Equality and Identity in the Poems of Langston Hughes

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Image title page: Langston Hughes, Pastel by Winold Reiss (c. 1925)
Introduction

America, land of the free, was for a long time selective in who it granted that freedom and who was to accept a second-rate, subservient place in society. The arrival of the first ships with captured Africans in 1619 marked the beginning of the construction of an economy built on slave labour (Berlin 50, 68). Descendents of the people brought to America by slave traders eventually diminished the need to procure labourers from the African continent but the slavery system remained in place until the Civil War (1861-1865). Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist, concluded in his 1944 study “An American Dilemma” that “The Negro was brought to America for the sake of the white man’s profit. He was kept in slavery for many generations in the same interest.” (Commager 2). The Civil War liberated the African American through a number of Amendments to the Constitution. The 13th, 14th, and 15th amendment were created to ensure the end of slavery and the right to vote for all males over the age of 21. These new laws gave the African Americans control over their personal lives for the first time.

However, while the laws changed, society did not. Some twenty years after the Civil War Frederick Douglass, one of the most esteemed African American intellectuals of the time, recognised that “The color line meets him (the African American) everywhere, and in a measure shuts him out from all respectable and profitable trades and callings. In spite of all your religion and laws he is a rejected man.” (Commager 14). The hostility present in society continued unremittingly for decades, leaving America with a segregated society and the African American as a second-rate citizen. Protest came from African American leaders such as the aforementioned Frederick Douglass and later Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du

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1 I will use the term African American wherever possible, but, as it is a relatively new term, many of the quotes and sources use other terms to refer to African Americans. I mean no offense in and if these words are viewed as hurtful or offensive I apologize.
Bois. Each had their own views on how the formerly oppressed could become a valued member of society. The ways in which they differed is reminiscent of the many warring views present in America in those days. Douglass was a former slave and an active Abolitionist (Reynolds 103). Washington argued that African Americans should not demand equal rights and opportunities, including the right to vote and good quality education, before reaching economic independence. Du Bois disagreed strongly, arguing that African Americans needed leaders and that those leaders could only be trained through good quality schooling (Du Bois 74, Moore xvii). However, due to segregation this was scarcely available and despite the efforts of men such as Du Bois, America remained overtly racist until the second half of the twentieth century.

An exception to this was the Harlem Renaissance, a time in which it became fashionable to enjoy the musical and literary talents of African Americans. One of these talented individuals was Langston Hughes, a young up-and-coming writer who became an active participant in the Renaissance. Sometimes referred to as “poet laureate” (Conarroe 228), he was widely appreciated for his work. The literary success he achieved during the Renaissance helped him establish a career that would last until his death in 1967. Although he is mostly remembered for the work he produced during the early years of his career, Hughes proved to be a prolific writer who was always focussed on what he saw and experienced around him in society.

The focus of this dissertation will be on Hughes and his poetical work, specifically his use of the themes of identity and equality as related to race. In his poems Hughes focussed mostly on people, often lower class African Americans. He used his poetry to point out some of the social issues prevalent in America in the twentieth century. These issues could be related to, among others, relationships, housing, racism and difficulties arising from living in a nation separated through Jim Crow rules. The Jim Crow system had an impact on many, if
not all, areas of life, both for white Americans and African Americans. However, while the rules were in favour of those who created and upheld them, white society, the African Americans saw their actions limited in many ways.

What I set out to examine was how Hughes’s work reflected the issues prevalent at that time but also how his work fit in the context in which it was written. This context includes both personal and socio-historical information. Hughes’s career spanned almost half a century and during that time the world changed significantly. Time periods such as the Harlem Renaissance, the increased popularity of communism following the Great Depression, the Second World War and the Civil Rights movement were all important to people on all levels of society. Hughes’s work shows that he was aware and involved with what was going on in society at different times. In terms of the themes I intend to analyze, the use of the notions of identity and equality, there is a clear development that can be traced throughout his career, starting when Hughes was still young. By contextualizing his work the influences that led him through this development can be traced. What will become clear is that Hughes was very much in tune with the development African Americans went through during the decades in which Hughes produced his work. His work in that sense functions as a mirror reflecting what life was like during that time and the development that needed to take place not only for Hughes on a personal level but also for African Americans as a race and American society as a whole.

An important factor I will take into account when analyzing Hughes’s poetry is the work of the aforementioned Dr. Du Bois. As Hughes would later recall “My earliest memories of written words were those of W.E.B. Du Bois and the Bible.” (Rampersad Vol. 1: 19, Conarroe 228) As the author of *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois clearly described the issues African Americans had to suffer from at the beginning of the twentieth century. In a series of essays he addressed a wide variety of problems, ranging from his objections to
Booker T. Washington’s views on the place of African Americans in society to ideas on leadership and what Du Bois saw as the main issues threatening African American life in the twentieth century. The book introduces some of the ideas that have becomes almost synonymous with Du Bois: the idea of double consciousness, of the veil separating the races and of the notion that what would prove to be the main problem of the twentieth century was that of the colour-line (Du Bois 11-14). Du Bois himself describes the experience of double-consciousness as following:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, A Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (12-14)

The idea of the veil separating the race was inspired by an occurrence from Du Bois’s early childhood. He describes the first time he realized he was different from those around him as having occurred after a white girl refused to exchange cards with him on account of his race. “Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the other; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.” (12). He remembers feeling contempt and thereafter attempting to beat his classmates at whatever he could but “the words I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine.” (12). These two notions describe the inability of African Americans to be considered equal to others in America at the beginning of the twentieth century.
Du Bois saw the solution for these issues as lying with the African Americans themselves. He believed leaders should stand up who should give an example to those around them. This meant that good education needed to be available to those suitable: the Talented Tenth (99). This view contrasted the solution offered by Booker T. Washington a few years prior to the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Washington essentially wanted the African Americans to give up many of the privileges won through the Civil War: political power, insistence on civil rights and higher education in return for “industrial education, the cumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South.” (74). Washington believed that African Americans could earn the rights he wished for them to give up only after they gained economic self-reliance. This solution was readily accepted by both the South and the North while the African Americans saw no other option but to submit.

