

## EDITORS' NOTE: OCCUPY AMERICA

John Rosenwald and Lee Sharkey

"I'm gonna split this rock," cried Langston Hughes.

Others heard his cry. And listened. And transformed his language into their own.

In 2007 a group of Washington, D.C., poets, led by Sarah Browning, Regie Cabico, and Melissa Tuckey, set out to organize a convergence of politically engaged poets from across the country and beyond. The following March, on the fifth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, more than three hundred participants gathered to inspire each other through four days of conversations, workshops, and readings. They brought words of provocation and witness to our nation's capital to split the rock of deception and denial, violence, greed, disdain, and ignorance that weighed so heavily on our country.

Our predecessors at the *Beloit Poetry Journal* also heard Hughes's cry, publishing as its first chapbook in 1951 his translation of Federico García Lorca's *Romancero Gitano*. From its inception the magazine has worked to expand American poetic language and vision through its publication of international poetry and of work that challenges social, political, and aesthetic norms, from Hughes's Lorca translations to Michael Broek's "The Logic of Yoo" (Fall 2011), which indelibly parses one episode from the Bush II years.

Langston Hughes became for Robert Shetterly one of the "Americans Who Tell the Truth." After the 9/11 attacks, this artist found a way to "channel . . . anger and grief" at the policies of the U.S. government by creating a series of portraits honoring Americans who have spoken out and acted against injustice and the abuse of power. Across each portrait Shetterly incises a statement made by his subject. The choice for Hughes rings as vividly in the wake of the Arab Spring and Occupy America as it did when the poet composed it more than seventy years ago: "We, the people, must redeem. . . all the stretch of these great green states—and make America again."

Jazz poet, essayist, playwright, novelist, journalist, master of his craft, Langston Hughes became rightly famous for giving voice to African American lives and dreams. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s he proclaimed in a manifesto that

“we younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful.” His manifesto continues, “And ugly, too. The tom-tom cries, and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.” Hughes defies pigeonholing—and in this he offers us a model. He was chronically curious, ever on the move, alert to everything around him, and bound to the truth as he saw it. His would not be a one-dimensional portrait of race or poverty in America; he could code shift and turn on a dime from prophetic fury at injustice to easy laughter at the ways of the residents of his beloved Harlem. Racially mixed, sexually ambiguous, sympathetic to communism but unwilling to be restricted by dogma, he saw and wrote from a set of complex perspectives.

In 1937 Hughes traveled to Spain as a journalist to cover the Spanish Civil War. While there he began to translate Lorca's *Romancero Gitano*, the *Gypsy Ballads*. A beloved cultural figure whose verse, much like Hughes's, was seen to embody the spirit of his people, Lorca had been assassinated the previous year. Hughes worked with poet friends of Lorca's on the translations, revising them years later with the aid of Miguel Covarrubias and then the poet's brother, Francisco García Lorca.

These translations caught the eye of Robert Glauber, one of our founding editors, when he discovered them in the archives of *Compass*, the immediate predecessor of the *BPJ*. He wrote to Hughes, who was delighted to see them published in the fall of 1951. A thousand copies of the Hughes/Lorca chapbook were printed; within two months the issue was sold out. Thus this singular work by Hughes, the first complete English translation of Lorca's volume, fell into obscurity. Happily, a facsimile of the issue is now available to readers in the *BPJ*'s online archives at [www.bpj.org](http://www.bpj.org). And soon the correspondence between Hughes and the *BPJ* will be available to researchers at the Beloit Poetry Journal Library in Farmington, Maine.

This chapbook therefore brings together Split This Rock, the *BPJ*, and Robert Shetterly, all of whom heard Hughes's call and responded by taking action. In 2007, when we as *BPJ* editors learned of the intentions for Split This Rock, we volunteered to edit a chapbook (Spring 2008: Vol. 59, No. 3) of the work of poets to be featured at the festival. This year, we gladly accepted the invitation to produce a second chapbook, of unpublished work by poets featured at the 2012 festival, which takes place March 22–25 in Washington ([www.splitthisrock.org](http://www.splitthisrock.org)). For the cover, Robert Shetterly contributed his probing portrait of Hughes, into which our designer Mary Greene has integrated one of John McNee, Jr.'s illustrations from the *BPJ*'s original *Gypsy Ballads*.

Not surprisingly, the poems in the 2012 Split This Rock chapbook have a somewhat different set of concerns than the poems in the first, which was focused largely, as was the country, on issues of war and peace. Now that the Iraq occupation has ended, at least formally, the poets represented here direct our attention to issues that in the last year have spawned the Arab Spring and our homegrown occupations: political oppression, poverty, economic inequality; cultures of violence; persistent racism, sexism, and sexual predation; the loss of neighborhoods and traditions that sustained communities.

The contributors emerge from a broad range of literary traditions, but surely all can claim as one of those the world-engaged American poetry Langston Hughes epitomizes. As if in response to Hughes's call to let an America that has yet to exist "be America again," they tell our histories, represent us in our multiplicity, and talk back to stereotyping. They identify the "enforcers" who "lie in wait for us with black daggers" (Aridjis) not unlike the one on our cover. They praise and they rage. They reflect, and quicken on the global pulse. Khaled Mattawa's "After 42 Years," written in the wake of the overthrow and death of Muammar Gaddafi, might well be speaking for all the work in the collection when it looks toward a future where systems of oppression have been dismantled and "an earthy sun is shining on us, with us, within us again," then poses the open-ended question, "What will our aftermath be then?"