

Robert Shulman: On "Come to the Waldor-Astoria"

Several contexts animate "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria," another of the poems Hughes wrote during the fall of 1931. He published it in *New Masses* in December, so that the "CHRISTMAS CARD" ending is, like "Merry Christmas," seasonal. Another occasion for the poem is that, two years into the depression and in the midst of the fight to save the Scottsboro Boys, Hughes read a two-page advertisement in *Vanity Fair*, the most elegant magazine in America. Along with ads for luxury cars, furs, and expensive clothing--the depression did not exist in the world of *Vanity Fair*--Hughes encountered an advertisement announcing the opening of the new Waldorf-Astoria "where," as Hughes noted, "no Negroes worked and none were admitted as guests." In his poem, in place of the bold-faced headings in the ad--"PRIVACY," "FREEDOM FROM RESPONSIBILITY," "MODERN CONVENIENCES"--Hughes substitutes such headings as "LISTEN, HUNGRY ONES," "EVICTED FAMILIES," and "NEGROES."

In a prose format like the ad's, Hughes opens up the absurdities and contrasts between his down-and-outers and the luxury of the rich in their new hotel. His approach is to parody the ad, sometimes by using a left language, sometimes an idiomatic language instead of *Vanity Fair* formality and by directing his flophouse clientele to take advantage of the amenities the hotel provides, to "ankle on down to 49th Street at Park Avenue." Hughes summarizes the "PRIVATE ENTERTAINING" and "PUBLIC FUNCTIONS" the ad describes by intoning of the Waldorf,

It will be a distinguished background for society.

So, when you've got no place to go, homeless and hungry ones, choose the

Waldorf as a background for your rags--

(Or do you still consider the subway after midnight good enough?)

Under the heading, "ROOMERS," "take a room at the new Waldorf," he advises them, "sleepers in charity's flop-houses where God pulls a long face, and you have to pray to get a bed."

For their edification Hughes reprints a luncheon menu of "GUMBO CREOLE CRABMEAT IN CASSOLETTE / BOILED BRISKET OF BEEF / SMALL ONIONS IN CREAM / WATERCRESS SALAD / PEACH MELBA." Then he adds, "Have luncheon there this afternoon, all you jobless. Why not?" To provide an answer, Hughes departs from his dominant tone of high-spirited satiric indignation. He reanimates the left imagery of hands, some cutting coupons while others, exploited by the rich, do hard manual labor. Parodying the ad writer's invitation, Hughes tells his people, "dine with some of the men and women who got rich off of your labor" and then in the emotionally charged, pile-driver rhythms and imagery of left discourse he adds,

who clip coupons with clean white fingers because your
hands dug coal, drilled stone, sewed garments, poured
steel to let other people draw dividends and live easy.

(Or haven't you had enough yet of the soup-lines and the bitter bread of
charity?)

Walk through Peacock Alley tonight before dinner, and get warm, anyway.

You've got nothing else to do.

In one of his most irreverent sections, under the heading "NEGROES" Hughes shifts from the language of left social protest to the language of black vernacular, a language especially incongruous in the upper-class white world of the Waldorf and Vanity Fair. "Oh, Lawd, I done forgot Harlem!" Hughes breaks in, using "I" for the first time. Then, in the perfectly rendered idiom of the street, Hughes goes on to contrast the reality of hunger on 135th Street with

the swell music they got at the Waldorf-Astoria. It sure is a mighty nice place to shake hips in, too. There's dancing after supper in a big warm room. It's cold as hell on Lenox Avenue. All you've had all day is a cup of coffee. Your pawnshop overcoat's a ragged banner on your hungry frame.

Does the last line heighten the emotional impact not only through the contrast between ease and pawnshop poverty but also through the reinforcing contrast between the street idiom of "shake hips" and "cold as hell" and the more formal, literary metaphor, "a ragged banner on your hungry frame"? Hughes often achieves his effects by juxtaposing contrasting languages, although readers unsympathetic to his literary and political project may respond negatively to the slight elevation of the metaphor of the pawnshop overcoat as "a ragged banner on your hungry frame."

