

“Just People” are Just People: Langston Hughes and the Populist Power of African American Literary Journalism

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In the summer of 1937, the Baltimore Afro-American sent a letter to poet and playwright Langston Hughes asking him to travel to Spain and report on black Americans serving in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. Hughes produced thirteen stories for the paper, all of which focused on the everyday experiences of the soldiers. These stories are important to the field of literary journalism studies not only because they broaden the US canon that heretofore has consisted predominantly of white writers, but also because Hughes's stories illustrate the political significance of a journalistic dedication to the ordinary. Hughes's reporting for the Baltimore Afro-American is historically significant because it is an unexplored link between two important pieces of African American wartime journalism: W. E. B. Du Bois's controversial 1918 "Close Ranks" editorial in The Crisis during World War I and the Pittsburgh Courier's popular "Double V" campaign during World War II.

“The poem, the picture, the song is only water drawn from the well of the people and given back to them in a cup of beauty so that they may drink—and in drinking, understand themselves.”

—Langston Hughes, radio address
“The Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals, Madrid”¹

On June 22, 1937, Joe Louis fought James J. Braddock in Chicago's Comiskey Park for the heavyweight-boxing championship of the world. In the days leading up to the fight, airlines and railroads added flights and trains between New York and Chicago to accommodate fans wanting to make the journey.² Sixty thousand spectators filled the baseball park and watched the twenty-three-year-old Louis knock out the reigning champ Braddock in the eighth round to become only the second African American heavyweight boxing champion of the world.³ Afterward, celebrations erupted from Chicago to Cleveland to New York.⁴ The fight propelled Louis into the national spotlight, where his celebrity status surpassed even that of popular Olympian Jesse Owens and transcended racial boundaries, making him "the first African American to achieve lasting fame and popularity in the twentieth century."⁵

One month later, in Louis's native state of Alabama, another historic decision was reached. Multiple juries under the jurisdiction of Judge W. W. Callahan rendered guilty verdicts in the remaining three cases of the Scottsboro Boys; meanwhile, the state of Alabama dropped rape charges against the other five defendants, bringing a legal end to one of the most racist set of trials in American jurisprudence.⁶ The Scottsboro saga began six years earlier, when nine black teenagers were arrested and accused of raping two white women on a Southern Railroad freight train traveling west from Chattanooga to Memphis. Within two weeks of their arrest eight of the nine boys, all lacking adequate counsel, were tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by all-white juries.⁷ Their executions—scheduled to take place only seventy-four days after the completion of the last trial—were stayed while the Alabama Supreme Court heard their appeals, which were denied. The International Labor Defense, the legal arm of the Communist Party in the United States, then took over as lead counsel, and during the next six years, dozens of trials, convictions, reversals, and retrials ensued. Throughout these proceedings, judges and juries ignored eyewitness evidence from the train conductor, medical evidence from the doctor who examined the women shortly after the train was stopped, testimony that suggested the women were prostitutes, and the fact that one of the women recanted her story and repeatedly testified for the defense. The three final convictions in July 1937 overshadowed the release of the other defendants, and the case's conclusion brought little solace, as the poet and playwright Langston Hughes wrote at the time:

That Justice is a blind goddess
 Is a thing to which we black are wise.
 Her bandage hides two festering sores
 That once perhaps were eyes.⁸

In that same summer of such historic black achievement and recurrent racial injustice, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, a weekly black newspaper with thirteen regional editions that circulated widely along the East Coast, sent a letter to Hughes asking him to go to Spain to report on its civil war. In need of money and happy to collect on the four-month commission, Hughes accepted the paper's offer. He left Cleveland the day after the Louis fight, his voice hoarse from hours of celebratory shouting as he rode around the city with friends cheering the championship.⁹ On June 30, 1937, he set sail from New York City aboard the *Aquitania*, and after a two-week stay in Paris, Hughes arrived in Barcelona on July 24. He divided his first month in the country between the Catalonian capital and Valencia, before heading to Madrid—and the front lines of the war—for the remaining twelve weeks of his assignment.¹⁰

His first story appeared in the *Afro-American* on October 23, 1937, under a banner headline, above the paper's masthead, that proclaimed: "Hughes Bombed in Spain." Twelve more stories would follow. His dispatches from Spain mirrored the US news narratives of transcendent racial acceptance and continued racial discrimination embodied by the stories of Joe Louis and the Scottsboro case. They celebrated African American war heroes and noted the acceptance of people of color in Spain while decrying Fascist imperialism and Franco's forced conscription of Moors to fight on behalf of the Nationalists.

Hughes's stories range from first-person accounts of air raids, to travelogues chronicling the racial attitudes of the Spanish people, to heroic profiles of soldiers. Most of the articles are brief sketches and contain many of the characteristics that scholars would later ascribe to literary journalism.¹¹ During his four-month stay, Hughes immersed himself in reporting the war and observing Spanish culture, interviewing soldiers, nurses, performers, and peasants. In writing these reports he employed a range of literary devices from symbolism to allegory, flashbacks to hyperbole. These elements are highlighted when one reads the compressed literary journalism of his newspaper articles against his fuller retelling of the same events in his 1956 autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*, where the stories have a much flatter affect.

THE CONTEXT FOR HUGHES'S WAR STORIES

Hughes's reporting for the *Baltimore Afro-American* is historically significant because it is an unexplored link between two important pieces of African American wartime journalism: W. E. B. Du Bois's controversial 1918 "Close Ranks" editorial in *The Crisis* during World War I and the *Pittsburgh Courier's* popular "Double V" campaign during World War II. Both Du Bois

and the *Courier* called on African Americans not only to support, but also to fight in each respective war as a way to further demonstrate their equality and garner full-rights citizenship. Hughes bridges these movements with his own explicit endorsement of military involvement as a path to democratic acceptance.

