

Global Black Consciousness and Multimedia Aesthetics in Langston Hughes' 'Ask Your Mama'

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Keywords: Polyphony, Postcolonial, Epic, Modernist, Multimedia Project

Article Information

Received	3 rd Jul 2025	Accepted	11 th Sep 2025
Published	30 th Sep 2025		

Abstract

Ask Your Mama, a long poem by Langston Hughes, is unique, not only in its style and composition, but also in its content. Analyzing its materiality, stylistic complexity, and content, this paper argues that Hughes' masterpiece is a multimedia project of Global Black consciousness, that is postcolonial and reformist in nature. The 12 poems-in-one, the text font type, the ink colors and type used, as well as the artistic design of the book stage it as an epic, which this paper terms as 'an epic of blackness'. Moreover, my paper discusses that the book uses cubist-style figures, black comedy jokes (Yo mama jokes), along with allusions to famous artistic and political figures of the era. With its various features and references to popular figures, it appears as a polyphonic, multimedia project of modernist, reformist, and postcolonial nature that celebrates blackness and its common memory.

Introduction

Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz is the "longest, most ambitious poem" by Langston Hughes (Lowney 2012). Together with *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (another longer poem/collection of poems by Hughes), *Ask Your Mama* (AYM) presents not just '12 moods for Jazz', but a plethora of meanings and revisions of history, and achieves an archival status through its polyphonic, multimedia-style presentation, stylistic complexity and organization, and content. The book is so experimental, radical, and unique, not only in its materiality, but also in its stylistic choices, that it is probably among the few of its kind. With the help of several studies, I will argue that AYM is a polyphonic, multimedia project aimed at social reform with anti-/de-/post-colonial implications. With each aspect of the exteriority and interiority carefully and purposefully crafted and employed, AYM could be considered an epic: an epic of Hughes, an epic of American modern poetry, an epic of blackness, an epic of Africa, and an epic of common existence in the world.

Beginning with the materiality of the book, we notice it was first published in 1961 by one of the most famous US publishers: Alfred A. Knopf. The book presents twelve poems in one poem, or one poem in 12 poems, which are dedicated to Louis Armstrong, 'the greatest horn blower of them all'. The text of the poem is set on the 'Linotype in Ionic No. 5', all in caps and in alternating blue and brown ink on beige paper in homage to Duke Ellington's song *Black, Brown & Beige*. The opening pages of the book contain printed lines from sheet music of 'Hesitation Blues' and 'Shave and a Haircut', two musical phrases that appear later as leitmotifs and figurines throughout the book. Various material features of the book, including its name, the choice of design modelled on an album, and colors, etc., turn out to be carefully chosen by the author in his effort to

present, represent, and echo the African American past, present, and anticipated future, as well as to pay homage to 'the wretched of the Earth' home and abroad.

The book is unique and 'modern' in its design as a musical album and its motivated choice of vibrant colors of black, red, and green on the front cover that boldly reflect the colors of Pan-Africanism and Negritude. The alternating colors of print, blue and brown, on thick beige paper give the book a peculiar, concrete, and vibrant look and feel (apart from its associations with Duke Ellington). Cubist-style geometric shapes accompany each poem number, just like they are manifest on the front cover and in the title page; no extant study has attempted to decipher their significance. The cubist style figures probably signal the modernist style of the poem. The book gets its title from the black comedy form of the dozens (commonly known as "Yo' mama" jokes) and the 12-bar blues. The verse is framed in the middle of each page, accompanied by musical cues in the margins, and 'Liner Notes' (notes which are usually presented with a music disc or record) at the end of the poem. The addition of marginalia and liner notes makes the book 'genre-bending' and ambivalent, making it "Hughes' most experimental blend of Jazz and music" (Lowney 2012), and at the same time making it harder for critics to categorize the genre of the book. In extant knowledge, no book/poem contains musical marginalia and liner notes, which makes Hughes' poem a multimedia project in its structure, design, and purpose, especially when we know that Hughes had planned the performance of the book with musicians in his own lifetime. Sadly, he could not see the performance of his multimedia project to completion in his own life, but it was made possible later by Laura Karpman, and the multimedia project premiered in Carnegie Hall, New York, in 2009².

