Politics in any country in the world is dangerous. For the poet, politics in any country in the world had better be disguised as poetry. . . . Politics can be the graveyard of the poet. And only poetry can be his resurrection.—Langston Hughes

Mr. Shakespeare in Harlem
Mr. Theme for English B
Preach on
kind sir
of Death, if it please—
—Kevin Young

Langston Hughes proposes a twofold disguise: he will conceal “politics” in “poetry,” and he will suggest that poetry is constitutive of a politics it is often thought to transcend. For Hughes, there are multiple concealments in play: the masking of politics as poetry and the pretense that politics, because it looks like poetry, has been masked. Hughes wanted his writing to be recognized as “art,” and at the same time he sought to show that aesthetic standards are shaped by social institutions and racialized principles of judgment. These competing impulses—the desire for acceptance within a universal tradition and the desire to assert an African American vernacular regularly demeaned by universalist protocols—were crucial to the poetics that Hughes developed, and they have been formative to the literary culture that he helped animate.

My thanks to Daniel Chiasson, Marjorie Garber, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Barbara Johnson, Henry S. Turner, Daniel J. Walkowitz, and Judith R. Walkowitz, whose readings have been invaluable. I am grateful also for the questions posed by participants in the “Manifesto” conference at Harvard University, 8–9 May 1998, and in particular for the comments of Diana Fuss and Mun-Hou Lo. This essay benefited from the generous criticism of my editors and readers at MLQ: Marshall Brown, Brent Edwards, and Priscilla Wald. My thanks to them for their persistence.

The editors of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* describe this double consciousness and also reproduce it: they align their project with the singular urgencies of African American history even as they associate its purpose with the common “task” of anthology making. For Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, the anthology is a “celebration” of writing, but the professional recognition of African American literature, culminating in the publication of the *Norton*, constitutes a political as well as an aesthetic triumph (xxxvi). “The resistance to the literary merits of black literature,” Gates and McKay argue, “has its origins . . . in the peculiar institution of slavery” (xxxiv). Although they are explicit about the stakes of writing in the African American past, Gates and McKay are rather circumspect about the politics of the anthology they have conceived. Like Hughes, they articulate a style of critique by disguising the conditions of its practice.

Having thanked M. H. Abrams, general editor of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, for his inspiration and advice, Gates and McKay wryly integrate their predecessor’s aim for his *Norton* into their aim for theirs: the volume necessary to “the indispensable courses that introduce students to the unparalleled excellence and variety of English literature” in Abrams’s preface becomes the anthology “indispensable for ‘the indispensable courses that introduce students to the unparalleled excellence and variety’ of African American literature” in Gates and McKay’s (xxxvii). The latter preface repeats Abrams’s uncompromising superlative both to canonize the new anthology’s own texts and to ironize the exclusive rhetoric of canon formation. Gates and McKay, in their turn, offer a poetics of indirection: their anthology contests an aesthetic hierarchy in which it nevertheless participates.

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To be sure, whatever irony Gates and McKay may direct toward
Abrams's language, the claim for "excellence" has a distinctive genealogy
in the African American anthology tradition. From the important
volumes of the 1920s by Robert T. Kerlin, Countee Cullen, and V. F.
Calverton to later volumes by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps to
recent collections by Clarence Major and Keith Gilyard, the anthology
itself, and its place in a line of prior anthologies, often serves—as it
does for Gates and McKay—to construct and confirm the "tradition"
that justifies its publication.3 James Weldon Johnson, whose Book of
American Negro Poetry (1922) many later anthologists cite as an archetypal
type of the genre, famously writes a forty-eight-page history of "creative
genius" to account for the representative selection that will
follow: the whole and the part, African American literature and its
necessary anthology, emerge at one and the same time.4 With
Johnson's text still in circulation, Cullen's volume of "verse by Negro poets"
(1927) opens with a catalog of recent predecessors of "five years," "four
years," "three years" (ix); Cullen cites the concentration and quantity
of anthologies to affirm the quality of work that these texts present.
Only eight years later, in the preface to the revised edition of his Negro
Poets and Their Poems (1935), Kerlin submits his collection and those
like it—starting with Johnson and including ten or fifteen others—as
"abundant evidence" for the "great poetic activity on the part of young
Negroes" (xix–xx). By the time Gilyard introduces "contemporary
African American poetry" (1977), he can easily punctuate his own
genealogical narrative with thirteen different anthologies of poetry
alone, which he offers not as a comprehensive list but as a representa-

1935); Countee Cullen, ed., Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets (New
York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), rpt. as Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Black
Poets of the Twenties (Secaucus, N.J.: Carol, 1993); Calverton, ed., Anthology of American
Negro Literature (New York: Modern Library, 1929); Hughes and Bontemps, eds., The
Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1949 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1949); Hughes, ed.,
Perennial, 1996); Gilyard, ed., Spirit and Flame: An Anthology of Contemporary African
American Poetry (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

1922), iii.
tive one (xix–xxii). The list creates the community and the tradition by which Gilyard measures the contributions of the poems he selects.