These issues and this socio-historical background form the context in which Hughes began his literary career. What I hope to argue is that Hughes used the notions of identity and equality as related to race throughout his poetical work to establish firstly a sense of identity and secondly to attain the equality he felt due to African Americans both in the eyes of the law and of society. The development he went through as a writer illustrates the development African Americans went through as a race and as individuals.
Chapter 1

Personal and Historical Background

Introduction

To be able to understand Hughes’s use of the racial identity and equality themes, it is important to understand the background and historical context in which he created his poetry. This background is of a twofold nature: a personal background and a socio-historical background. What shows in his work is that as a writer Hughes was very much in touch with the world around him: he discussed social issues through his work and as a whole his work shows that his views on identity, equality and related topics continually developed. The information on which my analysis of his poetical work is based is similarly twofold. The information on his personal background comes mainly from his own autobiographies, *The Big Sea* and *I Wander as I Wonder*, and from the biography written by Arnold Rampersad. Rampersad is the leading scholar on Hughes, both in terms of personal background as well as the work itself. He has written extensively on Hughes, edited parts of *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* and has written forewords and introductions on many books dealing with Hughes’s work. Additional information comes from the books which deal with the time in which Hughes wrote and the issues he dealt with. In terms of socio-historical background there are two main time periods that require attention at this point: the Harlem Renaissance and the Jim Crow Era. These two time periods effectively gave Hughes means and motive to become the writer still known today.

Personal Background

The years leading up to Hughes’s decision to become a professional writer, according to *The Big Sea* shortly after he received the 1931 Harmon Award (CW 13: 249-250), were marked
by change: Hughes moved from city to city and home to home many times, a habit he continued for part of his adult life (53). Born to parents who shortly after his birth decided to part ways, he was raised mainly by his grandmother for the first twelve years of his life (38). Though she offered a sense of constancy this was regularly interrupted by trips with his mother. Furthermore, his grandmother on a regular basis rented out their house to be able to afford the rent (39-40). After his grandmother died Hughes went to live with his mother on a more permanent basis and as a result moved several times within a few years (44). By the time he was seventeen he was living on his own, living on whatever little money he could earn while also graduating from high school (51). His father, with whom he had no contact while growing up, invited him to stay with him in Mexico, first a single summer and later an entire year after Hughes graduated (52, 64, 71). Their relationship was difficult and the only reason Hughes remained in Mexico for as long as he did was that he needed his father to pay the tuition for Colombia University (77). After the first summer in Mexico Hughes realized he greatly disliked his father, going so far as to state that “I hated my father.” (CW 13: 61). This relationship never improved and further deteriorated a few years later when Hughes decided to drop out of Colombia after only a year. Their relationship would thereafter consist of a few letters and Hughes was not surprised when his father did not leave anything to him in his will (CW 13: 85, 14: 286, Rampersad Vol. 1: 298).

Hughes’s relationship with his mother was different. Though she often left him and was less than gracious about his visits with his father, Hughes continued to care for her one way or another her entire life. His mother would often ask for money and, if at all possible, Hughes would give it. A striking example is mentioned in Rampersad’s Life of Langston Hughes where it is explained that his mother refused to go on welfare on account of having a wealthy, famous son (Rampersad Vol.1: 297-8).
Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance

One third of The Big Sea is dedicated to what Hughes calls “the Black Renaissance” and it describes the impressions and experiences Hughes had while being part of what is now known as the Harlem Renaissance. The Renaissance came to full speed at roughly the same time as Hughes moved to New York from Washington. He recalls living in a house with Wallace Thurman and Harcourt Tynes, of which the former bought and published some of Hughes’s work through The Messenger (CW 13:182). This casual method of having one’s stories published was common in those days. “It was the period when the Negro was in vogue.” (178) as Hughes put it and, although his memory of it seems ambivalent, it allowed him to build a solid basis on which to build his life as a writer.

As a cultural phenomenon the Harlem Renaissance stood out for a number of reasons. There is no general consensus concerning the years during which it took place save that it took place between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Great Depression. At the time it was known as the Negro, Black or Harlem Renaissance and some even refused to see it as a renaissance period, since it lasted for only a few years (Singh 3). The gravitational point for the Renaissance was New York, specifically Harlem, but its influence was felt throughout the nation. As a movement it supported and celebrated African American artists in a society hostile towards anyone who could not pass for white American (Wintz 8). It was in fact the first time in history that African Americans could aspire and achieve artistic success on this large a scale. Ironically, however, while the vast majority of the artists was African American, the art produced during this area was bought mostly by the people who could afford to: white Americans. Furthermore, it can even be argued that the Renaissance was enabled by the behaviour of white Americans in the South. Ira Berlin, author of The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations, identifies the Great Migration as occurring between the beginning of the First World War and ending several decades after
World War II. In part due to the hostile environment and in part due to the economic pull of the North thousands of African Americans moved from the South to the cities of the North and the West Coast. During the 1920s an average of 500 African Americans per day moved away from the South and some of these peopled Harlem and provided the Renaissance with an audience (Berlin 154, Ososky 105, Wintz 12).

