

Jazz in the English Classroom: Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B"
and Bebop Identity [Form]ation

Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B" offers a wonderful opportunity to bring both formal and historical studies of music—specifically 1940s jazz—into the English classroom, and to do so with relevance to the literary period of Hughes' work and to the work itself. The poem's rhythm, rhyme, and language display the organizational and instrumental tendencies of bebop, a revolutionary mode of jazz pioneered after World War II by, among others, the saxophonist Charlie Parker and the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie. Further, the content of "Theme for English B" reflects bebop's reassertion of African American cultural identity at a time when mainstream culture had co-opted a previous form of jazz and thus removed from it its significance as a musical expression of racial difference and racial identity. Listening to and studying bebop in the classroom as context for Hughes' poem thus engages students in an important interpretive journey, one that examines form, investigates history and racial politics, and encourages interdisciplinary connections between literature, history, and music.¹

Historical and Musical Contexts

My in-class analysis of Hughes' poem begins with historical background, with a discussion of the circumstances surrounding the birth of bebop music. I look first at the music that preceded bebop in the jazz genre: swing. This look is not comprehensive, but it does outline several key factors that later figure in as important contexts for talking about bebop and "Theme for English B." Swing is one style of many in a musical lineage with roots in African and African American culture. This lineage includes the field hollers of slaves, spirituals, blues, Dixieland jazz, and indeed the swing music of Harlem dancehalls. Further, despite its African

American connection, swing was immensely popular among middle-class whites during a time when nineteenth century Jim Crow laws still pervaded American politics and society—the mid-1930s and early-1940s.

With such general contexts in mind, I ask my students to reflect on the popularity of swing in mid-century America while also considering the racial climate of the time. Such reflection sets up a discussion of co-optation, or cultural appropriation, in which my students consider the consequences of minority cultural forms—musical or otherwise—being assimilated into mainstream culture. What happens when a cultural display of racial identity, a musical expression of racial history, becomes a popular fad? What happens when whites all over America start listening to and dancing to swing, to black music? Certainly, some might say, and have said in my classes, that such appropriation represents racial acceptance, a willingness on the part of whites to embrace difference. But my push is to point out the three decades that passed between the beginning of the swing era in the 1930s and the end of legal segregation and discrimination in 1964. Mainstream America's co-optation of swing did not mark an embrace of African American culture and history; instead, it flattened the cultural and historical meaning of the music. By 1945, swing was no longer black music representing racial identity. It was everybody's music. Democratic, maybe, but ultimately stripped of its cultural and historical meaning as an African American form.

Bebop emerged in the mid-1940s as the evolutionary step that jazz, as urban music rooted in African American experience, had to take to preserve its meaning more as a product of African American culture and history and less as a soundtrack for a popular dance craze. So co-opted, and with its culturally diverse musicians, swing did come to represent an ultimately democratic ethos, a “dream of a more abundant life, with its possibilities of freedom in the

group, a more pluralistic society, and the ecstasy of romantic love” (Erenberg 235). But as LeRoi Jones writes, swing was not “expressive of the emotional life of most young Negroes after the war” (*Blues People* 181). While wartime economic demands promised to lift the class status of African Americans, and while African American participation in the war promised their increased acceptance in American social and political life, such hopes proved illusory. As Jones states, African American men returned from the war “only to find that they were still treated like subhumans, that it was only ‘their country’ so long as they remained in ‘their places.’ Negroes who held good wartime jobs as civilians and whose incomes were much higher than ever before were infuriated to find that their increased economic status still couldn’t buy them a way out of the huge Negro ghettos of the cities” (178). America danced to African American music, but America hadn’t yet accepted the racial difference and racial identity imbedded in the musical form.