Alongside the history of African American anthology production, Gates and McKay embrace the Norton series as another “continuity” in which their volume participates. Indeed, the African American literary tradition inaugurates its aesthetic specificity in the negotiation, like this one, between “standard” and particularist identifications. Like all traditions, what counts as standard also has a history, and its content changes with the times: one may notice that the unparalleled excellence repeated by Gates and McKay in their preface is fairly new to the Abrams text; the word unparalleled does not appear in the preface of the fifth edition of 1986, but only in the sixth edition of 1993. The claim for superlative merit inscribes a “Norton tradition,” and it registers the contentious proliferation and intervention of new anthologies in it. It seems possible that the structural “parallel” between “English” and “African American” anthologies occasioned the “original” language on which the referential wit of Gates and McKay depends.

The reaction to proliferating Nortons, although muted in the case I have described, has reached more audible peaks in the pages of some magazines, where the undisputed cultural capital and curricular influence of the volumes fuel the scrutiny of its recent manifestations. Kevin Meehan, in a book review full of respectful reservations, deems the Norton anthology series “one of the main tools of canon formation in U.S. literature curriculums.” With an “editorial policy of belletrism,” Meehan argues, The Norton Anthology of African American Literature chooses the literature of “self-contemplation” over the literature of historical critique. According to their stated “principles of selection,” Gates and McKay favor an emphasis on the African American literary tradition as a “formal entity,” represented by “works of such a quality

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6 It is often hard to say what constitutes an “occasion,” but I would argue that The Norton Anthology of African American Literature should be read in the historical context of debates about multiculturalism and curricular revision. It is one of any number of recent volumes, although perhaps one of the most visible, to make accessible and “traditional,” through its production and publication, literature historically excluded from the most “indispensable courses.”

that they merit preservation and sustain classroom interest” (xxxvi–xxxvii). That Gates and McKay conform their selections not only to their sense of the African American tradition but also to their sense of the Norton lineage is evident when one looks, by way of example, at the preface to the landmark Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, published by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in 1985. This anthology is arguably the prototype, at least among Nortons, for The Norton Anthology of African American Literature; it is the first Norton collection to reflect the curricular developments through which “literature by women” or “African American literature” have become legitimate fields of study in the academy.

The two Nortons share a commitment to the project of disciplinary revision and multiculturalism, but their editorial practices and public receptions have been markedly different. Where Meehan criticizes Gates and McKay for perpetuating the “canonizing project embodied in the Norton” (44), Denis Donoghue roundly attacks Gilbert and Gubar for selections that are “political and sociological” and that exemplify “range of experience” rather than “literary merit.” Whether or not it is true, or even “lamentable,” that Gilbert and Gubar turn away from “literary merit,” their volume, in both its first and its second (1996) editions, diverges from Abrams’s example in some basic structural ways: they thank Abrams for his “wise counsel,” but they do not reiterate his preface or his ideals;^9 they do not mobilize an editorial board (Gates and McKay have nine editors; Abrams by now has thirteen); the front of the volume lists Gilbert and Gubar by name and institution, but it forgoes the professorial titles—the trappings of

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^9 Gilbert and Gubar, eds., The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English (New York: Norton, 1985), xxxii; Gilbert and Gubar, eds., The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1996). The quotations below come from the first edition. Cf. Gates and McKay’s claim for “unparalleled excellence” and Gilbert and Gubar’s desire to represent the “exuberant variety yet strong continuity of the literature that English-speaking women have produced” (xxvii). Although their selections should illuminate “major” works, Gilbert and Gubar write, they are also valued for “documenting the self-consciousness with which these writers situated themselves and their texts in specifically female and often feminist contexts” (xxix). Gilbert and Gubar deem “historical, intellectual, or aesthetic significance” equal categories of merit in their principles of inclusion (xxx).
“excellence”—that typically accompany the Norton pedigree. Ultimately, however, Gilbert and Gubar share with Gates and McKay an implicit discretion about these choices and these signifiers; neither pair remarks on, either to repeat or to reject, the “excellence” and the exclusions that the Norton tradition has helped establish.¹⁰

Langston Hughes was also an anthologist, but it is as a poet that he remains a touchstone for other anthologists throughout the century. James Weldon Johnson, writing in 1931, names Hughes one of the “younger group” leading “Negro poets” into the future; Woodie King Jr. dedicates his 1975 anthology of midcentury African American poets to the memory of the “patron saint” who died in 1967; and Clarence Major, in his 1996 anthology, finds in “the spirit of Hughes’s artistic rebelliousness” a continuing model for the negotiation between politics and art in the African American poetry of today (xviii).¹¹ Hughes was such a model, I argue, because he recognized a dialectic between the “celebration” of literature and the enunciation of a tradition to which this celebration refers. Hughes was interested, moreover, in taking the institutional contexts of writing as the content of his work and in asking what literature might make of literary “excellence.” He demonstrates in his poetry the tactics of selection, citation, repetition, and revision that make traditions and anthologies possible.

