The Worlds of Langston Hughes

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CHAPTER FIVE

BACK IN THE USSA

Joe McCarthy’s Mistranslations

I thought you just said I was a Red Russian. Now here you go calling me a Negro. Which is I?

—Langston Hughes, “When a Man Sees Red”

Words may be the instruments by which crimes are committed, and it has always been recognized that the protection of other interests of society may justify reasonable restrictions upon speech in furtherance of the general welfare.

—Judge Harold Medina in 1949

Near the end of The Big Sea, Langston Hughes recounts how his early political verse “Advertisement for the Waldorf Astoria” earned him the thinly veiled scorn of his patron: “It’s not you…. It’s a powerful poem! But it’s not you,” Charlotte Osgood Mason sighed, concluding that her New Negro protégé “had written nothing beautiful” since the completion of his novel, Not Without Laughter (1930) (BS, 323, 325). Shortly after her rebuke, the gap between what “Godmother”—as Zora Neale Hurston called her with a mixture of ambivalence and affection—wanted and what Hughes felt he could deliver proved unbridgeable. In a section ironically titled “Diagnosis,” Hughes recounted rather bitterly,

She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. So, in the end, it all came very near the old impasse of white and Negro again, white and Negro—as do most relationships in America. (BS, 325)

His disappointment with Mason did not wear off quickly. It resurfaced as late as 1939 in “Poet to Patron,” a thinly veiled autobiographical lyric that appeared in American Mercury:

What right has anyone to say
That I
Must throw out pieces of my heart
For pay?
.
.
.
A factory shift’s better,
A week’s meager pay,
Than a perfumed note asking:
What poems today?”

(CP, 212)

Like the caustic “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria,” published in New Masses in 1931, Hughes’s even more explicitly leftist poetry has fared little better among academic readers since Mason’s disapproval, which threw him into a severe bout of depression and physical illness. As James Smethurst reminds us, in the USA, “[n]o portion of Hughes’s literary career has been more commonly dismissed than that of the 1930s.” ¹ Those who had praised the “authentic rhythms” of The Weary Blues and, far more reluctantly, of Fine Clothes to the Jew were rather taken aback by the so-called red poetry Hughes penned in the 1930s. Many of Hughes’s contemporaries regarded poems such as “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” (1934), “Good Morning, Revolution” (1932), and “Black Workers” (1933) as unfortunate aberrations. This was not the kind of Negro poet they, like Mason, wanted Hughes to be. Reviewers virtually ignored the collection A New Song (1938), which included a number of these poems. Even now, academic readers, with few exceptions, prefer either the blues poetry or the more visibly neomodernist poetry from the 1950s and 1960s, notably Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951) and Ask Your Mama (1961).² Hughes’s radical lyrics, which are rarely anthologized, figure prominently among what Cary Nelson has called the modern poems that English professors in the USAmerican academy, have wanted to forget.³ As we have seen, even in the Hispanic Americas, where Hughes was widely admired for his leftist politics, few of his radical poems were actually translated.⁴

Translation and the McCarthy Hearings

It is precisely Hughes’s “red” poetry, which was also spurned by English departments across the nation, that caught the attention of the U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations chaired by second-term junior senator Joseph (Joe) McCarthy of Wisconsin.⁵ Cary Nelson is quite right in suggesting “that there are more intricate relationships between the academic disavowal of Hughes and his public harrowing than we would like to admit,” and he likens “the restricted and depoliticized canon of modernism” to “our discipline’s testimony before HUAC.”⁶ Extending the comparison to McCarthy’s Senate subcommittee, which was distinct from the House on Un-American
Activities Committee with which McCarthy is often erroneously associated, I build on Nelson’s provocative insights as I explore Hughes’s testimony and the poems that the committee took as evidence of his “subversive” ways.

Contrary to what is commonly believed, there was not one hearing in late March of 1953 but in fact two: the public hearing was preceded by a lengthier interrogation during a so-called executive session, which was not only closed to the public at the time but held in secret. No one, it seems, knew that these meetings even existed. I will work my way backwards from what we know—that is, the transcript of the public hearing—to what we did not know until early 2003 when the written records of the so-called executive sessions were released. The latter transcripts tell a very different story about Hughes than the one with which we have been familiar. The fact that the Hughes of the executive session is anything but cooperative makes it necessary to reassess the prevalent picture of Hughes as a “friendly” McCarthy witness and inquire more into the reasons for his apparent friendliness.

What, then, does translation have to do with reading these congressional records? My logic is that a poem or a part of a poem that becomes part of an official government document by being either quoted or entered into the record undergoes a displacement and transformation analogous to what happens in a translation. In this case, the translation is not intercultural but, as with the vernaculars I discuss in chapter 4, intracultural. Speakers use what appears to be the same language, in this case English, but make that language signify differently. The salient differences we witness in these hearings are between the languages of literature and literary interpretation and the language of the law. Translation is at issue, I argue, because committee members tried very hard to translate Hughes the poet into Hughes the former, and repentant, Communist. We observe in the secret hearing what amounts to a breakdown in communication between Hughes and his questioners. Especially when debating questions of literary interpretation, it is as if they were speaking different languages. In a way, they were. For the committee, the key question was that of intent: what did Hughes mean to say in his radical poems? My contention is that by focusing on intent, the committee willfully mistranslated Hughes’s poems into the register of political propaganda, with the goal of turning his verse into evidence of unlawful conduct, that is, advocating the overthrow of the government of the United States of America. Can a literary text, any literary texts, be constructed as evidence of this sort, and if so, under what precise circumstances?

**A Twice-Told Tale**

Much of what we know today about the McCarthy era (1950–54)—and especially the hearings in 1953 and 1954—from radio and television broadcasts, newspaper reports, official congressional records, and countless scholarly
studies is not new. Although McCarthy did not discover a single Communist, he was extremely successful in capitalizing “on the fears in American society—fear that the Russians had stolen the atomic bomb, fear of spies in government, fear due to the loss of China, and fear of the Korean war. His party was the party of fear. He mobilized the masses of the alarmed.” And he did so with breathtaking recklessness and ruthlessness. Rather than being a demagogue, however, as many have portrayed him, the Wisconsin senator actually knew little about Communism. For McCarthy, anti-Communism was not a moral or ideological cause but simply an “issue” that would advance his short-lived political career and give him the opportunity to exact revenge on personal enemies. Many McCarthy-era historians have since regarded the widespread worries about Soviet Communism, which had steadily grown in the USA after the October Revolution in 1917, as exaggerated, even baseless excuses for a political witch hunt. In the immediate aftermath of the toppling of the Berlin Wall, however, it turned out that such might not have been entirely the case. In the 1990s, the Russian government made available to select USAmerican historians documents about the Soviet Union’s Comintern, which supervised Communist parties worldwide. The second set of highly classified records released in 1995 was the so-called Venona documents, decrypted cable messages by KGB agents showing that, since 1942, the USA “had been targeted by an intense and widespread Soviet espionage program that had utilized numerous professional Soviet agents and hundreds of Americans, often from the ranks of the CPUSA’s so-called secret apparatus.” This new evidence, legal scholar Martin Redish points out, brought a new perspective to arguments that USAmerican historians had previously made about the McCarthy era as the sole product of widespread paranoia about Communism, with no tangible threat in sight. Yet, as Redish remarks, “[t]he most important point to be emphasized about Senator McCarthy today is that…nothing in the dramatic revelations of the 1990s concerning espionage activity by American communists in any way historically vindicates either who he was or what he stood for”—or, for that matter, what he and his committee did with such gusto: destroy careers and lives.

In May 2003 came additional news, this time from the USAmerican government archives: McCarthy and his staff had also conducted 160 so-called executive sessions behind closed doors, for which there were also detailed transcripts that had been sealed for fifty years. It appears that the committee held these secret meetings to stage-manage the public admission of witnesses’ alleged Communist activities. “The closed hearings,” Ted Morgan explains, “were dress rehearsals for productions that sometimes never saw the stage. Even when they led to open hearings, some of the witnesses in the close hearings did not make the grade, if they defended themselves effectively or failed to advance the chairman’s case. In 1953, 117 [sic] executive sessions were held behind closed doors, and 395 witnesses were
heard. To bring in these hundreds of witnesses, McCarthy was said to be signing blank subpoenas like traffic tickets. Many witnesses had no time to prepare or find a lawyer.”

The proceedings of McCarthy’s closed sessions exemplify some of the extremes to which an overly anxious democratic society will go at a time of perceived crisis. To protect itself from real and imagined dangers, such a society will, without hesitation, sacrifice certain of its core values, in this case, the First Amendment protection of the freedom of speech and expression. In this particular crisis, the Red Scare years of the Cold War, expression could only have two forms: affirmation, that is, “propagandization” of “the free world, the free system,...the American system” (PT, 75), or dissent in the form of advocating the Soviet form of government—Communism, for short—which implied the destruction of the government of the USA. “Communist infiltration” was thus the very evil that the House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and then the Senate subcommittee were to root out by exposing the political associations of certain individuals.

The opening salvo of HUAC, which had been formed in 1938, was aimed at the entertainment industry (in 1947), while McCarthy’s subcommittee was to focus mainly on government employees—which, of course, it did not. For those engaged in this ideological war on the home front, USAmerican citizens could occupy only one of two possible positions or spaces: that of the loyal patriot or that of the traitor. This rigid polarity created a particular dilemma for many of those whom the McCarthy committee interrogated in 1953 and 1954. The transcripts of the closed sessions allow us to look at this particularly ugly part of our national history and come face to face with the kinds of accusations, arguments, and threats that the committee used to create compliant witnesses. Among the most prominent—and publicly cooperative—witnesses was Langston Hughes, “the well-known poet” (PT, 74), who was unfortunate enough to make the grade in his closed hearing.

The Senate subcommittee subpoenaed Hughes on March 21, 1953, barely two months after the beginning of McCarthy’s second senatorial term. In fact, Hughes was questioned twice, first in an executive session on March 24 and again in a public hearing two days later, on March 26, and he had very little time to prepare. Presumably Hughes was subpoenaed because some of his books were lodged in the overseas libraries of the United States Information Agency, but no specific reason was mentioned in the document itself. Given Hughes’s international renown, the presence of his books in foreign libraries was not surprising. That, however, was not the whole story. The “Poet Laureate of the Negro Race” was a likely candidate for such treatment because his popularity in the USA, combined with his well-known Communist sympathies, made him potentially a very useful witness.

