



“I Built My Hut near the Congo”: Langston Hughes’s Aesthetic Debt to Africa

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ABSTRACT

Langston Hughes is undoubtedly the most famous African America poet. However, while critical studies of Hughes and his poetry have generally focused on his contributions as a pivoted figure during the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties and the equally remarkable Black Arts movement of the sixties, surprisingly not much attention -- if any -- has been paid to his lyrics which celebrate Africa and its great cultural traditions. Despite the immense contribution of George E. Kent, Richard K. Barksdale, Akiba Sullivan Harper, R. Baxter Miller and others to Hughes scholarship generally, a great deal still needs to be done, especially with respect to the poet’s adaptation of aesthetic material from the African world view to illuminate his verse. True, images of Africa predominate in Hughes’s poetry, but neither these images nor the poet’s message which exploits them, have received serious critical considerations. This essay therefore aims to examine how Langston Hughes employs specific themes and images which recall or echo Africa, not only because they shed significant light on his cultural heritage, but more importantly, it is by discussing them that the full range of his poetic vision can be better measured and appreciated.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike his contemporaries of the Harlem Renaissance period, especially Countee Cullen and Claude McKay -- who often fantasized or romanticized Africa in their verse -- Langston Hughes was no stranger to that continent which he visited several times between 1923 and 1967¹ when he died suddenly from complications following surgery. But it cannot be argued with conviction that those visits alone inspired his genuine love and commitment to African cultural values. On the contrary, his desire to explore poetic themes and images which capture the richness of Africa is apparently borne out of three principal considerations. First, the vision of Africa, what he calls

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the "Motherland" and the "Real Thing"² offered the poet those things which he seemed to have missed dearly in America, particularly racial pride and a feeling of self-worth.³ Second, Langston Hughes was able to see for himself - through direct physical experience -- the richness of Africa which for centuries was distorted, denigrated and reviled by European colonizers, explorers, and historians.⁴ A third reason, which is closely bound up with the second, was the need to correct the inaccuracies and misrepresentations of the truth which the early European writers perpetrated about Africa and its people.

Finally, it can be argued that Hughes must have decided to explore the African flora and fauna as a framework for his poetic art in order to counter the often-held notion that the African American, unlike the other major ethnic groups in the United States -- particularly the American Indian, the Chicano, and the Asian American -- has no language and no distinct culture of his own. Thus by discussing, for example, the theme of the African oral matrix as a component of the African American poetic tradition, Hughes not only seeks to highlight the integrative role of the African American culture, but aims to show that his people, that is, the African Americans, have a rich oral tradition. This essay will therefore also discuss the thematic link between the African orature and the African American tradition in the context of Hughes's aestheticism.

IMAGES OF AFRICAN IN HUGHES'S VERSE

But what particular ethos inspired the images of Africa which one finds very rampantly in Langston Hughes's poetry? First is the need to document the black man's struggles and aspirations through the ages. And nowhere is this theme better illustrated than in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (*Crisis*, January 1921), the poem from which my essay partly derives its title:

.....

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers

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My soul has grown deep like the rivers⁵

In this poem, which Langston Hughes composed in 1920 aboard the Mississippi on his way to Mexico and which was dedicated to W.E.B. Du Bois, the poet employs images and symbols which reflect his deep knowledge of the African cosmogony and history. One such image is “rivers”: the reference to the Euphrates, the Nile, and the Congo suggests the poet’s awareness of the fact that, for ages, the destiny of Africa was inexorably bound up with the fortunes of these rivers. The word “rivers” not only serves as a metaphor for the ups and downs, the rise and fall of the water element as it navigates its pathways through nature, but it clearly symbolizes the travails of the African American since his centrifugal journey from African to the Americas.

The expression, “my soul has grown deep like the rivers,” is symbolic and interesting on two counts: on the negative side it suggests the sufferings and humiliations of the African American -- both in body and spirit -- in his relationship with other racial groups with whom, by sheer force of circumstance, he has had to mingle and live. On the positive side it connotes the fortitude with which he has been able to weather the storms of racism in all its ramifications, so that, in effect, his spirit has grown solid and formidable like the rock. Furthermore, the imagery “soul” has some elements of transcendence, for, it is the spirit of the dead -- that is, the sanctified dead -- that ultimately will be transformed into a soul.