Early in his career Hughes was a key participant in debates about whether African American art should be engaged in “propaganda.” More recently, the collection and republication of his poems have occasioned a return to these concerns. In Helen Vendler’s extensive review of The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, for example, the dif-

¹⁰ Donoghue also notices this absence of comment and recommends Lillian S. Robinson’s discussion of these canonizing issues. Many of Robinson’s insights about the politics of anthology production are relevant to my argument, in particular her sense that those who wish to confer canonicity on texts historically excluded from the center of the curriculum frequently “are torn between defending the quality of their discoveries and radically redefining literary quality itself” (“Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon,” in The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory, ed. Elaine Showalter [New York: Pantheon, 1985], 111).

ference between art and propaganda plays a central role.\textsuperscript{12} The assertion of this difference in Vendler’s review and the competing prefatory gestures of the new Norton volume suggest that it continues to matter—for literature and for politics—whether African American literature can, or even does, make such distinctions. Arnold Rampersad, editor of the Harlem Renaissance section of the Norton, more or less divides his selections for Hughes between poems that emphasize innovative practice and essays that theorize what this practice meant in the context of African American literary culture. Hughes, however, imagined that his poetry could itself theorize a relation to the institutions it engaged. Many of his poems, written at the same time as the more famous “blues” lyrics of the 1920s, consider the canonical and political implications of aesthetic innovation; they confront their own use of traditional forms and allusions and historicize the “unparalleled excellence” of which they are now examples.

“Politics can be the graveyard of the poet. And only poetry can be his resurrection.” Rampersad offers this statement as an epigraph to the second volume of his landmark biography of Hughes.\textsuperscript{13} In the biography the epigraph confirms a lesson Hughes has learned the hard way: politics is dangerous; better turn back to poetry. Reading the poetry, Vendler cites Rampersad’s epigraph to suggest that Hughes recognized in his work a choice between propaganda and art: “Hack propagandists do not know how to write genuine poems; but a genuine poet who writes propaganda (as many have done) engages in a conscious faithlessness to art” (37). By themselves, the two sentences, written by Hughes and repeated by Rampersad and Vendler, seem to create an opposition between “politics” and “poetry,” where politics is the site of death and poetry the agent of rescue. The context of the opposition, however, suggests something slightly different, for Hughes says first: “Politics in any country in the world is dangerous. For the poet, politics in any country in the world had better be disguised as poetry.” Hughes learns not to discard politics but to transform it. Resurrec-

tion is not the negation of death but the opportunity for a new kind of life.

The brief manifesto of which my own epigraph offers the opening lines concludes with this argument and injunction:

Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country. Therefore, how can a poet keep out of politics?

Hang yourself, poet, in your own words. Otherwise, you are dead. (Rampersad, *Life*, 385)

Hughes thought that the expression of art within a particular time and place was subject to local conditions. He did not believe that he could extract his writing from these circumstances, but he did think that his writing could facilitate a form of intervention in them. Instead of, say, “getting lynched,” “you” can “hang yourself,” but “in words”: in the exchange of a given hazard for a taken risk, the poet is invoked and produced in the words he or she writes. Repeating himself with a difference, Hughes transforms literal danger into figurative language: poetry, as “resurrection,” recasts politics and its perils as the condition for any life worth living.

Vendler’s review of *The Collected Poems* conflates “propaganda” and “politics” and opposes both to “genuine” poetry, such that propaganda and poetry are separate activities, with separate goals. Vendler begins by distinguishing between the more and the less successful poems in Hughes’s career; she then maps propaganda and the genuine onto these aesthetic distinctions. Thus Vendler renders universal and understood a language of evaluation that Hughes himself addressed and revised in his work. For Hughes, as for other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the definition and relevance of propaganda were important questions for literary practice. The term was used early, often, and variously among those who argued about the role of “racial individuality” in art and artistic expression. When Hughes invoked the need for “racial individuality” in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” he was responding not just to George S. Schuyler

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14 Nathan Irvin Huggins provides one of the earliest and most decisive critical accounts of propaganda in the Harlem Renaissance (*Harlem Renaissance* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1971], 201–5).
and his “Negro-Art Hokum” (the specific occasion) but also to a broad
ongoing debate about art and politics. The broad debate is perhaps
most closely associated with Alain Locke and W. E. B. DuBois, who are
often thought to have represented opposite sides of the propaganda
issue. Above all, however, Locke and DuBois disagreed about what pro-
paganda was. They differed as to how, or whether, aesthetic standards
were informed by social conditions.

In 1926 DuBois spoke before the NAACP about the “criteria of Neg-
ro art.” He began his talk by responding to imagined critics who
might object to a discussion of art in the context of social reform.
DuBois presumed that his audience would consider aesthetic com-
mitments an irrelevant distraction or, at best, a welcome relief from the
real work at hand. On the contrary, DuBois argued, art was inseparable
from “rights”; it was “part of the great fight”: “It is right here that
the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
comes upon the field . . . to say that the Beauty of Truth and Freedom
which shall some day be our heritage and the heritage of all civiliz-
ed men is not in our hands yet and that we ourselves must not fail to rea-
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lize” (292, 294). DuBois’s argument depends on the reciprocal causality
between “civilized men” and “Beauty,” in which the signs of civilization
(Beauty) justify and facilitate political recognition and social justice.
The structure of causality is lifted from Enlightenment and post-
Enlightenment theories of “race,” nation, and aesthetics: if a civilized
nation is defined by its “race” or people, and a people by its literature
and artistic achievement, then the claim to civilization rests on the
claim to Beauty and aesthetic success.

Johnson had argued similarly in his first preface to The Book of
American Negro Poetry: “The world does not know that a people is great
until that people produces great literature and art.” He attributed the
“status of the Negro” to a “national mental attitude” rather than to

in Nathan Irvin Huggins, ed., Voices from the Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford
1926, rpt. in Huggins, Voices, 309–12.