Hughes and his family were among the many who migrated North, though he was the only one of his family to move to Harlem. The migration in general often occurred with leaps and bounds, moving from city to city until eventually settling down in one of the Northern cities. Hughes and his family moved from Missouri and Kansas to Illinois and later Ohio until eventually Hughes convinced his father to let him enrol in Colombia University, New York (Rampersad Vol. 1 49, CW 13: xi, xii, 77). The allure of the Renaissance was spread among others through The Crisis, the magazine published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This magazine, of which eminent scholar and intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois was editor, was able to reach African Americans nationwide through its publication of essays, articles, poems and short stories for and by African Americans. The Crisis functioned as Hughes’s first professional venue: “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” became his first officially published poem when he sent it to one of the editors of The Crisis, Jessie Fauset, who subsequently published it in June 1921 and requested he send more work (CW 13: 77). The following years Hughes continued to publish his work through The Crisis and thereby created an audience for his 1926 publication of The Weary Blues, his first book of poetry.

The years between these two publications were filled with a year at Colombia, several sea journeys and time spent in France, and functioned as something of an awakening for the emerging writer. His experiences in Africa taught him that African Americans were a race on

\[2\text{ The poems that are important to my line of argument but are not featured in the main text will appear in the Appendix.}\]
their own by African standards. The young writer who so thoroughly related to Africa states two things concerning his experiences with Africa: “But all those days I was anxious to see Africa [...] My Africa, Motherland of the Negro peoples! And me a Negro! Africa! The real thing, to be touched and seen, not merely read about in a book.” and a few lines later “But there was one thing that hurt me a lot when I talked with the people. The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro.” (CW 13: 36). This left him in a state of racial limbo: he was accepted for who he was by neither the Africans nor the Americans. His mixed heritage, a type of heritage that was common among all those who descended from slaves, meant that he was essentially a member of a new race. Europe, on the other hand, taught him that he could be appreciated for himself, his own abilities and talents, regardless of his skin. Europe, specifically Paris, equalled being able to find a job, build relationships, rent a room and share it with a white person without anyone frowning at him because of his skin colour (CW 13: 165).

After these experiences Hughes once more gave in to the pull of Harlem and returned to New York in 1925, after spending time with family in Washington. His fame grew quickly and a year later his first book of poetry was published. Hughes was one of the stars of the Harlem Renaissance, winning several awards for his work, producing poems, essays, short stories, plays and a novel. He gained the attention and friendship of a number of influential people, one of whom was Charlotte van der Veer Quick Mason, “one of the most delightful women I had ever met, witty and charming, kind and sympathetic, very old and white-haired, but amazingly modern in her ideas, in her knowledge of books and of the theatre, of Harlem, and of everything then taking place in the world.” (CW 13: 234). Within months she became his patron, supporting him through a monthly allowance and additional funds if needed. As the Great Depression hit and the Harlem Renaissance died its slow death, Hughes was financially supported and able to live in relative luxury while others like him were forced to
change their lives in order to survive. However, the relationship turned sour when his patron expected a specific kind of writing, a kind Hughes could not deliver. He recounts in *The Big Sea* that:

“She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro – who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa – but I was not Africa.”

(CW 13: 243)

Hughes’s assertion shows that he indeed had realized the distance that lay between him and Africa: he belonged in America regardless of his racial past.

**Beyond the Renaissance**

The hopeful years of the Renaissance gave way to the hopelessness of the Great Depression. Young artists who heretofore had been able to support themselves through the sale of their art were now forced to find other means of supporting themselves. Hughes was among the few who decided to retain their artistic careers. He turned to communism and wrote extensively on the values of the workers world and what could be gained from reforming society. In retrospect this development is hardly surprising, considering Hughes’s poor childhood, his recent falling out with the wealthy Mrs. Mason, and the realities of the Great Depression. If anything, the Great Depression placed further emphasis on the divide created by wealth or the lack thereof. In *The Big Sea* Hughes speaks of being fully aware of the reality of his position: the only reason he was not one of those sleeping on park benches was because of the financial support given to him by Mrs. Mason (CW 13: 239).

In part because of his commitment to communism and to writing he travelled to the Soviet Union and later to Spain as a war correspondent (Conarroe 230). The book of poems
published in 1938, *A New Song*, testifies to Hughes’s belief that a communistic society could be the answer to many of the social issues he identified both in America and the world at large. His goal now became achieving equality for all, regardless of race. However, the Second World War forced him to change his view on communism. Hughes encountered resistance to his views and was forced to repudiate one of his more controversial poems, “Goodbye Christ” (*CW 2: 3*, Rampersad Vol. 1: 390-5). The 1940s saw him change course: he joined the war effort by writing against Hitler and turning his literary gaze on America rather than the world in general. He continued to write prolifically: in addition to four books of poetry, he worked as a columnist for the Chicago *Defender* and produced several plays, short stories and translated work by other writers. By the end of the decade Hughes came under scrutiny for his politically charged work. He is denounced as a communist and is forced to repudiate his views by 1953. His focus on African American issues and art remains clear: he continues to write and functions as editor to several anthologies. The importance of his work in America is first established through his induction into the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1961. A few years later he is further honoured at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Senegal in 1966, confirming the importance of his work both nationally and internationally. The following year Hughes died as the result of medical complications following surgery and his death is followed by the posthumously published *The Panther and the Lash* (*CW 13: xiii-xvi*).

**Jim Crow**

The Jim Crow system permeated all levels of American society from the late nineteenth century until the successes of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s. Hughes, like all other African Americans, experienced the limitations set for him that limited his choices in life. The rules and regulations that would eventually evolve into the Jim Crow system slowly
began coming into place at the end of the nineteenth century. For a brief period of time following the Civil War the former slaves were able to wield influence over their lives, take their own decisions, elect whomever they chose to elect. This new freedom did not last long, especially in the South. The newly free were bullied into submission by their former masters and within a few decades many found themselves subject to a new form of slavery. According to the Constitution they were free, but according to other laws their employers yielded extensive power over those in the sharecropping system (Blackmon 218). Others fell victim to the corrupt justice system and were imprisoned and made to work in mines or on the cotton fields (Berlin 152, 161). Some fifty years after the slaves were freed they were once again living a thoroughly restricted life under a set of rules and regulations that determined what a person’s place in society was based on their race (Boles 336). This meant that African Americans were rarely able to receive higher education: the vast majority of African Americans had a low-paying job and lived off of a meagre pay. W.E.B. Du Bois, the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard, was only able to attend Fisk University, his first college experience, after sponsors had been found willing to financially support him (Lewis 54-5, Wintz 328).