In line with the geometric shapes on the front cover, each poem/section of the poem begins with the poem number with small cubist-style geometric shapes on the right-hand side of the page; a pattern which is followed religiously throughout the book, followed by the title of the poem on the next page, and the actual text of the poem on the right-hand side of the page. The pattern causes some pages to be left blank when the previous poem ends on the right-hand side of the page, and the next poem number must begin on the next right-hand side, thus leaving the left-hand side page empty. This specific pattern disrupts the visual continuity of the poems, making the readers rethink whether they are separate poems or sections of the same poem, akin to a musical album that contains several songs. Whatever the case, Hughes probably wants his readers to pause and think, as well as establish the sections emphatically. In addition, the book contains two blank pages at the beginning and at the end. The initial blank pages seem to be asking the readers to empty their minds to focus on what is coming in the next pages, as well as building anticipation for the poem. The empty last pages probably suggest that it is not the end for Hughes, the African American way of life, as well as that of all oppressed nations, colored or otherwise, and he seems to have left the pages for those coming in the future to complete the epic when the deferred dream comes to life.

Hughes employs several stylistic innovations on the visual scale of the poem. For instance, the title of the book, as well as the poet's name, along with the center-framed verse of all twelve sections with their titles, appear in uppercase letters, whereas the marginalia and liner notes are in standard case. The use of uppercase letters, along with dividing the poem into twelve sections seem to sit well with the fact that the poem has been called an epic poem. Probably experimenting with the requirement of grand diction for epic poems with capital letters, the capitalization seems to shout, scream, or forcefully voice, in an anticolonial or postcolonial manner, what the poet and the poem want to express: the voice of an individual as well as a community with

¹ Borrowed from Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*

² For details of the project see Stevens-Garmon, Morgen. "Langston Hughes, Laura Karpman, and Jessye Norman Ask Your Mama!" *Langston Hughes, Laura Karpman, and Jessye Norman Ask Your Mama! | In The Muse: Performing Arts Blog*, 22 Sept. 2022.

a long history of suppressed voice, as if shouting back paralleled with 'writing back'. Hughes's employment of visual elements to thematic ends could also be exemplified by his use of "\$" and "c" signs in the sixth mood "HORNS OF PLENTY" where "THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES" is symbolized by "c" whereas the upper-class and upper-middle-class life is symbolized by "\$" to illustrate the economic divide within the black community". See how the "c" could be the "QUARTER", and the overall connection of these 'quarters' to the hope of hearing the "HORNS OF PLENTY" with those who have "MADE IT" "TO ST. ALBANS³/ WHERE THE GRASS IS GREENER" connects the visual and the thematic (Marcoux 396). The mood, with its "\$" and "c" signs, presents the "commodification... of black celebrities" as well as points towards "the commercial exploitation of African American performing artists, especially of jazz musicians" (Lowney 2012). Another example of the visual informing the thematic is the "pattern of juxtaposition similar to the earlier *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, in which the gaps between voices, scenes, and sections" convey extremely crucial interpretative aids as well as "enhance the thematic significance of the poem's intercultural dialogue". The juxtaposition and mix of music and sounds "resembles a DJ's mix" of songs and sounds, presenting yet another continuity between the design of the book as a musical album, as well as the visual and thematic harmony of the book (Lowney 2012).

Thus, we see that the choices made by Hughes with regard to the book as a physical artifact and its visual and physical elements are extremely motivated, meaningful, and symbolic. As compared to the earlier, longer poems by Hughes, especially *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Hughes has broadened his vision and scope to envision and envisage not only Harlem and African American life, but also the global 'cullud' life and those communities who are striving against social, racial, and political justice. The anticolonial, social reformist, and revisionist nature and purpose of Hughes' project are concretely evident even from the exteriority of the book. The contents of the book, as well as the circumstances that led to the composition and publication of the book, are also very relevant to the discussion of the book as a multimedia project of reformist and anticolonial nature.

1960, the year before *AYM*'s publication, was a year of many local, national, and international upheavals that not only triggered the composition but also found their way into the book. The year was "one of the most tumultuous years of jazz history, a year of intensifying debates about the economics, international politics, and aesthetics of jazz" as well as "the most tumultuous of Modern African history" (Lowney 2012). It was the same year when the Newport Jazz Festival incident happened (as well as the Newport Rebels Festival) that urged Hughes to write the poem.⁴ The United Nations had declared 1960 as the 'year of Africa' as seventeen African nations had achieved independence. The year and the next one when *AYM* was published also saw some shocking events like "the Sharpeville massacre of apartheid protesters in South Africa and the civil war in Congo, with the notorious assassination of Premier Patrice Lumumba in January 1961". The year also saw rising "radical black activists in the US" (Lowney 2012). Analogous to what was happening in America and the world, the years were 'tumultuous' for Hughes as well, with "increasing demand for his skills" as well as "renewed anticommunist threats" he had to face. Thus, Hughes was faced with a tempest that was multifaceted, and his answer to all that was *AYM*, which was personal and communal, national and international, all at the same time. *AYM* seems to be the culmination of personal, communal, poetic, artistic, reformist, and anti-/de-/post-colonialist ideologies of Hughes, as it combines them all.