Even before he was compelled to appear before the subcommittee on very short notice, Hughes had been faced with “red smear” campaigns in the press, which gave him good reasons to be worried about his political reputation.
Allegations surfaced as early as 1943, the year of the so-called Zoot Suit Riots in which white Marines and Latino youths clashed in Los Angeles and the race riots in Detroit, Michigan, when Hughes had signed a message to the California House of Representatives opposing the Dies Committee’s inquisition and when he began a series on the Soviet Union for his Chicago Defender weekly column. In October of 1944, the New York Sun columnist George Sokolsky called Hughes the model joiner of Communist-front organizations, which frightened some school boards away from him during his 1944 tour for the Common Council for American Unity (CCAU). Accusations multiplied as the 1940s drew to a close. On August 31, 1947, a front page article in the Chicago Tribune called Hughes “a member of the Communist Party,” to which the poet responded in the Chicago Defender two weeks later, on September 13: “I am not now, nor have I ever been a member of the Communist Party, but I believe in equality.” Still, a few months later, on November 28 of that same year, the New York Journal American published an article about Hughes by Chicago red-baiter Howard Rushmore, entitled “Leftist Poet Opens Educator Parley.” There were also two WOR (Chicago) radio broadcasts, one on December 12, 1947, the other on March 8, 1948, recommending that scheduled lectures by Hughes be canceled, and an article in the Pittsburgh Courier from March 13, 1948, “Called ‘Commie’ Langston Hughes Rapped in Akron.” There were public disclaimers from Hughes and others, but the damage had already been done. An entire series of lectures and readings in Illinois, Missouri, and Southern California, which had been scheduled for February and March 1948, was canceled. The same publishers and (black middle-class) readers who had applauded Hughes’s revolutionary poetry in the 1930s, when Communism was de rigueur among African American intellectuals, did not find the combination of blackness with political radicalism as appealing during the Cold War as they had during the Depression years. During the 1940s and 1950s, it was also becoming difficult for Hughes to find publishing venues for work consonant with his earlier calls for a revolution, since, as James Smethurst notes, “the institutions, whether New Masses (which under the pressures of the period had retrenched from a weekly journal to a monthly and merged with the journal Mainstream in 1947) or the National Negro Congress (which folded in 1946), that had provided both a forum and form for such sentiments had collapsed or were becoming increasingly isolated.”

In the years leading up to the rampages of the McCarthy Committee, Hughes had already become vigilant about how he constructed his public persona. Yet even in the face of such public adversity and the threats it posed to his livelihood as a writer, he had not let go of the Cuba Libre project and of his long-standing role as a cultural ambassador—at least not yet and not without a measure of resistance. The published and unpublished versions of Cuba Libre have already given us a good sense of Hughes’s struggle to navigate increasingly treacherous political terrain, as a result of which
his public persona became more and more of a protective armor, eventually bringing him to the point of utter silence on certain issues. While it is not entirely unreasonable to see in Hughes’s writings from the late 1940s evidence of the adjustment he would make to his own political profile several years later, the image of the repentant Communist and zealous patriot that emerged from his public testimony before the McCarthy Committee is well worth revisiting in light of the transcripts of the executive session, which were unavailable to any of Hughes’s early biographers.26

**The Compliant Witness: The Public Hearing**

Before taking a closer look at what certain committee members—notably Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen of Illinois, the future Republican minority leader, and especially the committee counsel Roy Cohn—did to make Hughes so cooperative (McCarthy himself was not present at the closed hearing),27 let us first consider the end product of their efforts: the figure of the compliant witness. The following is a representatively genial exchange between McCarthy and Hughes from the congressional record of the public testimony before the subcommittee.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** Let me ask you this. You appear to be very frank in your answers, and while I may disagree with some of your conclusions, do I understand that your testimony is that the 16 different books of yours which were purchased by the information program did largely follow the Communist line?

**MR. HUGHES:** Some of those books very largely followed at times some aspects of the Communist line, reflecting my sympathy with them. But not all of them, sir.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** Now, let us take those that you think followed the Communist line. Do you feel that those books should be on our shelves throughout the world, with the apparent stamp of approval of the United States government?

**MR. HUGHES:** I was certainly amazed to hear that they were. I was surprised; and I would certainly say “No.” (PT, 79)

To Roy Cohn’s follow-up question—or better, his suggestion—that “[v]ery frankly, you are not particularly proud of them at this stage?” Hughes replied, “They do not represent my current thinking, nor my thinking for the last, say, 6 or 8 years, at any rate” (PT, 79–80). Throughout the hearing, Hughes obliged his questioners to the point of being commended twice by John McClellan, Democratic senator from Arkansas and one of the “most ardent red- and black-baiters of the era”:28 “I want to commend anyone as frank about their errors of the past as you are being before this committee and before the public. It is always quite refreshing and comforting to know that any Communist or Communist sympathizer has discovered the error
of his ways and beliefs, and changes” (PT, 80). When asked by Roy Cohn whether he still held “any of the views expressed in [“Goodbye, Christ”],” the only poem that was entered into the record on this occasion (and to which I will return later), Hughes recanted: “No; I do not. It is a very young, awkward poem, written in the late 1920s or early 1930s. It does not express my views or my artistic techniques today” (PT, 82). Speaking of “a complete reorientation of my thinking and emotional feelings” about Soviet ideology around 1950 (PT 74–75), Hughes disowned his radical poetry and implicitly disavowed his leftist sympathies and friendships with prominent Communists at home and abroad, among them Nicolás Guillén and Jacques Roumain, to name but a few.29 Hughes was also given the opportunity to use his later writings as evidence of his political change of heart. To emphasize his patriotism, he cited the poems “Freedom’s Plow” from 1943, “Mystery” from Montage, and the short story “One Friday Morning,” and he read a passage from The First Book of Negroes (1953). Hughes followed Cohn’s lead in dating his change of heart to around 1950 (PT, 74–75), 30 which is far too close to the publication of Cuba Libre not to raise questions about what really might have motivated Hughes’s public testimony. At the end of this hearing, Hughes returned the committee’s favors by claiming that far from having been “mistreated in any way by the staff or by the committee,” he had been “agreeably surprised at the courtesy and friendliness” with which he had been received (PT, 83). The session concluded with McCarthy reportedly winking at his obliging witness.31

It cost Hughes plenty to get McCarthy’s wink. While under oath in the closed session, which was chaired by Cohn, Hughes had stalled, fenced, and fought with his inquisitors, and there is evidence of barely suppressed anger on both sides. There is no evidence in this earlier testimony that Hughes’s cooperation with the committee was in any way voluntary. Although he was not as confident and bluntly impatient as Paul Robeson would be at hisHUAC appearance in 1956, Hughes certainly stood his ground, sparring with Cohn over the definition of Communism, pointing out “misstatements,” and refusing to be bullied into simple yes-or-no replies. And Hughes did not cede any ground easily. It was only under the thinly veiled and repeated threat of a perjury charge if he did not tell a straight story that Hughes at length conceded that he had in fact “desired the Soviet form of government in this country,” as Cohn put it to him (ST 990). Hughes added, however, that he had never advocated violent means to this end. This forced admission apparently allowed Hughes to strike some sort of deal with the committee on March 25, the day before his public testimony. Unsurprisingly, there are no records of what would likely have been a private meeting with McCarthy and Cohn, not even anecdotal ones. Faith Berry comments that “[t]he whole scenario of their behind-the-scene interrogation…was not a story Hughes liked to tell,” and there is no evidence that he ever did. We also know from Berry’s interview with Frank Reeves, Hughes’s legal counsel
at both hearings, that McCarthy “was anxious that a renowned American author should not become a ‘hostile witness,’” and “he had worked out an agreement whereby Hughes would not be asked to ‘name names’ of known Communists” but only “to admit tacitly his own pro-Communist sympathies and writings.” Hughes agreed to this deal very reluctantly, “after much private discussion with Reeves,” and only after he was assured that his poems would not be read over the air. In fact, McCarthy himself stated during the public hearing, “I have been asked to put in the record a poem written by Mr. Hughes while he was, as he says, following the Communist Party line and believing in it, for the purpose of showing the type of material that was written by those who did believe in the Communist cause. I do not believe it is necessary to read it” (PT, 81). Berry further notes that Hughes “feared the worst if he didn’t consent to the deal.”

What was the worst for Hughes? When one reads the transcript of the closed hearing, a contentious and increasingly tense interrogation that went on for several hours, it is easy to see why Hughes would not have been fond of recollecting it. He might have derived some satisfaction from putting up a good fight had it not been for two things: the fact that Cohn in the end tripped him up and what apparently resulted in the private meeting in McCarthy’s office prior to Hughes’s public testimony the following day. That private meeting, I suspect, is the story that Hughes really did not like to remember, let alone tell, because it would have provided evidence that his public testimony was little more than a carefully staged drama. Frank Reeves, the only witness to this deal, even if he were still alive, would still be bound by confidentiality rules to his former client. Given these circumstances, exactly what transpired between Hughes and McCarthy behind closed doors on March 25, 1953 can be only a matter of conjecture.

The transcript of Hughes’s formerly secret testimony, however, provides considerably more information than had previously been available, forming a solid basis for some educated speculation. This first interrogation on March 24, 1953, was considerably longer than the public session, and the differences not just in what was said but also in how it was said are striking. We will see that unlike the public Hughes, whose comments sound flat and almost scripted, the Hughes of the closed session is rather feisty, challenging his inquisitors as much as they did him. The men who did most of the questioning on that occasion—Cohn and Dirksen—also merit attention as part of the context for these hearings, as do the ties between Communism, homosexuality, and the beginnings of the civil rights movement that not a few politicians imagined and voiced in those days.

**Secrets and Lies: The Closed Hearing**

Questions of citizenship and loyalty arose from the very start of the hearing as an implied result of Hughes’s foreign travels. Dirksen pursued them
before even explaining to Hughes, who was of course under oath, the purpose of the hearing. Dirksen’s initial statement, “I assume you travel and lecture?,” followed by “You are a single man?” (a remark to which I shall return), quickly turned more specific:

**Senator Dirksen:** Now, with respect to your travels have you traveled recently in the last ten or fifteen years?

**Mr. Hughes:** In the country?

**Senator Dirksen:** Outside.

**Mr. Hughes:** No, sir. I have not been out of the country if my memory is correct since 1938 or 1939.

**Senator Dirksen:** Would you care to tell us whether you have traveled to the Soviet Union?

**Mr. Hughes:** I have, sir, yes.

**Senator Dirksen:** For an extended period?

**Mr. Hughes:** I was there for about a year. (ST, 974)

Hughes derails this line of questioning when Dirksen asks him to spell “Menschrabprom,” the ill-fated film company under whose auspices Hughes had initially visited Russia: “I am sorry I can not tell you. I don’t read Russian” (ST, 975). Hughes’s diction is very discriminating here because he certainly did speak Russian. Dirksen then shifts to the hearing’s purpose: the State Department’s purchase of “books that allegedly delineate American objectives and American culture, that would be useful in propagandizing our way of life and our system” in other countries (ST, 975).