According to James Beeby and Donald G. Nieman’s The Rise of Jim Crow, 1880 – 1920, featured in A Companion to the American South, the cause for the far-reaching segregation and hostility was divers, including economic extortion by White Americans, pseudo-scientific racism, and the new generation of African Americans who refused to accept their pre-described role in especially Southern society, an issue furthered by the fear of the danger African American men posed for white women (Boles 336). Once in place, the Jim Crow system quickly annulled the freedoms gained through the Civil War. Despite the fact that under the constitution African Americans were entitled to the same opportunities as white
Americans they were subject to violence and harassment in many parts of the country when they attempted to benefit from these opportunities.

A significant fact to remember when attempting to ascertain the impact the Jim Crow regulations and the overall inequality had, is the fact that there was no such thing as an African American until the early eighties. The U.S. Census Bureau records show that race became dissociated with skin colour only in the 1980 census. The previous ones asked the participant to enter race or colour. While in 1890 a person could be black, white, mulatto, quadroon or octoroon, by 1930 there was only a single distinction: either a person was fully white or he was not. The influence of a mixed African lineage also mattered for those of Native American descent: if the African characteristics showed a person was considered black, if however he was accepted within the community as Native American he would be registered as such. Essentially the census recorded anyone of mixed heritage, no matter how far removed, as being of another race. It provides a clear image of how important race was during that time: those of pure white ancestry were considered superior and all others as inferior. Following the logic on how to determine whether one is Native American or African American it is easy to conclude that the latter was considered most inferior. Langston Hughes grew up and reached a certain amount of fame in a society which, at large, considered him as the lowest form of humanity.
Chapter 2

Racial Identity and Equality in the Poetry of Langston Hughes between 1921 and 1940

Introduction

The analysis of Hughes’s poetical work in terms of his use of racial identity and equality as a theme will be divided in two parts: this chapter will feature the analysis of his work up until 1940 and the following chapter will analyze the poetical work produced between 1941 and 1967. The decision to separate the work at 1940 is based on a twofold reason: based on content the divide is logical because the focus of his work greatly changed around 1940. Furthermore, Hughes’s literary career spanned just over four decades and 1940 falls in the middle of that stretch of time. In addition to that 1940 is a significant year historically speaking due to the beginning of World War II.

The first twenty years of his career saw Hughes in the throes of finding out who he was as a writer and, moreover, as an African American writer. The poems often deal with an attempt to carve out an identity for oneself, either by looking at a racial past or by looking at the struggles of everyday life and the battle to become more than society allowed the African American citizen to be. This search for identity is closely linked to the struggle to be seen and appreciated for who a person is and what he is capable of rather than being judged solely because of skin colour.

Racial Identity on a Personal Level

While Hughes rarely chose to write about his own personal struggles, he did choose to stand up for his race through his writings. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” made clear from the very
start that Hughes felt proud to be descended from Africans and that he associated himself with the African race in a positive manner. This connection is exemplified by some of the poems featured in *The Weary Blues*. The closing poem featured in the book is called “Poem” and clearly explains how Hughes saw his race:

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.

(CW 1: 41)

The strong sense of relation to “my people” must have developed from early childhood but, taking his early years into consideration, Hughes was essentially raised with an anti-example of what he states in “Poem”. Hughes’s sense of self was influenced by many different factors. As a child growing up in Jim Crow society he will have experienced hostility and racism. Growing up under financially difficult circumstances and in a variety of households he mostly experienced how difficult life could be for African Americans. At the same time, however, Hughes learned to look beyond skin colour from an early age. He recalls in *The Big Sea* that while he was discriminated against during his time at a mostly white school in Topeka, a white classmate stood up for him and through his actions taught him “…not to hate all white people. And ever since, it has seemed to me that most people are generally good, in every race and in every country where I have been.” (CW 13: 38).
The degree to which Hughes accepted people as “generally good” regardless of race or country can to a certain degree be attributed to his father’s view on race. Despite the fact that James Hughes was an African American of mixed lineage, he despised African Americans. When Hughes first went to visit his father in Mexico James Hughes came to pick him up and Hughes records his father’s behaviour on the journey to Mexico. When his father first arrived in Cleveland Hughes had not yet received the news, having recently relocated. His father’s reaction was as follows: ““Just like niggers,” he spat out. “Always moving! Are you ready to go?”” (CW 13: 54). On the train coming through a village in the cotton fields they saw a group of African Americans and Hughes describes his father attitude towards them as contemptuous, saying ““Look at the niggers!”” (CW 13: 56).

This contempt is never present in Hughes’s poetry; rather he expresses deep respect and admiration for his race. “Poem” expresses just that sentiment and it stands out in the collection for different reasons. First there is its simplicity, even when compared to Hughes’s other work. Running only six lines that are almost repetitive in nature, “Poem” sends out an exceedingly clear message: I am proud of my race, my people. This message is also conveyed through the repeated use of the possessive “my people”. This is a far cry from his father’s contemptuous view on African Americans. Furthermore, by connecting the word beautiful three times to different aspects of nature and the phrase “my people” Hughes emphasizes his admiration and the beauty he sees in the African American race. This poem shows Hughes taking a stand for both himself and those of his race, proclaiming their worth to the rest of the world. Considering this poem was published in a country where the common sentiment was quite the opposite it can be seen as an almost bold poem.

Despite his experiences in Africa, Hughes continued to recognize the ancestry and importance the idea of Africa represented to African Americans, especially in the America of the early twentieth century. Hughes was among those who returned to the notion of Africa
time and again, who truly saw himself as a member of a race originating from a land both beautiful and strong. In fact, it is a poem about the essence of the people of Africa that sets the tone for *The Weary Blues*.

