

Langston Hughes and the Stereo Acoustics of Global Black Solidarity

One of the most remarkable aspects of Langston Hughes's poem cycle *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961) is the scope of musical references. Ranging from the transcribed score of "Hesitation Blues" with which he opens to the lieder of Leontyne Price to the "Gospel Cha-cha" the poems clearly widen the scope of what "jazz" includes and might mean. The poems' references appear to propose a pan-African diasporic music whose listeners recognize and participate in global struggles that amplify the echoes between a Governor Faubus in the U.S. and a Malan in South Africa, for example. Similarly, the references to numerous African nationalist leaders, from Nkrumah to Nasser to Sekou Touré, reflect Hughes's close involvement with newly independent nations as well as the anthologizing work he completed in assembling *An African Treasury* (1960). While *Ask Your Mama* has been seen as a modernist tour-de-force, juxtaposing the capitalized text of the poem with an italicized musical commentary in the marginalia there has been relatively little attention devoted to the internationalist dimensions of these poems. Paying attention to the use of multi-lingualism and the musical references in the poem, I trace how Hughes transcribes on the page the type of forum for encounters between Africans and black diasporans which meetings like the All-African People's Congress in Accra, 1958 (which Hughes attended) and the International Congresses of Black Artists and Writers in 1956 and 1959 (which Hughes did not attend) had made available to a limited number of luminaries. I suggest that *Ask Your Mama* not only narrates the "Cultural Exchange" that titles the first poem but enacts it by juxtaposing languages and musics from the Caribbean, African America, Africa and beyond and charging the reader with the task of interpreting this stereophonic and

stereoscopic page. I put this in the context of Hughes's journalism, particularly the Simple stories of 1959, whose relationship to *Ask Your Mama* Daniel Kim has pointed out, noting the impulse to grant access to the critical discourse of (transnational) black citizenship to a wider readership. I also reflect on how this impulse continues in Hughes's participation in the 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts (which the documentary of the same name by William Greaves frames with "I've Known Rivers"). Recalling that *stereo* comes from the Greek for "solid" we may discover an invitation to engage in and with transnational solidarity in the very figuring of multiple sources in the poems' typographical presentations.

Tsitsi Jaji teaches in the English department at University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include African, Caribbean and African American literatures, and music in literature. She has published articles or book chapters on Nafissatou Diallo, Derek Walcott, Edouard Glissant, Maryse Condé and Toni Morrison, and her essay on Keorapetse Kgositsile is forthcoming in *Comparative Literature Studies*. She is currently at work on a longer project exploring jazz and soul music as figures of transnational black solidarity in African poetry and film.