In any case, in the pages of *New Masses*, writing explicitly to "you colored folks" within the poem but also to a radical white reading audience, Hughes goes on to subvert the upper-class fascination with things Negro. "You know," he writes, "downtown folks are just crazy about Paul Robeson! Maybe they'll like you, too, black mob from Harlem." Of course. Through the comic and slightly ominous incongruity of the "black mob," Hughes deconstructs the 1920s cult of Harlem, "When the Negro Was in Vogue," as he phrased it in a chapter heading of his autobiography, *The Big Sea*. Hughes cuts even deeper when he invites his "black mob" to

Drop in at the Waldorf this afternoon for tea. Stay to dinner. Give Park Avenue a lot of darkie color--free for nothing! Ask the Junior Leaguers to sing a spiritual for you. They probably know' em better than you do--and their lips won't be so chapped with cold after they step out of their closed cars in the undercover driveways. Hallelujah! Undercover driveways! Ma soul's a witness for de Waldorf-Astoria!

At his most acute, Hughes enters taboo territory and deflates the mix of class privilege and racial condescension at the heart of society's affair with the Negro. At the end he perfectly uses black vernacular to diminish those symbols of class and racial inequity, the underground driveways and the Waldorf itself. In the process, Hughes undercuts the religiously tinged Uncle Tom language he himself turns into a vehicle of hard-hitting comic protest.

In the "CHRISTMAS CARD" that ends the poem, Hughes intensifies his irreverent religious satire. Looking ahead to "Goodbye, Christ" and back to "Christ in Alabama," "Merry Christmas," and "A Christian Country," Hughes exuberantly, provocatively sends his radical greetings:

[?.]

The censors who a decade later hounded Hughes because of "Goodbye, Christ" somehow overlooked the ending of "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria." In "CHRISTMAS CARD" Hughes's cultural politics are as radical as his politics. In presenting Mary as a "little girl--turned whore / because her belly was too hungry to stand it anymore," Hughes vividly connects depression hunger and poverty and that of the Holy Family. He does so with a blasphemy--Mary as whore--that he compounds in relating the immaculateness of the Immaculate Conception to the clean bed Mary needs and the manger of the Waldorf can supply. Hughes's radical politics reinforce and are reinforced by his irreverent cultural politics. The brash announcement that "the new Christ child of the Revolution's about to be born," the injunction "kick hard, red baby, in the bitter womb of the mob," and the final imperative, "listen Mary, Mother of God, wrap your new born babe in the red flag of Revolution" are examples of the radical spirit of 1931, hopeful, optimistic, unintimidated. In "CHRISTMAS CARD" and "Goodbye, Christ," Hughes handles communism as the new religion with more verve and idiomatic force than anyone in the decade.

In "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria" Hughes is also one of the pioneering left poets who incorporated and put to unconventional uses the language of the media--advertising, in this case, the documentary in Muriel Rukeyser's, the movies in Kenneth Fearing's. These poets engaged and tapped into the energy of influential "low" forms and turned them from their prevailing commercial to left uses. As with the black vernacular and jazz rhythms and improvisation that animate his work, Hughes as much as any modernist delights in "low" forms typically excluded from the "high" art of traditional poetry. They contribute to the immediacy, energy, and accessibility of his work, reinforced in the *New Masses* by the drawings that frame "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria." The drawings are fanciful satiric line sketches of limousines, upper-class dowagers and top-hatted gentlemen, and decadent partygoers above a panorama of grim-faced working people.

From *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered*. Chapel Hill: University

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Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Langston Hughes [2]

Author:

Robert Shulman [3]

Poem:

Come to the Waldorf-Astoria [4]

Source URL: <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/robert-shulman-come-waldor-astoria>

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