These articles are equally important to the field of literary journalism studies not only because they broaden the US canon that heretofore has consisted predominantly of white writers, but also because Hughes's stories illustrate the political significance of a journalistic dedication to the ordinary. These consequences are twofold. In the African American press, the ordinary *is* newsworthy because black news has been historically excluded from the mainstream press. In majority publications, however, a focus on the everyday has the power to elevate the familiarity, and emphasize the humanity, of marginalized publics. For African American readers, the black press's attention to the accustomed affirms their sense of humanity, while that same focus in conventional newspapers creates a sense of empathy in privileged publics—a quality largely absent in the mainstream press, but one that scholars of twentieth-century American literary journalism would increasingly identify as significant.

Throughout its history, scholars and practitioners of American literary journalism have acknowledged that the genre's democratic impulse to capture the quotidian is one of the main differences from conventional journalism's conception of news as timely information about people and events of consequence. For instance, as an editor, the famed muckraker Lincoln Steffens encouraged his writers to "get the news so completely and to report it so humanly that the reader will see himself in the other fellow's place."¹² Several decades later, in what is widely considered the first academic treatise on literary journalism, Edwin Ford noted that the writers collected in his bibliography showed "people in the midst of life."¹³ As the staid styles of post-war journalism were eclipsed by the ostentation of New Journalism, various observers hailed the form as "literature for the majority"¹⁴ and declared that it "allowed the reader[s] to see and feel ordinary people in unusual situations," thus giving them a chance to engage in the story and not just respond to the facts.¹⁵ Tom Wolfe, of course, had his say. In an introductory jeremiad to *The New Journalism* he shouted: "Come here! Look! This is the way people live these days! These are the things they do!"¹⁶ And contemporary scholarship has followed his imperative. In his first book, *The Literary Journalists*, Norman Sims highlighted this feature of *feuilletonism*, saying, "through their eyes we watch ordinary people in crucial contexts."¹⁷ Thomas B. Connery followed suit, drawing strong connections between a reportorial populism

and a stylistic realism, which together “capture people as they really are.”¹⁸ In fact, all of the foundational texts in literary journalism studies make mention of the democratic impulse of the genre, yet scholars have not sufficiently explored the civic significance of this characteristic.¹⁹

Broadly speaking, a focus on daily life and common people creates a discursive space for readers to enter the story and see themselves as subjects rather than as “spectator[s] and ratifier[s].”²⁰ Stylistic and substantive egalitarianism generates empathy because readers recognize themselves in the stories of others. Moreover, by giving voice to the voiceless and engaging citizens in stories that might not otherwise be told, writers contribute to a fuller conception of an imagined community. Benedict Anderson’s influential work on nationalism and the social construction of publics offers a useful frame of reference for understanding the power of Hughes’s work. Anderson argues that through “print-capitalism”—the late-eighteenth-century entrepreneurial enterprise of disseminating information in a popular rather than high style in order to appeal to a broad public—classical languages like Latin, Greek, and Hebrew “were forced to mingle on equal ontological footing with a motley plebeian crowd of vernacular rivals.”²¹ This democratization of language allowed various reading publics an opportunity to understand and imagine themselves and their neighbors. The literary journalism of Langston Hughes afforded *Baltimore Afro-American* readers a similar opportunity. His commitment to capturing the lives of otherwise anonymous African Americans fighting in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion of the International Brigades allowed him to highlight the extraordinary experiences embedded within ordinary occurrences.

The political power of a populist approach has special significance when considering African American journalism. Scholars often differentiate between conventional journalism and its literary counterpart by noting that the former selects its topics as exceptions to ordinary life, while the latter draws strength, in part, from its focus on the overlooked aspects of day-to-day existence; however, for marginalized publics, be they classified by race, gender, class, sexuality, or otherwise, both the newsworthy *and* the commonplace get little coverage in the mainstream press “not because they lack validity or interest, but because they lack official sponsorship.”²² For example, between the official start of the Spanish Civil War on July 17, 1936, until its resolution on April 1, 1939, the *New York Times* published nearly 3,000 articles chronicling the battles and bombings between the Nationalists and Loyalists. Of those, fewer than 300 focused on the contributions of the International Brigades, and fewer than two dozen mentioned the Abraham Lincoln Battalion (and, further proving Schudson’s point, the “Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Bri-

gade” society provided most of the information for those stories). The African American press, like all minority presses, developed in response to this type of marginalization. Historian Charles Simmons has shown that the “basic editorial philosophy” of the black press has remained relatively unchanged since the publication of the first issue of *Freedom’s Journal* in 1827. The journalistic mission has been “to cover items that were ignored in the mainstream press, primarily the news, activities, and achievements” of African Americans.²³ The black press made ordinary African Americans visible to African American readers. As pioneering journalist Vernon Jarrett has said, it was in these papers “we did get married, they showed us our babies being born, showed us graduating, they showed our Ph.D.s.”²⁴ This literary populism also helped black readers connect local concerns with issues affecting national and global communities.

