Rehearing “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”
in an Era of Global Decolonization: *ASK YOUR MAMA*’s Jazz Poetics

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Hi everyone, thank you to Shane and Tony for making this happen. I’m grateful to be here with Victoria, Chiyuma, Charissa, and DeLisa, and with all of you who are joining us.

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Echoes and fragments of Hughes’s iconic poem are scattered throughout *ASK YOUR MAMA: 12 Moods for Jazz*, his final book-length project. For example: “Cultural Exchange,” the first mood, invites readers into a series of scenes “BY THE RIVER AND THE RAILROAD” that remind us of Hughes’s anecdote about the poem’s composition and link the train the teenage poet rode South to Mexico toward his father to well-known anecdotes of the underground railroad—that “TRAIN,” as Hughes writes, “THAT LOST NO PASSENGERS / ON THE LINE WHOSE ROUTE WAS FREEDOM.” Both of these trains RUMBLE in parallel through the second stanza of “Ode to Dinah,” *MAMA*’s fourth mood, carrying us into a bar scene where the rhythms of river and railroad recede into the temporal and affective distances of historical trauma and remembrance just as another centennial, 1965, approaches.

Likewise, the eighth mood revises the “muddy / bosom” of the Mississippi as “A MUDDY TRACK”—a track like a rut in the road or a groove on an LP. Yet the mood principally insists that the riverine, muddy songs of the miscible world cannot be recorded. The blues poem and the jazz poem, while highly mediated art forms, are not instruments of capture or mimetic performances that seek to close the distances between music and text, race and region.

Rather, Hughes's poetry is invested in the blues and jazz as communication, in how "jazz seeps," as he remarked in 1956, "into spelled out words," in how it works as mediated traversal to create a poetics of address that exceeds technological capture and state containment.

The first stanza of "Blues in Stereo," *MAMA*'s fifth mood, concludes with another deliberate echo:

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
WHERE AN ANCIENT RIVER FLOWS
PAST HUTS THAT HOUSE A MILLION BLACKS
AND THE WHITE GOD NEVER GOES

How should we understand these echoes and fragments? I want to propose that they are not only a formal reconstitution or recombination of Hughes's first published poem, but a redistribution that situates readers as listeners and reorganizes the social relation of sound and sense.

Because jazz is the primary communicative context of *ASK YOUR MAMA*, I also propose that the redistributed sounds of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" disposed within *MAMA*'s twelve moods index the historical possibilities for form that modern jazz offered Hughes and his contemporaries at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties. They disclose the complex negotiation *MAMA* undertakes with the social and material conditions of its reception. *MAMA* redistributes the sounds of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" for a plurality of differentially situated listeners, and, as the title "Blues in Stereo" intimates, does so within stereophonic space.

To rehear "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" within this space entails hearing it not as music but as something more akin to sound at variance with itself, an air made eerie and "ear- / piercing" (78). Hughes's poem becomes audible in *MAMA*'s discrepant, proliferating scenes of

address, that is, as mediated echo, scratch, distortion, fragment, or whisper, acousmatic transfers only partially legible and audible to *MAMA*'s disparate, heterogeneous publics.

The question *MAMA*'s revision gives rise to is not simply what can be heard in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" forty years on—or one hundred years on—but how and where to hear it, and who with. In cueing readers to hear speech as variant sound, *MAMA* enacts a continual, dramatic reorganization of relations between speakers, readers, and listeners. Across the sounds and silences, distances and intervals, between these positions, *MAMA*'s scenes estrange readers from midcentury norms of reading and listening.

These scenes are at once more racially specified than Hughes's early poetry—more self-reflexive about the racialized social and material conditions of addressability—and, as Meta DuEwa Jones suggests, more attuned to the "idiomatic, idiosyncratic, and interlocutory aspects of jazz communication" (1148). In *MAMA*, Hughes transforms the soundworld of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" for the era of global decolonization, an era in which black cultural production was defined by the convergence of new forms of technological reproduction or "capture" and the transformation of the world system. The anti-mimetic dimensions of Hughes's diasporic sound-text—those aspects of *MAMA* that are "opaque, multiply resonant, that elide interpretive closure," in Jones's words—cue us to the poem's strategic intentions (1150).

In their staging of the difficulty of listening and hearing well alongside the possibility of mishearing, misinterpretation, expropriation, and enclosure, *MAMA*'s moods incite readers to anticipate otherwise, to hear more in the future and hear it more freely. If Hughes began his career by looking toward the deep, already known past he concludes his final book-length poem looking toward the future, carrying in its protective embrace its initiating, unanswered questions so that they might be borne along and reheard in our present.