Another effective use of African imagery in the poem, although set against a background of Abraham Lincoln’s plea for the emancipation of the slaves, is to be found in the expression “I heard the singing of the Mississippi.” It serves as a powerful reminder of the blues and the spirituals, the depth of their impact, and the tremendous role they played during the African American’s moments of joy and sorrow. The slaves, for example, were noted for the lyricism of their songs which accentuated or mitigated their joy or sorrow, whether at home or in the cotton plantations.

Nor can we fail to be moved by the immediacy and deep impact of the phrase, “the flow of human blood in human veins,” perhaps the most remarkable imagery in the entire poem. It points up Langston Hughes’s power of observation and reflection, and his physical and emotional experiences: for instance, right from the time he was captured as a slave in Africa, through his journey on the high seas, until his arrival in the New World where his struggle for socio-economic and political survival has been dogged by nothing else other than the pigments of his skin color. These experiences, and the images they suggest, are profound, deep and universal in their intensity. By effectively employing images and symbols which are rooted in African flora and fauna, Langston Hughes not only brings a fresh awareness and understanding to them, he also effectively captures our imagination.

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Apart from the theme of the African American's perennial struggle for social justice, which dates to antediluvian times, and which started from Africa, a second major theme which features in Langston Hughes's verse, is that of racial pride. The reasons for Langston Hughes's celebration of this theme are not hard to find. For example, all through recorded history, blackness -- one of the distinguishing features of the African American -- was not only reviled but was perceived as a metaphor for evil and other negative phenomena. Consequently, the African American, who was brought to America from Africa as slave, was not only treated with scorn and derision, but he was made to feel as if he was a second class citizen.⁶ The chief cause of this humiliating treatment can be traced to the fact that Africa, his original birthplace, was for centuries characterized by Western historians as the "Dark Continent," because, in their opinion, it was not only inhabited by black people who were created to be permanent hewers of wood and drawers of water, but whose people had no culture and no history. Thus, it is partly the desire to correct the distortions of the truth about Africa,⁷ as perpetrated by the Western historians and writers on one hand, and the necessity to restore dignity and a sense of self-worth to the black man on the other, that Langston Hughes continually celebrates blackness and racial pride in his poetry.

In his treatment of the theme of racial pride, Langston Hughes not only employs specific images designed to change some of the negative stereotypes traditionally associated with Africa and Africans, but more importantly he explores those virtues that would restore greatness, beauty, or integrity to the African American as a human being. Consequently, images and concepts of Africa, the "Negro," blackness and darkness are frequently and delicately woven into the fabric of his poetry in order to give them Hellenic treatment, especially since these concepts and images -- perhaps more than any other -- have traditionally suffered denigration in the hands of Western critics. A poem in which Hughes celebrates the theme of racial pride is "Negro" (*Crisis*, 1922):

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black
Black like the depths of my Africa

I've been a slave:

...

I've been a worker:

...

I've been a singer

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...
I've been a victim:

...
I am a Negro:
 Black as the night is black,
 Black like the depths of Africa.(24)

In the poem above Hughes documents the various stages in which the African American has found himself in human history, namely, as slave, worker, singer, and victim, but in each of these positions he has prevailed with dignity. The tone of the poem is dramatic but it is also defined by courage, self-confidence and integrity. Furthermore, the protagonist -- that is, the "Negro," long denigrated and maligned -- is proud to be who he is, for, in both the opening and closing stanzas he projects a dynamic ego with ironic realism.

The African American's place, the poet avers, right from biblical times when he served Caesar through the era of Washington down to our own contemporary period, has been the same: static. The fact that the unfolding events of history through the centuries have changed through space and time -- except the place of the African American -- gives a grim ironic quality to this lyric, an irony resolved only because the protagonist is a celebrant without bitterness or animosity towards the human society that has long ignored and despised him. The poem, thus, is not only a rejection of stasis and stagnation, to which the African American was for long confined by painful history, but a celebration of selfhood, a glorification of individualism. The consummate employment of the first person pronoun, "I", suggests the protagonist's precision and assured self-confidence.

