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Issue Four

Langston Hughes and *Flamenco*: Pan-African Kin

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In his autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, Langston Hughes affirms that he "wouldn't give up jazz for a world revolution" [1]. Janheinz Jahn adds that Hughes "always rated the African-American cultural heritage higher than any ideology" [2]. This may have been the way Hughes viewed African-American culture, but I would add that he probably rated highly the cultural heritage of any people he saw as being part of the off-white world. Furthermore, Hughes didn't do so without an ideological perspective; in fact, he desired to be what Edward Mullen called a "spokesman for the downtrodden of the world" [3]. In this paper I will seek to examine Langston Hughes' use of images and stereotypes of a particular ethnic group, the *Gitanos*, or gypsies of Southern Spain, and demonstrate how he uses Blues and *Flamenco* to identify African-Americans with other racial groups.

The image of African-Americans as the downtrodden of the world, and the idea of racial identification can be seen in works such as "Lament for Dark Peoples" (1924), where Hughes compares the destinies of the red man and of the black man:

I was a red man one time,
But the white men came.
I was a black man, too,
But the white men came.

Now they've caged me
In a circus of civilisation.

Later, in "Memo to Non-White Peoples" (1957), Hughes speaks to all non-whites and exposes the exploitation African-Americans suffer at the hands of white Americans:

They will let you have dope
Because they are quite willing
To drug you or kill you.

They will let you have babies
Because they are quite willing
To pauperize you —
Or use your kids as labor boys
For army, air force, or uranium mine.

They will let you have alcohol
To make you sodden and drunk
And foolish.

This view of a world divided between white and non-white, oppressor and oppressed, is patent in the way Hughes identifies the *Gitanos*, the gypsies of Southern Spain, as non-whites, and sees them as an exploited and outcast race. He understands them as a people subjected to colonialism, and related to the Moors, consequently 'black' and part of the African diaspora. His interest in the *Gitanos* is connected to their perceived North

African origins, and with establishing the primacy of Northern African peoples. This primacy can be traced to both the Bible and the Koran, which in some passages, such as Acts 8:27-39 and Koran 20:67, provide a justification for a perceived priority in terms of religious ancestry of Africans, especially North Africans, over white people.

Hughes' way of thinking about the relationships between non-whites, or Pan-Africanism, is inherited and developed from the views of W.E.B. Du Bois. In *The Negro*, Du Bois presents a map of the African diaspora, or as he put it of the "Distribution of Negro Blood, Ancient and Modern", which includes Southern Spain. [4]. Hughes' poem "A Ballad of Negro History" (1952), where he gives an exhaustive listing of episodes of African history and mythology and explores the association between the Moors and the South of Spain "before the Moors crossed into Spain / to leave their mark," and the Biblical primacy of Africans in Christianity: "It was a black man bore the Cross / For Christ at Calvary", referring to Simon, the Cyrenian [5]. Identically, Aimé Césaire in "Notebook of a Return to My Native Land" (1939) sees Africa as "gigantically caterpillaring as far as the Hispanic foot of Europe." [6]

As Glicksberg points out, "Negro writers in the '20's were obsessed with the dream of racial identification. Alliances, cultural and political, with other black peoples throughout the world were the professed aim" [7]. This obsession with racial solidarity can be illustrated by one of Hughes' poems about the Spanish Civil War, "Letter from Spain" (1937), as well as by what he wrote in *I Wonder as I Wander* about the episode described in the poem: "To try to express the feelings of the Negro fighting men in this regard, I wrote these verses" [8]. These are feelings about the irony of Franco having Moors fighting on his side, and feelings of guilt for having wounded another African.

Hughes' eagerness to identify at any cost with anyone who was darker than a blond Nordic results in the most pathetic and miscalculated verses. The poet confesses to not understanding or being understood by the subjects he addresses, and yet somehow he knows they share the same convictions. The tone of the poem is reminiscent of simple statement of fact which is characteristic of the poems in the collection, *The Weary Blues*. The poem reveals the way in which Americans perceive their world and themselves, despite the various racial backgrounds of the people who compose their society. The speaker stresses what he perceives to be economic and racial connections between him as African-American and the Moor as another oppressed African.