**Proem**

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,

Black like the depths of my Africa.

I’ve been a slave:

Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.

I brushed the boots of Washington.

I’ve been a worker:

Under my hand the pyramids arose.

I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I’ve been a singer:

All the way from Africa to Georgia

I carried my sorrow songs.

I made a ragtime.

I’ve been a victim:

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.

They lynch me now in Texas.
I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,

Black like the depths of my Africa.

(CW 1: 22)

The poem begins and ends by stating “I am a Negro: / Black as the night is black / Black like the depths of my Africa.”. Speaking for his entire race, Hughes immediately creates the connection to the past, to “my Africa”. Without having read anything else, it is immediately clear that this speaker belongs to an ancestry he is profoundly proud of. Rather than denying his heritage like his father was wont to do, Hughes accepts, embraces and promotes his racial past. This acceptance is especially conveyed through the first and last stanza, which function as a refrain. In a society that preferred a light skin Hughes chooses to emphasize the opposite. This message is further delivered through “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (36). Even more so than “Proem”, this poem allows Hughes to deliver his view on his race and to connect their present lives in America with the past. In a few lines he creates a sense of pride and superiority: “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.” (36). Ironically, this poem was inspired at least in part by his father’s aversion towards African Americans. According to Hughes the birth of this poem came about on the train to Mexico where Hughes hoped to convince his father to pay for his university education. He had been contemplating his father’s dislike of African Americans and how this opposed his own point of view. As the train crossed the Mississippi river he remembered the importance of that river for his people and the poem came into existence (CW 13: 65-6). It marks a moment in time when Hughes distinctly disagrees with his father and essentially makes the choice to follow his own path. Consequently, this poem and the events surrounding it can be seen as a pivotal time and a turning point for Hughes. No doubt it was choices such as these that inspired him to become a writer in defence of his race.
**Mulatto**

Hughes published his second book of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, in 1927 and it continued to deal with racial issues, albeit more focused on the issues as experienced by the average person rather than by the author himself. The poem that stands out most in this respect is “Mulatto”, a poem which deals with a father-son relationship. The poem is remarkable compared to the other poems featured in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* for several reasons. It is one of the few poems in the book that is not written in dialect and it features a relationship, or rather lack thereof, between a white father and his mulatto son. Most of the other poems in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* deal solely with African American lower-class society and its social issues. Another reason why the poem stands out is its almost personal nature. Rather than documenting an experience, this poem deals directly with the struggle experienced by the mulatto son to be recognized by his father. The description of the landscape and the situations common in the South are interspersed with pieces of a conversation between the son, the father and the legitimate white son. The struggle between the characters in the poem comes across even stronger when taking into account the context. The division between the races in America was stricter than ever when this poem was published. Anyone even remotely descended from an African was to accept his place at the bottom of the social ladder; the mere thought that a white father would accept his mixed-race son was beyond comprehension. The possible interpretation of this poem is threefold: it could be a reflection on Hughes’s personal relationship with his father, a protest against the abuse of African American women by white men during the slavery and the following Jim Crow Era, or it could be a reflection on the contemporary situation in America.
The possibility that “Mulatto” reflects on Hughes’s relationship with his father is the least likely. Hughes’s father was not white and Hughes was not a mulatto, though he was of mixed heritage. Hughes was recognized by his father as his son and although the relationship was often less than cordial, it certainly existed. However, it is likely that the relationship did play a role in “Mulatto”. Hughes’s father may have been African American but he did not associate himself with African Americans and his disdain for African Americans had been made clear to Hughes.

The second interpretation of the poem is therefore more probable when considering Hughes’s interest and defence of his race. The Weary Blues clearly showed a sense of pride for the African American people and although Hughes decided to deal less with his personal views and opinion and more with the experiences of lower-class African Americans, this pride is still present. As such, situations such as the one described in “Mulatto” must have been unacceptable to Hughes. As one of the main figures of the Harlem Renaissance he was eager to attain equal rights and opportunities for African Americans. However, the success of the fight for equal rights was at that time unlikely. Situations like the one described in “Mulatto” where the white man is able to take advantage of the African American people were still common, if not to say the norm, especially in the South. In spite of the Emancipation Proclamation and the following amendments to the constitution, African American citizens were often forced to live and work under conditions reminiscent of slavery.

Douglas A. Blackmon, author of Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II, concludes that African Americans in the South were restricted in terms of mobility and choice of work (359). According to his research, a federal survey conducted by the Bureau of Census in 1909, Plantation Farming in the United States, concludes the following:
Of nearly 2.5 million farms in the eleven states of the old Confederacy, the owners of almost 1 million farms reported giving some form of compensation to workers during the previous year. On most of the farms – a total of more than 850,000 – the entire compensation to “laborers” for the years was less than seventy-nine dollars. (qtd. in Blackmon 359)

In 1964 Martin Luther King would come to a similar conclusion while reading Charles Silberman’s *Crisis in Black and White*, when he made the following note:

> The South deluded itself with the illusion that the Negro was happy in his place; the North deluded itself with the illusion that it had freed the Negro. The Emancipation Proclamation freed the slave, a legal entity, but it failed to free the Negro, a person.

(qtd. in Blackmon 394)

In view of these findings the idea that “Mulatto” was written with the situation in America in mind becomes more than probable. Taking the white father as a symbol for the superior white society present at Hughes’s time and the mulatto son as a symbol for the African American members of society, this poem becomes a strong political statement. It refers to all three sides of the issues surrounding the fight for equal rights: the white former slaveholders and society at large who find themselves facing the descendants of former slaves who demand acceptance and respect. Secondly, the descendants of slaveholders who were forced to see as equals those they had been raised to consider as little more than cattle. Finally, the mulatto masses. The choice for a mulatto son demanding recognition is interesting considering the fact that many African Americans are of mixed heritage. In this case it could also be a result of Hughes’s experiences in Africa. As a result of their enslaved past, the African Americans are in a sense not of any – then – recognized race: they are a new race, born of slavery and hardship.