More than half of Hughes’s stories for the *Baltimore Afro-American* are profiles of everyday soldiers who he feels have made a meaningful difference while volunteering for service in Spain. Each story’s headline connects individual efforts in the Castilian countryside with the brigade member’s hometown. They read: “New York Nurse Weds Irish Fighter in Spain’s War,” “Fighters from Other Lands Look to Ohio Man for Food,” “St. Louis Man’s Spanish Helped Him Cheat Death,” “Pittsburgh Soldier Hero, but Too Bashful to Talk,” “Howard Man Fighting as Spanish Loyalist,” and “Harlem Ballplayer Now Captain in Spain.” Hughes reinforces this spirit of local pride by explicitly commenting in each article on how these men will return to the United States and serve their race well. Hughes uses the profiles not only to update the black community, but also to editorialize. A wedding announcement turns into an epistle on interracial harmony. A soldiering college student is an opportunity to discuss the need for more international awareness on campuses. These profiles have a folk quality about them that regionalizes the characters and places them in their neighborhoods, which is significant because it helps readers, no matter where they live, imagine a network of solidarity across the United States. In separate articles, Hughes introduces readers to Abraham Lewis of Cleveland, Ralph Thornton of Pittsburgh, Walter Cobb of St. Louis, and Basilio Cueria of New York. These profiles also have their roots in *The Crisis*—the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded by W.E.B. Du Bois and first published in 1910—which, early on, ran regular features entitled “Men of the Month” that highlighted African Americans who demonstrated qualities of racial uplift. For example, a March 1918 profile introduced *The Crisis* readers to a then-unknown collegian named Paul Robeson who “has maintained a high scholastic record. He has won the class oratorical prize for two years,

a feat never before accomplished in the school. He is varsity debater, plays guard in basketball, throws weights in track, catches in baseball, and is a baritone soloist.”²⁵ Robeson, of course, went on to become a famous singer, actor, and political activist, taking a vocal stance against the Spanish Civil War, among numerous other causes. Hughes ends nearly all his profiles by stating that these men will return to America to help the cause of equality. Much like the men featured in *The Crisis*, Hughes’s profiles celebrate the achievements of African Americans and offer the black community models for racial uplift.

FLÂNEUR-OF-THE-FRONTLINE

When editors at the *Afro-American* wrote to Hughes in the spring of 1937 about covering the escalating civil war, they asked him to focus on “the conflict’s significance for American blacks.”²⁶ The heroic profile was one way Hughes accomplished this mandate, but he also employed a flâneur-of-the-frontline approach whereby he observed devastated urban landscapes “in terms of color and race.”²⁷ When his first story ran on October 23, 1937, the *Afro-American* boldly advertised his method (and its scoop). Under the aforementioned banner headline “Hughes Bombed In Spain,” the paper then included this subhead: “Exclusive!!! From war-torn Spain, Langston Hughes, celebrated American novelist and poet, brings exclusively to *Afro-American* readers a vivid and accurate portrait of the bitter struggle that is now going on. This interesting series and accompanying photos will appear only in the *Afro-American*.” Another subheading below that tantalized: “Tells of Terror of Fascist Raid” and “Women, Children Huddled in Fear as Bombs Explode.”²⁸ Despite these sensational promotions, Hughes’s first article in the *Afro-American* is less “news” than an introduction to the war and his relationship to it. He arrived in Barcelona on July 24, one day after the city suffered its then-worst bombing campaign of the war. Fascist planes killed more than one hundred civilians along La Rambla, and newspaper headlines greeted Hughes, shouting, “AIR RAID OVER BARCELONA!” In his introductory article he bemoaned missing the exclusive—“‘Last night!’ I thought,”—adding, “Well, tonight I’ll be there.”²⁹ Although such lamentations privilege the story over the deaths of innocents, they do reveal Hughes, who traveled extensively but had never previously worked as a reporter, to have a sense of journalistic derring-do.³⁰

In his second article for the *Afro-American*, Hughes explains his journalistic motivations by asking rhetorically, “Why had I come to Spain?” and then answering, “To write for the colored press.”³¹ This purpose is significant because the *Afro-American*, like most black newspapers, centered its mission on advocacy. The paper’s prospectus stated its mission was “to present to the

world that side of the Afro-American that can be had in no other way, and in the second place to as far as possible assist in the great uplift of the people it represents.”³² Therefore, unlike George Orwell, who remarked wryly in another piece of literary journalism from Spain, *Homage to Catalonia*, “When I joined the militia I had promised myself to kill one Fascist—after all, if each of us killed one they would soon be extinct,” Hughes pursued a different objective: “In the Civil War in Spain, I am a writer, not a fighter. But that is what I want to be, a writer, recording what I see, commenting on it, and distilling from my own emotions a personal interpretation.”³³ Hughes’s statement is a precise job description of the literary journalist; not only did he “record and report”—he “interpreted as well.”³⁴ What is significant about his interpretation is the complex conception of a global community that connects Scottsboro to Seville, Atlanta to Addis Ababa.

In October 1935, Mussolini’s army invaded Ethiopia, which, at the time, was the only independent black nation in Africa, thus launching the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. During the intervening years between World War I and World War II, this incident became “the international issue which most concerned black Americans” who saw the invasion through the lens of racist imperialism.³⁵ Many African Americans interpreted the U.S. government’s refusal to support Haile Selassie and his people as indifference by whites to come to the aid of blacks. The Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia waged a “Hands Off Ethiopia” campaign in an effort to raise awareness, generate aid, and mobilize African Americans to fight on behalf of Ethiopia, but many of these attempts were stymied. Potential army recruits were warned by the U.S. Justice Department that they would be in violation of an 1818 federal statute that prevented U.S. citizens from enlisting in a foreign army. The Red Cross refused to send personnel to the war-torn country. Despite the lack of action, however, the consciousness of African Americans had been raised. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley argues that “the defense of Ethiopia did more than any other event in the 1930s to internationalize the struggles of black people in the United States.”³⁶

Shortly after the Italian invasion, Hughes penned a poem called “The Ballad of Ethiopia,” which appeared in the *Afro-American*.³⁷ In verse Hughes exclaims: “All you colored peoples / Be a man at last / Say to Mussolini / No! You shall not pass.”³⁸ The adjective “all” here is important. In using it, Hughes expands the responsibility for stopping Mussolini beyond just Ethiopians. He implicates all readers of color, including those reading the Baltimore newspaper. Moreover, Mussolini is portrayed as both a literal threat in Ethiopia and a symbolic representation of fascism and oppression. Finally, Hughes’s challenge to “be a man at last” links the struggle for freedom with masculin-

ity—an ongoing trope in African American history as black men struggled to fight against stock representations in white consciousness. Hughes’s poetic call to arms prefigures his response to the war in Spain and the conscription of the Moors.