As is typical of the committee’s presumptive rhetoric, which implies that the logical or right answers were foregone conclusions, Dirksen’s statements, like his earlier remarks to Hughes, are declarative and conclusory rather than interrogative: “So we have encountered quite a number of your works [purchased by the State Department], and I would be less than frank with you, sir, if I did not say that there is a question in the minds of the committee, and in the minds of a good many people, concerning the general objective of some of those poems, whether they strike a Communist, rather than an anti-Communist note” (ST, 975). With this declaration, Dirksen cedes the floor to Roy Cohn, who uses the standard “Have you ever been a Communist?” to gloss over Hughes’s request that Dirksen identify the books he had mentioned earlier. Hughes replies in the negative: “No, sir, I am not” (ST, 976). But note the shrewd shift in tense here, which seems to escape Cohn’s notice because Hughes distracts him with a presumptive remark of his own: “I presume by that you mean a Communist party member, do you not?”(ST, 976). When the sparring over a definition of Communist makes Cohn rephrase his question first as “Have you ever believed in communism?” and then as “Have you ever believed that there is a form of government better than the one under which this country operates today?” Hughes comes across as calm and emphatic: “No, sir, I have not.” The latter
is the question that would come back to haunt him later on in the session, when Cohn confronts him with several lines from the poem “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” which, Cohn later admitted, was not even included “in any poems in the collection in the information centers.” Cohn is adamant: “I would like to know right now whether you ever desired the Soviet form of government in this country, and I would like it answered.” Hughes’s attempt to stall—“Would you permit me to think about it?”—is fruitless, and an increasingly impatient Cohn moves in for the kill:

MR. COHN: Pardon me? Mr. Hughes, you have belonged to a list of Communist organizations a mile long. You have urged the election to public office of official candidates of the Communist party. You have signed statements to the effect that the purge trials in the Soviet Union were justified and sound and democratic. You have signed statements denying that the Soviet Union is totalitarian. You have defended the current leaders of the Communist party. You have written poems which are an invitation to revolution. You have called for the setting up of a Soviet government in this country. You have been named in statements before us as a Communist, and a member of the Communist party. Mr. Hughes, you can surely tell us simply whether or not you ever desired the Soviet form of government in this country.

MR. HUGHES: Yes, I did.

MR. COHN: The answer is yes. I think if you were a little more candid with some of these things, we would get along a little better, because I think I know enough about the subject so I am not going to sit here for six days and be kidded along. (ST, 990)

This is the point to which the entire meeting had been building up: a simple yes to signal Hughes’s defeat. It is worth noting that Cohn’s assertions were not exactly accurate, and his claim to sufficient knowledge of the subject was just bluster and bullying, something for which he was well known. Hughes had, in fact, never been named before this Senate subcommittee, nor had he ever been a member of the CPUSA. Why, then, did Hughes capitulate at this point in the closed hearing?

An answer, I believe, can be gleaned from the treatment to which the committee subjected his writing, especially his poetry. “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.,” which had first been published in the mass-circulated Communist newspaper the Daily Worker in 1934, was not the only poem on which the committee pounced. Other poems that Cohn and Dirksen cited as evidence of Hughes’s unpatriotic politics, including his alleged anti-Semitism, were “Good Morning Revolution” (1932), “Ballads of Lenin” (1933), “Hard Luck” (1926), and “Goodbye, Christ” (1932). Hughes was also questioned about Scottsboro Limited (1932), which Cohn kept calling “the Scottsboro thing,” and “When a Man Sees Red” from Simple Speaks His Mind (1950). Yet the fact that the committee, ostensibly concerned about
what Cohn called “all these Communist books” lodged in other countries’ libraries—“approximately 13 books, 161 copies altogether in 60 Information Centers” (PT, 77)—chose to focus on these particular poems would have been odd had it not been for the fact their real targets lay elsewhere. At the time, only three of these poems had been included in any books: “Goodbye, Christ” in Nancy Cunard’s *Negro* anthology (1934), “Ballads of Lenin” in *A New Song* (1938), and “Hard Luck” in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927). The rest had been published in journals and not been included in any of Hughes’s poetry collections. Nor would they be reprinted in *The Langston Hughes Reader* (1958) or in Hughes’ *Selected Poems* (1959). While red journals such as the *New Masses*, the *Daily Worker*, and *Anvil* also circulated outside the USA, they would not easily have found their way onto the shelves of the various United States Information Centers known as America Houses. Nor, for that matter, would Granville Hicks’s 1935 anthology *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, which included several of Hughes’s poems.

Translation is mentioned exactly once during both sessions. At the public hearing, a now more affable Roy Cohn remarked: “And a good many of your works have been published not only in English but in other languages throughout the world. Is that right?” (PT, 74). Although the committee’s lack of interest in translations confirms that the focus of the hearings was not on traitorous political ideas being disseminated in other countries but on the circulation of such ideas in the USA, translation is a relevant subtext in these interrogations in at least two ways, and the cliché *traduttore, tradittore* (translator, traitor) assumes unexpected dimensions of significance. For one, the committee regards Hughes as someone who translated his radical political ideas into his poetry, assuming that there is no mediation, that meaning is univocal and self-evident, and that authorial intent is easily discernible. During the closed session, Cohn’s and Dirksen’s comments consistently exhibit a blatant disregard for the hermeneutics of literary interpretation and for processes of creativity through which a literary “liar” can speak (or write) true. For another, the committee members themselves can be said to have engaged in acts of translation, producing what we usually perceive as mistranslations, in which there is a stark imbalance between the deficits and surfeits of meaning that accrue during the process of any literary translation, the task of the translator being to balance these meanings carefully.

Although “bad” or mistranslations can be the result of sheer incompetence on the translator’s part, they can also be ideologically motivated, with the two not being mutually exclusive. Such is the case with the McCarthy Committee’s rereading of Hughes’s poems as Communist propaganda for the sole purpose of branding Hughes a traitor to his country. The committee’s recastings of Hughes and his poems as disloyal to the state, under whose auspices the committee functioned, are examples of interested and
reductive translations of poetry into political propaganda by fixing meanings that remain unfixable and indeterminate. At issue here are not linguistic differences but a radical divergence of assumptions about how (literary) language signified in the context of the Cold War USA. The transcript of the executive session shows an intractable clash over meaning and interpretation that can be analyzed through the hermeneutical lens of translation as a power struggle analogous to the dynamics between dominant languages and dominated ones. I examine the assumptions at work in this struggle in the pages that follow.

At the end of his public testimony, Hughes singled out Senator Dirksen, who was not present on that occasion, as “most gracious and in a sense helpful in defining for me the areas of this investigation,” and he excused “the young men [Cohn and David Schine, his sidekick] who...of course, had to interrogate me” (PT, 83). Anyone who reads the exchanges in the transcript of the closed hearing will find it hard to overlook the biting irony in these remarks. Dirksen was the one to question Hughes closely about the controversial “Goodbye, Christ,” a poem that had already been a problem for Hughes in 1940 (see Life, 1:392–95). At the closed meeting, Dirksen read out loud two stanzas from “Goodbye, Christ” as evidence of Hughes’s antireligious and hence seditious sentiments. Dirksen’s source was an unauthorized reprint from the Saturday Evening Post from November 15, 1940. The poem was also reprinted on a mass-distributed flyer entitled “‘Hate Christ’ Is the Slogan of the Communists,” which identified Hughes as a “Notorious Negro Stalin lover.”

Listen, Christ, you did all right in your day, I reckon,
But that day is gone now.
They ghosted you up a swell story, too,
And called it the Bible, but it’s dead now.
The popes and the preachers have made too much money from it.
They have sold you to too many.

To Dirksen, blasphemy—“Do you think that Book is dead?”—is clearly a form of social deviance that runs afoul of his own more comfortable “familiarity with the Negro people for a long time” and his belief “that they are innately a very devout and religious people” (ST, 980). Rejecting Hughes’s explanation that “Goodbye, Christ” “is an ironical and satirical poem” about “racketeering in religion and misuse of religion as seen through the eyes at that time of a young Soviet citizen,” Dirksen, who “fancies” that “it was not so accepted...by the American people,” remains unyielding: “Of course when all is said and done a poem like this must necessarily speak for itself,...its impact on the thinking of the people is finally what counts” (ST, 980–81, my emphases). But if a poem—and not just a poem like this—does speak for itself, then why ask the poet what it means? Despite Hughes's
efforts to argue that there are as many interpretations of his poem as there
are of a Shakespearean sonnet and that “you cannot take one line” out
of context (ST, 982), Dirksen is undeterred. Finally returning the poem to
its context, Hughes offers the following interpretation, giving an example
Dirksen himself has used earlier. “If you read the twelve-year old the whole
poem, I hope he would be shocked into thinking about the real things of
religion, because with some of my poems that is what I have tried to do,
to shock people into thinking and finding the real meaning themselves”
(ST, 982). Dirksen, however, persists in claiming “that this could mean
only one thing to the person who read it” (ST 982, my emphasis), a phrase
that Cohn later repeats. “This” specifically refers to the poem’s third stanza:

Goodbye, Christ Jesus, Lord of Jehovah,
Beat it on away from here now.
Make way for a new guy with no religion at all,
A guy named Marx communism, Lenin, Peasant, Stalin, worker, me.

Dirksen never clarifies exactly what he means by “only one thing,” assuming
that every “right thinking American” (a phrase from then FBI director
J. Edgar Hoover) would implicitly know.