Early beboppers recognized that mainstream culture expected them to assume dominant racial and economic paradigms. In order to resist such assimilation on the cultural level, beboppers repossessed jazz, identifying it once again with the African American vernacular and thus in opposition to the debilitating mainstream. Indeed, bebop had a “political edge” (Lott 245). In fact, responding to the accusation that bebop’s politics were unpatriotic, Dizzy Gillespie, one of bebop’s pioneers, attests to this edge: “We refused to accept racism, poverty, or economic exploitation, nor would we live out uncreative humdrum lives merely for the sake of survival. But there was nothing unpatriotic about it. If America wouldn’t honor its Constitution and respect us as men, we couldn’t give a shit about the American way. And they made it damn near un-American to appreciate our music” (287). Ultimately, by establishing new, “outside” ways of

playing jazz, beboppers consciously and creatively addressed the risk of appropriation by the mainstream, thus interrogating the racist assumptions inherent in such appropriation.

In his extensive study of the development of bebop and the technical innovations pioneered by bebop's key figures, Thomas Owens notes, "When bebop was new, many jazz musicians and most of the jazz audience heard it as radical, chaotic, bewildering music" (3). Owens continues, "The first bebop recordings, which appeared in the mid 1940s, offered striking contrasts to the norms of the swing style" (4). The contrast in musical form that Owens points to was, for bebop, an intentional contrast rooted in, as Jones claims, "a reaction against the sterility and formality of Swing as it moved to become a formal part of the mainstream American culture" (*Black Music* 16). While there really is no simplified, typical model for bebop composition, there is a general form that most bebop songs do follow, and that sets them apart from more orchestrated swing compositions. A bebop song often begins with a brief piano introduction, moves into an organized theme statement, repeats several choruses of improvised solos, and ends with an organized theme statement. This structure, as Owens states, "gave maximum emphasis to improvised melodies and to the rhythmic and harmonic interplay between soloist and rhythm section" (5). Bebop form, unlike the less improvisatory form of swing, allowed musicians as individuals to compose their own instrumental voices and identities.

Teaching "Theme for English B"

First published in the Spring of 1949, "Theme for English B" emerged with bebop. Hughes' poem works within the same formal and political motivations that underlined the evolution of bebop in the 1940s: it parallels the musical structure of bebop, and the speaker of the poem, in bebop fashion, resists an assimilative definition of identity that devalues an understanding of self rooted in one's unique difference from the masses. The concept of identity

that surfaces by the end of the work celebrates resistance to assimilation while it recognizes the cultural, indeed American, necessity to assert one's difference against the overwhelming thrust of the mainstream to push for a prescribed sameness.

Form

To demonstrate the way Hughes' poem performs with text what bebop performs with notes, I play Charlie Parker's "Confirmation" and "Bloomdido," two bebop classics that represent the genre well. I ask my students to document the songs' movements as we listen, paying attention to the characteristics of their form. "Confirmation" and "Bloomdido," like most bebop songs, begin with theme statements, or heads, that both identify the songs and, in a way, outline their purposes by giving the musicians musical lines to develop in their eventual improvisations. These theme statements lead to improvisational midsections comprised of saxophone, trumpet, piano, and drum solos. Each song then closes by returning to the theme statements of their beginnings.

With the bebop organizational structure thus outlined and clear, I direct my students to "Theme for English B." I ask them to keep in mind our discussion of bebop form (organized introduction, then improvisational midsection, then organized conclusion) as they listen to me read the poem in its entirety. Our discussion then ensues: After the brief statement "The instructor said," which is the first line of the poem and which interestingly parallels the brief piano and/or drum introductions that begin many bebop songs, the poem opens with the following "theme statement":

Go home and write

a page tonight.

And let that page come out of you—

Then, it will be true. (2-5)

The first three lines of this section use iambic feet, suggesting the rhythmic organization of a bebop introduction. The last line provides rhythmic contrast, using instead a trochaic, but nevertheless rhythmically ordered, form. The couplets that make up the rhyme scheme of these lines also imply a musical order similar to the introductions of “Confirmation” and “Bloomdido.” While the connection between the first lines of Hughes’ poem and a bebop introduction might seem far-fetched at first, the difference between the rhythmic organization of these lines and the less-than-rhythmic subsequent lines of the poem is drastic enough to suggest some purpose. Indeed, in my class’s reading that purpose is musical, Hughes’ way of paralleling bebop musical form by shifting from a theme statement to an extended improvisational section.