The poem's celebratory quality, however, transcends all elements of individual configuration; it is, much like Walt Whitman who, Hughes admired, a celebration of the communal or universal which, in this instance, is the entire black race. There is a Romantic, liberating quality to the poem's fundamental structure. Consequently, in contrast to the traditional stereotype which has attended the words, "Africa," "Negro" and "Black," here in this poem Hughes overturns or transforms them to encompass the celebration of their essential quality. For Hughes, therefore, these images connote the virtues of grace, beauty, and vital energy. Their cumulative employment at several points in the poem is an announcement of their relative significance suggesting that, in fact, the African American deserves the recognition and the respect long denied him.

Hughes similarly celebrates the theme of racial pride in "Dream Variations," "Afro-American Fragment," and "My People." In "Dream Variations" (*Current Opinion*, September 1924). Hughes, in almost Blakean tone, says that while he cherishes several things including the freedom of the wind, the bright day, the warm sunshine and the cool evening, nothing captivates him more than the "night." His love for the night is centered around its inner contemplative serenity and its beautiful dark color which

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(apparently) reminds him of his blackness. The variations which the poet creates between the concluding lines of the first stanza:

Beneath a tall tree
While night comes gently,
 Dark like me --
This is my dream! (40)

And the closing lines of the second stanza:

A tall, slim tree ...
Night comes tenderly
Black like me (40) vividly illustrates the degree to which he finds joy and satisfaction in the image of the thing he loves, that is, "night." Here, Man and Nature are united in the spirit of dazzling color, but it is Man that is pulling this string of elemental relationship.

The image of the "tree," which is employed in both stanzas of "Dream Variation," is significant: it suggests the tree of life which needs proper nourishment and care. Equally important is the act that this "tree" is both "slim" and "tall," respectively symbols of health and growth. Thus, by implication, the African American will fully realize his sense of being, that is, the American dream, if he is accepted for who he is despite his skin color, and if society offers him equal access to the resources necessary for growth and development. Hughes's vision of racial pride, articulated in his celebration of the union between the protagonist and "night," is remarkable: it is not only democratic but it brings into focus the world of communal values which is widely popular in black Africa.

Hughes's projection of the African consciousness in "Afro American Fragment" (*Crisis*, August 1922), is done with restrained exhilaration and nostalgia:

So long,
So far away
Is Africa.
.....

Subdued and time-lost
Are the drums--and yet
Through some vast mist of race
There comes this song
I do not understand,
This song of atavistic land,
Of bitter yearnings lost
Without a place--
So long,
So far away
Is Africa's
Dark face. (129)

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The significant African images in the above poem are “songs,” drums,” “atavistic,” and “dark.” Songs and drums are important instruments of music and dance, which are generally associated with the ancient civilization of Africa. The word “atavistic” recalls the virtue of ancestral origins and, in this context, it alludes to Africa, the original birthplace of the black population, where people not only revere the honorable dead, but where they cherish family ties and past civilizations -- values which are equally significant in the African American culture.

What impact does the word “Dark” have? Despite the poem’s agonizing tone -- due apparently to the degree to which the African cultural heritage has been distorted or lost to history -- there is a triumphant quality to it which is soberly imaged in “Africa’s/Dark face.” Much like in the previous two poems discussed above, that is, “Negro” and “Dream Variations,” in this poem Hughes’s primary interest centers around the beauty of “Africa’s/Dark face.” In contrast therefore to the negative stigma traditionally associated with the word “Dark,” Hughes’s employment of the word here marks a turning point”: it calls attention to its immutable mythic beauty, of which the black race should be justly proud.

But nowhere, however, is Hughes’s sense of racial pride better dramatized and celebrated than in the lyric which he affectionately titles “My People” (*Crisis*, June 1922). The dominant image of the poem, “night,” is vigorously highlighted and lauded. For the poet, appropriately, the word “night” symbolizes Africa, its “people,” their “faces,” “eyes,” “souls” and those things which animate them, including the “sun and the “stars:”

The night is beautiful
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people. (36)

However, Hughes’s poetic sensibility transcends racial pride”: it encompasses the theme of the celebration of all multi-cultural voices and the virtues they cherish. In “Sun Song” (*Crisis*, 1927), for example, the poet invites all humanity to converge and enjoy the beautiful “song” and the illuminating sunshine:

Sun and softness,
Sun and the beaten hardness of the earth,
Sun and song of all the sun-stars
Gathered together --
Dark ones of Africa,
I bring you my songs
To sing on the Georgia roads. (122)

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Other than capturing the splendid moments of human affections, Hughes, in this poem, emphasizes the inter-connection between two continents: Africa and America. The "song," which the African American brought from Africa to Georgia in the United States during the key-days of human slavery, underscores this link. Other images of the poem, particularly the "roads," the "sun," the "stars" and the "earth" (which are of universal significance) not only draw attention to the integrative link between Africa and the Americas, but they symbolize the bond between all human cultures and civilizations whose fortunes are determined, in one way or another, by these wonderful phenomena.

