**Introduction**


LIKE MANY WARTIME POEMS, THESE FOUR WERE WRITTEN WITH URGENCY AND POLITICAL PURPOSE, AND UNDER DIFFICULT CONDITIONS. IN SOME CASES, HUGHES SCRIBBLED DRAFTS OF THEM IN NOTEBOOKS ON THE WAR FRONT—THE PAGE ON WHICH

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he wrote “Girl (She looks like a gypsy)” is now frayed and torn in half (fig. 1)—and he typed one of them, an untitled poem that concludes “MADRID CELEBRATES RUSSIA’S TWENTY YEARS,” on a piece of scrap paper. These drafts, which have been preserved among the Beinecke’s Langston Hughes Papers, contribute to a growing corpus of Hughes’s Spanish Civil War writing.

The literary response to the Spanish Civil War was so deeply international that we cannot read Hughes’s poems from the war in isolation; rather, we must read them as part of a dense web of collaboration with Spanish, Latin American, and Caribbean poets who were writing in defense of the Spanish Republic (Nelson 190). In July 1937, the Second International Writers’ Congress in Defense of Culture took place in several Spanish cities—Valencia, 4 July; Madrid, 5–8 July; and Barcelona, 11 July—and in Paris, 16–17 July (Soler). Writers such as Chile’s Pablo Neruda, Mexico’s Octavio Paz, and Peru’s César Vallejo flocked to Spain to take part in the congress, which Neruda helped to
organize. Hughes delivered his speech “Too Much of Race” to the conference in Paris before traveling to Spain with Cuba’s Nicolás Guillén, who also spoke at the Paris congress.

When he arrived in Madrid, Hughes worked with Rafael Alberti, Manuel Altolaguirre, and other members of the Spanish literary avant-garde at the Alliance of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals to translate Federico García Lorca’s celebrated collection of poems Romancero gitano (1928; Gypsy Ballads). The act of translating Lorca was meant to honor his life and legacy after he had been assassinated by nationalist troops at the start of the civil war (Scaramella 179). Hughes’s translation work, as well as his own poetry, grew out of conversation and collaboration with the hispanophone writers he met, or whose work he read, in Spain.² Hughes’s Spanish Civil War poetry therefore shows traces of intertextuality with the cancioneros written in defense of the Republic at the same time: Guillén’s España: Poema en cuatro angustias y una esperanza (1937; Spain: A Poem in Four Anguishes and One Hope), Neruda’s España en el corazón (1937; Spain in Our Hearts), Paz’s “Bajo tu clara sombra” y otros poemas sobre España (1937; “Under Your Clear Shadow” and Other Poems about Spain), and Vallejo’s España, aparta de mí este cáliz (Spain, Take This Cup from Me, written in 1937 and published in 1939, after his death).

Hughes explores gitano (“Roma,” or “Gypsy”) culture through the Spanish popular musical traditions of cante jondo and flamenco in the short, impressionistic “Girl” (fig. 2). Hughes, like Lorca, explored the connections between the Gypsy cante jondo and the African American blues tradition. “Girl” suggests the influence of Lorca’s ideas and shows Hughes’s interest in linking the emotional histories of diasporic communities.

A famous line from a flamenco song—“Soy de la raza calé” (“I am of the gypsy race”)—is one of several voices woven together in “Untitled (Madrid Celebrates Russia’s Twenty Years).” The poem’s next and final line marks a radical shift, to a headline reporting the October 1937 commemoration of Russia’s Bolshevik Revolution. While earlier in the poem Hughes implies that poetry follows a linear path when he describes it as something he could “ride . . . down the muddy road,” the collage-like form of the poem suggests that readers must take a less straightforward route to integrate its disparate voices. The poem prompts its reader to “[make] a story” out of its distinct lines, connecting poetry, performance, and communist revolution in the fight against fascism in Spain.

