incapacity.) Third, both modernism and this affective crisis are associated with the enigmatic encounter "on the boulevards of Paris" between the African-American poet

and the “African from Senegal.” Like the viewer of a cubist painting, or a pedestrian in the modern metropolis, we are confronted by Hughes with a problem of relation, with the task of mapping or cognitively assimilating a set of abruptly juxtaposed aesthetic, psychic and social realities. The apparent simplicity of Hughes’ language should not obscure the ambition of the poet’s challenge: how are we to understand the social system that gives rise, at once, to the modernist artistic revolution, to the affective and expressive crisis of the metropolitan imperial subject, and to the confounding modern experience of the black diaspora itself? The remainder of the poem can be understood as a cubist exploration of the elusive relations among these fragments—as an attempt to produce a cognitive map of the modernity thus enigmatically experienced.

At a formal level, Hughes holds together the disparate fragments of the opening stanza through a series of linguistic repetitions. Although we cannot yet understand the substance of the connection, we know that Picasso is associated with the drunken men because his “broken cubes” echo their “broken songs,” and because Hughes repeats twice that it is “in the days” of one that the other has also been produced. The men are, in turn, associated with the fearful women because both are “young” and because the men are “*A little* too drunk” just as the women are “*A little* too unsure of love.” These repetitions of simple words and phrases are partially responsible for the colloquial feeling of the stanza. This technique, which produces a steadily increasing emotional intensity and conceptual sophistication over the course of the poem, is in fact a carefully controlled formal experiment that draws on two strands of modernist aesthetics: the model of Picasso’s cubism and the black vernacular musical sources that pervade Hughes’ poetry. The poet employs linguistic repetition here the way a cubist painter employs geometric repetition—in order to establish and emphasize underlying similarities, relations, and resonances among apparently disparate objects. (Just as Picasso might suggest that a guitar, a newspaper and a human form may echo one another geometrically within a given composition, Hughes establishes through linguistic resonances the obscure relations between Picasso’s representational practice and the quotidian behavior of the young.) These repetitions also draw on the vernacular practices of jazz and the blues—musical practices that are among the most influential U.S. contributions to the modernist aesthetic revolution.¹⁰ Like the repeated line within a blues stanza, the repeated words enable Hughes to explore the multiple meanings and emotional nuances contained within a single phrase. And just as a jazz musician may employ a repeated riff persistently within a single improvisation in order to explore unsuspected paths between one harmonic or melodic point and another, so too the repeated words enable Hughes to trace possible relations between apparently disparate social phenomena without entirely rupturing the continuity of his inquiry. From the outset, then, Hughes’ technique here is at once modernist and vernacular: it is, perhaps most precisely, a black vernacular literary cubism.¹¹

In the second stanza, Hughes focuses his attention on one of the fragments from his initial portrait: the enigma of the African in Paris. He approaches this enigma by expressing his confusion—at once a moral and cognitive uncertainty—about why this black man has been subjected to such a striking geographical displacement:

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God
Knows why the French
Amuse themselves bringing to Paris
Negroes from Senegal.

The poet's expression of uncertainty contains the fragments of its own clarification. At the most obvious level, Hughes indicates that the African's presence in Paris can only be understood in the context of the bewildering global system of exploitation—and migration—produced by European imperialism. As a member of a colonized people and a subject race, the Senegalese man has been "brought" to his current geographical location by those with power over him. This materialist political perspective is psychologically inflected, as Hughes emphasizes that the black man has not simply been "brought" to Paris, but has been brought specifically so that the French may "*amuse*" themselves through him. The poet suggests here that the global migrations of the African diaspora have not only a *material* cause, but also—and ultimately—a *libidinal* one. This is a quintessentially Hughesian insight and deserves emphasis. As throughout his poetic corpus, Hughes insists in "Cubes" that systems of material exploitation—including those of imperialism—stem ultimately from the desire of those with power to extract *pleasure* (in this formulation, "amusement") from their subordinates.