Hughes, as any other American would have done in his place, is setting himself up as the defender of freedom, and, as an African-American, the herald of equality and brotherhood among African peoples. By adopting an American mainstream position of a defender of these values, Hughes can be seen as a transitional poet between the earlier tradition of freed slaves writing, and the newer tendency to assimilate African-American culture into mainstream American culture. W. E. B. Du Bois' writings are representative of the tradition and culture of freed slaves, advocating the liberation of African peoples from white oppression. He saw African peoples as "gaining slowly an intelligent thoughtful leadership" [9] in the societies they lived in, be it the United States, Spain or elsewhere in the world.

Hughes sees the struggle for freedom from a socialist perspective. As Arthur Davis observes, "like other young men of the thirties and early forties, [Hughes] saw hope for the oppressed in the Marxist position" [10]. For him the confrontation is between oppressor and oppressed, superimposing the perspective of the class-based struggle on the race-based conflict. These views on class and race are akin to the views of Vladimir Mayakovsky, the poet of the Revolution, who wrote in a poem about Cuba, "Black and White" (1925):

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In Havana      everything's      marked off clearly:
    whites have dollars,      blacks—nil per head.

whites eat pineapples
    blacks      ripe and tight,
    eat them      wet and rot.
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White-collar jobs
black hack-work's
are kept for the white,
the black men's lot.

Despite the difference in perspective, Hughes follows Du Bois' thoughts on the role of African-Americans — "Led by American Negroes, the Negroes of the world are reaching out towards each other to know, to sympathize, to inquire" [11] and is attempting what Glicksberg called

[a] fusion with other black folk regardless of cultural, linguistic, and historical differences. The motives behind such a policy were strictly similar to the proletariat's renunciation of capitalistic society [12].

This poem "From Spain to Alabama" (1949) juxtaposes African-Americans and gypsies and their respective types of music and song, and addresses an audience apparently oblivious to the fact that these songs, *Flamenco* and Blues, still exist and have not been marginalised or silenced by the war. The need to alert the reader to their existence implies that they are to some extent invisible or not recognised by his readership, that they have become seemingly socially irrelevant.

Furthermore, in "Song of Spain" (1937), Hughes associates the *Gitanos* with a form of primitive carnality by juxtaposing the primary compulsions of Eros and Thanatos, or "Death and love and heartbreak," thus placing the *Gitanos* in a primitive, carnal stage, which is the same stage on which the white man places African-Americans. This sexualization of colour is explored by Claude McKay, in *Home to Harlem* (1928), and as Juda Bennet points out, regarding Jake as the main character in the novel, "his blackness is sexualized and he in turn sexualizes color" [13]. McKay also exposes what Bennet calls "the ignominious racism of the US" by comparison to the "larger and more tolerant world" [14]. This is the same observation made by both Du Bois and Hughes in their visits to Europe and Asia. This tolerance is likely to derive from less puritan views on sexuality than those held by Americans.

Hughes writes about the white perceptions of the primitivism of the African-American, when he ends the relationship with his patron Charlotte Mason:

She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the institutions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive. I was only an American Negro but I was not Africa [15].

The irony reflected by the use of the word 'unfortunately' reveals that Hughes understands that Mason's concept of the primitive is ethnocentric and racist, and defines her as not primitive. Furthermore, her collections of primitive bibelots were a form of cultural imperialism. Despite this, and the fact that he never felt African, Hughes is still interested in pursuing the possible connections between the 'black' peoples of the world. About Africa, Hughes wrote in "Afro-American Fragment" (1930): "So long / So far away / Is Africa" and in "Motherland" (1943), "Dream of yesterday /And far-off." Countee Cullen also sees Africa as a distant memory in "Heritage" (1925), when he poses the question "What is Africa to me?"

