

Introduction to Shakespeare and African American Poetics: An Essay Cluster Published in Association with the *Langston Hughes Review*

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Abstract

This Introduction uses the example of Langston Hughes's volume *Shakespeare in Harlem* to meditate on the connections between the two terms joined by the copula in this essay cluster's title, "Shakespeare and African American Poetics."

Seventy years ago, Langston Hughes published *Shakespeare in Harlem*, a volume of self-described "light verse," illustrated with etchings by the well-known British graphic designer E. McKnight Kauffer and set in the contemporary modernist typeface of Vogue Extra-Bold.¹ The volume foregrounds, as Rebecca Walkowitz suggests, multiple questions about the location and meaning of both terms in the title. Is "Shakespeare" subject, or predicate? Are poem (and volume) located in Harlem, "where Shakespeare stands for 'great poetry'? . . . Or does the poem contain the elements of Harlem that sounds like Shakespeare: does it register moments of Shakespeare in Harlem, a refinement of Harlem into Shakespeare?" (Walkowitz 1999, 513).

The "brief and saucy" title lyric, only eight lines long, comprises two quatrains, rhymed abcb in a pattern that some have compared to folk song or "'Negro' call and response," depending on whether the second speaker belongs to the Harlem community or stands outside it (Walkowitz 1999, 513). It tells a story of love, loss, and community: the first stanza concludes plaintively, "Where, oh, where / Did my sweet mama go?" and the second retorts that "they say" she "Went home to her ma" (Hughes 1942, 111). The droll refrain, which appears in lines one, two and five, modifies the early modern nonce-phrase "hey nony nony," as "hey ninny neigh," and "nonny noe." "Nonny nonny" is also, as the *OED* notes, an Elizabethan slang term for the female genitalia,² and it appears as such in Ophelia's lament in *Hamlet* 4.5.164, in Balthazar's arch song "Sigh no more,

ladies" in *Much Ado* 2.363, 71 and in Edgar's injunction (as Poor Tom) to keep "hand[s] out of plackets" with the interjection "suum, mun, ha, no, nonny" (*King Lear* 3.4.90, 92; Shakespeare 1997).³ Walkowitz continues, "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," including the "oral . . . [and] performance tradition that constituted Shakespeare as such" (Walkowitz 1999, 513). In other words, we can look at Hughes's volume as an appropriation or collaboration with Shakespeare, one that deliberately and wittily takes on the "low" or parodic elements of Shakespeare.

Hughes's wit and his self-conscious presentation of the volume as — "light verse. Afro-Americana in the blues mood. Poems syncopated and variegated in the colors of Harlem, Beale Street, West Dallas, and Chicago's South Side" (Hughes 1942, Foreword, n.p.) — have, however, "almost certainly doomed [the volume] to critical neglect" (Ford 1992, 446). But scholars have re-evaluated both Hughes's deliberately casual description of these poems and the physical presentation of the volume. Karen Jackson Ford quotes the volume's colophon in order to argue that its material form develops Hughes's own poetics: "The headings are set in Vogue Extra-Bold, a typeface designed in our time with the aim to express the utmost simplicity" (Hughes 1942, 125, quoted in Ford 1992, 446). The volume's "un-sonnet sequence . . . treats love as a social rather than a merely private problem," she argues, and its form, content, and sources participate in Hughes's ongoing "poetry of simplicity" (Ford 1992, 448).

The volume also, it seems, enjoys a more complex relationship to nostalgia and the past than earlier critics had assumed. Arnold Rampersad notes that, although Hughes initially detested E. McKnight Kauffer's black-and-white etchings of African Americans with what Hughes called "nappy hair" — hair that was completely out of fashion in the Harlem Hughes knew — Hughes later found himself delighted with both the "bold type" and with the images, comforting himself with the thought that "nappy" hair would one day become fashionable again (Rampersad 2002, 2:9, 35) and that his own work, like Shakespeare's, would be read long into the future. The typeface's being "designed in our time" and the volume's descriptors, "syncopated" and "blues," suggest that *Shakespeare in Harlem* might do more than merely translate elements of Harlem into Shakespearean lyric, or move bits of Shakespeare into Harlem to see what became of them, or find Shakespearean words and situations in Harlem music and life. Douglas Lanier quotes this short lyric in its entirety and suggests instead that "Hughes, chronicler of the Harlem Renaissance, makes the even more daring claim that an African American poet working in the quintessential idiom of his culture might claim the mantle of the exemplar of the earlier Renaissance

— Shakespeare"; moreover, "for Hughes conjoining Shakespeare and black music was potentially empowering" (Lanier 2007, 77).

This essay cluster briefly commemorates this "potentially empowering" conjunction of Shakespeare and African American cultural production, and the release of Hughes's volume in 1942. Each essay-submission for this issue went through a more complex review process than usual, being blind-reviewed by a Shakespearean from the board of *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, and by an African Americanist from the board of the *Langston Hughes Review*. We therefore present two outstanding essays that contribute significantly and provocatively both to the study of Shakespeare and appropriation and to the scholarship of African American poetics. Chris Roark's posthumous essay claims for Toni Morrison what Lanier claims for Hughes: that Morrison's work constitutes appropriation in its truest sense, and that her writing fundamentally challenges a Western or Shakespearean notion of identity or what he calls a "soliloquy sense of self." Adam Meyer's essay investigates the productive use that African American authors have made of Shakespeare's Shylock; such appropriations, he argues, can transform the character "to represent a wide range of attitudes towards Jews and towards Black-Jewish relations." We are grateful to the current and former editors of the *Langston Hughes Review*, for allowing us to use their board and readers, and to all the scholars who sent us submissions for this cluster.

Notes

1. E. McKnight Kauffer is best known for his iconic Modernist poster designs, including Flight, "the first Cubist advertising poster published in England" (Heller 1992).
2. *OED* int. and n., B2 quotes John Florio, *Queen Annas New World of Words* (1611): "a womans pleasure-pit, nony-nony or pallace of pleasure." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, University of Georgia [accessed 18 December 2012]. The original citation appears in the third column, page 194, sig. R1v. *Early English Books Online*, GALILEO, University of Georgia [accessed 18 December 2012].
3. References to the plays of Shakespeare come from the *Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (Shakespeare 1997).

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