Significantly, the poet's psychological and materialist perception derives from a sense of racial identification with the African. While his encounter with the Senegalese man superficially resembles the long parade of modernist encounters with primitive Others (often in the streets of Paris), the black American poet refuses the distance that usually characterizes these canonical moments of exoticism. On the contrary, he immediately identifies with the Senegalese expatriate, referring to him as a "Negro"—the preferred term of African-American self-designation in the 1930s and a term that could apply equally to all peoples of African descent. By establishing this point of diasporic identification, even as he politicizes the African's situation, Hughes implicitly calls into question the meaning of his own presence as an African-American poet in Paris. Is his own place in the Western metropole truly freer than that of this other black man? As a black modernist who travels the world reading his poems of African-American life, is his task also to "amuse" those in power?¹²

In the third stanza, Hughes explicitly argues that the racial and economic power relations of imperialism—with their libidinal as well as material dimension—lie "behind" the aesthetic practice of modernism:

It's the old game of the boss and the bossed,
boss and the bossed,
amused
and
amusing,
worked and working,
Behind the cubes of black and white,
black and white,
black and white

Through a succession of three pairings in the first part of the stanza, Hughes emphasizes that the power-relations that lie behind modernism—and that define the relationship between the French and the “Negro from Senegal”—are exploitative, but also inherently unstable. The first formulation describes the “old game” of exploitation as a relation in which some people are not merely subjected to the power of another (“the boss”), but are defined by it: they are simply “the bossed.” The second reiterates the centrality of pleasure in such relations—but it also complicates the simple distribution of power, suggesting that it may well be the activity of the subordinates (those who *do* the “amusing”) that defines the status and identity of the dominant one (the “amused,” who has become the *object* of the verb and of the subordinate’s action). The third formulation is significantly ambiguous. At one level, this third pairing can be seen to mirror the first two, describing once again the opposition between those who are subordinate (those who are “worked”) and those who dominate them (those who are “working” others). But this third formulation has another meaning that explicitly focuses our attention on the instability of the location of agency that I have emphasized in describing the shift from the first to the second opposition. For the third pairing—“worked and working”—also describes two different ways of understanding the complex position of the subordinate, who can be perceived both as the object of exploitation (one who is “worked” by another) and as the active agent of productive labor (the one who is “working”). Through this succession of oppositions, Hughes offers a poetic and libidinally inflected extension of an insight that many will associate with Hegel’s famous master-slave dialectic: the poet insists that, in relations of domination, the master’s power to compel others to provide for his “amusement” is always tenuously balanced against the latent power of those who perform the work and provide the pleasure.¹³ In the final lines of the stanza, Hughes asserts that such complex and unstable power relations lie “Behind the cubes of black and white”—“behind” the expressive practice of modernism.

The sophistication of Hughes’ analysis here has been achieved through an extension of his black vernacular cubist technique. Just as a cubist painter can establish the resonances among disparate objects by reducing them to shared and repeated geometric forms, Hughes has successfully schematized various relations of exploitation within a simple series of binary oppositions (boss/bossed; amused/amusing; worked/working). And just as the cubist’s geometric “reduction” often involves an increased capacity to represent many perspectives of an object simultaneously, so too Hughes’ deceptively “simple” schematization contains within it a dynamic and subtle account of the multiple ways in which unstable hierarchical power relations should be simultaneously understood. Furthermore, the vernacular technique of linguistic repetition enables the poet to encapsulate formally the central observation that he has asserted conceptually. The repeated phrase at the end of the stanza—“cubes of black and white, / black and white, / black and white”—carries a dual meaning: it refers simultaneously to the “broken cubes” of modernist representation (Hughes’ as well as Picasso’s) and to the race relations that structure the Great Game of empire. By using the same figurative phrase for modernism and empire, Hughes insists, formally as well as cognitively, that the new expressive practice cannot be separated from the material, social relations in the midst of which it has emerged.¹⁴

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In the fourth stanza, Hughes deepens this analysis, suggesting that if inequitable social relations are to be sustained, those with power must provide some sort of compensation—libidinal or ideological—to those whom they exploit. As he explains allegorically, the Europeans have sought to make imperialism palatable by proffering their espoused Enlightenment ideals:

But since it is the old game,
For fun
They give him the three old prostitutes of
France—
Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—

At the most obvious level, this passage deploys a commonplace misogynist trope of the 1930s Marxist Left in order to emphasize the cynical use of Enlightenment ideology to justify imperial exploitation. According to that trope, the immorality of a nation that compromises its political ideals in the name of economic gain is aptly figured by the corrupted woman who sells her sexual virtue as a prostitute. Just as the “boss” may provide the compensatory sexual pleasure of a prostitute to secure the continued participation of the immigrant worker in the “game” of exploitation, so the French provide the ideological compensation of Enlightenment ideals (“Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”) which obscure and justify the practice of imperialism itself.