Kwame Anthony Appiah’s essay “Race” has aided my formulation here (Frank
Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., Critical Terms for Literary Study, 2d ed.
“actual conditions” (vii). DuBois, however, understood both kinds of “greatness”—people and literature—to depend as much on social access as on individual development. “After all, who shall describe Beauty?” he asked, intimating a paradox of causality: the description of Beauty is a right and a sign of “civilized man,” but Beauty is measured by the civilization it is meant to characterize. This paradox is not unlike the problem faced by anthologists of African American literature, who can only “celebrate” a newly recognized tradition with reference to a history of artistic excellence that they themselves inaugurate. DuBois noticed the circularity of aesthetic valuation even as he retained the Platonic language of ideal distinction: “That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable” (292). Because Beauty must be defined, because the right to describe it must be claimed, DuBois ultimately asserted that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (296). For DuBois, propaganda denoted a function; it demanded the recognition of what art could do; it announced art as a social and political intervention.

Locke, writing in 1925, asserted that the goal of “new Negro” artists should be “an objective attitude toward life.”18 Locke imagined an artistic practice that would dissociate “race” from “life,” rendering the former “a sort of added enriching adventure” for the latter (48). In a manifesto of 1928 Locke clarified his position: “Artistically it is the one fundamental question for us today,—Art or Propaganda. Which?”19 Locke deemed art an “objective attitude” and propaganda, like race, its corrupting supplement. Propaganda was not equivalent to race, yet Locke felt that both distorted a “free and purely artistic expression” (312–3). Like DuBois, Locke defined propaganda by the attention it called to itself: “It harangues, cajoles, threatens, or supplicates. It is too extroverted for balance or poise or inner dignity and self-respect” (312). For Locke, however, propaganda was indecorous, and art must show restraint; it must be “self-contained.” Where for DuBois propaganda reflected a political enunciation of art—as art—

19 Locke, “Art or Propaganda,” Harlem 1 (1928), rpt. in Huggins, Voices, 312.
for Locke it was a genre of writing incompatible with "self-expression."

At age twenty-four Hughes entered this debate with his influential essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." The essay, structured from beginning to end as a response to other poets, to critics, and to readers both "Negro" and "white," rejects all political and commercial attempts to direct artistic expression: "We young Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either" (309). This argument seems to ally Hughes with Locke's demand for and belief in "free and purely artistic expression." Yet "purity" and Platonic ideals are just what Hughes acutely critiques in the first paragraph of his essay.

Indeed, Hughes's commitment to individuality has more to do with asserting specificity than with transcending it. He begins by examining the statement "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet": "One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, 'I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,' meaning, I believe, 'I want to write like a white poet'; meaning subconsciously, 'I would like to be a white poet'; meaning beyond that, 'I would like to be white'" (305). The gloss Hughes provides sutures the politics of writing to an aesthetics of race. The analysis he concentrates in the transitions between the four statements goes as follows: (1) "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet" means that there is a universal category poet, which the adjective Negro demeanes. Negro poet is not greater than but less than poet. (2) "I want to write like a white poet" means that the universal subject is white. The poet from statement 1 must be a white poet. (3) "I would like to be a white poet" allows writing to signify being. There is a similar metonymy, in which literature stands for culture, in Johnson's remark "The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art." (4) With the final transition from being a white poet to being white, artists and poets come to represent a people at large: culture guarantees humanity. Poetic achievement—an attribute of whiteness (only)—stands for the people that it defines and valorizes.
Hughes understood the potential racism of universalist language, but he also found the rhetoric of collectivity useful: thus he writes of a “true Negro art,” “racial individuality,” and “inherent expressions of Negro life.” In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” the critique of authenticity is ambivalent: the desire to be a genuine poet may be an implicit desire for whiteness, but the demand for true Negro art—also a demand for authenticity—is, for Hughes, a resistance to caricature and censorship. From this perspective, poetry cannot be the opposite of racial politics, since poetry that seeks this opposition in fact seeks whiteness. Hughes does not explicitly join or even cite the call for propaganda voiced by DuBois, but he nevertheless asserts that a poet’s identity as a Negro artist is its own political practice.

Within this sensibility, Hughes addressed “the basic ‘how’” of poetry. From the beginning of his career he considered the relationship between art and politics, not just in newspapers and magazines but in his poems as well. Even in those poems that seem most interested in the what of international politics, Hughes often tried to understand how poetry as a vehicle and a tactic might transform its subject. For him, the question of subject matter—what could be poetic—linked the what to the how. The disguise of politics typically emphasizes the what as how, where “expressing” Negro life means evoking the conditions in which its writing takes place.

Acknowledging the paradox of political writing in aesthetic forms—that is, the poet’s inability to capture, in writing, the gravity of his subject or the danger that the aesthetic form might undermine that gravity—Hughes still achieved political “force” in a number of poems by announcing the inadequacy of his efforts. This is one way that Hughes explored the category of politics as a formal problem for poetics. Three poems published by Hughes in the 1920s—“A Song to a Negro Wash-woman” (1925), “Johannesburg Mines” (1925), and “Formula” (1926)—demonstrate the range of this exploration.


21 “Through the force of his art,” Hughes argued, the “young Negro artist” could influence his reader’s unconscious associations between Beauty and race (“Negro Artist,” 308).