The Spanish Civil War began when army generals Francisco Franco and Emilio Mola launched a coup against the democratically elected Popular Front. Franco’s military received support from Germany, Italy, and Portugal, while many western capitalist nations abandoned the Republic. To fill the void, the Communist International called for volunteers to assist in the fight and received offers from more than 35,000 people across fifty different nations and colonies. These volunteers would make up the International Brigades. For African Americans, Franco’s attempt at wresting the country from the people was seen as an adjunct to Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia. Just like the response to the Italian aggression, a campaign was waged to stop Spanish imperialism. And just like the previous campaign, there were impediments. Once again the US Justice Department threatened prosecution for any citizen fighting on behalf of another nation. It even went so far as to stamp passports with the dictate “NOT VALID FOR TRAVEL IN SPAIN.” Still, approximately eighty black men and one woman answered the call to fight and made their way across the Atlantic to France, where they crossed the Pyrenees into Spain.

Unlike many other front-page stories in the *Afro-American*, Hughes’s pieces were not salacious or sensationalistic. They were, however, hyperbolic in terms of his statements on racial equality. In his first story he noted that there was no color line in Spain, and in a later piece he says, “All the colored people of whatever nationality to whom I’ve talked in Spain agree that there is not the slightest trace of color prejudice to be found.”³⁹ Kelley offers a clearer explanation for the judicious treatment Hughes and other African Americans received in Spain: they were treated well because they were fighting for Spain’s freedom from fascism. The Spanish Moors, conscripted by Franco and fighting against the Loyalists, were as hated by the peasants and workers as Hughes and other black Americans were loved.⁴⁰

Hughes takes up the issue of the Moors in this second article, entitled “Hughes Finds Moors Being Used as Pawns by Fascists.” He once again uses first-person narration as a device to usher the reader along with him on his journey. The story is ostensibly a travel narrative, recounting his roundabout trip from Barcelona to Madrid, providing Hughes an opportunity to discuss the country’s geographic history. He says, “Spain once belonged to the Moors, a colored people ranging from light to dark,” but now the Moors are “cannon fodder for Franco.”⁴¹ Hughes admits he is “naturally interested in the

Moors” and wants to find out “what effect, if any, this bringing of dark troops to Europe had had on the Spanish people in regard to their racial feelings.” Ultimately, Hughes concludes, the Moors offer a cautionary tale about “colored troops in the service of white imperialists.” Although the oppression of the Moors would surely resonate, at least symbolically, with African American readers, Hughes often makes that connection explicit, linking “American racism with international Fascism and forcefully consociat[ing] international left politics and racial equality.”⁴²

Hughes reinforces this point of racial equality by juxtaposing the treatment of the Moors with the treatment of other people of color. He expresses this dual purpose early in the second story: “I want to write about both the Moors and colored people.”⁴³ Hughes is always careful to point out the difference between Franco’s treatment of people of color and the treatment they received from everyday Spaniards. An example of this difference comes from C. G. Carter, a fifty-two-year-old Utah man who traveled to Spain to serve as an ambulance driver with the Ninth Medical Unit of the American Medical Bureau (AMB). Just as Hughes focuses on common people he met on the streets of Barcelona, his concentration on Carter illustrates the grassroots effort of those working to free Spain from Fascist control. At one point Carter asks Hughes, “Who wants to be a slave to Mussolini?” His question illustrates the extent to which black soldiers in Spain saw the conflict as an extension of the Italo-Ethiopian war. Hughes uses Carter’s question to make the point that “within the last year, colored people from many different countries have sent men, money, and sympathy to Spain in her fight against the forces that have raped Ethiopia, and that clearly hold no good for any poor defenseless people anywhere.”⁴⁴ Hughes’s position was in accord with the majority of African American newspapers whose editors “saw Spain as a continuation of the Italo-Ethiopian conflict that so enraged the African American community.”⁴⁵ Hughes connects that rage with the conflict by offering a voice to ordinary soldiers like Carter.

Hughes rides with Carter’s Ninth Medical Unit and notes that the AMB, “in their selection of doctors, nurses, and assistants, [has] not drawn the color line.”⁴⁶ Once again he overestimates the degree of racial tolerance in the country, but this statement does offer insight into a question he asked earlier. The conscription of the Moors and their presence in Spain had not had an overall adverse effect on other people of color. Despite this fact, Hughes ends his second story by illustrating the inextricable link between the people of color fighting in Spain and the racially similar Moors whom they are fighting against. The Moors have been duped. Fascist imperialism is spreading. And so Hughes sees his role as a journalist and documenter of the resistance as an act

of counter-hegemony: "To help this People's Army, and to fight fascism before it makes any further gains in the world, men came to Spain from all over the earth. They formed the International Brigades. In these brigades there are many colored people. To learn about them, I came to Spain."⁴⁷ Although they were anonymous before the war and would largely remain anonymous after the war, Hughes portrays them as heroic examples of racial pride. In the long tradition of the African American press, Hughes presents these soldiers as models for others to follow.