As St. Clair Drake notes, although Hughes "felt impelled to speak of a sense of 'kinship' with Africa" [16], primitivism as a movement back to Africa, that is, a return to a savage state or to an allegedly primitive society elsewhere in the world, did not interest Hughes. Rather, he was interested in the idea of a future Golden Age, a world where people would experience life without colour barriers. This idea and his incorporation of motifs from myth and ritual constitute Hughes' form of primitivism. To attain such a utopian state, Hughes considers it important that people around the world share experiences. For him, the best way to commune is through sensory communication, be it song, music, dance or poetry. And so Hughes explored the spontaneous rhythms of the primitive community and the symbiosis of a natural beat, the African beat. However, Hughes was not alone in his exploration of images of primitivism. The beginning of the century saw anthropological and psychological theories, such as the works of Sir James George Frazer and Sigmund Freud bring primitivism, which had previously been a

relatively dormant element, to the forefront of Western culture. Across the Western world, artists utilised different media to explore images and elements of the primitive in their work.

In the 1920's, in the United States, black people, such as bushman, were still being shown as attractions, as the exotic other [17]. This fascination with the exotic seems to be another facet of Hughes' mainstream American views. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Gypsies were seen as part of the fascinating peoples, the exotic unknown. This is quite ironic, since whites viewed African-Americans and their music as exotic, and as Glucksberg points out, whites promoted "the glamorous yet sinister cult of the exotic, so appealing to the romantic imagination," in order to maintain the black/white divide and impose a caste system both in art and in society [18].

In *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hughes registers the way in which race is seen in a totally different way in Spain when he interviews El Negro Aquilino, an African-Cuban saxophone player of both Jazz and Flamenco: "I asked him about color in Spain. He said, ... it doesn't matter" [19]. The same observation about the seemingly non-existent colour barrier in other parts of Europe is attested by Du Bois' description of his visit to Portugal, when after mentioning that there were "nine colored members of European Parliaments," he points out that "between the Portuguese and the African and near African there is naturally no 'racial' antipathy" [20]. What Hughes understands is that although colour doesn't seem to matter, relations are determined by class, and coloured people are often, if not always, seen as inferior in the class organisation.

One way to reach out, or in the words of Du Bois to sympathize and to inquire, is to translate. In his first autobiographical work, *The Big Sea*, Hughes wrote that he wanted "to be a writer and write stories about Negroes, so true that people in far-away lands would read them – even after I was dead" [21]. His own works were translated into quite a few languages, thus guaranteeing his survival even after his death. He views translation as a means of knowing what others think, and to fit his idea of the universality of the black feeling, he translates the works of other African writers from Spanish and French into English, such as the poetry of the African-Cuban Nicolás Guillén, which as John Matheus observes "contain[s] much Cuban Negro dialect, which [Hughes] turned into American English Negro dialect" [22]. From French he translated the poetry of the Haitian Jacques Roumain, of Madagascan Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo, and of the Senegalese David Diop; and from Spanish, the poetry of Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral, a Chilean of Spanish, Basque and Indian descent. His contact with both Guillén and Roumain, whom he first met in Havana in March 1930 and in Port-au-Prince in 1931 respectively, helped to heighten Hughes' awareness of Negritude as an international movement [23]. All of the poets he translated are concerned with the conditions of the working class, the majority of which are Africans or natives, exploited by the white man.

Hughes also translated the *Romancero Gitano* (Gypsy Ballads), the work of a white man, Federico García Lorca. Not only do these ballads deal with a perceived black race, the *Gitanos*, but they also fit within Hughes' ideology of freedom, as Lorca is a representative of those few whites, like Mayakovsky, who are aware of and willing to change the prevalent class system. Although, as John Crosbie observed, Lorca was "a privileged member, born and bred, of the dominant class" [24]. Crosbie adds that the *Gypsy Ballads* are "grounded upon the dialectic of dominant and dominated" [25]. Hughes identifies the struggle between oppressed Gypsies and the oppressive white Civil Guard with the way in which African-Americans are treated in the United States. An example of injustice suffered by African-Americans, as portrayed by Hughes, can be found in *I Wonder as I Wander*, where Hughes writes about the Scottsboro case, in which a white girl, Ruby Bates, claims to have been raped by nine African-American teenagers, but "under oath she recanted her rape testimony, declaring the whole story had been a fabrication". Nonetheless, "the Negro youths still remained in the death house" [26].