22 All poems by Langston Hughes that are discussed in this essay are taken from *The Collected Poems*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Knopf, 1994).
all three were published in magazines affiliated with the Harlem Renaissance (the *Crisis* and the *Messenger*), and none appeared in Hughes's first two volumes of poetry, collected during the same years. Hughes often published one kind of poetry in his collected works and another kind in his newspaper columns or in magazines. In this way, as his own anthologist, he could shape the artistic persona he presented. In the 1940s, for instance, he concentrated in his books on "black people's particular American dream" and excluded poems that reflected a broad-based interest in class and Marxist politics. The uncollected poems from the 1920s that I will examine are more introspective about writing than those published in *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), and they point toward the work Hughes thought his poetry, in general, might do. That he excluded them from the collected books of the period is suggestive, since they ironize an aesthetic tradition in which the ambitious young poet sought to be recognized. Even in the 1920s, the poems demonstrate, Hughes considered politics dangerous in every way; his writing shows, however, that one of the best ways to make political statements *in* poetry is to express this danger *as* poetry.

Hughes gestures in his poems toward the most traditional lyric conventions, from Petrarchan *blazons* to poems about poems, as if to say that such conventions are part of what he is trying to negotiate. "Johannesburg Mines," for example, poses a question that it then answers in part:

> In the Johannesburg Mines  
> There are 240,000  
> Native Africans working.  
> What kind of poem  
> Would you  
> Make out of that?  
> 240,000 natives  
> Working in the  
> Johannesburg mines.  

(43)

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The staggering fact of 240,000 “Native Africans” working in the Johannesberg mines is a difficult subject for poetry, if only because of its shock value; it might paralyze reader and poet alike. The first three lines, besides presenting a traditionally unpoetic topic, read like a sentence from a newspaper: one stumbles, literally and figuratively, over the large number: 240,000. Yet the poem challenges “you,” reader and poet, to “make” a poem “out of” it. Out of the fact. Out of the sentence. The last three lines at once reiterate the staggering, stuttering fact and “make” it poetic by reshaping the first three into two rough tetrameters (the second is divided over the last two lines). The reiteration suggests that the poem cannot be made, while the reshaping makes it. The poem thus transforms the political statistic into poetry and also resists the very idea of approaching it—the vast number, the information—at all.

“A Song to a Negro Wash-woman” addresses a similar, if less obviously political problem of poetic expression (41–2). The narrative, presented in apostrophe to a “wash-woman,” recasts the Petrarchan poetry of praise by choosing a “little brown woman” as its subject. The last stanza reads:

And for you,
O singing wash-woman,
For you, singing little brown woman,
Singing strong black woman,
Singing tall yellow woman,
Arms deep in white suds,
Soul clean,
Clothes clean,—
For you I have many songs to make
Could I but find the words.

(42)

The poem announces its praise of the wash-woman’s song and life by claiming its own inability to “sing” her praises. The poet-speaker exclaims from the beginning, “I have many songs to sing you / Could I but find the words.” The paradox is that the success of the poem’s praise depends in good part on the gesture of declared inadequacy, a contract that is continuous with a long tradition of English love lyric but that here associates indescribable beauty with blackness, with
work, with the object’s ability to sing herself. In both “A Song to a Negro Wash-woman” and “Johannesburg Mines,” the boundaries between traditional poetics and racial politics seem slim indeed.

“Formula,” although it does not address race explicitly, also asks whether poetry has a proper subject and shows how it can undermine its own (ostensible) rules. The poem transforms a rule of traditional poetry into a playful negation of its initial statement:

Poetry should treat  
Of lofty things  
Soaring thoughts  
And birds with wings.

The Muse of Poetry  
Should not know  
That roses  
In manure grow.

The Muse of Poetry  
Should not care  
That earthly pain  
Is everywhere.

Poetry!  
Treats of lofty things;  
Soaring thoughts  
And birds with wings.

(74)

The first stanza comes across as a truism and a statement: it seems to be the initial “formula.” The poem’s title puts distance between the opening statement and the poet-speaker, even as the formula seems to describe what poetry traditionally does. The second and third stanzas confirm the poem’s presentation of the initial statement: the formula is only a formula. One expects the last stanza to repeat the banality of

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24 Shakespeare’s sonnet 106 (“When in the chronicle of wasted time”), for instance, is a good example of the poet-speaker who describes the stunning beauty of his object by claiming that he and “we... lack tongues to praise” (The Norton Shakespeare, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt [New York: Norton, 1997], 1958–9).
the first, thus completing the poem’s indictment. Instead it repeats the first with a difference in punctuation: *should treat* becomes the plural noun *treats*; what was “lofty” is reduced to a frivolity (the word *lofty* makes the “things” merely pretentious); poems become amusements; and meanwhile this poem achieves a certain gravity. The formula is thus the content of the first stanza and also the poem’s demonstration of how a banal poetics can be “treated” and made into a “treat.” Since the formula includes what “the Muse of Poetry / Should not know,” the poem might be said to teach the Muse how to assess this forbidden information. “Formula,” in this last sense, is a serious guide to undermining the seriousness and the exclusions of traditional poetic subjects.