I have italicized various phrases in my citations above to highlight the
slipperiness of words spoken from a position of power. It is that very im-
precision that safeguards power’s notorious invisibility and makes its dis-
cursive attributes difficult to pinpoint. This invisibility is also a function
of the recoding of political dissent as nonconformity and thus as social
deviance. The state’s enemies become visible as black, red, and indeed both,
by being strategically constructed in terms of their deviation from assumed
standards of thinking and acting. As a black USAmerican citizen and an
educated one to boot, Hughes—much like Paul Robeson, who had stud-
ied law—would already have been under suspicion for disloyalty at a time
when HUAC, under the leadership of a Georgia congressman, took it upon
itself to conduct “Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration of Minority
Groups” to certify African Americans’ political trustworthiness and patrio-
tism. Robeson’s career was systematically destroyed by the combined ef-
forts of various government agencies, including the FBI and the Department
of Justice, although he had sworn under oath in 1946 that he was not a
member of the Communist Party. It is no accident, then, that his name
comes up at this hearing as well. When Hughes declares that he “would
not be able to say if he [Robeson] ever was a Communist,” Cohn’s reac-
tion supplies a key word of the conservative political discourse of the day:
“Are you a little bit suspicious?” (ST, 982, my emphasis). The way in which
Cohn, the darling of conservative Republicans, phrases it, “suspicious” ap-
plies not just to Robeson but also to Hughes. While neither Cohn nor Dirk-
sen were southerners, Dirksen’s claim of familiarity with African Americans
gives an added edge to his questions and comments. The idea that African Americans were easy prey for Communist propaganda was hardly limited to the south of the USA. As Jeff Woods explains: “The southern red scare had taken shape in the years between 1948 and 1954, but it rested on traditions stretching back to the antebellum period. Massive resisters, like their conservative southern predecessors, equated dramatic social reform, particularly in race relations, with the conspiratorial design of outsiders. The long-held racist assumption that African Americans were easily duped into supporting un-American causes served as a linchpin to their argument. Reacting to the changing social and political conditions of the early cold war, they counted black and red cooperation among the greatest threats to domestic tranquility.”

Hughes’s critical stance toward what he saw as a debased, hypocritical Christianity and its mainstream institutions would not have sat well with religious conservatives such as Dirksen, who would have received any such criticism from a black intellectual, or his pen, in precisely this frame of mind.

By far the most colorful and controversial figure in these hearings was Roy Cohn, the “whirling dervish” of a lawyer from the United States district attorney’s office in Manhattan, whom McCarthy had appointed as his chief counsel when Cohn was barely twenty-six. The other candidate for that job had been Bobby Kennedy, Cohn’s nemesis, who served as the committee’s minority counsel early in 1953 and whose name still appeared on the roster as an assistant counsel even after his resignation.

Though by all accounts not particularly well prepared for his new job, the ambitious and literary-minded Cohn quickly became the senator’s alter ego. Cohn’s antics with David Schine, for whom he secured preferential treatment in the military, would in no small measure contribute to McCarthy’s undoing during the Eisenhower presidency.

It is fair to assume that Cohn’s role for the public hearings was that of playwright and stage manager rolled into one. During the public hearings, McCarthy appears to have done little more than ventriloquize Cohn’s questions and comments from the closed sessions. It is unsurprising that McCarthy did not hesitate to take Cohn’s lead. “Despite his quick intelligence,” writes David Oshinsky, the former Wisconsin judge “seemed remarkably uncurious about the world beyond his immediate ambitions and physical needs. He knew nothing about history, literature, music, art, or science. And he had no desire to learn. ‘As far as I know,’ said Van Susteren, ‘Joe looked at only one book in his life. That was Mein Kampf.’”

In fact, many of the executive sessions, including Hughes’s, were held in the senator’s absence. During the secret interrogation conducted by Cohn and Dirksen, with the consultant Schine in the odd posture of legal adviser, Cohn was the one to question Hughes most closely about his radical poems, mainly “Ballads of Lenin” and “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” Cohn’s strident tone is entirely consistent with his reputation as the most aggressive,
rabidly hostile of the committee’s questioners. From the moment that Cohn takes over the questioning from Dirksen, the tension is palpable from the transcript of the two-hour session (from 3:00 to 5:10 p.m.). The image of Hughes that emerges is hardly that of a cooperative, amiable witness.

Hughes is guarded from the very beginning. Unlike the composer Aaron Copland, for instance, who testified to the committee that same day, Hughes does not declare that he had never been a Communist, only that he had never been a “Communist party member,” challenging Cohn to define what he meant by Communism (ST, 976). Throughout the session, Hughes tries to stall and dissemble, asking that questions be broken down or rephrased and claiming that he has forgotten a question only minutes after it has been asked. His repeated requests to be presented with written evidence are not honored. Consider the following exchange in which Cohn systematically elides any distinction between “writing” and “saying.”

MR. COHN: Did you know what you were doing on February 7 [1949], when you gave a statement to the *Daily Worker* defending the Communist leaders on trial and saying that the Negro people too are being tried?

MR. HUGHES: Could I see that statement, sir?

MR. COHN: Did you ever hear of something called the *Chicago Defender*?

MR. HUGHES: I certainly have.

MR. COHN: Did you write in the *Chicago Defender*, “If the 12 Communists are sent to jail, in a little while they will send Negroes to jail simply for being Negroes, and to concentration camps simply for being colored.”

MR. HUGHES: Could I see it?

MR. COHN: My first question is did you say it?

MR. HUGHES: I don’t know.

MR. COHN: Could you have said it? That was a pretty serious thing to say in 1949….

MR. HUGHES: I would have to see it to see if it is in context….I don’t know whether I said it or not. (ST 983–84)\(^56\)

Hughes, of course, knows full well that he wrote these lines in “A Portent and a Warning to the Negro People,” published in the *Chicago Defender* on February 5, 1949. Cohn does not care to add the sentence that followed in the actual essay, and for good reasons. Hughes had written: “Maybe you don’t like Reds, but you had better be interested in what happens to the 12 Reds in New York City—because it is only a sign of what can happen to you.”\(^57\)

What probably unsettles Hughes to the point of being even more keenly conscious of how he answers Cohn’s questions about his writings is not so much the quotation from his own essay as Cohn’s reference to the notorious 1949 trial of twelve top leaders of the American Communist Party, who had been arrested in 1948. The trial was presided over by Harold Medina,
federal district judge for southern New York. Medina was the earliest-known Hispanic on any federal district or circuit court and had been one of Paul Robeson’s law professors at Columbia in the early 1920s. I quote from Medina’s instructions to the jury in the second epigraph to this chapter. Eleven of the twelve defendants were charged with violating the antigovernment conspiracy provision of the Smith Act (explained below), found guilty on October 13, 1949, after an eight-month trial, and sentenced to five-year prison terms and $10,000 fines. There can be no doubt that Cohn’s reference to what became known as Dennis v. United States veiled a threat perhaps more disturbing to Hughes than any perjury charge.

*Criminal Intent*

What was the Smith Act, and why would Roy Cohn have alluded to it? Named after Representative Howard W. Smith of Virginia and signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 as the rather innocently named Alien Registration Act, the Smith Act is a criminal statute that makes it unlawful to advocate the overthrow of the government of the USA. Important for my discussion is how the statute defines the process of “knowingly or willfully” advocating. Its language posits a direct link between speech or writing and unprotected—that is, criminal—action (*actus reus,* “the guilty act”). It does so by way of “intent,” also a key word during Hughes’s closed-session questioning. Here are the relevant paragraphs from the statute, which is still in force.

Whoever *knowingly or willfully advocates, abets, advises, or teaches* the duty, necessity, desirability, or propriety of overthrowing or destroying the government of the United States or the government of any State, Territory, District or Possession thereof, or the government of any political subdivision therein, by force or violence, or by the assassination of any officer of any such government; or

Whoever, with *intent to cause* the overthrow or destruction of any such government, prints, publishes, edits, issues, circulates, sells, distributes, or publicly displays any written or printed matter advocating, advising, or teaching the duty, necessity, desirability, or propriety of overthrowing or destroying any government in the United States by force or violence, or attempts to do so; or

Whoever organizes or helps or attempts to organize any society, group, or assembly of persons who teach, advocate, or encourage the overthrow or destruction of any such government by force or violence; or becomes or is a member of, or affiliates with, any such society, group, or assembly of persons, knowing the purposes thereof—Shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than twenty years, or both, and shall be ineligible for employment by the United States or any department or agency thereof, for the five years next following his conviction. (My emphases.)
Until 1957, when the U.S. Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren would reinterpret the Smith Act more narrowly, this USAmerican federal criminal statute was a popular vehicle for prosecuting Communists at the federal and state level. It also paved the way for the large-scale harassment of writers and artists first by HUAC and then by the Senate permanent subcommittee. The fact that the outcome of Judge Harold Medina’s Manhattan district court trial was upheld on appeal and that the Smith Act was held constitutional by the Supreme Court in *Dennis v. United States* in 1951 clearly emboldened Cohn as he questioned Hughes. Earlier that same year, Cohn had also helped Irving H. Saypol, U.S. District Attorney for the Southern District of New York, successfully prosecute Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as Soviet spies, “a crime worse than murder,” according to the sentencing judge Irving Kaufman.

The Smith Act made the entire witch hunt possible in the first place by giving it a legal foundation. Collapsing the distance between *mens rea* and *actus reus*, intent and action, the Smith Act, especially as Judge Medina applied it in the *Dennis* trial, made it possible to charge and convict someone simply on the basis of his or her political beliefs and projected intentions without having to muster actual evidence—that is, that something had actually been caused by such beliefs and intentions. As Redish notes, “[i]n light of the total absence of evidence presented by the government to demonstrate even the remotest beginnings of an active American communist plan to attempt to overthrow, the ‘subversion’ for which communist leaders were prosecuted in the 1940s and 1950s effectively amounted to very little more than punishment for the holding of unpopular ideas. From a constitutional perspective, such suppression is therefore far more invidious than punishment for espionage.” It is for this reason that Redish calls *Dennis v. United States* “one of the most troubling free speech decisions ever handed down by the United States Supreme Court”—indeed a “constitutional monstrosity” that was more reminiscent of a totalitarian society than a democratic one. Redish’s worries go back to the words of a rather appalled Justice William O. Douglas, one of the two dissenting judges in *Dennis v. United States*. Douglas wrote in 1951:

The opinion of the Court does not outlaw these texts [books that contain the Marxist-Leninist doctrine] or condemn them to the fire, as the Communists do literature offensive to their creed. But if the books themselves are not outlawed, if they can lawfully remain on library shelves, by what reasoning does their use in a classroom become a crime? It would not be a crime under the Act to introduce these books to a class, though that would be teaching what the creed of violent overthrow of the Government is. The Act, as construed, requires the element of intent—that those who teach the creed believe in it. The crime then depends not on what is taught but on who the teacher is. That is to make freedom of speech turn not on *what is said*, but on the *intent* with which it is said. Once we start down that road we enter territory dangerous to the liberties
Justice Douglas did not mince words, insisting on the distinction between spoken intent and actual conduct or action: “[N]ever until today has anyone seriously thought that the ancient law of conspiracy could constitutionally be used to turn speech into seditious conduct. Yet that is precisely what is suggested. I repeat that we deal here with speech alone, not with speech plus acts of sabotage or unlawful conduct. Not a single seditious act is charged in the indictment. To make a lawful speech unlawful because two men conceive it is to raise the law of conspiracy to appalling proportions… We might as well say that the speech of petitioners is outlawed because Soviet Russia and her Red Army are a threat to world peace.”