The most important reason to parallel the *Gitanos* with African-Americans is the contribution *Gitanos* made to the creation of *Cante Jondo* [27], or as Lorca called it the

Primitive Andalusian Song [28]. This is the type of Flamenco most deeply associated with the Gitano tradition and includes three important types: the *siguiriyas gitanas*, the *saetas*, adopted from Spanish religious processions, and the *martinetes*, of Gypsy origin and sung without dance. This contribution to the creation of folklore parallels the creation of the Blues and Jazz by African-Americans. The *Cante Jondo*, like the Blues, is intensely sad and deals with themes of death, anguish, and despair; in Hughes' words, "Death and love and heartbreak." Flamenco is the music and dance of the Andalusian *Gitanos* and has its roots in Gypsy, Andalusian, Arabic, and possibly Spanish Jewish, folk songs. It is also likely that Flamenco is related to both Byzantine and Indian religious chants. Its development started around the fourteenth century as displaced Gypsies, Arabs, Jews, and socially outcast Christians began to interact on the fringes of society.

In the United States, the urban Blues have a similar origin, resulting from the displacement and interaction of diverse groups of African-Americans who arrived in the cities of the industrial North from all the southern States [29]. With them they brought their oral folkloric tradition based on a mix of African fables, or what survived of them, and white tales: Irish and English folklore, French tales from Louisiana, and Spanish and Latin-American stories. The Blues were influenced by work songs, show music, church music, and the folk and popular music of white people, and were played by southern African-Americans, mostly agricultural workers. The rural Blues developed in Georgia, North and South Carolina, Texas, and Mississippi. The urban Blues are, as Lemuel Johnson argues in *The Devil, The Gargoyle and The Buffoon*, the result of "urbanization and formation of ghettos", which transformed the "dominant Negro subculture ... created by slavery and Protestantism" [30]. The Blues reflect what R. M. Dorson calls "a web of interrelationships between the folk and the mass culture" [31].

Another parallel may be established between the Blues and the traditional Portuguese song *Fado*, which translated literally, means Fate. It is a type of song particular to Lisbon, where it developed in both Alfama and Mouraria, the two Moorish quarters of the Portuguese capital. The thematic connection and the performance of the *Fado* singer is similar, if not identical to that of the Blues singer, exploring the same tragicomic elements in the song, and crying as catharsis. An example of this thematic similarity with, for instance, "Bad Luck Card" (1926) and "Gypsy Man" (1926), is the *Fado* "Tia Macheta" (1924), where the woman is told by an old crone that her lover will not come back [32]. *Fado* elicited the same response from the Nigerian poet, Wole Soyinka, as Flamenco did from Hughes. Soyinka's reaction to *Fado* is best described by his poem "Fado Singer" (1967):

My skin is pumiced to a fault
I am down to hair-roots, down to fibre filters
Of the raw tobacco nerve.

The influence of North African song, present in both *Flamenco* and *Fado*, is felt by both poets, and is what Hughes perceived as the connection between the *Gitanos* and other African peoples, including African-Americans.

On the tragi-comic aspect of the Blues Hughes wrote:

for sad as the Blues may be, there's almost always something humorous
about them – even if it's the kind of humor that laughs to keep from
crying. You know,

I went to de gypsy's
To get ma fortune told.
Went to de gypsy's
To get ma fortune told,
But gypsy said, dog-gone
Your un-hard-lucky soul! [33]

Richard Barksdale in the article "Comic Relief in Langston Hughes' Poetry," observes:

abrupt emotional transitions are inherent to the blues statement. One always recovers from the blues. All that is needed is another place or another face. It may be argued that the emotional metamorphosis wrought by the blues suggests the comic, simply because there is a movement from sorrow and grief to laughter and relief [34].