In a remarkable move in the second half of the stanza, however, Hughes resists this misogynist cliché by returning the allegory to its literal level, focusing attention on the prostitutes themselves. He now represents the “old prostitutes” not as the epitome of moral depravity, but as themselves the victims of an institutionalized system of exploitation:

And all three of ‘em sick
In spite of the tax to the government
And the legal houses
And the doctors
And the *Marseillaise*.

The poet emphasizes here that the legalized system that is supposed to protect the prostitutes is in fact an official mechanism of their oppression. Just as the French seek to justify imperialism by proclaiming their corrupted Enlightenment ideals, so too they have erected a legal and ideological apparatus around prostitution to make it seem safe and compatible with their national self-image. While the government takes its portion of the prostitutes’ earnings through taxes, neither the state’s regulatory gestures (“the legal houses” and “the doctors”) nor its ideological subterfuges (“the *Marseillaise*”) actually protects the prostitute from the ravages of her occupation. The prostitute—a recurring figure throughout Hughes’ poetry—thus stands here as a perfect symbol of the exploited worker. She performs, most literally and most intimately, the function that he believed pertains always to the worker: providing pleasure to those with power.¹⁵ And the prostitute’s “sickness” is the literal embod-

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iment of the toll taken by her exploited labor; it is the price she pays for providing “fun” to men who have money and therefore power over her. Her “sickness” is at once an instance of, and a figure for, the deformation of self that follows from the exploitation of one’s capacity to provide pleasure.

The prostitute thus stands in a complex relation to the Senegalese man. On the one hand, she is his double, his sister—the perfect representative of his own exploitation. On the other, he is himself an instrument of her oppression. While her exploitation is parallel to that of the worker, the black man, the colonial, it is also used as a diversionary device that cuts across, palliates, obscures, these other oppressions. Through a kind of careful, colloquial rotation of his subject, Hughes transforms a banal, misogynistic political allegory into a multi-layered analysis, insisting that these disparate forms of oppression and exploitation—across lines of gender, class, race, and empire—are structurally homologous but also independent and variably inter-related.¹⁶

This complex materialist analysis has important ramifications for Hughes’ relationship to the Enlightenment values for which the prostitutes allegorically stand. Above all, we must grasp the dialectical ambivalence that the poet introduces through his humanization of the prostitutes. He recognizes the truth of the Marxist critique of Enlightenment ideals as the ideological instrument of an unjust ruling class. (He sees that the proclamations of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” are often deployed as cynical deceptions and ideological distractions.) At the same time, however, he refuses to engage in a simple repudiation of Enlightenment values, just as he refuses the vulgar misogyny of the prostitution cliché. The prostitute’s “sickness” is the result of her exploitation rather than her depravity; so too these Enlightenment values are seen not as innately meretricious, but as deformed by a system of interlocking power relations.¹⁷

The last stanza follows the Senegalese expatriate back to Africa, and anatomizes the legacy he carries with him in his migrations through the black diaspora—a legacy of injury caused by these systems of exploitation, which are entangled with Enlightenment politics and modernist aesthetics.

Of course, the young African from Senegal
Carries back from Paris
A little more disease
To spread among the black girls in the palm huts.
He brings them as a gift
 disease—
From light to darkness
 disease—
From the boss to the bossed
 disease—
From the game of black and white
 disease
From the city of the broken cubes of Picasso

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At the literal level, the Senegalese man carries home a sexually-transmitted disease that he has contracted from the French prostitutes. But the “disease” he carries also has a series of metaphorical meanings. First, he has fallen ill, like the prostitutes, because he has suffered the same deformation of self that results from undergoing the exploitation of one’s capacity to produce, to amuse, to give pleasure. It is worth emphasizing that the “young African” now “spread[s]” the disease among “the black girls”—not as a result of domination, but simply through his acts of sexual connection.¹⁸ The disease is now internalized: the deformation of self cannot be limited to exploitative relationships, but rather makes itself felt in all relations. The capacity to give and receive pleasure has itself become infected. As the structures of domination expand ever-outward, with the extension of empire and of an increasingly global capitalism, the effects of exploitation, intimate as well as public, expand: the damage cannot be contained to the actual sites of instrumental material appropriation (the brothel, the workplace, the urban industrial metropole)—but rather, they migrate, permeating more and more relations.¹⁹