In this improvisational section, Hughes’ language and rhyme give the poem the same tension-release qualities central to improvisatory jazz. While a bebop soloist might have certain repeated musical phrases with which to begin lines of improvisation, as well as certain notes to establish musical tension and certain notes to resolve that tension, Hughes uses textual repetition to introduce improvised lines as well as a play of rhyme to suggest tension and release. The first four lines of this improvisational section demonstrate these bebop qualities:

I wonder if it’s that simple?

I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.

I went to school there, then Durham, then here

to this college on the hill above Harlem. (6-9)

The repetition of “I” at the beginning of the first three lines here quoted parallels a bebop motive, or, as Owens defines it, “a short melodic or rhythmic fragment, used repeatedly, but not regularly and constantly, in a phrase, in several phrases, or even throughout a solo or composition” (281).

Rhyme is also present in these lines, as it is throughout this section; but it is not present enough to identify a specific organization. Rather than suggest a particular scheme, the occasional rhyme here implies the same play of tension and resolve that marks musical phrasing. If in music playing notes of, or harmonically related to, the key of a song creates a release of tension in the listener, then in poetry—as Hughes seems to have grasped and ingeniously played with—rhyme serves this same purpose. Finally, these lines, as with the other lines in this improvisational section, vary in length, further suggesting connections to the bebop tradition of which it is a part. Some lines are very short, while others are breathlessly long.

Finishing out the theme-improvisation-theme structure of his bebop composition, Hughes ends “Theme for English B” by returning to prosodic unity:

As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me—
although you’re older—and white—
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B. (37-41)

While these last lines do not restate the theme chorus of the opening, they do present a specific order that is not present throughout the improvisational section of the poem. Ultimately, considering the parallels between bebop composition and Hughes’ poetic composition discussed above, “Theme for English B” successfully brings bebop form into poetry.

Content

After a formal reading of Hughes’ poem, my students then engage the work to interpret its meaning within the cultural and historical contexts of jazz discussed at the outset of the

lesson. Interestingly, connections between the poem and the political motivations of bebop emerge immediately, in the title of the work. The “B” in “Theme for English B” provides a juxtaposition of both the musical form “B”-bop and the ontological—or identity-related—“B”-ing, or, to “B.” What the title indicates for the poem as a whole, then, is a poetic merging of bebop musical form with the goal of 1940s jazz to reassert African American being against mainstream negations of true identity.

Just as bebop’s originators recognized the power of mainstream forms to gloss over their identity and the identity of jazz as a style of music significant for its roots in African and African American history, so too does the speaker of Hughes’ poem recognize the power of his teacher’s simplistic assumption about self to gloss over the roots of his identity. The given assignment supposes that “true” identity simply comes out of “you” rather than out of a combination of social and environmental factors. As a result, the assignment inherently negates the presence and importance of such factors. To demonstrate this point, and to reflect on the content of the introductory lines of the poem, I ask my students to write several words that characterize themselves, their identities: strong, shy, motivated, musical, caring, and so forth. Such characteristics indeed “come out of [them],” but I insist that they reflect further on the circumstances that made them strong, shy, motivated, or caring. Was it a family figure? Was it a teacher they had? Was it a particular experience or a series of experiences? Was it a place where they spent their formative years? Any assignment that does not encourage reflection on, and attention to, such roots—like the assignment given in Hughes’ poem—perpetuates the erasure of cultural identity also exercised in mainstream culture’s co-optation of swing, a music that flourished in the mainstream as its roots in African and African American culture and history were pulled away.