Although he did not quite put it in those terms, Justice Douglas implied that it is not possible to conflate mens rea with actus reus. Doing so would contradict the very premise of a criminal statute in Anglo-American law, for which one needs speech plus acts of sabotage or unlawful conduct. Alan Filreis explains the stakes cogently:

The high court [in Dennis v. United States] thus used an abstract notion of proximity, that is, of language to action; of language intended to lead to action to the action itself—but tried to look away from the intention in the language and as exclusively as possible at the action, and in this way demanded the relevance of external evidence to the interpretation of language. Investigators and attorneys working on behalf of the American government in 1951 had no choice but to reshape the doctrine of clear and present danger if they wanted to define American communist language as suggesting illegality.… Lacking the external evidence that seemed required by the Schenck interpretation, the prosecutors, aides in the executive branch (guided by Truman and his attorney general), the FBI, the lower court, and eventually the high court succeeded in shifting the test from the relation between language and the world to the intention of the language itself—that is, from external evidence of a powerful state imminently endangered by subversive language to internal evidence offered in a text which “meant” future illegal action.

Speaking and writing take on the role of “specified” behavior (“intent”) that, coupled with a state of mind called unlawful “intent,” may in and of itself constitute a guilty act. As a contemporary textbook of criminal law notes, in cases of “specified intent”—for instance, overthrowing the USAmerican government—“[t]he future events contemplated by the defendant…need not occur in order for the crime to be complete.” I have placed the legal terms in quotations marks here because the legal locution “intent” may not necessarily
have the same meaning as intent in a hermeneutic context (as in “authorial intent”). In fact, they may well be regarded as false cognates in the same way that Negro and negro are (see chapters 2 and 4). As any law student knows, legal terms, even and perhaps especially when they resemble so-called natural language, require translation. The same textbook tellingly compares legal language to a foreign language: “Just as one begins the study of a foreign language by learning the English equivalent of the words to be used . . . it is useful to treat common law mens rea terms, and indeed much of the language of the law, as words that must be translated into ordinary language. 70

My question, then, is not whether the Smith Act is flawed as a criminal statute that collapses the guilty act into the guilty mind. I could not possibly even begin to engage in a satisfactory discussion beyond pointing out that the statute appears never to have been challenged on these grounds. More important here is whether legal terms such as “intent” and “specific intent” can be applied to literary writing. Writing a novel or poem about murder is clearly not the same as committing murder, and Hughes’s point throughout the hearing is that writing about revolution even in approving ways is hardly the same as exploding a bomb. Literature does not represent an author’s intent, certainly not beyond a reasonable doubt. Even if it could, what we mean by intent in a literary context is altogether different from the word’s legal meaning, which depends on a degree of specificity that literary interpretation renders impossible. Literature and the law work very much at cross-purposes when it comes to how each produces meaning in language. For the law, the irreducible multiplicity of meanings in a literary text can only lead to confusion and is thus eminently undesirable. This variance makes translation in either direction difficult in the extreme. What we see enacted in the exchanges during the executive session is a breakdown in communication attributable to the denial, most clearly on the part of the questioners, that there are discursive differences that require translation in the first place. Although all parties involved appear to converse in the same language, there is no common ground.

However problematic from both a legal and a literary perspective, the implications of presuming the proximity of a speech act to a potentially ensuing (violent) action, even conflating them, would have been profoundly disturbing for writers, including Hughes. Although he—unlike Richard Wright, for instance—had never been a dues-paying member of the Communist Party, he could easily have been pegged as a fellow traveler. Fileis’s example is Arthur Miller, whom HUAC succeeded in forcing “to concede the harmlessness of certain [literary] genres” even as he defended “the right of the author to advocate.” “If literary language congeals around life’s action,” Fileis comments, “then it fell into the government’s widening net of established subversives and subversive material. The only alternative was to make a substantial retreat and concede that some literary genres—poetry: harmless, it would commonly seem—entail less absolutely than other genres a responsibility for
what the writer says about the world. Thus the ‘absolute’ right specifically of the poet to write anything he or she wants about, say, bloody revolution, implies for the writer the evaluation of more or less dangerous genres.”

Roy Cohn surely did not perceive poetry as a harmless genre, although he himself was known to have written some verse on occasion. Like Dirksen, Cohn tries hard to force Hughes to incriminate himself by sidestepping the complexities of literary interpretation, reducing poetry to messages, personal beliefs, and especially authorial intent—“How did you intend it to mean?” (ST, 978). Hughes, in turn, flatly rejects the assumption that any poem, no matter what its subject, carries a specific message, that it “could mean only one thing.” A poem, he insists, must be taken seriously as a work of art that “means many things to different people.” This assertion should have been sufficient to invalidate the intentional fallacy. It implies, as Redish puts it, that “because words may have a force or impact wholly apart from the speaker’s [or writer’s] intentions, it is just as conceivable that the neutral exposition of the ideas could lead to action as would their advocacy.” Neither Dirksen nor Cohn, however, was prepared to regard poetry, or any form of literary writing, in this way, even though doing so would quite ironically have enabled them to make a far more convincing case for subversion: the ability of poetry-as-performance to develop a collective consciousness in readers through participation.

The arrogance for which Cohn was generally feared is plain not just in his insistence on turning mere assumptions into facts but also in his general disrespect for Hughes’s work. As Cohn becomes more agitated during the closed hearing, he does not even deign to get the titles of the poems right, turning “Goodbye, Christ” into “Goodbye to Christ,” “Scottsboro Limited” into “the Scottsboro thing,” “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” into “Put One ‘S’ in U.S.A.,” and “Ballads of Lenin” into “Ballads to Lenin.” The differences are not negligible. Witness the following exchange about “Ballads of Lenin,” the only time when Cohn actually calls the poem by its correct title.

MR. HUGHES: Sir, I don’t think you can get a yes or no answer to any literary question, so I give you…

MR. COHN: I am trying, Mr. Hughes, because I think you have gone pretty far in some of these things, and I think you know pretty well what you did. When you wrote something called “Ballads of Lenin,” did you believe that when you wrote it?

MR. HUGHES: Believe what, sir?

MR. COHN: Comrade Lenin of Russia speaks from marble:

On guard with the workers forever—
The world is our room!

MR. HUGHES: That is a poem. One cannot state one believes every word of a poem.

MR. COHN: I do not know what one can say. I am asking you specifically do you believe in the message carried and conveyed in this poem?
MR. HUGHES: It would demand a great deal of discussion. You cannot say yes or no.

[...]  
MR. COHN: Mr. Hughes, is it not a fact now that this poem here did represent your views and it could only mean one thing, that the “Ballads to Lenin” did represent your views? You have told us that all of these things did, that you have been a consistent supporter of Communist movements and you have been a consistent and undeviating follower of the Communist party line up through and including recent times. Is this not a fact? (ST 978 and 983, my emphases)

As before in Dirksen’s remarks, the emphases I have placed in this passage are to draw attention to the lack of specificity in Cohn’s rhetoric. What, for instance, does it mean to “have gone pretty far in some of these things”? Typically, Cohn reduces the “something” Hughes had authored to a single stanza or line, trying to extract from a poem a singular message that would stand as evidence of Hughes’s subversive intentions. When Hughes reproaches Cohn, reminding him that “that is a poem,” he opens up a gap between art and politics that seems to be in line with Sir Philip Sidney’s “Defence of Poesie”: unlike politicians, poets do not lie. Each time Hughes insists that “you can’t get a yes or no answer entirely to any literary question,” he sounds as if he were quoting Sidney—except that Hughes would not, in fact, have agreed with Sidney that the poet does not “affirm” anything. Yet yes-or-no answers were all that the committee was willing to countenance, and Cohn’s interruption in this passage stands as a reminder of that shortsightedness.

That Hughes’s remarks fell on deaf ears raises the question of what line of defense was available to him under those circumstances. Filreis suggests that “American writers had two options when facing investigators in search of subversive language. They could dissociate literature entirely from the political world by disconnecting texts from the acts of people who have civil rights worth defending; thus, for instance, they could seek refuge from the committee’s intentional fallacy—subversive writings when interpreted invariably lead back to subversive writers—by hiding behind uncharacteristically formal readings of irony or ambiguity.” The second option Filreis cites “was to invite the committee back into the business of the historical interpretation of texts (which in reality ignored texts and focused on the writers’ opinions) and so to allow the committee to reiterate its author-centered simplicities.” Hughes tried both options to no avail. Are these really the only available options? Granted, they may have been for Hughes at the time, and neither argument would convince those who today persist in reading his radical poems as uncritical leftist propaganda devoid of any aesthetic merit. If, in the 1930s, “writing poetry became a credible form of revolutionary action,” if only for a brief time, it did so not primarily
because of a thematic shift but because it abandoned the forms of interior
lyric subjectivity—the fictions of selfhood that Hughes also challenged in
his autobiographies—that academics came to value in poetry. Cary Nelson
argues that “[p]oetry became a form of social conversation and a way of
participating in collaborative political action. Poetry was thus in the im-
mediate materiality of its signs dialogic—engaged in a continuing dialogue
both with other poetry and with the other discourses and institutions of its
day.”76 To understand the political poetry from this era, we cannot take
poetic discourse as unproblematically monologic and therefore as self-
enclosed or self-absorbed as the New Critics proposed in the waning days
of the Great Depression. There is no question that the New Criticism has
profoundly shaped our understanding of modernist writing as high modern-
ism and continues to do so in many quarters. The historical proximity of
the passage of the Smith Act (1940) and the publication of Cleanth Brooks’s
Understanding Poetry (1939), one of the monuments of the emerging New
Criticism, speaks volumes. Although a number of convictions under the
Smith Act were thrown out as unconstitutional in 1957 (see below), the
statute remains on the books even today.77 Likewise, the New Criticism,
along with other formalisms, has continued the work of censorship by ef-
fectively depriving political poetry of any aesthetic value.