³ St. Alban's was famous in the 1950s for its black celebrity residents, especially jazz musicians, as well as its earlier history of efforts to curtail the incoming flow of black homeowners. See Lowney for further insight into the place, its history and its symbolic significance in reflecting the upward mobility especially of the black musicians and artists.

⁴ For a short description of the two festivals please see Jackson, Ashawanta. "The Newport Rebels and Jazz as Protest." Jstor Daily, 23 July 2020, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-newport-rebels-and-jazz-as-protest/>.

Jazz was the perfect link/thread/weapon and/or tool to capture the chorus of all those voices that the '12 Moods' strive to represent: the personal, communal, national, and international. It was the best-suited candidate to perform the multimedia-based anticolonial social reformist project Hughes had envisaged for his book. Since long Hughes had his faith in Jazz, as he says in 'The Negro and the Racial Mountain' that Jazz had been "the music of common people, the low down folks" and "the blues and... the spirituals had found a new incarnation in Jazz" (Hughes 1926) and that it "expressed the rhythm of life of the black community" (Gunter 2003). Jazz was the 'montage of a dream deferred,' and it had become a tool of political resistance by the time Hughes wrote the poem. Hughes probably had a fair share in making Jazz a tool of political resistance as he had been using Jazz, blues, bebop and other similar musical genres that were originated by colored artists to represent colored life in America, in Harlem, and in the world in general, as we see in his previous poems as well, e.g. *The Weary Blues*, and the *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Although less attention has been given "to the political significance of jazz as a medium of protest and black transnationalist expression" Jazz had become "an inherent expression of Negro life in America" and it was not possible for black life and history in America and the world in general to be presented without Jazz, and thus we have '12 Moods for Jazz' when we discuss the colored life inside and abroad (Hughes 1926). Jazz was the thread that linked all black souls together and even "identified with Black militant movements" along with Bebop, "attempt[ing] to resolve at the level of style what the militancy fought in the streets" (Brinkman 2011). Indeed, Hughes utilized Jazz to bind all together in its 'moods'; Jazz came out to be the soul of the communities, as the one thread going through and connecting the destinies, voices, and souls of them all.

Just as his *Montage* was to be read as a portrait of 'contemporary Harlem' and 'a community in transition', so is this montage of twelve moods, but in this book, Hughes' vision is much broader and more futuristic than in any of his previous poems. This poem "dramatically expands the scope of his vision", although its title 'Ask Your Mama' "anchors the poem in the verbal rituals of the dirty dozens of the urban black community" and "in the oral culture" as well as its subtitle 12 Moods for Jazz "confirms the formative power of African American music", echoing a communal and national voice (Gunter 2003). The international pan-African and postcolonial scope of the book is further highlighted by Gunter who is of the view that "the volume resituates and rearticulates the notion of the black community—which finds expression as the leitmotif of *Ask Your Mama* in the line "IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGRO" numerous times repeated and varied in the twelve parts of the book—in the transnational, global context of the postcolonial world, of the fight of the former colonies of European empires for independence and its interrelations with the fight against racism and oppression in the United States". Further, commenting on *AYM's* international, extra-racial, humanistic appeal Gunter says that the book "not only transcends the range of different genres and forms of black music created in the US and refers to all kinds of world music, not just African diasporic music, but ranging from German lieder to Latin American cha-cha, West Indian calypso, the Jewish liturgy, white American hymns and various kinds of African instruments and drumming" (Gunter 2003). Hughes seems to suggest racial bonding for blacks throughout the world, but that should not let them forget the bond of humanity they share with all other nations and races of the world; thus, he uses all kinds of world music that do not have their origins in Africa. Hence, *AYM's* vision is not only "post-modernist and post-colonial" in its scope, but global and planetary that 'transcends national borders as well as the limits of cultural nationalism" (Gunter 2003).