Hughes's third dispatch from Spain draws the most direct connection between African Americans in the United States and people of color living and fighting in Spain. The title "Organ Grinder's Swing' Heard Above Gunfire in Spain" refers to the popular 1936 jazz standard by Will Hudson, Mitchell Parish, and Irving Wells made famous by the African American band leader Jimmie Lunceford. Hughes's use of the song title in his story immediately signifies to African American readers a common bond with the people of Spain. He builds upon that bond by noting throughout the article the many ways in which he and many other people of color are accepted by Spaniards.⁴⁸

Hughes begins his story with the declarative statement: "Colored people are not strange to Spain, nor do they attract an undue amount of attention."⁴⁹ He then goes on to list all of the different ethnic groups he has thus far encountered in Spain before concluding that "all the colored people of whatever nationality to whom I've talked . . . agree that there is not the slightest trace of color prejudice." His conclusion is a familiar variation on a theme, which he also brought up in his first two articles. But in this piece, Hughes locates the cause of this tolerance of the darker complexion of most Spaniards in "traces of Moorish blood [that] still remain."⁵⁰ This reasoning is specious at best, but it is consistent with Hughes's objective, outlined in his reporting for the *Afro-American* and the partisan periodical *Volunteer for Liberty*, of presenting Spain as fundamentally a tolerant and accepting society, thus necessitating the need to drive Franco out.

Hughes spends his entire third article chronicling various examples of African American popular culture that are well liked in Spain. He says that the favorite theatrical star in Madrid is the Cuban vaudeville performer El Negro Aquilino. He follows this observation by noting that jazz in Spain is played more and received better than in other places in Europe. He states that the records of Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington sell especially well.⁵¹ As evidence of the music's popularity, he tells an anecdote that led to the story's headline: "In fact, during one of the heavy shellings of Madrid a few nights ago a shell from one of Franco's cannons fell crashing into the street at our corner just as our radio in the dining room began to play Jimmie Lunceford's version of

‘Organ Grinder’s Swing.’”⁵² The symbolism of this scene illustrates that black culture perseveres in the midst of all the terror.

Hughes also mentions the affection Madrilenos have for the singer, actor, and activist Paul Robeson. And he adds that in Spain “tap dancing is quite popular, and whenever colored dancers are seen in the movies, Spanish youngsters try their best to imitate the steps.”⁵³ In addition to song and dance, Hughes finds that black sports heroes are also widely admired in Spain. He says the Spanish still talk about the exploits of the track star Jesse Owens and boxer Jack Johnson. These positive representations of black culture further illustrate Hughes’s claim about the inclusiveness of Spanish society.

Hughes, however, is not enamored with all aspects of black representation in Spain. He takes especial exception to popular books, noting that “the least representative of the books on colored people seem to be the only ones translated into Spanish.”⁵⁴ He cites two books in particular that focus on the exoticism of black people, William Seabrook’s account of Haitian voodoo in *Magic Island* and Julie Peterkin’s Pulitzer Prize-winning account of African Americans living in the South Carolina Low Country, *Scarlet Sister Mary*. What troubles Hughes most, however, is that there is “nothing by colored writers themselves.” And to correct for that he recommends Walter White’s *Fire in the Flint*, an account of a young black doctor who returns to his southern roots to help battle segregation and racism, and James Weldon Johnson’s autobiography *Along This Way*.

Hughes spends the entire article chronicling all the various forms of African American popular culture that are consumed in Spain. Although these lists are significant in that they reveal an acceptance of black culture, they are also a red herring. Hughes uses these arts and sports references to set up his final point, which is that “in Spain, the most interesting colored people one meets . . . are not prizefighters, or writers, or performers in theaters. They’re men with uniforms on.”⁵⁵ And it is here that Hughes most explicitly lays out his populist agenda. He notes the diverse geographic representation of the soldiers: St. Louis, Chicago, Harlem, Panama City, and Havana. He then concludes:

Those you never read of in any book. (But you will, in due time, no doubt.) They’re in the International Brigade. . . . And they’re just people from various corners of the world who’ve come to help the “just people” of Spain in their fight with the folks with big names.⁵⁶

By juxtaposing these “no name” volunteers with the celebrities in African American arts and sports, and then saying the volunteers are “the most interesting,” Hughes elevates the social and political status of the common man and demonstrates his strongly held belief—and his journalistic conviction—

that those who will do the most good will be those who are the least known.

ADVOCACY AND THE COMMONPLACE

As Hughes pointed out in many of his articles, the fight for freedom in Spain was symbolic for many African Americans of the struggle for freedom and equality in the United States. This was clear to most of his readers in the United States because as they were reading his reports from Madrid and Barcelona, they were also following the case of the Scottsboro Boys as it entered its sixth year; the debate and ultimate failure of the Costian-Wagner Anti-Lynching Law that was drafted but failed to receive support from President Roosevelt; and the ascension of Hugo Black—a one-time member of the Ku Klux Klan who while a US senator had filibustered and effectively killed an anti-lynching bill—to the Supreme Court.⁵⁷ All of these stories made front-page news in the *Baltimore Afro-American*.⁵⁸

The paper also had an internationalist outlook and often hired stringers to report on events across the globe. Langston Hughes was perhaps their most famous part-time hire. Although his journalism fits in with a long tradition of first-person, subjective narration in the black press, Hughes's reportage during the Spanish Civil War differed from the work of other African Americans at the paper in the same way the work of his white counterparts in Spain—George Orwell, Martha Gellhorn, and Ernest Hemingway, among others—differed from the conventional coverage in the mainstream press: the immersive, even participatory nature of the reporting combined with the employment of literary devices in the storytelling. His focus on the everyday experiences of average African Americans serving in Abraham Lincoln Battalion of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War is significant for what it tells us about the relationship between ordinariness and empathy, how the commonplace has the power to engage our subjectivities and expand our conceptions of community. In that sense, his work aligns with other authors of early American literary journalism from Stephen Crane to James Agee to Joseph Mitchell. However, Hughes's work diverges from theirs in that it occurs under the editorial aegis of advocacy.