At another level, the disease that the African carries home is also the internalized result of his encounter with the universalizing Enlightenment ideals, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” The final sentence of the poem offers a reprise of the bitter ironies of this encounter with an Enlightenment idealism that is at once the hypocritical instrument of exploitation and also a liberatory tradition that is being daily more deformed—like the prostitute and the African himself. The sarcasm of the first proposition here—that the African has brought this disease home as a “*gift*”—is compounded by the second assertion, so resonant with the complacent racism of an Enlightenment-justified imperialism, that this “gift” has traveled “from light to darkness.” In the final three propositions, Hughes retraces the larger terrain covered by the poem, insisting that this disease has been transmitted not only through hierarchically organized class relations (“From the boss to the bossed”) and imperialistic race relations (“From the games of black and white”), but also through the expressive practices of modernism that emerged in the metropolitan imperial centers (“From the city of the broken cubes of Picasso”). With its call-and-response structure, the stanza again deploys the poet’s vernacular cubist technique: with every repetition of the word “disease,” Hughes adds and links together another determinant of the crisis of modernity, so that by the end he has enabled us to see that capitalism and empire, modernism and Enlightenment, are tightly interwoven features of a common and corrosive system.

Finally, in its concluding gesture, the poem’s last (and most densely coded) word—disease—is typographically broken, fractured, denaturalized, spacialized. Having

turned the image over and over, teasing out and accreting its many meanings, Hughes subjects the word itself—a physical assemblage of letters—to a cubist rendering, a modernist representation. While the poem’s final proposition declares that the “disease” of modernity comes “*from the city of the broken cubes,*” Hughes formally asserts that we cannot understand the disease without representing and recognizing it as itself *one of those “broken cubes.”* Modernism and the disease are, he insists, inseparable—cognitively, representationally, politically.

In the end, “Cubes” articulates an ambivalent vision of modernism. The poet insists that modernism is part of the “disease” being spread by a vicious modernity—a direct expression of an expanding system of economic, racial and gender exploitation. “Behind the cubes of black and white” lay “the old game of the boss and the bossed”—a game being conducted on an unparalleled scale in an age of intensifying imperialism, stretching quite literally from the “boulevards of Paris” to the “palm huts” of Senegal. But Hughes does not reject or separate himself from modernism on this account. On the contrary, “Cubes” is also a self-conscious embrace of modernism as a set of representational practices uniquely suited to capturing and exposing this bewildering system of exploitation, so vast that even as it shattered more and more of the world, it could itself be perceived only in fragments.

The poem is itself an eloquent proof of modernism’s representational power. By arranging and re-arranging its fragments, the poem ultimately resolves its opening enigma: in a world in which the human capacity to produce, to amuse, to give pleasure is being exploited ever more extensively, a deepening crisis has emerged in which the young are uncertain about the possibility of love and are unable to sing an unbroken song. Hughes suggests that modernism is a sensibility, a structure of feeling, that corresponds to those broken songs and insecure yearnings—and by the end, he has made it clear why the African-in-Paris stands as an apt symbol for the material processes that have brought that sensibility into being. The poet demonstrates that modernism is also a specific set of representational strategies that can enable us to produce a cognitive map of these vast, almost unknowable material processes and the subjective experiences that accompany them. In the poem’s last word, Hughes offers us a visual synecdoche of this process, this map. For in that simple cubist rendering of “disease” he leaves us with an image of an entire complex process of exploitation, quite literally dissolving—into the lives and the psyches of people around the globe, permeating ever more extensively the relations between women and men, black and white, African and Occidental, the bossed and the bosses, the amusing and the amused. The power of modernist representation to piece together in this way the dissolving fragments of a corrosive modernity—a power at once enacted and analyzed in “Cubes” itself—suggests that the poet is not only being sarcastic when he describes the “disease” of modernism as a “gift.” Hughes will no more reject a tainted modernism than he would the political ideals of the Enlightenment, entangled though they are with the practice of empire and racism, class exploitation and patriarchy. For modernism, he suggests, can perhaps alone reveal to us the “disease” that has brought it into being.