**Politics**
The search for an identity and equal treatment continued in his later work when he used his poems to share his political views with the world. 1938’s *A New Song* shows a communistic Hughes who demands equality on all grounds, not just on the basis of race. The first poem in the book, “Let America Be America Again”, features not only the African American people as part of the subdued masses but:

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek –
And finding only the same old stupid plan.
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

(CW 1: 131: 26-31)

Hughes no longer focuses solely on those like him, but takes up the plight of all those who are subjected to the “mighty”. This shift from a focus almost solely on the problems of African Americans to a broader view on the inequality that permeated all layers of American society was a gradual one that started early on in Hughes’s career. One of the uncollected poems published in the early 1920s bears the title “Question”. The question Hughes asked in the early days of his career was:

When the old junk man Death
Comes to gather up our bodies
And toss them into the sack of oblivion,
I wonder if he will find
The corpse of a white multi-millionaire
Worth more pennies of eternity,

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3 In addition to the poems collected in books, Hughes wrote and published many other poems. In Rampersad’s *Collected Works* these are grouped per decade in a chronological order. The year in which the poem was written or published is not given.
Than the black torso of

A Negro cotton-picker?

(CW1: 153)

This poem lists not only the colour contrast and what is represents, but also the inequality caused by financial differences. Hughes noted the different levels of inequality that separated him and all those like him from who he described as the “mighty”. Some years later, in the uncollected “America”, Hughes begins his poem with “Little dark baby, / Little Jew baby, / Little outcast,” (CW 1: 167). This relation between the African Americans and the Jewish population as both being part of the outcast masses will likely have found its origin in Hughes’s experience with his Jewish, European and Eastern-European classmates at Central High School in Cleveland (CW 13: 49). The main differences between “Question” and “Let America Be America Again” are therefore that Hughes further broadened his view as to who could be considered suppressed and the simple fact that in the late 1930s Hughes chose to publicize his views. This choice is perhaps one of the clearest signs of Hughes’s increasingly radical political views: he has the confidence to share these views with the world and defend them.

2.3 Racial Equality

Along with a growing sense of identity as related to race, Hughes developed the wish, and eventually the demand, to be considered equal to others, specifically those others who could boast a white skin and gathered wealth while others starved. The notion of equality encompassed, according to Hughes, not only equality based on race but full equality on all possible grounds. This sentiment did not have as strong a presence in Hughes’s early career as the need for an identity did. In The Weary Blues there is very little reference to the wish to be equal. The recognition that African Americans were seen as second-rate citizens is present but
Hughes only deals openly with the frustration of being considered less than white people in “Epilogue”, the very last poem in The Weary Blues. The speaker refers to himself as “the darker brother” who is unworthy of being seen by visitors. The second stanza speaks of hope and determination:

   Tomorrow,
   I’ll sit at the table
   When company comes.
   Nobody’ll dare
   Say to me,
   “Eat in the kitchen,”
   Then.
   (CW 1: 61/62)

This second stanza shows how Hughes views the future that awaits African Americans. This is further confirmed by the closing line: “I, too, am America.” (CW 1: 62). As early as 1926 Hughes was determined to be seen as equal and to have all those like him recognized as such.

   Hughes continues to explore this theme in Fine Clothes to the Jew but focuses more on the effects the average person experienced due to the inequality present in American society. What he describes are broken homes, young white men taking advantage of African American girls, men beating and leaving their wives, husbands unable to support their families because the education and the jobs available for African Americans did not offer enough pay. What is interesting about Hughes’s depiction of these issues is that while describes the behaviour it causes he does not express judgement. A striking example of this is “Bad Man”:

   I’m a bad, bad man
   Cause everybody tells me so.
I’m a bad, bad man.
Everybody tells me so.
I takes ma meanness an’ ma licker
Everywhere I go.

I beats ma wife an’
I beats ma side gal too.
Beats ma wife an’
Beats ma side gal too.
Don’t know why I do it but
It keeps me from feelin’ blue.

I’m so bad I
Don’t even want to be good.
So bad, bad, bad I
Don’t even want to be good.
I’m goin’ to de devil an’
I wouldn’t go to heaben if I could.
(CW 1: 77)

Due to the segregation and discrimination present in all levels of society it was difficult, if not impossible, for African Americans to change their lives for the better. Certain opportunities were reserved for certain types of people and financially speaking African Americans always drew the short stick. A fact of life for most African Americans, a fact that Hughes himself describes after his return from Europe (CW 13: 163), was that most of the jobs available for African Americans demanded little education, offered little pay and saw the employee in a
form of servitude (Osofsky 23). This meant that the role division between African Americans and white Americans was often similar to how it was prior to the Civil War: African Americans worked as waiters, porters, shoe shiners, or washerwomen. The separation created hereby is accentuated in “Bad Man” through the use of dialect. These professions and others are listed in “Laughers”, interjected with the simple phrase “My people.” (CW 1: 107). It functions again as a simple statement to explain both Hughes’s view on his race as well as a reflection on what they were allowed to be.

A decade later Hughes went beyond just describing what he witnessed in African American society. In A New Song (1938) Hughes deals with politics, recommends communism as the solution for the differences not only between races but also as a means to close the gap between rich and poor, educated and uneducated. Hughes celebrates the idea of the “worker’s world” and presents a worldwide conversion to communism as the only solution to the oppression he recognizes to be present everywhere. One of the poems that translates this view is “Always the Same”, one of the poems featured in the unpublished poems written between 1931 and 1940. The poem stresses the exploitation suffered by those in “Sierra Leone / Kimberly / Alabama / Haiti / Central America / Harlem / Morocco / Tripoli” (CW 1: 227). As the solution for exploitation and greed Hughes offers in the final stanza:

Until the Red Armies of the International Proletariat
Their faces, black, white, olive, yellow, brown,
Unite to raise the blood-red flag that
Never will come down!