The improvisational section of “Theme for English B” presents Hughes’ speaker reflecting on himself in the same way my students reflected on themselves minutes earlier: he searches for the roots of his identity. For example, the speaker observes the disparity between his physical home environment, as a black student, and the environment of the white school he attends, a disparity that suggests the racial and socio-economic experience not accounted for in the teacher’s simplified assignment. After being given the assignment, the speaker—“the only colored student in [the] class”—goes down the steps of the college, which lead into Harlem (10):

The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page. (11-15)

The speaker’s initial questioning of the instructor’s assignment (“I wonder if it’s that simple?”) as well as the spatial difference pointed to in the abovementioned lines (“The steps . . . lead down into Harlem”) signal his recognition that the instructor assumes a model of self expression that overlooks key factors of the self and as a result cancels out those factors. While the instructor supposes that students can easily produce a representation of themselves on paper if they just “let that page come out of [them],” the speaker of the poem realizes that, for him, such a representation involves the consideration of forces external to himself—in this case, spatial factors.

After recognizing the difference between his social conditions and those of the other students in his class, the speaker examines his identity as a product of this different social arena. He begins this examination by noting the social construction of his identity: “It’s not easy to

know what is true for you or me / at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what / I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you" (16-18). By defining his identity as generated by the feelings, sights, and sounds of Harlem, the speaker takes an important stance. Rather than connecting his identity to mainstream culture—to everyone else—he asserts an identity that is a product of the marginalized world of Harlem, which has its own historical and cultural significance. He then moves into an explanation of his likes, an explanation that at first seems to assert sameness and assimilation, but in conjunction with the surrounding material of the poem, ultimately suggests the independence, difference, and self-sufficiency of Harlem identities:

Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.

I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.

I like a pipe for a Christmas present,

or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach. (21-24)

Significantly, the speaker presents this list of his likes after noting Harlem as the place that constructs his identity.

At this point in the lesson, my students have composed a list of terms that characterize themselves, as well as a list that explains briefly the roots of these characteristics. Following Hughes' speaker, their next task is to compose a list of their likes: eating, sleeping, working, reading, music, sports, and so forth. In reading their lists to each other in pairs and then to the class as a whole, my students indeed find a wealth of similarities between themselves. But, I ask, does this mean they are all the same, that they are all now just "mainstream"? Attentive to the direction of our discussion by now, my students most often reply with a resounding "no"; they might like the same things, but the roots of their identities—their individual experiences, their cultures, their races, their environments—make them significantly different.

Ultimately, my students' realization equals the assertion of Hughes' speaker: our identities are necessarily composed of our differences and our similarities. After noting that his composition will "not be white" (28), will not be the same as the other students' compositions, the speaker continues,

But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American. (29-33)

As in bebop composition and politics, "Theme for English B" makes an explicit claim for a clear and assured definition of identity rooted in difference, rooted in an effort to "not be" as everyone else is. But, as demonstrated in the above lines, Hughes' speaker bases identity also on being "a part of" another, himself being a part of his teacher. This declaration seems to challenge my lesson's overriding claim that "Theme for English B" and bebop are parallel cultural efforts; for, wasn't bebop a *radical* break from another form of jazz and a *radical* break from another cultural system—the mainstream? While bebop's form and politics seem rather black and white, the poem's meaning seems a bit more complex, or at least more developed; such complexities make up the focus of my lesson's writing assignment, outlined below.

Conclusion: An Assignment for Making Connections

The juxtaposition of bebop form with Hughes' "Theme for English B" poses few interpretive challenges and indeed can lead to short and engaging exercises that ask students to consider other formal parallels—from similarly locating musical form in other poems, to examining concrete poetry. The juxtaposition of bebop politics with the poem, however, poses a

more challenging question, one which I shape as the following assignment in critical thinking and writing:

Our discussion of bebop identity politics suggested that early beboppers consciously pulled jazz away from the swing music of the masses as they also redefined themselves as African Americans against mainstream, white America. Hughes' "Theme for English B," though, seems to suggest that sameness, that having similar likes even between races, is central to identity, and as such indicates a definition of identity rooted in some relationship between the unique self and the self that holds likes in common with others. Write a 2 page essay that offers a perspective on, or accounts for, this tension.