“Boy” presents a mother at home in Iowa examining a map, trying to understand the death of her son at the Fuentes de Ebro front, which Hughes visited in October 1937 to report on the death of Milton Herndon, a black volunteer and brother of the persecuted labor organizer Angelo Herndon (Rampersad 353; Hughes, “Milt Herndon” 181). This poem recalls the imagery of a poem by Guillén in which Mussolini examines a map while his soldiers suffer during the Italo-Ethiopian War.³ The map in “Boy,” like the letter in the four epistolary ballads Hughes wrote in Spain,⁴ becomes a symbol of the effort to bridge geographic and ideological distances. For Hughes, the International Brigades soldiers’ commitment to the antifascist cause created a new map of solidarity among disenfranchised groups.

“Note to the Democracies” condemns inaction and complacency—in particular, the refusal of Western governments to provide military and humanitarian aid to Republican Spain. The poem’s use of direct address, verses in capital letters, and repeated questions and exclamations resonates with other “call to action” poems by Hughes that provoke the reader to act in times of political crisis.

These four Spanish Civil War poems enrich our understanding of Hughes’s deep commitment to the Republican cause.
NOTES

Special thanks go to Craig Tenney of Harold Ober Associates Incorporated and the Langston Hughes Estate for granting permission to publish these poems. We are also grateful to the archivists, curators, and staff members of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

1. These anthologies include Good Morning Revolution, edited by Faith Berry; Langston Hughes and the Hispanic World and Haiti, edited by Edward Mullen; African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: “This Ain’t Ethiopia But It’ll Do,” edited by Danny Duncan Collum; The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, edited by Arnold Rampersad; and The Collected Works of Langston Hughes.

2. El mono azul (The Blue Monkey), the journal of the Alliance of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals, published a weekly section of ballads, or romances, called “Romancero de la guerra civil” (“Ballads of the Spanish Civil War”), and Hughes translated several poems from a 1936 anthology of the same name (Scaramella 181).

3. Hughes translated this poem, “Soldados en Abisinia” (“Soldiers in Ethiopia”), after meeting Guillén on a trip to Cuba earlier in the decade. The original was published as part of Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas (1937; Songs for Soldiers and Songs for Tourists).


WORKS CITED


———. Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.


this time, Hughes also composed a number of his own poems about Gypsies and their culture, such as "A Farewell," "Ballad of the Gypsy," "Bad Luck Card," "Girl," "Gypsy Man," "Gypsy Melodies," "Fortune Teller Blues," and "Song of Spain." A draft of his unpublished book "First Book of Gypsies" includes a chapter called "Gypsies of Spain" and is found in the Beinecke’s Langston Hughes Papers.

2. Angle brackets have been placed around words that Hughes crossed out.

3. In his 1947 essay "My Adventures as a Social Poet," Hughes again invokes mud as part of his identity as a poet. Defining the type of poetry he writes, Hughes explains that "having been born poor—and also colored—in Missouri, I was stuck in the mud from the beginning" (150).

4. Hughes incorrectly transcribes café as jale in his notes, a mistake he repeats elsewhere in his writing. Café is synonymous with raza gitana, "Gypsy race." Calo refers to the language spoken by gitanos in Spain.

5. When the anniversary of the Russian Revolution was celebrated in Madrid, it was covered by the press, including the International Brigades publication *Volunteer for Liberty*. Its 15 November 1937 issue ran the headline "Madrid Celebrates Double Anniversary," referring to the twenty-year anniversary of the Russian Revolution and the one-year anniversary of the defense of Madrid.

6. "Boy" illustrates Hughes’s fascination with charting the heroism and sacrifices of American soldiers and medics who traveled far from home to fight against fascism. Americans served in several different battalions in the Spanish Civil War, and the American volunteers in the International Brigades tend to be referred to collectively as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, named after one of those battalions, the Abraham Lincoln Battalion (Carroll vii). American volunteers also served with the George Washington Battalion, formed in the spring of 1937, and other battalions, including the predominantly Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, known as the "Mac-Paps" (126).