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APPENDIX

Cubes

In the days of the broken cubes of Picasso
And in the days of the broken songs of the young men
A little too drunk to sing
And the young women
A little too unsure of love to love—
I met on the boulevards of Paris
An African from Senegal.

God
Knows why the French
Amuse themselves bringing to Paris
Negroes from Senegal.

It's the old game of the boss and the bossed,
boss and the bossed,
amused
and
amusing,
worked and working,
Behind the cubes of black and white,
black and white,
black and white

But since it is the old game,
For fun
They give him the three old prostitutes of
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Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—
And all three of 'em sick
In spite of the tax to the government
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NOTES

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1. The exclusion of African Americans from the emerging canon of modernism reflected, of course, a racial myopia that has pervaded U.S. literary studies more generally. Documenting silence or exclusion is a difficult task—but a couple of significant examples should indicate the racial bias of earlier modernism scholarship. When Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson, Jr., assembled the impressive and influential anthology that helped to define the modernist canon as it emerged from the New Critical generation—*The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature*—they included no African-American writers. The persistence of this exclusion into the next critical generation is illustrated by the fact that the best single-volume overview of the international modernist literary movement from the 1970s—*Modernism, 1890–1930*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane—does not include a single African-American author in its biographical list of 100 modernist writers, nor does its 1300-item index contain a reference to a single black author or work.
2. For example, the opposition between modernism and African-American culture can be seen at work in typically complex ways in Nathan Huggins’ important early study, *The Harlem Renaissance*. On the one hand, Huggins criticized the literature of the Renaissance for failing to achieve the sophistication of the “formalist” “high art” associated with canonized modernism. On the other, he singled out for praise a few vernacular currents of early 20th-century black culture—especially jazz—which he viewed as lying outside this “high culture.” It is striking that the first sustained, polemical effort to break down the opposition between modernism and African-American culture—Houston Baker, Jr.’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*—was still so deeply influenced by this binary that Baker insisted on defining African-American modernism as a separate tradition opposed to a racist and primitivist Euro-American modernism.
3. The distinction between Hughes’ commitment to “folk culture” and the “high art” associated with canonized modernism has structured a great deal of the Hughes scholarship. Nathan

Huggins, for example, argues that Hughes chose to reject “serious ‘high culture’” and “formalism” in the name of black “folk art” (227). In a more recent example, Karen Jackson Ford celebrates Hughes’ “aesthetics of simplicity,” claiming that Hughes embraced “folk materials—rather than high art” (446). Arnold Rampersad argues similarly that in his “loyalty to the forms of black culture,” Hughes rejected “modernism as defined by elitism, hyper-intellectualism, and a privacy of language” (102). Rampersad’s invaluable two-volume biography was actually poised at the turning-point of current thinking about modernism—and about Hughes’ relationship to it. Early in the first volume, Rampersad suggests that modernism is a complex and contested phenomenon, and that Hughes was pursuing “a version of modernism” that was “populist in nature” and “quite unlike” the modernism of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot “whose elite standards would soon define the term” (29). During the remainder of his study, however, Rampersad generally abandons the term “modernism” to the “elite standards” he associates with Pound and Eliot—and defines Hughes’ poetry as a repudiation of modernism itself.