I have had much success with this lesson. The formal parallels between bebop and "Theme for English B" can be clearly delineated when the two are placed side-by-side. The contextual parallels engage students in discussion and in brief class exercises that are revealing and relevant. Students always enjoy bringing the literature to themselves, testing it against their understandings and experiences. And the final writing prompt elicits reflections that both challenge and develop the connections between bebop and Hughes' poem.

Note

¹ Several critics have noted the importance of bebop to the unity and drive of Hughes' *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, the cluster of poems to which "Theme for English B" belongs. I have here included a brief review of some of this critical work to assist the teacher of Hughes' poem with some literary contexts regarding Hughes' general poetic relationship with bebop. Walter C. Farrell Jr. and Patricia A. Johnson write, "In *Montage* Hughes took advantage of the structural characteristics of bebop by drastically reordering the traditional limitations imposed on the poem" (61). In *Montage* Hughes uses a jazz-oriented form of composition that allows him "to compress a wide and complex range of images into one kaleidoscopic impression of life in Harlem during the 1940s" (62). Discussing historical contexts, Farrell and Johnson write, "The idea that America has perennially denied her black working masses the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is the concentric unifying theme of *Montage of a Dream Deferred*" (63).

In his contribution to *Montage* criticism, "Jazzing it Up: The Be-bop Modernism of Langston Hughes," Robert O'Brien Hokanson compliments the study just discussed. He likewise discusses *Montage*, yet he brings to the foreground the aesthetics of bebop, rather than the political and social elements of bebop, as represented in the work—thus expanding and substantiating Farrell and Johnson's brief claim. Hokanson, working with the idea that in *Montage* Hughes fulfills the "modernist challenge to 'make it new'" by drawing from jazz—a resource yet untapped by other African American and European American modernists—points out particular instances throughout the work where bebop-like musical moments occur (62). For example, Hokanson relates the play of multiple voices, monologues, and dialogues in *Montage* to "solos in a be-bop performance" (72). While a bebop band presents its separate instrumentalist

voices contributing to the movement and spontaneous generation of a composition, in parallel, *Montage* presents distinctive voices contributing to the collective movement and generation of the entire work. For Hokanson, Hughes experiments with bebop's characteristic improvisational instrumentation in order to develop a unique form of modernism grounded in the African American urban vernacular.

Indeed, the criticism just reviewed looks to substantiate the very claims for *Montage* that Hughes himself makes in his introductory note to the work:

In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed—jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and be-bop—this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in transition. (Rampersad and Roessel 387)

Here, Hughes points to two factors that have since become the focus of *Montage* criticism, as demonstrated in the abovementioned studies: (1) the work is rooted in jazz and the various other interrelated musical forms that make up the African American musical tradition and (2) the work's center of attention is "a community in transition," a community alive within a particular historical moment.

Yet, in attempting to demonstrate the ways in which Hughes's work as a whole represents the bebop "jam session" and Harlem's bebop era themes, *Montage* critics often neglect the importance of the independent poems, such as "Theme for English B," that comprise the work. For example, Farrell and Johnson state, "Each poem maintains some individual

identity as a separate unit while contributing to the composite poetic message” (61). This argument, as noted, focuses on the thematic unity of *Montage*; however, considering the work’s form, or, forms, it seems appropriate when analyzing *Montage* within the context of bebop to claim that each poem possesses not “some” degree of individual identity, but a radical degree of it. For, as Eric Lott notes, bebop “was a soloist’s music, despite the democratic ethos of jazz” (249). Considering Farrell and Johnson’s claim for *Montage*’s unity, Hokanson’s for its delineation of a bebop aesthetic, and Lott’s observation of bebop as an individualistic music, it seems fitting to examine each poem’s role in the bebop jam session that the whole work represents.

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