All three of these early poems describe and enact the poet-speaker’s ambivalence about poetry’s capacity to address social conditions or racial politics. In a column published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1927 Hughes expressed his doubt that traditional English lyric forms could accommodate “Negro” experience: “Certainly the Shakespearean sonnet would be no mould in which to express the life of Beale Street or Lenox Avenue.” Distancing himself from the “conventional” poetics of Claude McKay or Paul Laurence Dunbar, Hughes questioned the universal accessibility of poetic forms; he also suggested that literary traditions imply or create cultural coherence where there might be cultural difference. Nonetheless he came to use Shakespearean tropes and styles to explore the relationship among scholarship, tradition, and “the real wide world.”

In the 1933 poem “Ph.D” the Shakespearean sonnet provides a contrast between academic “order” and “human world” disorder:

He never was a silly little boy
Who whispered in the class or threw spit balls,
Or pulled the hair of silly little girls,
Or disobeyed in any way the laws
That made the school a place of decent order
Where books were read and sums were proved true
And paper maps that showed the land and water
Were held up as the real wide world to you.
Always, he kept his eyes upon his books:

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And now he has grown to be a man
He is surprised that everywhere he looks
Life rolls in waves he cannot understand
And all the human world is vast and strange—
And quite beyond his Ph.D’s small range.

(161–2)

This poem works chiastically: the rhymes draw closer as the text moves from the ordered false consciousness (slant rhymes) of the boy’s “paper maps” to the disorderly experience (final couplet) of the man’s “human world.” The bookish tradition of the sonnet accommodates the oversized, unassimilated environment better than it renders the more academic representation. That “sums” are “proved true” has the double, Shakespearean sense of “made” as well “shown”: arithmetic and geography are systems of explanation whose selectivity and contingency the child is taught not to consider. Prospero’s “books” keep the boy from seeing that life is a tempest. In the last lines Hughes imagines a sea change: the boy’s environment has been transformed by his ignorance of what learning has failed to teach him.26 The English literary tradition is used in “Ph.D” to contrast not its opposite but its inside and so to undermine the cultural authority of underexamined scholarship.

Before Hughes, several other Harlem Renaissance poets had used English lyric conventions. Their work provides an important context for thinking about the poems Hughes wrote: while they compared “black” poets to the English tradition, Hughes tended to resist affirming this opposition. In his 1917 elegy Johnson praises “black and unknown bards” in two ways: by comparing their songs to the “tones.../ That helped make history when Time was young” and by placing their stories in the elegiac form of the tradition itself, as if to say that they were as worthy as, and continuous with, the (white) canonical poets already recognized by “history.”27 Johnson’s poem takes the “black and unknown bards of long ago” and makes them “still live” through a “race” that hears their songs and has been affected by them. The force of comparison in Johnson’s poem, in its attempt to place

26 Cf. “Ph.D” with “Ariel’s Song” in The Tempest, 1.2.400–9 (Norton Shakespeare, 3067).
the “bard” in the literary tradition of the lyric, ultimately reinforces the European standard as well as the need to achieve it. Rather than challenge or elide differences, the comparison consolidates them.

In an essay on the Harlem Renaissance poets, Rampersad observes a similar contrast in McKay’s work. His use of the Shakespearean sonnet, for example, demonstrates the tension between “radicalism of political and racial thought, on the one hand, and, on the other, a bone-deep commitment to conservatism of form.”28 Rampersad points to McKay’s well-known “If We Must Die” (1922), in which the narrative’s rhetorical effect and anger are strengthened by the sonnet’s structural restraint.29 Hughes, in his turn, revises this familiar content-form dynamic in “Ph.D” by addressing the fact of the contrast as a paradox of “education”: what one learns from the sonnet is what it cannot teach.

“Shakespeare in Harlem,” a poem published by Hughes in 1942, alludes to Shakespearean forms and texts in analyzing the comparison—and the opposition—that its title so readily suggests. The poem is brief and saucy:

Hey ninny neigh!
And a hey nonny noe!
Where, oh, where
Did my sweet mama go?

Hey ninny neigh,
With a tra-la-la-la!
They say your sweet mama
Went home to her ma.

(260)

The poem’s title presents several contradictory possibilities about what the lyric promises to be. Is it a poem located in Harlem, where “Shakespeare” stands for “great poetry,” and this is the generic “great poetry” found in Harlem? Is this what Shakespeare—the work of Shakespeare—would sound like (would have sounded like?) if he had been

writing in Harlem? Is this, perhaps, a translation of Shakespeare’s poetics into “Negro life”? Or does the poem contain the elements of Harlem that sound like Shakespeare: does it register moments of Shakespeare in Harlem, a refinement of Harlem into Shakespeare?

The text, like its title, offers several interpretations. This deceptively simple lyric mobilizes an elaborate formal and rhetorical structure. From the title, one might initially ask what part of the poem is "Shakespeare" and what part the context, location, or language "Harlem." Looking at the poem, one sees that it is written in two short quatrains. Vender suggests that the use of quatrains in Hughes’s poems lends a jazz syncopation to metrical lines that would seem more traditional, perhaps more literary, in a longer form (39–40). She argues that the “short rhythmic pulses” of the blues and jazz traditions allow Hughes to represent thinking in “fits and starts” (40). To demonstrate this point, she transforms a lyric written by Hughes from its dimeter quatrains into a tetrameter stanza and then contrasts her made poem with the one Hughes published. Where Vender uses transformation and juxtaposition to show how a vernacular style contributes to the poet’s art, in “Shakespeare in Harlem” Hughes asks what a vernacular style is and takes transformation and juxtaposition as topics for his art to imagine.