Advocacy is a foundational part of the black press, whose historical *raison d'être* has been to deliver “messages in unity to [its] readers, deliver them with passion and emotion, and let white editors and citizens know that black citizens were humans who were being treated unfairly.”⁵⁹ The activist angle that Hughes promotes in his articles is not the characteristic that makes his work literary journalism.⁶⁰ Equally, the connection to advocacy should not *preclude* his stories, or stories from other African American writers, from being considered literary journalism. Scholars have debated the acceptance of advocacy in

the genre, and they must consider Hughes's promotion of African American civil rights and his declarations against fascism abroad and racism at home in their historical and cultural context the same way that the composite characters created in the 1940s by John Hersey ("Joe Is Home Now"), Joseph Mitchell ("Old Mr. Flood"), and A.J. Liebling ("Colonel Stingo") are accepted in the canon of literary journalism because the sin of syntheses had not yet been codified in the professional practice of magazine journalism.⁶¹ Hughes's reportage from the Spanish Civil War certainly demonstrates a point of view, but then again, so does Orwell's and Gellhorn's. What's important to note is that Hughes is transparent about his perspective, which makes his subjectivity much less pernicious than that of other journalists, literary or otherwise, who feign being a "candid observer" and use a guise of neutrality to appeal "to people whose pride is their no-nonsense connoisseurship of fact."⁶²

THE MILTON HERNDON STORY

Hughes's most powerful piece of literary journalism comes in a later story that depicts the death of Lincoln Battalion member Milton Herndon who was killed in an attack on Saragossa on Saturday, October 16, 1937. Milton Herndon was the brother of the African American political activist Angelo Herndon, who was arrested in 1932 for leading a hunger strike on the steps of an Atlanta courthouse. Angelo Herndon wanted to draw attention to the plight of unemployed blacks in the South; instead, he was held for eleven days without charges before "prosecutors dusted off a Reconstruction law providing the death penalty for 'any attempt . . . to induce others to join in any combined resistance to the lawful authority of the State.' In all its 66 years no one had ever been convicted under that statute." An all-white jury convicted him of violating the anti-insurrection law, citing the Communist pamphlets found in his possession. He was sentenced to serve between eighteen and twenty years on a Georgia chain gang. A five-year appeals battle ensued, culminating with a Supreme Court decision overturning Herndon's conviction and ruling the Georgia statute unconstitutional because it violated "guarantees of liberty embodied in the 14th Amendment."⁶³

Angelo Herndon's trial was a *cause célèbre* in labor and Communist circles during the mid-1930s. His brother Milton was not as publicly active as his brother. He was a Works Progress Administration worker before enlisting in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion. And when he was killed, his death was seen as significant only in relation to his brother's public court battle. It garnered three paragraphs on page sixteen of the *New York Times*. Under the headline "Milton Herndon Dies in Loyalist Attack" the subhead read "Brother of Angelo, Freed from Georgia Chain Gang, Is One of Nine Americans Slain." The

first paragraph of the staff report gave word of his death—once again, via the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade—and then noted his relationship to Angelo, who received as many sentences as his slain brother. The second paragraph noted Milton's battle history in Spain and then listed his surviving family members. The final paragraph was devoted to listing the names and hometowns of the other eight Americans killed in Saragossa.

By comparison, Hughes's story "Milt Herndon Died Trying to Rescue Wounded Pal," published in the *Afro-American* on January 1, 1938, gives a personal and humanizing account of Milton, not Angelo. A sense of familiarity is first established with the headline where Milton is shortened to "Milt" and the object of his heroism is presented as "Pal." Like his earlier stories from Barcelona, Hughes begins the piece with a suspense-filled narrative lede: "It was quiet on the front. No action. Our attack was over. Silence in the blanket of a rainy night in a valley where perhaps twenty-thousand men lie."⁶⁴ Here his realistic portrayal of waiting in the rain connects readers with the misery of those "twenty-thousand" other soldiers. Hughes admits that he was initially interested in this story because he was a friend of Angelo, and then confesses, "I never knew Milton." Yet the story of Herndon's death becomes significant for Hughes not because of his friendship with Angelo, but because it illustrates the unifying power of shared ideals. In death, Milt Herndon becomes a symbol of racial unity, someone who retained his black identity while bridging the races to fight a common enemy.

Hughes structures the story around his mission to find the two men who were with Herndon when he died. His quest, however, is perpetually delayed by the heavy rain and booming artillery in the distance. Finally a truck pulls up and the soldiers Hughes is looking for appear. They are Aaron Johnson, a black man from Los Angeles, and Hjalmar Sankari, a Scandinavian-American residing in New York City. At first they are hesitant and resist opening up to Hughes, who confesses "it was a rather halting interview." When he finally gains the trust of the two soldiers, they open up completely, and Hughes hears harmony:

"Milt Herndon! He died like this," they said. Sometimes one talked, sometimes the other. One answered a question, another added a phrase. Two voices in the night, a colored voice and a white voice. Two American voices telling me how Milton Herndon died.⁶⁵

Through these otherwise unheralded men, Hughes is able to construct a resonant scene about the possibilities of racial hope. It is a moment when America, not Spain, embodies a place of racial harmony.