Hughes’s “Ballads of Lenin” is a case in point. To arrive at his reductive
reading of the poem’s language both as subversive and as representative
of Hughes’s own views, Cohn had to ignore several facts: one, that Hughes titled
the poem in the plural—“ballads” rather than “ballad”; two, that poem’s stan-
zas are ballads of and not to Lenin; and three, that the repeated epithet “Com-
rade” does not carry over into the poem’s title. Here is the poem in its entirety:

Comrade Lenin of Russia,
High in a marble tomb,
Move over, Comrade Lenin,
And give me room.
    I am Ivan, the peasant,
    Boots all muddy with soil.
    I fought with you, Comrade Lenin.
    Now I have finished my toil.
Comrade Lenin of Russia,
Alive in a marble tomb,
Move over, Comrade Lenin,
And make me room.
    I am Chico, the Negro,
    Cutting cane in the sun.
    I lived for you, Comrade Lenin.
    Now my work is done.
Comrade Lenin of Russia,
Honored in a marble tomb,
Move over, Comrade Lenin,
And leave me room.
I am Chang from the foundries
On strike in the streets of Shanghai.
For the sake of the Revolution
I fight, I starve, I die.
Comrade Lenin of Russia
Speaks from the marble tomb:
On guard with the workers forever—
The world is our room!

(CP, 183–84)

Cohn also had to disregard the fact that the poet who writes about the figures of the workers in the first person is not one of those who address Lenin here, or at least not directly. That Hughes reports other voices, something that is hardly even from the final quatrain Cohn misquotes, disregarding the rhyme on “tomb” and “room.” Much like Hughes’s “Ballad of Roosevelt” (CP, 178–79) from 1943, this poem is not an ode, a ballad to someone, if you will, and Cohn’s persistent confusion of the title seems generic in origin: he wants to read this poem as the ode it is not. Similarly, Ivan, Chico, and Chang are not lyric personae but generic names that represent three distinct yet parallel situations in which political resistance is embedded in exploitation and social injustice. Their voices function in the poem much as dramatis personae would in a play. They, not Hughes, address their individual ballad stanzas to Lenin, who comes back to life and responds in the two italicized lines at the end. The italics signal a citation and work almost as a chorus would. Thinking of these voices in dramatic terms helps us realize how important the idea of dialogue is in this poem, in a way that it is conspicuously not in the poem “Lenin,” which Hughes published in New Masses in 1946:

Lenin walks around the world.
Frontiers cannot bar him.

(CP, 318)

Even though they do not address each other, the three voices in “Ballads of Lenin” are all part of a conversation in which proximity is created by the near repetition of the opening stanza, which becomes almost a refrain—but not quite. Not quite because salient differences remain in what Ivan, Chico, and Chang convey about their specific historical circumstances. These differences account for Hughes’s retort to Cohn that this poem “symboliz[es] what I felt at that time Lenin as a symbol might mean to workers in various parts of the world” (ST, 978). Hughes imagines the possibility of a world in which Lenin is alive through his writings, which speak to others as they do
here, while at the same time making room for workers worldwide to communicate and benefit from the knowledge of one another’s conditions, so that they themselves might imagine the community that the pronoun “our” in the final stanza suggests (“The world is our room”). More than five decades ago, Hughes imagined the transformative potential of a conversation that, in our present world, Cohn surely would have supported: the truly revolutionary changes that the Internet—a new kind of “room”—has brought to modern Russia, China, and, more recently, the role that digital texting has played in the so-called Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East. Clearly, such a global vision would not have been available to Cohn in his time, which makes Hughes’s point: that his poems mean different things to different audiences at various times in history and cannot be reduced to a single message.

Hughes and his questioners did not share any common ground from which to acknowledge, let alone find and make use of, the transformative insights that a poem or any work of art might offer. For Cohn and Dirksen, “revolution,” for instance, had only one meaning in this context, one that eclipsed even the American Revolution: the October Revolution that created Soviet Russia. The idea that a poet might not write about himself but instead use the voices of others whose beliefs he might or might not share is incompatible both with the intentional fallacy that undergirds the very concept of subversive language and with the requirements of poetry as interiorized subjectivity. The differences between Hughes and his interrogators become starkest when an annoyed Dirksen poses an explicit question to Hughes about why he writes poetry: “May I ask, do you write poetry merely for the amusement and the spiritual and emotional ecstasy that it develops, or do you write it for a purpose?” (ST, 981, my emphases). Hughes’s reply broadens the question’s reach: “You write it [poetry] out of your soul and you write it for your own individual feeling of expression. First, sir, it does not come from yourself in the first place. It comes from something beyond yourself, in my opinion…. There is something more than myself in the creation of everything that I do, I believe that is in every creation, sir” (ST, 981, my emphasis). “Something beyond yourself” can be understood not as a mysterious transcendental origin or impulse but as a precise reference to the dialogic dynamics that characterize “Ballads of Lenin” and most of Hughes’s other verse and that rely heavily on the call-and-response patterns of musical forms such as the blues and jazz.

Hughes’s poems self-consciously communicate a strong sense of contributing to wider discursive fields in which his poetry becomes part of a multi-layered, more encompassing literary and historical conversation. The poem “Union,” published in New Masses in 1931, exemplifies this sense of connectedness. Rather than enclosing the “I” and what it knows, the dashes placed at the end of the first two lines reach out toward the world.

Not me alone—
I know now—
But all the whole oppressed  
Poor world,  
White and black,  
Must put their hands with mine.  

(\textit{CP}, 138)

It is a sense of purposefully participating in history that animates Hughes’s poetry: “I want to make my country as \textit{beautiful} as I can, as \textit{wonderful} as a country as I can,” he testified further on in the closed hearing (ST, 988, my emphases). The little poem “History” from \textit{Opportunity} (1934) encapsulates both purpose and beauty in four succinct lines that organize around the emphatically placed noun “mint,” allowing its connotations and denotations—money, government authority, abundance, and perfection—to attach to “blood and sorrow” in a disquieting metaphor:

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
The past has been a mint  
Of blood and sorrow.  
That must not be  
True of tomorrow.  
\end{center}
\end{quote}

(\textit{CP}, 179)

An important effect of Hughes’s careful negotiations of the relationship between aesthetics and politics is that he rewrites “the imagist fragment as social text,”\textsuperscript{79} pulling into his verse material from a variety of socioeconomic contexts, from restaurant menus in “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria” to the dollar signs at the end of “Elderly Leaders” (\textit{CP}, 194). He also does this in \textit{The Big Sea}, where he interrupts the narrative with ads for Saturday rent parties and signs barring access to African Americans (see \textit{BS}, 229–32 and 287).\textsuperscript{80} He arranges these nonliterary fragments into motile shapes—such as scattering dice in “Cubes” (\textit{New Masses}, 1934)\textsuperscript{81}—that violate the integrity of the lyric line.
Such shapes, plus the use of different fonts, font sizes, and vertical columns (as in “Wait” from 1933, *CP*, 174) to create a highly differential semiotic field, are quite familiar to readers of T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and H.D., to name but a few other, more canonical modernists. Smethurst is certainly right in noting that “[w]hat has also generally been missed in Hughes’s revolutionary poetry is the continued connection with modernism formally and thematically as Hughes, like nearly all other radical poets of the 1930s, writes quite consciously with the legacy of earlier modernists’ art and literature in mind.” Another object of the committee’s scorn, “Scottsboro,” which Hughes published in *Opportunity* in 1931, echoes Williams’s famous poem “Great Figure” from 1921 and its visual representation in Charles Demuth’s 1928 painting *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*.

8 BLACK BOYS IN A SOUTHERN JAIL
WORLD TURN PALE!
8 blacks boys and one white lie.
Is it much to die?

*(CP, 142)*

These resonances remind us that the subject of Williams’s poem about glimpsing an ornate number on a fire truck is also a state of emergency—“siren howls / and wheels rumbling / through the dark city”—though the precise reasons for it remain unspecified. Williams, who was also a fellow traveler of the greater New York Left and, like Hughes, frequently published in Communist journals, would have been quite familiar with the conversational vernacular idiom Hughes used in “Good Morning, Revolution”—You’re the very best friend / I ever had. / We gonna pal around together from now on” (*CP*, 162). Cary Nelson points out that it was “partly in response to his politics,” which cost Williams his position as poetry consultant at the Library of Congress in 1948, that USAmerican academic critics did not induct him into the modernist canon until the 1970s, and then with reluctance and misgivings. Could this have been the reason that Harold Bloom did not include Williams in his early studies of poetry?

“One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.,” the poem that apparently most disgusted Cohn, had initially been composed for a Scottsboro rally and employs what Dawahare calls “a working-class vernacular [Hughes] believed has multiracial mass appeal.” Hughes’s diction, he continues, “has much in common with that of Carl Sandburg, who was one of his early literary influences. Hughes’s poetic language is informal, often intimate, not unlike speech one might hear between friends. It is devoid of philosophical or political abstraction, like much proletarian poetry, in order to appeal to the average worker unschooled in Marxist theory.” The poetic frame contrasts significantly with the informality of the diction. Hughes uses two balladlike quatrains as a “chorus” to be repeated after each of the four varying sestets,
the combination of each set of fourteen lines creating the shadowy outline of a sonnet. This outline is even fainter in the sections where the chorus is not actually repeated but just imagined.

Put one more s in the U.S.A.
To make it Soviet.
One more s in the U.S.A.
Oh, we’ll live to see it yet.
When the land belongs to the farmers
And the factories to the working men—
The U.S.A when we take control
Will be the U.S.S.A. then.