This brings us to the fourth major theme which Hughes explores in order to capture the African sensibility in his verse, that is, the viability or place of the oral tradition, which he delineates mostly through the employment of story telling. The place of the story, as a fulcrum for promoting cultural values, cannot be overestimated.⁸ Hughes employs story telling for his poetic structure in his lyrics. This literary device has several advantages. For instance, through it he creates for his poetics and authentically African American aesthetic voice while bringing into our consciousness those elements of the African oral corpus from which he appropriates his material.

Further, the literary device has the potential of deflating the fallacious theories which Western writers had perpetrated about Africa, its folklore, and its topography which is famous for its wildlife and country scenery. This is particularly true since the stories Hughes incorporates are not only didactic but inspire traditional virtues like courage, patience, perseverance, and honesty. A possible rationale for Hughes's employment of story telling as poetic structure is perhaps the desire to challenge the preponderance or dominance of the Western literary canon which boasts of several aesthetic forms. For Hughes the literary matrix is particularly expedient when viewed against a backdrop of the fact that other ethnic groups in the United States -- e.g., the Native American and the Chicano -- have employed it to great advantage in their work. Hughes's subtle use of this poetic device is informed by a penetrating psychological insight which enables his reader to capture the African American world view of art, culture, life style, etc., which these story poems illuminate.

We shall illustrate our discussion of this theme by examining three poems, namely, "Aunt Sue's Stories", "Mother to Son," and "The Negro Mother." In "Aunt Sue's Stories" (*Crisis*, July 21), Hughes portrays a woman, Sue, who realizes the need to offer her child a guiding hand through stories drawn from the slave narrative:

Black slaves
Working in the hot sun,
And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night.

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And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river
Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of old Aunt Sue's voice,
Mingle themselves softly
In the dark shadows that cross and recross Aunt Sue's stories.(23)

The underlying moral of Sue's stories, which are told during the "Summer nights on the front porch," centers around the fact that because the black man's tragic past presents a record of struggles and stresses -- suggested by the fact that he was not only enslaved but subjected to "Working in the hot sun" and to "Walking in the dewy night" -- the young child, by implication, should not expect that his life would be any easier. Sue's injunction to the child, that is, to be prepared against the hazards of tomorrow, is implicit.

However, in the poem "Mother to Son" (*Crisis*, December 1922):

.....
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Causes you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now --
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ani't been no crystal stair.(30)

And in "The Negro Mother" (*Selected Poems*, 1959):

.....
Remember the whip and the slave's track.
Remember how the strong in struggle and strife
Still bar you the way, and deny you life--
But march ever forward, breaking down bars.
Look ever upward at the sun and the stars
Oh, my dark children, may my dreams and my prayers
Impel you forever up the great stairs--
For I will be with you till no white brother
Dares keep down the children of the Negro Mother.(156)

the protagonists' message, though similar to that of "Aunt Sue's Stories," is more pointed, profound and philosophical. The striking African images in the three poems cited above are "dark," "black," "night," "slaves," and "sun." But more than that, however, are the parallels which can be drawn between the African oral narrative and the African American oral corpus. For example, the allusion to slavery and the perennial struggle for existence dramatized in the three poems, is reminiscent of the kind of stories which African parents often relate to their children about the evils of European colonialism and why they must work hard in order to regain lost glory and establish self-respect. There are other interesting parallels: The humor and colloquialism of the

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lyric "Mother to Son"; vividly captures the witty and vernacular tone of the peasantry in indigenous African communities. Similarly, Sue's narrative, which takes place during the summer nights in "Aunt Sue's Stories," recalls the dry season moonlight nights of Africa when parents often relate didactic stories designed to educate their children about the norms of society and the appropriate modes of behavior.