Before the men are trucked back to the front, Sankari tells Hughes, "The

men liked him. He had both Americans and English under him, and we all liked him.” Johnson then adds that he and Herndon were the only two African Americans in the company and that despite this minority, Herndon convinced the unit to name the machine gun company after Frederick Douglass. Johnson recalls that Herndon had told the company about Douglass and then says, “Yesterday Ethiopia. Today, Spain. Tomorrow, maybe America. Fascism won’t stop anywhere—until we stop it.”⁶⁶ Here Milt Herndon’s story takes on a larger significance. He is not only a brave opponent of fascism, but he is a model for African Americans to connect their history to the present. Hughes concludes his story by pulling the reader aside and saying, “You see, he understood the connection between the enemy at home and the enemy in Spain: They are the same enemy.”⁶⁷ In making this explicit connection, Hughes speaks directly to black readers in America, instructing them to understand that the racism they experience at home is part of a global nexus of prejudice. Hughes does not mention any international efforts on behalf of the United States and Europe to come to the aid of Spain; instead, he shows the death and destruction wrought by Franco and emphasizes the volunteers coming to stop it, thus tacitly condemning nations for not providing a systematic response. Milt Herndon is a martyr to this ideal.

For many African Americans, the Second Italo-Ethiopian War and the Civil War in Spain were as personally and politically significant as the two world wars that bookended them. Hughes’s advocacy of military intervention during the Loyalist-Nationalist conflict provides a bridge between Du Bois’s “Close Ranks” editorial in *The Crisis* at the beginning of US involvement in World War I and the *Pittsburgh Courier*’s popular “Double V” campaign that advocated American victory over fascism abroad and African American victory over racism at home during and after World War II. Du Bois’s 1918 editorial, which some critics regarded as insufficiently critical of Jim Crow, announced that “We of the colored world have no ordinary interest in the outcome” of the war with Germany; therefore, “let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy.”⁶⁸ Similarly, Hughes advocated—even celebrated—the military involvement of people of color from not only the United States but also Cuba, the Caribbean, and North Africa. His story “Soldiers from Many Lands United in Spanish Fight” is his most explicit celebration of the multinational, multiethnic International Brigades. He notes that many of the soldiers could not understand each other but were “united only in their antifascist ideal.”⁶⁹ After interviewing its many members, Hughes concludes that they were “a different kind of soldier and a different kind of man.”⁷⁰ And a different kind of soldier

was necessary because if “Fascism creeps across Spain, across Europe, and then across the world, there will be no place left for intelligent young Negroes at all. In fact, no decent place for any Negroes because Fascism preaches the creed of Nordic supremacy and a world for whites alone.”⁷¹ Although Hughes paid tribute to the service of the soldiers in the International Brigades, he was under no illusions about the sad irony of Franco’s employment of the Moors who, Hughes believed, were “shooting the wrong way.”⁷²

The duality of integration and oppression is the defining characteristic of Hughes’s literary journalism from Spain, as well as a significant feature in the *Courier’s* “Double V” campaign four years later. In fact, it is not hard to hear an echo of Hughes (and Du Bois) in the famed letter that James G. Thompson, a Cessna Aircraft Corporation worker from Wichita, Kansas, wrote to the editors at the *Pittsburgh Courier* at the outset of World War II: “I suggest that while we keep defense and victory in the forefront that we don’t lose sight of our fight for true democracy at home. . . . If this V sign means that to those now engaged in this great conflict, then let we colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory. The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second victory over our enemies from within.”⁷³ The *Courier* adopted the slogan and created what was known as the Double V campaign that produced a series of stories and rallied more than 200,000 readers to create memberships pledging support for “a two-pronged attack against our enslavers at home and those abroad who would enslave us.”⁷⁴

The *Afro-American* also vigorously campaigned for United States intervention against Hitler because the editors believed that many blacks would enlist and work toward curbing the Fascist threat, which in turn would aid in equality at home.⁷⁵ Like most black newspapers, the *Afro-American* “believed that equality in the nation’s armed forces was a prerequisite for black civilian freedom and equality.”⁷⁶ Hughes’s articles embody that philosophy. He crafted his stories from Spain with an eye toward narrative and an emphasis on the symbolic significances of the country’s civil war for African Americans. His stories demonstrate the democratic effect of journalistic advocacy. Although this idea sounds like a paradox, it is not. In fact, Hughes operates within this historical tradition of the black press, and by promoting the soldiers’ volunteerism and bravery, he effectively elevates the efforts of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to that of other members of the International Brigades and, several years later, to those serving during World War II.

Still, Hughes’s dispatches ultimately leave the reader somewhere between hope and hopelessness. Throughout the air raids and explosions that rocked Barcelona and Madrid during the three months that Hughes lived there, he cultivated a sense of optimistic realism. He continually asserted that the Loy-

alists would—like Joe Louis—prevail, that political and economic democracy would take root, for racial democracy already had. Still, readers in America knew all too well that for as uplifting as the story of Joe Louis—and Walter Cobb, Ralph Thornton, and Basilio Cuerdo—was, it was always paired and understood within the context of the Scottsboro case, Jim Crow, and the forced conscription of the Moors. This duality is perhaps best illustrated by two of Hughes's most well-known poems, "I, Too" and "A Dream Deferred." The first offers a redemptive story of a man banished to eat in a segregated kitchen after the company comes, but returns after growing strong to deliver a comeuppance to his oppressors: "Besides, / They'll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed— / I, too, am America." But the latter presents a more ominous future for the long-delayed dream of equality, which sags under the weight of its own heavy history. It ends with that last, desperate question, recalling the air raids of Barcelona: "Or does it explode?"

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NOTES

1. Langston Hughes, "The Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 9, *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 152.
2. "Extra Planes, Trains Needed on All Lines," *New York Times*, June 22, 1937, A28.
3. "Louis Knocks Out Braddock in 8th, Wins World Title," *New York Times*, June 23, 1937, A1.
4. "Festive Harlems Celebrate Victory," *New York Times*, June 23, 1937, A30.
5. Larry Schwartz, "'Brown Bomber' Was Hero to All," last modified July 2, 2009, <http://espn.go.com/sportscenury/features/00016109.html>.