7. National Youth Administration, one of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal agencies.

8. Fuentes de Ebro, a town near Zaragoza, the capital of the Aragon region, was the site of fighting during the Republican Army’s Zaragoza Offensive in October 1937, during which the Abraham Lincoln Battalion and the Mac-Paps suffered many casualties in their attempt to take the town.

9. The poem reprimands the world powers like England, France, and the United States that cited the nonintervention pact to justify their refusal to aid the Spanish Republic militarily while overlooking the aid Hitler and Mussolini provided Franco. "Note to the Democracies" is perhaps most similar in style and tone to "Roar, China!," a poem that Hughes published during the Spanish Civil War in *Volunteer for Liberty*. Sometimes he dramatizes such appeals in dialogic form, having one speaker make the case to another to take action on behalf of Spain

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**EDITORS’ NOTES**

"Girl (She looks like a gypsy)" and "Untitled (Madrid Celebrates Russia’s Twenty Years)" are the titles assigned to these poems by the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

1. Gypsy and flamenco became pervasive themes in Hughes’s poetry and prose through his obsession with Federico García Lorca. Lorca and Hughes each saw a kinship between blues and cante jondo. In one of the articles Hughes wrote from Spain for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, he wrote, "Flamenco is to Spain, I suppose, what the blues are to America. . . . The flamencos are like blues in that they are sad songs, with a kind of triumphant sadness, a vital earthiness about them from which life itself springs" ("Around the Clock" 200). In addition to Lorca’s *Romancero gitano* (Gypsy Ballads), Hughes translated Spanish Civil War ballads of living Spanish poets like Rafael Alberti, José Moreno Villa, and Emilio Prados (Scaramella 179). Although Hughes finished a draft of his translation of Romancero gitano in 1937, and published translations of individual poems from the collection in the United States as early as 1938, he did not publish Gypsy Ballads until years later, in the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, in 1951. He also completed his translation of Lorca’s play Bodas de sangre (Blood Wedding) in 1938. The translation of Bodas de sangre, which he titled "Fate at the Wedding" and "Tragic Wedding" in the manuscript versions, was adapted and published by Melia Bensussen in 1994 under the more common title, *Blood Wedding* (Martin-Ogunsola 4). During
(“Song of Spain”) or to join with other black workers in a May Day demonstration (“Sister Johnson Marches”). The epistolary poems Hughes wrote from the perspective of Johnny, a volunteer African American soldier in Spain, to his family and friends in Alabama also make an appeal to take action across geographic and ideological space (“Letter from Spain,” “Love Letter,” “Note from Spain,” and “Postcard”). Hughes wrote many poems in this period that declared themselves to be letters, memos, notes, and broadcasts addressed to a particular audience, including “Open Letter to the South” (1932), “Letter to the Academy” (1933), “Broadcast to Ethiopia” (1936), “Dear Mr. President” (1943), “Broadcast to the West Indies” (1943), and “Note to All Nazis Fascists and Klansmen” (1943).

10. Not only did Hughes urge democratic nations to do more than send food and medical supplies to Spain, he also participated in organizing and fund-raising on behalf of the Spanish Republic. When he returned to the United States, in early 1938, he became involved with the Negro Committee to Aid Spain, part of the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, which sent an ambulance full of supplies to Spain later that year. Paul Robeson, Thyras Edwards, Salaria Kea, Louise Thompson, and Angelo Herndon were also active in raising funds and supplies for the ambulance, which was painted with the words “From the Negro People of America to the People of Republican Spain.” Hughes also recalled seeing efforts to raise relief aid in the United States before he went to Spain in his article “Hughes Finds Moors Being Used as Pawns by Fascists in Spain” (originally published in the Baltimore Afro-American on 30 October 1937). He noticed the appeals to aid “[t]he new democratic Spain . . . placarded in the main streets of cities like Denver and Salt Lake City when [he] lectured there. AID REPUBLICAN SPAIN! MILK FOR THE BABIES OF SPANISH DEMOCRACY!” (164).

WORKS CITED


———. Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.


———. “Note to All Nazis Fascists and Klansmen.” Hughes, Collected Works, vol. 2, p. 79.