4. Adrien Oktenberg, for example, expresses this view particularly clearly, arguing that Hughes’ commitment to “proletarian” writing must be understood as directly “opposed” to the “art for art’s sake” “doctrine” of “the modernist faction” represented by “Pound, Eliot, Williams, Stevens, Moore, Crane” (86, 93–99).
5. The phrase “new modernism studies” has come into common usage relatively recently to identify the substantial changes that have taken place in the field over the last two decades. Many scholars have participated in the welcome expansion of the modernist canon, but a few of the most influential general interventions are these: on female modernists, see Shari Benstock’s *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900–1940*, Suzanne Clark’s *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*, and Bonnie Kime Scott’s influential revisionary anthology, *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*; on working-class and left modernism see especially Cary Nelson’s *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945*, Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, and Walter Kalaidjian’s *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique*; on African-American modernism, Houston Baker’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* was a pathbreaking study and, more recently, George Hutchinson’s *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* has dramatically shifted the debate by emphasizing the interracial character of U.S. modernism, including the formation we have called the “Harlem Renaissance.”
6. See especially James Edward Smethurst’s astute account of what he calls Hughes’ “popular neomodernism” in *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African-American Poetry, 1930–1946*, particularly chapters 3 and 5 (93–115, 144–63).
7. This tendency to use modernism as a period term, without concern for the formal particularities that distinguish “modernist” from other “modern” literature has been especially pronounced in some of the most daring and valuably revisionary work of recent years. The problems raised by this terminology become particularly acute in the case of scholars who use a sociological definition of “modernity” as a period stretching over two or more centuries. Marshall Berman, for example, in his influential and evocative study *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experiences of Modernity*, uses the term modernism to describe all the cultural formations since the rise of modern capitalism, from Goethe onwards. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy uses “modernism” to mean the “culture” (and “counter-cultures”) of “modernity”—where modernity seems to mean the period since the rise of the Enlightenment and the African slave trade. Among revisionary scholars working with a narrower periodization (the early 20th century), similar though less extreme problems emerge. In *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, George Hutchinson blunts the precision of his important intervention by using the word “modernism” as roughly synonymous with the entire “American literary field”—which results, for example, in figures like Theodore Dreiser being identified as “modernist.”
8. See Fredric Jameson’s “Cognitive Mapping.”
9. “Cubes” was originally published in *New Masses*, March 13, 1934, and reprinted in *Good Morning Revolution: Uncollected Writings of Langston Hughes* and in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Because many readers will be unfamiliar with “Cubes,” and because the poem has been out of print until recently, I have reprinted the poem in its entirety as an appendix at the end of this essay.
10. While I will be suggesting some of the ways in which Hughes’ use of repetition in this poem draws on vernacular musical traditions, “Cubes” is not strictly speaking a “blues” or a “jazz” poem in the sense that its overall poetic structure does not closely follow a single musical form

in the way that some other Hughes poems do. For the influence of the blues on Hughes' poetry, the most sustained study is Steven Tracy's *Langston Hughes and the Blues*; see also David Chinitz's "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes."

11. By using this formulation, I want to suggest that Hughes' formal experiment in "Cubes" can usefully be understood as a literary equivalent of the vernacular cubisms explored by African-American visual artists during the 1930s, such as Aaron Douglas in his famous "Aspects of Negro Life" murals and Jacob Lawrence in the "Toussaint L'Ouverture" series. On the relationship between black vernacular music and African-American visual art, including cubist experiments, see Richard J. Powell's "Art History and Black Memory: Toward a 'Blues Aesthetic'" and Paul Gilroy's "Modern Tones." See also Robert Hughes' comments on Stuart Davis's experiments in the 1930s (and Romare Bearden's in the 1960s) with cubism as a visual equivalent to the musical idioms of jazz improvisation: *American Visions: the Epic History of Art in America*.
12. In her important study of African-American anti-imperialism, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anti-Colonialism, 1937–1957*, Penny Von Eschen has emphasized the significance of the politicized identification of African-Americans with African colonial subjects. "Cubes" offers here a phenomenological, poetic enactment of this identification on the part of Hughes, an influential early figure in this political tradition. David Chioni Moore has offered the most subtle account to date of the complex racial vision underlying Hughes' anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist politics in the 1930s: see "Local Color, Global 'Color': Langston Hughes, the Black Atlantic, and Soviet Central Asia, 1932."
13. For Hegel's account, which has influenced generations of Marxists, see G.W.F. Hegel's "Self-Certainty and The Lordship and Bondage of Self-Consciousness."
14. The accretive, synthesizing power of Hughes' technique of linguistic repetition is even greater than this compressed analysis suggests. For all the oppositions of the first half of the stanza ("boss and the bossed," "Amused / and / Amusing," "worked and working") are echoed rhythmically and syntactically by the final repeated phrase ("black and white, / black and white / black and white")—and the final phrase, by a kind of rhetorical implication, knits together a whole host of phenomena that have been invoked: class hierarchy, racial hierarchy, hierarchies of pleasure and amusement, imperial power-relations, and the practices of modernism (in the "black and white" of ink as well as paint). Like a blues singer, or a cubist painter revealing to us additional facets of the same object, Hughes implies a different meaning with each repetition of the phrase, "black and white."
15. Hughes' emphasis on pleasure is conceptually significant for those interested in theorizations of exploitation. In the 1930s, and throughout his adult life, Hughes was deeply influenced by the Marxist account of exploitation, with its materialist emphasis on the ways in which capitalism involves an intensification of the process by which a minority (those who happen to own capital) are able to extract surplus value from the labor of the great majority, who must work at whatever wages the market will provide. While accepting a Marxist analysis, Hughes adds to it a psychological or phenomenological dimension. The poet emphasizes that individual members of the capitalist class personally seek to maximize their capital, in the last analysis, in order to maximize their pleasures—material, psychological, emotional, sensual, etc. (The French bring the African to Paris, ultimately, in order to "amuse" themselves.) Some specialized workers who happen to earn a living by directly providing pleasure to others are immediately aware of the relationship between their exploitation and the pleasures of others: this is true, for example, of those who produce art, knowledge, or entertainment of various kinds, and also those who provide sexual or other forms of physical pleasure. (It is this recognition that underlies Hughes' identification, as a poet, with the African and—throughout his poetic corpus—with the prostitute.) While most workers do not provide pleasure directly in this way, Hughes suggests that this is the ultimate goal of their exploitation, from a psychological or inter-personal standpoint: the surplus value extracted from their labor will, one way or another, increase the commodified pleasures that can be disproportionately consumed by those with capital. Hughes did not abandon a structural, materialist analysis of exploitation (he wrote many poems in the 1930s emphasizing the "impersonal" dynamics driving the processes of economic exploitation)—but in "Cubes" and other poems, he emphasizes that the libidinal effects of economic exploitation were among the most important, and damaging, aspects of capitalist society.
16. The Marxist tradition has been widely (and, in some of its incarnations, appropriately) criticized for promoting a totalizing vision that minimizes the significance of racial and gender oppression—or that seeks to reduce these to mere epiphenomenal effects of capitalism. I want,