If Hughes had written his poem in couplets, it would look, following Vender’s lead, like this:

Hey ninny neigh! And a hey nonny noel!
Where, oh, where did my sweet mama go?

30 I am using translation in a broadly metaphorical sense, in which differences in language are understood to convey kinds of cultural specificity beyond those associated with national identity. Thus, with James Clifford, I associate “translation” with “practices of cross-cultural understanding” not only between nations but within them (Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997], 359 and passim). Such practices might include literary traditions as well as other forms of local knowledge.

31 Arnold Rampersad also identifies the adaptation of traditional poetic forms to jazz and blues as Hughes’s major innovation (“Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance,” in The Columbia History of American Poetry, ed. Jay Parini [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993], 464), and Steven C. Tracy argues that “the blues” constitutes the “soul” of Hughes’s work (Langston Hughes and the Blues [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988], 144–7).
Hey ninny neigh, with a tra-la-la-la!
They say your sweet mama went home to her ma.

These two couplets correspond to the anapestic tetrameter found in, for instance, a bawdy song from As You Like It. As quatrains, then, “Shakespeare in Harlem” might be said to transform Shakespeare into Harlem. The diction of the poem, however, might suggest the opposite translation. This is a story about a poet-speaker in search of his “sweet mama,” a term for “lover” specific to black vernacular of the period. The story has been cast in a Shakespearean idiom, with allusions to the language of folk songs that appear in at least four of Shakespeare’s plays. The poet has taken the Harlem story and made it sound like an English ditty. Text and context, original and elaboration, vernacular and literary are difficult to establish here.

Like the diction and meter, the two stanzas seem to constitute a dialogue. The poem has two explicit speakers, although it is hard to say whether they are both Harlem, or Harlem and Shakespeare. The first speaker asks, “Where, oh, where / Did my sweet mama go?” and the second responds, “They say your sweet mama / Went home to her ma.” The response, which implicates a third party, makes the respondent either closer to the first speaker (not part of “they” but part of “us”) or farther (not “us” but someone who talks to “they”). In the latter case, sweet mama would repeat in quotation marks, as the language of the first speaker returned from a distance.

The distance of the second speaker is significant: is the poem a “Negro” call-and-response, a dialogue within the community that inscribes the community, or is it a dialogue between one who uses the term sweet mama and one who does not? Perhaps, however, the second speaker differs from the first but within the context of Harlem, rather than in opposition to it, where the first speaker imitates Shakespeare

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32 As You Like It, 5.3.14 (Norton Shakespeare, 1651).
34 See As You Like It, 5.3.14; Much Ado about Nothing, 2.2.57; King Lear, 3.4.92; and Two Noble Kinsmen, 2.4.21 (Norton Shakespeare, 1651, 1407, 2519, 3219).
and the second imitates, or "signifies on," his imitation. The poem might render a contrast not between two different traditions but between differences within traditions—Shakespeare or Harlem—that are thought to be undifferentiated. As "Shakespeare in Harlem" points to Shakespeare's bawdy songs, it represents not "low" Shakespeare so much as Shakespeare's own conjunction of high and low cultures. These songs were popular in his time; in his plays they are already in quotation. As his work brings high and low together, Shakespeare seems quite a bit like "Shakespeare in Harlem." One might say that Harlem can be found in Shakespeare, except that it is no longer clear just what Harlem is. Hughes has dismantled the opposition between high and low cultures that the poem's title seemed to offer.

By making Shakespeare into a Harlem song, Hughes reminds us not only of the oral tradition in Shakespeare but also of the performance tradition that constituted Shakespeare as such. Rather than contrast the African American vernacular tradition, elements of Shakespeare draw attention to the long history of vernacular practices in which both Shakespeare and Hughes participate. Steven C. Tracy argues that readers should pay close attention to "both the oral and the literary" in Hughes's work (245) and points in particular to the collection Shakespeare in Harlem, where the poet announces the priority of performance in his writing. The poems in Shakespeare in Harlem, Hughes wrote, should be "read aloud, crooned, shouted, recited, and

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35 Gates and McKay offer "signifying" as a continuous practice that defines the African American literary tradition, although it is a practice that comes to writing from vernacular idioms, such as folktales, street rhymes, "the dozens," and other forms of verbal dueling. Gates and McKay argue: "Precisely because 'blackness' is a socially-constructed category, it must be learned in the same way—like jazz—through repetition and revision" (xxxvi). Gates elaborates his theory of signifying more fully elsewhere, defining the term as "repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference" (The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism [New York: Oxford University Press, 1988], xxvii).


37 Hughes, Shakespeare in Harlem (New York: Knopf, 1942).
sung. Some with gestures, some not—as you like. None with a far-away voice” (1). Bringing Shakespeare and Harlem together, Hughes returns Shakespeare to a historical context and also asserts his proximity to an African American oral and performance tradition. For Hughes, the priority of writing—both in the African American tradition and in the English tradition that Shakespeare represents—is itself an assembled standard, produced through practices of editing, authorization, and canon formation.