(CW 1: 228)
The poems Hughes wrote in the final years prior to World War II called for equality regardless of anything. The experiences of the following years further helped him develop his ideas concerning racial identity and equality and how these were to be accomplished.

**Du Bois**

The ideas used by Du Bois, specifically those of double consciousness and of the veil, also appear in Hughes’s work. Although he never specifically mentions them, the experiences he describes in his poetry are reminiscent of the concepts Du Bois described in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Hughes’s need to assert himself as a proud member of the African American race through poems such as “Poem” and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” can be seen as a result from double consciousness. Forming an own racial identity to contrast the identity forged by an oppressive society allowed Hughes to continue to build a career for himself as a writer. This sense of identity was essential in the development seen in Hughes’s work in relation to equality. Hughes developed from merely touching on the subject of equality to proclaiming the need for a communist society that would create equality for all. Hughes’s use of and wish for equality is reminiscent of Du Bois’s description of the veil. However, rather than just describing it, Hughes seeks out solutions to remove that veil from society altogether.
Chapter 3

Racial Identity and Equality in the poetry of Langston Hughes between 1941 and 1967

Introduction

During the second half of his career Hughes continued to develop his views on identity and equality, but while during the 1920s and 30s he often took a descriptive role, in his later work he becomes more active in procuring the rights and recognition he sees as due to African Americans. The poems show a thorough understanding of contemporary historical events and social issues and address these. Because of his commitment to the fight for equality Hughes maintained a strong connection with society, a connection which shows especially through the choices he made in terms of the subjects used in his poetry. This connection also influenced his ideas concerning the African American identity to a point where it can be argued that the pursuit of a clear, positive identity becomes part of the fight for equality and is no longer a separate goal to strive for. Being equal to all others becomes intrinsic to forging the African American identity.

Family Matters

Family and relationships play an important role in Hughes’s depiction and interpretation of racial identity throughout his work. These relationships often focus on either a child-parent relationship or a male-female relationship. This emphasis on the interaction between people is also present in the poetical work produced in the second half of his literary career. An important difference, however, is that the focus is less on the difficulties one might experience
in a relationship with a father or a partner but rather on the positive example set by predecessors. A name often featured is that of John Brown, a man connected to Hughes’s past through his grandmother. His grandmother’s first husband was Lewis Sheridan Leary, who fought alongside Brown in the attack on Harpers Ferry Armory on October 16, 1959 (Reynolds 297, CW 13: 37, Rampersad 5). Leary, described in The Big Sea as someone who “…always did believe people should be free.” (CW 13: 37), first joined Brown’s cause after a rally against the Fugitive Slave Act in Ohio (Reynolds 289). Brown, known for his violent approach to freeing slaves and his desire to reshape America into a country without slavery and with full equality for all minorities (251), had been preparing the raid on Harpers Ferry for years but was time and again delayed for lack of funds, weapons and men. His aim was to attack the armoury, claim the weapons and free the slaves held on neighbouring properties. He believed that the freed slaves would join him, take up arms and help him free the state and possibly the whole South (240-41). Leary believed in him and joined him a some weeks prior to the attack on Harpers Ferry, although he failed to explain this to his wife, who was left believing he had gone on a trip until “A few weeks later his shawl came back to her full of bullet holes.” (CW 13: 37, Rampersad 6). Hughes, however, does not condemn either Leary or Brown, rather he admired them, stating that his grandmother’s second husband, his grandfather, held similar beliefs to Leary’s (CW 13: 37).

As an author Hughes followed the example left to him by these men. All three fought one way or another for freedom, for equal rights and sheer recognition of being human. John Brown captures interest the most, however, since Hughes uses and mentions him in a variety of poems. Analyzing the poems in which John Brown figures, there are two ways in which Hughes uses him. The first can be found in what can be seen as Hughes’s “history poems”: poems that recount the history of African Americans from Africa through slavery until the (then) present day. Hughes uses these poems to recount the long history of having to fight for
freedom and equality. An example of this is “Ballad of the Seven Songs: A Poem for Emancipation Day”. As a poem focused on freedom and the people who have tried to achieve full freedom for African Americans, John Brown is mentioned as one of the heroes fighting for this cause. One of the stanzas reads “John Brown’s body lies / A-mouldering in the grave - / But his soul goes marching on!” (CW 2: 275). The allusion to Brown gives a sense of pride and a sense of determination: not even the grave can stop those fighting for full freedom from achieving their goal. An interesting characteristic of the poems Hughes uses to recount history and explain his views on politics, such as “Let America Be America Again”, is that these are often prose poems. Due to the extensive use of enjambment these poems can be read out as manifestos proclaiming the heroics of the past and the changes needed for the future.

The sense of pride present in “Ballad of the Seven Songs: A Poem for Emancipation Day” is also present in “October 16”, a poem centred entirely around John Brown and the Harpers Ferry raid. The importance of the poem and John Brown himself comes not only from the content of the poem but also from the simple fact that Hughes chose to publish and republish this poem in Jim Crow’s Last Stand (1943), One Way Ticket (1949), Selected Poems (1959) as well as the posthumously published The Panther and the Lash (1967). Given the historical context to the publications of the four books it is perhaps not a strange choice to republish this poem so often. One of the significant aspects of John Brown’s raid, an aspect mentioned in the poem, is the fact that John Brown’s band was purposely made up of both white and African-American members (Reynolds 300). By the time The Panther and the Lash was published this aspect could be seen as reminiscent of the Freedom Riders, who similarly chose to “attack” the racist South in a group made up of people of both races (Arsenault 2).