(CP, 176)

This is hardly the first time that Hughes riffs on the sonnet form. He does so most visibly in “Seven Moments of Love: An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues,” printed in Esquire in 1940, to chronicle a mundane love affair turned sour. One might read “One More ‘S’”—in which the sonnet form is far more effaced than in “Seven Moments” or even in E. E. Cummings’s famous sonnet sequences—along similar lines as the account of a political love affair between USAmerican workers and the Communist Party, especially when one adds into the equation another poem Hughes published in Esquire in 1936: the Whitmanesque “Let America Be America Again.” The Great Depression and its aftermath were hardly times in which to write love poetry to Lady Liberty, but, for Hughes and others, there was still room, as it were, for expressing hope and the desire for change. Adding an extra “s” to “U.S.A.,” which is subsequently capitalized in the poem’s chorus, in addition to rhyming “Soviet” with the proleptic “yet,” stands as an articulation of possibilities for positive transformations that might bring an end to injustice, poverty, repression, and racism. Unlike “Let America,” “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.,” which emulates the rhythm of a work song and combines it with the catchiness of political slogans and advertising jingles, takes readers beyond a national framework, declaring the nation to be as inadequate an object of one’s political affections as the sonnet form is an insufficient vehicle for such declarations. In the later poem, Hughes returns to a canvas of more staid imagery but also projects against that canvas the dream that “used to be” a figure of “America” (not the USA) as “the land that never has been yet”:

Let America be America again
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

(*CP* 189–91)

It is quite evident, from this poem and from others that I discuss in earlier chapters, that America exists in a very different discursive space for Hughes than the USA. The line “America was never America to me,” which is initially bracketed in the poem as if whispered, points to a recurring topic in Hughes’s writing, from “I, Too” to his essays in the *Chicago Defender*: “The most dire thought we are holding in our deep hearts is a dream of a real AMERICAN America…. Shall we, who are the Negro people of America, have no great dreams? Shall we only ask for the half-freedoms that move nobody to action for the great freedoms that this war is supposed to be about?”

The essay from which these lines are drawn, “No Half-Freedoms,” was written in 1943, when *Brown v. Board of Education* and desegregation were not even on the legal horizon. At the time of Hughes’s testimony before McCarthy, however, *Brown* had been argued before the U.S. Supreme Court for the first time, on December 9, 1952, and there was palpable hope that the separate-but-equal doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) might actually be overturned. The case would be reargued on December 8, 1953, and finally decided in favor of the *Brown* plaintiffs on May 17, 1954.

Hughes took up the case for an “AMERICAN America” when he delivered a lengthy autobiographical monologue—approximately two thousand words in the transcript, which he may have read from a prepared script—as part of his closed testimony. The purpose of his statement was to give a “full interpretation” of the poems under attack by demonstrating that poetry, as an act of the imagination, “goes out of a very deep background” and that it is precisely the fact that “it does not come in a moment” that gives it substance.

The committee initially indulges him—“Take as long as you want” (ST, 982)—but soon grows impatient. Arguing that “[t]o give a full interpretation of any piece of literary work one has to consider not only when and how it was written, but what brought it into being. The emotional and physical background that brought it into being,” Hughes intones words reminiscent of the beginning of classic slave narratives: “I, sir, was born in Joplin, Missouri. I was born a Negro. From my very earliest childhood memories, I have encountered very serious and very hurtful problems” (ST, 986).

Was Hughes simply trying to buy time, or did he hope to garner the committee’s sympathies? Neither seems very likely. It is hard to believe that
Hughes would have misjudged his listeners so badly on this occasion. What resounds is Hughes’s undaunted reply to Cohn, who proposed to “save a little time” by “conced[ing] the background which you wrote it from was the background you wanted to describe.” “I would much rather preserve my reputation and freedom,” Hughes responds, “than to save time” (ST, 986). It is worth doing what the committee did not: take the time to listen to what Hughes tells us in this autobiographical account, which is very different from anything we read in his two autobiographies, where he spends little time and emotional energy recounting events from his childhood. In fact, the first childhood memory he recalls here is not even mentioned anywhere in The Big Sea:

One of my earliest childhood memories was going to the movies in Lawrence, Kansas, where we lived, and there was one motion picture theater, and I went every afternoon. It was a nickelodeon, and I had a nickel to go. One afternoon I put my nickel down, and the woman pushed it back and she pointed to a sign. I was about seven years old. [Continues after an interruption from Cohn.] The woman pushed my nickel back and pointed to a sign beside the box office, and the sign said something, in effect, “Colored not admitted.” It was my first revelation of the division between the American citizens. My playmates who were white and lived next door to me could go to that motion picture and I could not. I could never see a film in Lawrence again, and I lived there until I was twelve years old. (ST, 986–87, my emphasis)

The point for which this episode in Jim Crow Kansas around 1910 shrewdly prepares more attentive listeners is one Hughes develops carefully in narrating the second incident, which, though familiar from The Big Sea (see 14)—which he calls The Deep Sea (ST, 988) in mockery of Cohn’s infelicities—is cast there in rather different language:

They did not let me go to the school [in Topeka]. There were no Negro children there. My mother had to take days off from her work, had to appeal to her employer, had to go to the school board and finally after the school year had been open for some time she got me into the school.

I had been there only a few days when the teacher made unpleasant and derogatory remarks about Negroes and specifically seemingly pointed at myself. Some of my schoolmates stoned me on the way home from school. One of my schoolmates (and there were no other Negro children in the school), a little white boy, protected me, and I have never in all my writing career or speech career as far as I know said anything to create a division among humans, or between whites and Negroes, because I have never forgotten this kid standing up for me against these other first-graders who were throwing stones at me. I have always felt from that time on…that there are white people in America who can be your friend, and will be your friend, and who do not believe in
Hughes’s point here—that he had never been divisive even though he might have had good reasons to be so—is far more specific and focused on *America* than what he writes about the same experience in *The Big Sea*, where he expresses a faith in humanity in words similar to those Anne Frank uses in her famous diary: “So I learned early on not to hate all white people. And ever since, it has seemed to me that most people are generally good, in every race and in every country where I have been” (*BS*, 14). Here national specificity serves as a springboard for the almost desperate appeals to his patriotism that follow. Mentioning his father, James N. Hughes—who plays such a problematic role in *The Big Sea*—now becomes an occasion for marking progress on the civil rights front:

> My father as a young man, shortly after I was born, I understand, had studied law by correspondence. He applied for permission to take examination for the Bar in the state of Oklahoma where he lived, and they would not permit him. A Negro evidently could not take the examinations. You could not be a lawyer at the time in the state of Oklahoma. You know that has continued in a way right up to recent years, that we had to go all the way to the Supreme Court to get Negroes into the law school a few years ago to study law. Now you may study law and be a lawyer there. (*ST*, 987)

Although Hughes does not refer to *Brown v. Education* directly, he is very probably alluding to two of the Supreme Court cases that prepared the path to it: *McLaurin v. Oklahoma* (1950), which held that public institutions of higher learning could not treat students differently because of their race, and *Sweatt v. Painter*, which desegregated law schools in Texas. Hughes deploys the legacy of these cases, which were surely known to Cohn, as evidence of the gradual abolition of Jim Crow laws and argues that because of such changes, he lacks “the kind of bitterness, the kind of utter psychiatric, you might say, frustration that has been expressed in some Negro novels” and that also characterized his father’s feelings toward his native land. Hughes may well have been thinking about Richard Wright’s *Native Son* here. “I love the country I had grown up in,” he continues. “I was concerned with the problems and I came back here. My father wanted me to live in Mexico or Europe. I did not” (*ST* 987). Noting that his own father was “rabidly anti-American, anti-United States,” Hughes states that “I did not sympathize with that viewpoint…. My feeling was, this is my country, I want to live here. I want to come back here I want to make my country as beautiful as I can, as wonderful as a country as I can, because I love it myself” (*ST*, 988).

The strategy backfired, and Hughes’s declarations of loyalty proved as ineffective as his attempts to defend his poetry. The committee responded
with indifference to Hughes’s emotional account, telling him that he had provided “enough background” and ordering him to cease what they took as evasive maneuvering (ST, 989). There was nothing left for Hughes after this failed defense strategy—it failed because Hughes appealed to a version of the same autobiographical or intentional fallacy to which the committee subscribed, and he could not beat them on their own ground. Hughes’s failure also puts into evidence a sentiment that James Baldwin would express in 1963: “It is perhaps because I am an American Negro that I have always felt white Americans, many if not most of them, are experts in delusion—they usually speak as though I were not in the room. I, here, does not refer so much to the man called Baldwin as it does to the reality which produced me, a reality with which I live, and from which most Americans spend all their time in flight.”

When Hughes, near the end of the session, tries to return to earlier issues, David Schine is quick to remind him that he is risking perjury. “[I]t is only fair to reemphasize to you,” Schine interrupts, “the danger that you face if you do not tell the truth to this committee, and to ask you to reconsider as to whether you wish to change any of your testimony here.” Hughes declines the offer, adding that “I have never been a member of the Communist party, and I wish so to state under oath” (ST, 997). When Schine reminds him that what is at issue here is not just that one question but “your entire testimony before the committee,” Hughes, after conferring with Reeves, equivocates and stalls: “The truth of the matter is, sir, that the rapidity with which I have been questioned, I don’t fully recollect everything that I might have said here. If a complete review of the testimony were given me, it might be possible that I would want to change or correct some” (ST, 997–98). Then Schine goes on to ask Hughes to name “some Communist party members whom you have known.” Hughes refuses, stating that he does not know who was or was not a member of the party, prompting another not-so-veiled threat from his interrogator about the accuracy of his earlier testimony: “Do you not think it is important when you are asked a question concerning your conversations with Communist party members that you try to be accurate?” Among those whom Hughes might have protected on this occasion were not only W. E. B. Du Bois, who had already been indicted for being a Communist sympathizer in 1951, but also his long-time Knopf editor Maxim Lieber, who had fled to Mexico.

When Hughes again asks to confer with counsel, Dirksen adjourns the meeting, requesting that Hughes return “at 10:15 on Thursday morning” for his public hearing.

We do not know whether McCarthy, in a private meeting on Wednesday, March 25, once again conjured up for Hughes the specter of perjury charges against him unless he cooperated with the committee the following day. Given the very contentious nature of Hughes’s first hearing, such a threat strikes me as a likely possibility. Although perjury charges might not have led to an actual jail sentence, they would still have resulted in some form
of blacklisting, which was the last thing Hughes would have wanted at a time when the difficulties he was beginning to experience with publishers and agents were already endangering his reputation and livelihood (see *Life*, 2:207). Perjury charges might also have opened the door for charging and prosecuting Hughes under the Smith Act, which is precisely what would happen to the Marxist poet and editor Walter Lowenfels on July 29 of that same year. Still, what most worried Hughes was continued public humiliation for having promulgated political ideas that were quite unpopular with most black USAmericans at the time. As we have seen in his editorial decisions for *Cuba Libre*, Hughes did not want to alienate that audience. Another possible avenue of coercion for McCarthy and Cohn might have been to expose Hughes as a homosexual, which would have made matters even worse. The Republicans had opened up the issue of “perverts” in the Truman administration in the late 1940s, and the persecution of homosexuals continued well into the 1950s. For not a few politicians at the time, homosexuality and Communism were close bedfellows. Senator Dirksen was one of them. Given that, during the 1952 presidential campaign, Dirksen had delivered speeches targeting what he called “the lavender lads” in the State Department, his question to Hughes about being “a single man” was not as innocent as it might otherwise have seemed. Cohn himself, who had sex with men but did not consider himself a homosexual, was also well known for his homophobia. It is by no means unbelievable that members of McCarthy’s subcommittee would have stooped to such slander, or at least to the threat of it.