The tradition of African-Americans as jesters is paralleled in the Gypsies' lies, for when they do so they are sharing the same combination of tragedy and comedy, which is reflected in their performances as swindlers and fortune tellers. In the Blues, as in Fado, comedy and irony disguise the tragedy of the speakers who lost their beloved. Despite having uncovered these lies, Hughes does not pass judgement on the fortune-teller, in fact he identifies the speaker in "Ballad of the Gypsy" (1942) with the Gypsy: 'But if I was a Gypsy/ I would take your money, too.'

In "Madam and the Fortune Teller" (1944), lies are used to swindle Alberta K. who, in the words of Dellita Martin, "like many others who seek the oracle, fails to understand" the oracle's simple message [35].

Your fortune, honey,
Lies right in yourself
You ain't gonna find it
On nobody else's shelf.

To this Martin adds that "the concrete symbol of the shelf evokes the blues mood and theme since a number of traditional lyrics refer to putting one's troubles on the shelf." Alberta K. fails to recognise this simple truth and "leaves herself open to exploitation" [36]. In The Book of Negro Folklore, Hughes states that:

The American Negro slave adopt[ed] Brer Rabbit as hero. He became in [the slaves'] stories a practical joker, a braggart, a wit, and a trickster. But his essential characteristic was the ability to get the better of bigger and stronger animals. To the slave in his condition the theme of weakness overcoming strength through cunning proved endlessly fascinating [37].

Brooks observes that this type of humour started with "the plantation brand of Negro humor," but was replaced by the "slap-stick, black-face minstrels" [38]. However, as Bennet puts it,

in a society that devalued African-Americans, minstrelsy had to be conceived as neither white nor black but another race called American. If 'the Negro' were to be considered the source and spirit of minstrelsy, it could in turn be considered unique, un-European, and primitive [and] although the minstrelsy is hardly a glorious tradition with which to be associated [there is a concern in American society with] the political dangers of associating a predominantly white and racist past with the utopian inflected jazz. I say 'utopian' because Americans, black and white, past and present, have always associated jazz with the future [39].

In his speech "Jazz as Communication" Hughes states that Jazz as communication is a circle, without a starting or ending point. He compares Jazz with the sea, constituted by all kinds of water. The metaphor for the community of races is obvious and Hughes' preoccupations about a future utopic American society are patent. By the end of the speech, Hughes admits that for him

jazz is a montage of a dream deferred. A great big dream – yet to come – and always yet – to become ultimately and finally true [40].

Nevertheless, Jazz has its particular place in the history of the United States. F. Scott Fitzgerald defined the 1920s as the Jazz Age, a label which is still used, and Juda Bennet adds, it was a "period which perform[ed] Americanness through black music" [41]. The pursuit of the ultimate utopia is reflected in the need to define the United States of America as something else, not European. As James Collier argues in his

study *The Reception of Jazz in America: A New View*:

[jazz] expresses our American nature – and as long as our name is expressed by anything so simple and straightforward we will have no cause to worry. When our nature becomes so complex that we need the high art of Europe, or something similar, to express it, it will then be time to realize that we are getting old and effete [42].

In 1925, J. A. Rogers in "Jazz at Home" asserted that jazz was, along with movies and the dollar, already the foremost exponent of modern Americanism, and claimed that jazz belonged to the African-Americans. Interestingly, he then proceeds to try to establish the genealogy of jazz, and he recognises that "in its elementals, jazz has always existed. It is in the Spanish fandango, the strains of Gypsy music, and the ragtime of the Negro" [43].