The mood that has enjoyed the limelight of critics' attention, and that presents the national and the international, is the first mood, "CULTURAL EXCHANGE". John Lowney has discussed the mood for its portrayal of the civil rights movements, African liberation movements, as well as the contemporary political use/abuse of Jazz by the American government and the resistance of African American musicians against the

portrayal of Jazz as a symbol of equal, just, and democratic America. Commenting on US government's use of 'ambassadors'⁵ and "satiriz[ing] racial stereotypes and invert[ing] national—and international—racial hierarchies" (Lowney 2012) the 'cultural exchange' takes place "IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES" and the 'ambassador' is "AN AFRICAN IN MID-DECEMBER/SENT BY THE STATE DEPARTMENT/AMONG THE SHACKS TO MEET THE BLACKS". So, the mood begins "IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES" with "LEONTYNE"⁶ and gradually moves to "NKRUMAH", "NASSER", "AZIKIWE", "CASTRO", "TOURE" AND "KENYATTA" all of whom collectively "[signify] the global struggles of third-world liberation movements" (Lowney 2012). Hughes also refers to Pan-Africanists and Negritude movement in other moods as well, for example, the tenth mood "BIRD IN ORBIT" mentions "ALIOUNE [Diop] AIME [Cesaire] SEDAR [Senghor] SIP[PING] [THEIR] NEGRITUDE". It is very interesting and meaningful that Hughes mentions the three as one person, "ALIONE AIME SEDAR SIPS HIS NEGRITUDE", as Negritude and Pan-Africanists envisioned one Africa encompassing all the black lives. One of the most discussed parts is the end of the first mood, which presents a "satirical reversal of Jim Crow social roles... that places African Americans in positions of power with white servants" (Lowney 2012). The reversal is both parodic and revolutionary in its portrayal as Hughes "DREAMS" (which is although deferred) of a completely inverted society where "THE NEGROES/ OF THE SOUTH HAVE TAKEN OVER", where "WEALTHY NEGROES HAVE WHITE SERVANTS", and where "WHITE SHARECROPPERS WORK THE BLACK PLANTATIONS/AND COLORED CHILDREN HAVE WHITE MAMMIES", specifically the politicians "FAUBUS" "EASTLAND" "PATTERSON" as "MAMMIES".

Thus, we see that AYM turns out to be "the chorus of common memory"⁷ and a polyphonic, multimedia project that is ambivalent, radical, modernist, experimental, reformist, anti-/de-/post-colonialist, personal, communal, national, and international in its scope (Schuster 2021), style, construction, content, commentary, stylistic innovations, choral variations, and visual artistry; and stands out among American Modernism and American Modernist poetry as an unparalleled epic poem/book/multimedia-project⁸. The polyphony in the form of various genres of world music as well as the voice of several African American jazz and music artists, the multimedia-based form and structure of the poem, the revisionist postcolonial desire and attempt of the book, and its racial, interracial and planetary scope make it not only the voice of Langston Hughes, but also that of the African American community, African community and humanity in general. Utilizing jazz as the voice of the common people, Hughes has left us an epic that showcases no kings, princes, or heroes, rather common 'negroes' as the representation of all humanity, making his poem the epic of the low folk.

⁵ For details on the use of 'ambassadors' by the US State Department in the famous/notorious jazz tours and the promotion of black musicians as symbols of a free, democratic America see John Lowney 566-569

⁶ Leontyne Price, the first African American Soprano to receive international acclaim. We see Leontyne 'unpacking' in the poem pointing towards the 'jazz tours' as Price was among the first African American cultural 'ambassadors'.

⁷ Borrowed from Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River*

⁸ It is indeed not possible to categorize Hughes' masterpiece, thus the use of hyphens.

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Article Information and Declarations

Declarations
Author's Contribution:
▪ Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions, Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript ▪ The author agrees to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed
Conflict of Interest: NIL
Funding Sources: NIL
Correspondence:
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How to Cite: Global Black Consciousness and Multimedia Aesthetics in Langston Hughes' 'Ask Your Mama'. (2025). Wah Academia Journal of Global Religions, 1(2), 44-49. https://doi.org/10.63954/48senj94 Open Access: Publication is Open Access Licensing: Creative Commons Attribution License - CC BY- 4.0 Copyrights: The author retains unrestricted copyrights and publishing rights