After his public hearing, Hughes wasted no time distributing partial transcripts to five hundred friends and business acquaintances, and he sounded a note of relief in a letter to Frank Reeves dated April 8, 1953: “All of my publishers are pleased with the outcome of the hearings, have backed me up beautifully, and are going ahead with their publishing plans in relation to my work” (*LHP*, 136:2525). Yet even as late as 1959, the year when his *Selected Poems* was published and the Red Scare had largely passed, Hughes felt the need to use his public appearance before McCarthy’s committee to vindicate himself, as in the following note appended to a contract with CBS News.

I am not now a member of any of the organizations or groups listed on the back of this sheet [groups that the attorney general had designated “Totalitarian, Fascist, Communist, or Subversive”]. . . . I have explained in full for the record my own personal, political, and artistic activities under oath on March 23 [sic], 1953, at a public hearing in Washington of the Senate Committee on Permanent Investigations headed by Senator McCarthy. At the close of the hearings I was commended by Senator [John] McClellan, thanked by Senator McCarthy, and since that time my books to which Schine and Cohn had objected have been replaced in the U.S. Information Service’s overseas libraries. Subsequently, a
number of my books have been published and distributed through the United States Information Agency—the latest being my FIRST BOOK OF JAZZ (Poetnica Jazza) in a Serbo-Croatian translation, Belgrad, May 30, 1959. The Agency has contracted for the right to translate various of my books into some 80 languages. And the State Department has sent a number of distinguished foreign visitors to interview me. My work is used on radio and television throughout the world, particularly in England, France, Italy, and other countries of Europe—much more so than here where the work of writers of color has had a pretty hard time getting on the airwaves or breaking into the mass media. (LHP, 365:5861)

That Hughes takes pains to emphasize the (now state-sponsored) presence of the translations of his work into other languages recalls the glaring absence of references to such translations during the McCarthy Committee hearings. One might say that Hughes strategically inserted his later remarks in the space left blank on McCarthy’s original subpoena. Flaunting the fact that people in other countries were, and had been, reading his work in languages other than English, Hughes reasserts his international stature along with the ultimate ineffectiveness of the committee’s attempted suppression of his written words. His remarks, in which we reencounter “the sly voice inhabiting the poems,” stand as a final reminder that his capitulation at the public hearing had indeed been staged.99

It would appear that the staged surrender that appeased most of Hughes’s political critics did not entirely stem the flow of skepticism, if not of outright accusations. Although Hughes had claimed during the hearings that he had officially ended his support for Communism, he would, “only seven months later, continue to attack in the pages of the Defender the governmental practices [of political censorship] that caused him so much trouble.”100 Given Hughes’s resistance at the closed deposition, I agree with Rampersad that “certain questions about Langston’s true feelings toward radical socialism remained unanswered” and that “the magma of political indignation in Hughes remained, below the placid surface, red-hot” (Life, 2:219–20). Regardless of whether the bitterly satiric poem “Un-American Investigators,” published posthumously in 1967 in The Panther and the Lash, was written before or after Hughes’s McCarthy experience, it renders his feelings about the process palpable.

The committee shivers
With delight in
Its manure.

(CP, 560)101

There is one important thing, however, that Rampersad did not know, could not have known, at the time he wrote his autobiography of Hughes: the Hughes we see in the executive session was clearly not the person who
“had come to Washington...to negotiate an honorable surrender” (Life, 2:211). To be sure, Hughes seemed largely composed and polite. Still, there are signs of suppressed anger and also of a growing, at times barely contained, alarm at the realization that his strategies were failing, that the story he was telling about being black, about being a writer in the USA, and about the difference between art and political propaganda was not one that the committee could and would credit. That panic seems to have spread to Reeves, who, near the end of the meeting, surprisingly interrupted the “rapid fire process” of Cohn’s questioning and was promptly called to order (ST, 994). Nonetheless, the Hughes whom we see in the closed hearing had come to fight with words. Given the failure of his frequent signifyin(g) on his questioners’ rhetoric and his attempts to insert a human dimension into their willful acts of mistranslation, it would be reasonable to expect a thoroughly defeated Hughes by the end of the hearing. Yet Hughes, still undeterred and with his feelings of panic under control, insists on turning the hearing to practical matters of survival. He bluntly asks Dirksen, “Would you tell me, sir, about expenses?” The question is unforeseen and perplexing to the senator.

SENATOR DIRKSEN: About expenses?
MR. HUGHES: Yes, sir. They are covered by the committee while I am here?
SENATOR DIRKSEN: Under the rule the transportation is paid and there is an allowance of $9 a day while you are here.
MR. HUGHES: From whom do I get it here?
SENATOR DIRKSEN: From the Treasury. (ST 998)

With this seemingly mundane exchange about expenses, Hughes returns the hearing to the economic implications of his earlier autobiographical remarks, allowing him to end with an assertion of some measure of agency and human dignity. In my book, pointing out that one has certain basic needs, including economic ones, and that those needs have to be both acknowledged and fulfilled does not qualify as surrender.

Denouement: Pledging Allegiance

In the years that followed, Hughes became exceedingly cautious about having his name associated with anything and anyone from the 1930s Left. In 1954 he even agreed, at the request of his publisher, Dodd, Mead, to drop the entry on Du Bois from his essays in Famous American Negroes. The following year Hughes also excised Paul Robeson from his Famous Negro Music Makers. Not surprisingly, Hughes’s Selected Poems from 1959 did not include a single one of the disputed poems—or any other radical poems—and ended with “Freedom’s Plow,” the very lyric from Opportunity
that Hughes had used in 1953 to prove his supposed political conversion. Also in 1959 Hughes sent a copy of Selected Poems to Frank Reeves, in remembrance of “how you once ‘saved my life.’” In the years to follow, Hughes revised several of his controversial poems in later editions, effectively producing what he had earlier criticized as “a saleable tissue of conscious lies.” The Langston Hughes Reader (1958), however, still included a translated poem by Guillén, whereas the excerpts from Hughes’s autobiographies conspicuously omitted all sections on his sojourn in the Soviet Union.

On September 18, 1960, in the midst of rapidly deteriorating USA-Cuban relations, Fidel Castro arrived in New York City to deliver a speech before the United Nations General Assembly. Time magazine reported on “the rumpled Cubans in their greasy green army fatigues” in less than glowing terms two weeks later. After causing chaos at the East Side Shelburne Hotel, Castro and his entourage relocated to the “dowdy old Theresa, which ha[d] brooded over Harlem’s 125th Street and Seventh Avenue since pre-World War I days.” There, according to Time, “Castro had a steady stream of visitors. Negro Moslem Leader Malcolm X, Beatnik Poet Allen (Howl) Ginsburg, Columbia Professor C. Wright Mills (who [was] writing a book on the Cuban Revolution) and Left-Wing Poet Langston Hughes dropped in to pay their respects. A couple of hours later, Nikita Khrushchev himself drove up to the Theresa in a skirl of sirens.” Hughes was not pleased to be included in this list of distinguished visitors. On September 30, 1960, the irate poet sent the following letter to the editor of Time:

Sir:

Since I do not know Fidel Castro and have never had any sort of contacts with him or communications from him, I would very much appreciate a retraction of the statement on page 16 in the October 3, 1960, issue of TIME to the effect that “Left-Wing Poet Langston Hughes dropped in” at the Theresa to pay respects. I have not been in the Hotel Theresa for several weeks, and was certainly not there during Mr. Castro’s stay. Leonard Lyons, in his NEW YORK POST column of September 27, erroneously stated that I was a guest at a Castro dinner at the Theresa. Mr. Lyons was, however, gracious enough to make a retraction in his POST column the following day. I trust TIME will be equally gracious—for both my sake and Castro’s.

Very truly yours,
Langston Hughes

Clearly, Hughes was very sensitive—perhaps overly so—about being called “left-wing” even seven years after his encounter with McCarthy. While his desire to distance himself publicly from Cuba’s new revolutionary regime may not be surprising, the fact that he turned a deaf ear even to his old friend Nicolás Guillén is. Six months after Castro’s visit, on April 18,
1961, Guillén sent Hughes a Western Union telegram. This telegram, signed “Asociación de escritores y artistas. Nicolás Guillén presidente,” seems to have been the last written communication between the two men, who had met in Havana in 1930 and had exchanged many letters over the years. The telegram reads, “Nuestro territorio ha sido invadido por fuerzas del imperialismo norteamericano brutal agresión nuestra soberanía nos permitimos esperar de usted y amigos de esa únanse protesta universal contra estos vandálicos hechos” (LHP, 70:1366). (Our territory has been invaded by the forces of North American imperialism. Because this is a brutal attack on our sovereignty, we allow ourselves to hope that you and friends of our sovereignty will join in issuing a universal protest against these vandalistic deeds.) Hughes did not respond to Guillén. Nor did he issue a public protest or participate in any demonstrations against the Bay of Pigs invasion.

When Guillén’s plea confronted Hughes with the reality of having to choose publicly between nationalist loyalty and the kind of transnational solidarity that Hughes’s history as a New World cultural broker might have suggested, as surely it did to Guillén, he came down in favor of the former. In 1961 both Guillén and Hughes pledged official allegiance to their respective countries’ governments, Hughes by severing the last of his ties to a radical political past, Guillén by embracing Cuba’s revolutionary regime. Ironically, the very actions, or inactions, that divided the two poets at this crucial point in history were cut from the same nationalist cloth. Even their rewards bear some similarity. Guillén received public recognition for his political choices by being appointed to a high-level bureaucratic post as president of the National Writers’ Union. He also, at long last, became Cuba’s poet laureate. Hughes, in turn, “earned the gratitude of the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security” for his resounding silence. Even more embarrassingly, the committee would later “mention him favorably in noting that American blacks had shrewdly resisted Cuban schemes ‘to popularize Cuba among Negros’” (Life, 2:330–31). Those who had known the Langston Hughes who, for nearly thirty years, had actively promoted Cuban and other Hispanic American writers in the USA, would surely have felt the painful irony with which this commendation must have been received.