Although Hughes' uses images and stereotypes and ideas associated with the Gypsies to explore concepts of universal 'blackness' and ideas of social injustice, there is possibly a deeper connection between African-Americans and Gypsies, particularly *Gitanos*. Hughes reveals a knowledge of the importance folklore has in groups strongly dependant on oral transmission of culture. All three types of sung performance mentioned, that is, *Cante Jondo* or *Flamenco*, *Fado* and Blues, are products of societies affected by displacement, with little or no use of literacy, and which have a need to share emotions through the intensely theatrical performances of these forms of song, music and body language.

Endnotes

- [1] Hughes, L, *I Wonder as I Wander*. (New York: Rinehart, 1956).p.122. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [2] Jahn, J, *A History of Neo-African Literature*. (London: Faber, 1968). p.204. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [3] Mullen, E. J, 'The Literary Reputation of Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World.' *Comparative Literature Studies*. 13 (1976), 254-269. p.263. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [4] Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Negro*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).p.144. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [5] This episode is described in two Gospels: Mark 15:21 and Luke 23:26. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [6] Césaire, A, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1995).p. 91. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [7] Glicksberg, C. I, "The Negro Cult of the Primitive." *Antioch Review*. 4.1 (1944), 47-55.p.47. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [8] Hughes, *I Wonder*, p. 353. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [9] Du Bois, W.E.B, "The Negro Mind Reaches Out." *The New Negro*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Boni, 1925.p. 411. [Return to endnote reference](#)
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- [11] Du Bois, *Negro Mind*, p.412. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [12] Glicksberg, p.47. [Return to endnote reference](#)
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- [14] Bennet, p.19. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [15] Hughes, *I Wonder*, p.325. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [16] Drake, St. C, "Hide My Face?: On Pan-Africanism and Negritude." *Soon, One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes 1940-1962*. Ed. H. Hill.(New York: Knopf, 1963).p.79. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [17] Jahoda, G, *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1999).p.213. [Return to endnote reference](#)
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- [20] Du Bois, *Negro Mind*, p.386. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [21] Hughes, L, *The Big Sea*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963). p..33-34. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [22]Matheus, J. F, "Langston Hughes as Translator." *College Language Association Journal*. 11.4 (1968), 319-330.p. 326. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [23] Rampersad, A, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). p. 1:179,1:208. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [24] Crosbie, J, "Structure and Counter-Structure in Lorca's 'Romancero Gitano'." *The Modern Language Review*. 77.1 (1982), 74-88. p. 88. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [25] Crosbie, p.88. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [26] Hughes, *I Wonder*, p.62. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [27] *Cante Jondo* is the most serious variety of *Flamenco*. The *Cante Jondo* developed a distinctive melodic style, and its principal characteristics are a narrow range, the reiteration of one note in the manner of a recitative, a dramatic use of ornate melodic embellishment, a preoccupation with microtones, and an intricate rhythm that defies notation. 'Folk Music.' *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. CD-ROM version 1.1 (1997). [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [28] Gibson, I, *Federico Garcia Lorca*. (Barcelona: Grijalbo, 1987).p. 112. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [29] In *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hughes describes the song of the Spanish Gitana singer, 'La Niña de los Peines,' Pastora Pavón, as a hair raising experience, and compares her *Flamenco* to the Blues of the deep south. p.333. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [30] Johnson, L. A, *The Devil, The Gargoyle and The Buffoon*. (Port Washington: Kennikat, 1971). p. 110. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [31] Dorson, R. M, *American Folklore*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968). p.187. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [32] This poem is not included in Rampersand's definitive *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, but its style and theme are identical to both 'Bad Luck Card' and to 'Fortune Teller Blues,' and since no authorship has been attributed by Hughes, I would like to suggest that the poem is, in fact, Hughes own creation. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [33] Hughes, L, "Songs Called the Blues." *Phylon*. 2.2 (1941), 143-145. p. 144. [Return to endnote reference](#)
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- [41] Bennet, p.63. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [42] Collier, J. L, *The Reception of Jazz in America: a New View*. (Brooklyn: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1988). p.14. [Return to endnote reference](#)
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