CONCLUSION

The interesting question now is, what do we gain from Langston Hughes's poetry which reflects the African consciousness? First, the organic unity of Hughes's verse is established around the themes of the struggle for social justice, racial pride, and the grandeur of the oral tradition -- themes which, while employing images and symbols rooted in the African flora and fauna, yet offer us the perspectives with which to appreciate the subtlety of his imagination and the range and depth of his lyric insights. Second, Hughes functions as the recorder of lost memories, thereby enhancing poetic discourse and aesthetic awareness, perhaps to a level hitherto unrecognized in the African American literary tradition. Finally, he engages us in a dialogue about those compelling aspects of African life which find their place in the African American experience -- e.g., life-affirming virtues like fortitude, endurance, and hard work -- which will always reinforce our collective values.

We have also demonstrated in this essay that Hughes's poetic art embraces his Africanity, and explained how he employs various poetic and rhetorical motifs to illuminate his work. Our mode of analysis and interpretation, which consists of a careful examination of crucial particulars hitherto ignored or overlooked by critics, should enable the objective reader to appreciate more deeply Hughes's poetic craftsmanship and the evolution of his creative sensibility. This critical formula further attests to Hughes's ethos which finds supreme expression in his abiding love for ancestral lores and cultural traditions which, in the context of his African connections, are of a far deeper reality than have been previously recognized.

There is a profound sense in which this study is also significant: it has expanded the corpus of Hughes's literary criticism, and the respective thematic structures, concepts and other appurtenances exploited in his lyricism, by virtue of their diversity and linguistic range, should serve as important literary props or reminders in any meaningful evaluation of other writers -- particularly African American authors -- who admire or follow in the tradition of this great poet and the ideals which his verse symbolizes.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Faith Berry, who, in Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem (183), notes that Hughes made several visits to Africa during his lifetime (322-323). Hughes's initial visits to Africa were motivated by curiosity and a patriotic desire to know something about his ancestral African homeland -- its wonders, beauty, cultures, history, etc. Berry records the following account from a letter which Hughes wrote to his mother, Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes Clark, dated July 3, 1923, about his impression of the African continent:
Dear Mother: This morning I had my first sight of Africa. At sunrise we were running along the coast—a coast of long low hills and strange jagged rocks, and now and then the tall silhouette of a palm tree against the sun. We were close enough to see the strange white houses on the hills and the flags on the French forts. This is the state where Siki, the black French boxer came from...But everybody is different and you can't tell a woman from a man. You ought to see them. (40)
However, Hughes's visits to Africa later in life were undertaken often at the instance of the United States government, such as the years following 1960 when "he found himself going to Europe and Africa on several trips on cultural grants from the State Department" (Berry, 322). At other times Hughes visited Africa in order to promote or participate in literary events, as, for example, in 1960 when he attended the Black Arts Literary Conference in Dakar, Senegal, where he was hosted by the Senegalese poet, Mamadou Traore-Diop (see Mamadou Traore-Diop, 1).
2. See Arnold Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes; Before and Beyond Harlem, Vol. 1. I. Too, Sing America. (73).
3. Jeannette S. White and Clement A. White suggest that Hughes must have found himself in a dilemma as he adjusts to a paradoxical state of injustice: "Guillen and Hughes, while allowing that there is a history of oppression, never brought themselves to reject their European heritage" (42).
4. In The Elizabethan Image of Africa, Eldred Jones quotes Pliny to illustrate how classical writers described the physical features and characteristics of the interior people of Africa: "Of the Ethiopians there are diverse forms and kinds of men. Some there toward the east that have neither nose nor nostrils, but the face all full. Others that have no upper lip, they are without tongues, and they speak by signs"(5).
5. Arnold Rampersad, The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (1995), 23. All citations of Hughes's poems or sections thereof are from this

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volume and are incorporated in the text, followed by the page number(s).

6. As Worley and Perry, Jr., remark: "The institution of slavery influenced how Americans viewed African Americans--as property to be managed and controlled... African Americans were considered by whites to be unintelligent or animal-like"(1).
7. See Jones (5).
8. Citing from Lincoln's Native American Renaissance, for instance, Woodward notes: "in traditional native cultures, the past is incorporated into the present by story...stories historically mark and recount events worth remembering, so that culture extends history as collective experience, across spaces between peoples" (126).

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