6. Ozie Powell is occasionally not linked with the four other defendants who had their charges dropped because although his rape charge was dismissed he pled guilty to slashing the throat of sheriff's deputy Edgar Blalock while in custody, and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

7. The ninth boy, Roy Wright, was found guilty but a mistrial was declared after the jury split on whether to impose the death penalty on a twelve-year-old boy.

8. Langston Hughes, "Justice," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 1, *The Poems: 1921–1940*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 133.

9. Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 14, *Autobiography: I Wonder as I Wander*, ed. Joseph McLaren (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 308.

10. Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 1, *1902–1941: I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 337–338.

11. Specifically, the characteristics outlined in the introductions to *The Literary Journalists: The New Art of Personal Reportage* and *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*, both edited by Norman Sims; *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre*, edited by Thomas B. Connery, and two histories, John C. Hartsock's *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* and Sims's *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*.

12. Lincoln Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York: The Literary Guild, 1931), 317.

13. Edwin H. Ford, *A Bibliography of Literary Journalism in America* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1937), 1.

14. Ronald Weber, quoting Seymour Krim. Ronald Weber, "Some Sort of Artistic Excitement." *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy*, ed. Ronald Weber (New York: Random House, 1974), 25.

15. Norman Denzin, "The New Journalism," in *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1997), 134.

16. Tom Wolfe, "The New Journalism," in *The New Journalism*, eds. Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson (London: Picador, 1974), 33.

17. Norman Sims, *The Literary Journalists: The New Art of Personal Reportage* (New York: Ballantine, 1984), 6.

18. Thomas B. Connery, *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992), 8.

19. In his historiography of the genre, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form*, John Hartsock traces literary journalism's long democratic tradition. And Kathy Roberts Forde has both noted the effects of and advocated for a multi-vocal press in her book *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson v. New Yorker and the First Amendment*.

20. James Carey, "The Press, Public Opinion, and Public Discourse: On the Edge of the Postmodern," in *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, eds. Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine Warren (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 229.

21. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 70.
22. Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News*, 2nd ed., (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 34.
23. Aurora Wallace, "The Black Press Goes to War," in *Newspapers and the Making of Modern America: A History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005), 53.
24. Patrick S. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 123.
25. "Men of the Month," *The Crisis*, March 1918, 230.
26. Michael Thurston, "‘Bombed in Spain’: Langston Hughes, the Black Press, and the Spanish Civil War," in *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Todd Vogel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 140.
27. Joseph McLaren, Introduction, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 1, *Autobiography: I Wonder as I Wander*, ed. Joseph McLaren (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 2.
28. Langston Hughes, "Hughes Finds Moors," 162.
29. Langston Hughes, "Hughes Bombed in Spain," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 9, *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 158.
30. Arnold Rampersad, "Chronology," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 9, *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), xii–xiii. Hughes did publish pieces on Haiti in the Communist magazine *New Masses* in 1931, but they are more aligned with his experiential travel writing than with the reporting and interviewing he undertakes six years later in Spain.
31. Hughes, "Hughes Finds Moors," 164.
32. Hayward Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American: 1892–1950* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), xii.
33. George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952), 70.
70. Rampersad, Vol. 1, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 344.
34. Thomas B. Connery, "A Third Way to Tell the Story: American Literary Journalism at the Turn of the Century," in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Norman Sims (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008; 1990), 6.
35. Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 162.
36. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 28.
37. The paper had a reputation for publishing young and then-unknown black artists, including Hughes, Claude McKay and Countee Cullen, all of whom went on to distinguished careers in the arts. Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 14.
38. Langston Hughes, "The Ballad of Ethiopia," in *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: ‘This Ain’t Ethiopia, But It’ll Do,’* ed. Danny Duncan Collum (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), 109.
39. Langston Hughes, "‘Organ Grinder’s Swing’ Heard Above Gunfire in Spain," in *The Collected*

- Works of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 9, *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 166.
40. Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 131.
 41. Hughes, "Hughes Finds Moors," 161.
 42. Thurston, "Bombed in Spain," 149.
 43. Hughes, "Hughes Finds Moors," 162.
 44. Hughes, "Hughes Finds Moors," 161.
 45. Thurston, "Bombed in Spain," 152.
 46. Hughes, "Hughes Finds Moors," 161.
 47. *Ibid.*, 162.
 48. Hughes, "Organ Grinder's Swing," 165.
 49. *Ibid.*, 165.
 50. *Ibid.*, 166.
 51. *Ibid.*, 166.
 52. *Ibid.*, 167.
 53. *Ibid.*, 168.
 54. *Ibid.*, 167.
 55. *Ibid.*, 168.
 56. *Ibid.*, 169.
 57. While serving on the Supreme Court, Justice Black supported *Brown v. Kansas Board of Education* and later apologized for his membership in the Klan saying, "I would have joined any group in order to get more votes."
 58. Thurston, "Bombed in Spain," 149.
 59. Charles Simmons, *The African American Press: A History of News Coverage During National Crises* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 5.
 60. It is literary journalism because he combines deeply reported and observed material with literary techniques like symbolism, metaphor, narrative, and allegory.
 61. Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 177.
 62. Hugh Kenner, "The Politics of Plain Style," in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Norman Sims (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 187.
 63. "Red Black and Georgia," *Time*, May 3, 1937, accessed February 1, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,745014,00.html>.
 64. Langston Hughes, "Milt Herndon Died Trying to Rescue Wounded Pal," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 9, *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 182.
 65. *Ibid.*, 183.
 66. *Ibid.*, 184.
 67. *Ibid.*, 185.
 68. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks," *The Crisis* 16, no. 3 (July 1918), 505.
 69. Langston Hughes, "Soldiers from Many Lands United in Spanish Fight," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 9, *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and*