Writing is given pride of place in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, but Gates and McKay acknowledge that the development of African American writing owes a continuing debt to vernacular forms, such as folktales, the blues, jazz, and street rhymes. They devote the first section of the anthology to vernacular materials and include a compact disc with an assortment of audio performances. The question of how or whether to include vernacular culture in African American writing has been essential to the negotiation between African American particularism and universalist aesthetics. Hughes often addressed this question in his poetry in good part by showing how the most canonical literature in English is also indebted both to spoken idioms and to performance forms.

The provocative claim that “Shakespeare in Harlem” might be Shakespeare, and its consequent claim to literary achievement for Harlem, is ultimately a disguise, and closer to mimicry than to masquerade: Hughes disrupts the definitions of both terms in his title, such that their content turns on the relation and the confusion between them. Theories of mimicry and masquerade are more regularly applied to styles of identity than to styles of writing, but for Hughes and other African American artists it is through writing that identities are often negotiated. Hughes recognized in his poems and elsewhere that literature could refashion as well as signify the perceived attributes of racialized persons. The point of disguise in Hughes is not to fit into a standard tradition so much as to reveal oneself fitting in in the way that all things are made to fit, in the way that differences are regularly standardized. Homi K. Bhabha argues that mimicry can unsettle the dis-

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38 Jacques Lacan formulates a seminal account of mimicry as “camouflage, in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled” (*The Four Fundamental
tinction between background and foreground to the extent that it "mocks" as well as "mimes."39 Mocking separates mimicry from masquerade: in the latter the actor unconsciously capitulates to a stereotype or convention rather than subverts it.40 As Diana Fuss rightly observes, however, mimicry easily becomes masquerade if the conditions of comparison and imitation—excellence, for instance—are never examined but only appropriated and naturalized (147). The Norton Anthology of African American Literature provides a good example of this slippage: repeating the promise of "unparalleled excellence," the editors would copy what cannot be reproduced; thus they seem to mock what they also assimilate.

This is the poetics of comparison that Hughes’s work engages. Ann Douglas persuasively argues that, for Hughes, a "lower-class idiom was an earned achievement, not a natural attribute": he “appropriated his black idiom”—Harlem—as much as he transformed Shakespeare.41 Hughes questions the social and cultural characteristics associated with both Harlem and Shakespeare; refusing to oppose high and low, "Negro" and "white," cultures, he displaces the uniformity of standardized traditions. "Shakespeare in Harlem" offers comparison and contrast, but never the distance that would stabilize and distinguish categories: the Harlem poet best occupies the Shakespearean tradition, best appropriates the English literary canon by replicating and redefining it at once.42

39 Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 86.
40 For more on these distinctions and definitions see Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, trans. Catherine Porter, with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 220; Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), 47; and Diana Fuss, Identification Papers (New York: Routledge, 1995), 146.
42 I differ here from earlier critical accounts of what Hughes did with traditional forms of literature. James A. Emanuel, for instance, distinguishes "the current of American literature” from the “many shades of Negro experience” that he believes Hughes added to it (Langston Hughes [New York: Twayne, 1967], 174). I argue that Hughes made every effort to show that the tropes of African American literature were constitutive of the “American” tradition they are thought to “color.”
Rampersad associates Hughes’s career with “the search for a genuinely Afro-American poetic form” (“Langston Hughes,” 62). For Hughes, however, a genuine Afro-American poetics asks what genuine poetry is and what an Afro-American idiom sounds like. This is the resurrection of politics as poetry, a disguise that challenges the genuine. It is within this commitment that Hughes’s most genuine poems—to return to Vendler’s phrase—are also the most political ones.

Within the *Norton* text, one is struck by the “paralleled” excellence that the writing throughout composes, Gates and McKay’s prefatory claims notwithstanding. Hughes considered and performed parallels of tradition and culture as poetry; in its work, “African American literature” thus prescribes its own ambivalence about the unqualified celebration of anthology production. Hughes offers an important model for the tactic of repetition and critique; he understands juxtaposition as a literary and political resource and also recognizes the aesthetic standards it cannot, or should not, fail to scrutinize.

One of the final poems in the *Norton* section on Hughes is the memorable “Harlem” (1951), a sharp lyric about comparisons and proposed similes:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

(426)

To the extent that Harlem oscillates between “deferred” action and the contemplation of its effect, it registers a history that it will consider as and through poetic language. The poem asks “what happens” and offers six questions in response. The first five suggest that “a dream
deferred” leads away from itself, to metaphor, quietude, and disintegration. The sixth contradicts the others and forgoes a final simile, although its power depends on the detours before it, on the “likes” it does not share and the metaphorical diction it inhabits all the same.43 The “dream deferred” is a dream transformed: the work of contemplation facilitates the transition from contained image to incomparable, unparalleled action. The resistance to comparison is a resistance to closure—to the foreclosure of a dream—yet comparison is also the structure through which this resistance is articulated. Reading the Norton, looking for Shakespeare in Harlem, it is best to read as Hughes wrote, with the art of propaganda in mind.

43 Critical interpretations of this often-cited, less-read poem tend to literalize its narrative, to associate each of its images with particular experiences in African American life. Although the poem surely invokes these referents, its overall effect depends on the persistent distance between referential events and contemplated, figurative action. See Jemrie, 79; and Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes, trans. Kenneth Douglas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973). 452–3.