therefore, to emphasize the flexibility and dynamism of Hughes' figuration of the global system in "Cubes." It is, in my view, emblematic of the African-American Marxist tradition at its best: a tradition that has placed a priority on developing a materialist analysis that grasps the relative autonomy of racial (and often gender) oppression—as well as their systematic incorporation into a capitalist economic structure. This tradition remains under-studied. Relatively recent books by Robin D. G. Kelley (*Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*) and Penny Von Eschen (*Race Against Empire*) have added to the pathbreaking work of Cedric J. Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* and Mark Naison's *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* and to Nell Irvin Painter's oral history, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: The Life and Times of a Black Radical*. Two recent studies of the African-American Marxist literary Left are: Smethurst's *The New Red Negro* and William J. Maxwell's *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars*.

17. It is also worth noting an additional implication of this underlying metaphor for Hughes' relationship to Enlightenment values. Throughout his career, the poet persistently returned to the parallel between sexual desire and the longing for freedom. Hughes clearly believed that people did indeed yearn for "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" as fundamentally as they longed for sexual fulfillment—and his verse (including "Cubes") implies that these desires may share a common libidinal source. For this reason, people's political ideals (like their sexual desires) are easily manipulated; and for this reason, such manipulation has particularly damaging effects. Ann Borden has touched on this nexus of political and erotic concerns in Hughes: see "Heroic 'Hussies' and 'Brilliant Queers': Genderracial Resistance in the Works of Langston Hughes."
18. While there is no explicit indication that the young African's relationship to the "black girls" is exploitative (as his relationship to the prostitutes is), Hughes does emphasize here the added vulnerability of women in the colonial situation. Current gay readings of Hughes might be supplemented by the critique of heterosexuality contained in this poem. Put simply, "Cubes" suggests that the hierarchical structures embedded in normative heterosexuality are inevitably drawn into the expanding systems of economic, racial and imperial exploitation. This critique of heterosexuality is, like his critique of modernism and Enlightenment politics, a richly ambivalent one. Here, as throughout his career, Hughes invokes sexuality as a central aspect of and metaphor for the positive human potentialities that are deformed by oppressive power relations. For two accounts that offer fragmentary gay readings of Hughes, see Borden's "Heroic Hussies" and bell hooks's "Seductive Sexualities: Representing Blackness in Poetry and on Screen." See also David Jarraway's argument that, in his life and work, Hughes was committed to an ambiguous "deferred" sexual "subjectivity."
19. Hughes suggests here that the psychological deformities that accompany the experience of exploitation spread steadily across society in much the same way that the psychological effects of commodification and reification permeate capitalist societies, according to Marx and Lukacs respectively. See Karl Marx's "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" and Georg Lukacs's "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat."

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