At the same time the poem seems aimed at those who fought for freedom at the time of publishing. The poem speaks to those for whom John Brown “Went to shoot your way to freedom” and are now “many years free” (CW 2: 84). Taking into account Hughes’s choice to
link himself not only with Africa but with African history as a whole from the start of his literary career, this can be interpreted as a call to those who have continued the fight for freedom to not forget or neglect their past. This brings to light an interesting concept that further underscores the idea of African Americans being part of a new race, a fact that further shapes their identity. By now the African Americans have a twofold history: one history connected to their ancestral past in continental Africa and another connected to their ancestral past in America. This distinction continues to separate them from what makes them African and steers them towards becoming African American.

The choice to use John Brown in his poems is interesting in another aspect as well. In his earlier work Hughes features several poems describing a situation or a conversation between a parent and a child. Poems like “Mulatto” describe the negative relation that exists between a father and his unacknowledged son, and, similarly, most of the poems describing a male-female relationship depict the male’s role as absent, abusive, or as taking advantage of the female character. In contrast, poems like “Mother to Son” and the Madam series describe strong women who know what is right both for themselves and for those close to them. Women are rarely depicted as the culprit; if something is wrong in a situation or a relationship Hughes often lays the blame with the male. By using John Brown as an example Hughes changes his depiction of male characters. The male who in the past was used almost solely to carry the blame for what has gone wrong is in these poems an example of what to pursue in life.

**Politics & Equality**

Wedged neatly between racial identity and equality, Hughes’s political affiliations as represented through the poems featured in *A New Song* allowed him to consider himself one of a mass of workers, equal to all others. However, further developments in Europe forced him to reconsider and even recant
some of his opinions. The rise to power of political figures such as Hitler and Stalin led to the Second World War and as a result communist views became unacceptable. This change in society is reflected in the more demure tone of *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942). The publication of this book was preceded a year earlier by the repudiation of “Goodbye Christ”. One of his most rebellious poems, it caused heavy criticism to the degree of threatening Hughes’s future career (CW 2: 3). Rather than forfeiting his dream of surviving as a writer, Hughes succumbed to the criticism and moderated his views. This is perhaps best illustrated through the first sentence of the instructional foreword to *Shakespeare in Harlem*, which states that this is “A book of light verse.”. However, 1943’s *Jim Crow’s Last Stand* proved that laying low was not Hughes’s *modus operandi*: as its title suggests, the poems are now focused against segregation and inequality as experienced under the laws that kept the Jim Crow system in place. The first stanza of the first poem in the book, “The Black Man Speaks”, reads:

I swear to the Lord

I still can’t see

Why Democracy means

Everybody but me.

(CW 2: 76)

The poem as a whole is a question and an accusation of why the inequality has not yet been resolved. It demands change in the present rather than the future. The poem as a whole functions as something of a precursor to the rest of Hughes’s career: he focuses on national rather than global issues and thereby supports the Civil Rights Movement through his work until and after they gain success through the successes of the 1950s and 60s.

This shift in politics is further reflected in his use of the theme of Africa in his later work. Hughes in many ways began his literary career with a declaration saying he was proud to be of African ancestry. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is arguably the single piece of writing for which he is remembered most, but his focus on Africa waned and evolved over the years. The four books of poetry
Hughes published between 1941 and 1950 feature only two poems in which Africa is mentioned, one of which mentions Africa only in passing. A further marker of Hughes’s focus on America rather than Africa is a poem named “The Bitter River”, published in Jim Crow’s Last Stand. The rivers that were a tool in expressing racial pride in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” have become “…a bitter river / flowing through the South” (CW 2: 81). The poem continues to reiterate the effects the racism, segregation and inequality have had on the speaker and those like him. The final stanza perhaps speaks most clearly of the direction Hughes’s poetry has taken:

Oh, tragic bitter river

Where the lynched boys hung,

The gall of your bitter water

Coats my tongue.

The blood of your bitter water

For me gives back no stars.

I’m tired of the bitter river:

Tired of the bars!

(CW 2: 84)

This poem no longer states that the African Americans can and will survive anything they go through as members of a great race but rather of being tired. Though the connection to Africa never ceased it is by now clear that in terms of finding an identity for both himself and African Americans in general Africa played an important but not decisive role. Hughes turned his eye back from the issues abroad to the issues at home and is once again on the barricades. This is further supported by poems such as “Beaumont to Detroit: 1943”, one of the uncollected poems published during the early 1940s. The poem compares Hitler and his actions to the treatment African Americans receive at the hand of white America and the fact that despite this treatment they are sent to Europe to fight Hitler. The question
raised in the poem is why African Americans do not get to share in the democracy promised to all Americans through the constitution.

This question is further discussed through the idea of the dream deferred. The idea of the dream deferred is first used in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, which was published in 1951. One of the poems featured, “Tell Me”, clearly summarizes the issue at hand:

Why should it be *my* loneliness,

Why should it be *my* song,

Why should it be *my* dream Deferred

overlong?

(CW 3: 36)

This short, almost bare poem neatly summarizes the injustice of racism as experienced in America. The question of “why should it be *my* dream” clearly indicates the random nature of racism: being treated as different and less than equal not because of a person’s actions but because of something that it wholly outside of their control. This lack of control can be seen further in a poem such as “Ballad of the Landlord” (CW 3: 43). This poem, while it does not speak of race until the final line, gives a taste of the mistreatment endured by African Americans on all levels of life. The landlord refuses to make repairs to a tenant’s house but when the tenant then chooses not pay rent until the landlord fulfils his responsibilities the heat is cut off and the furniture taken away. Coming from the wrong side of segregation one cannot expect a landlord to repair the house in return for rent. Even the judge, representative of the government, cannot be trusted to judge fairly but is, like the rest of society, biased against African Americans. It was this form of injustice Hughes fought through his work: the injustices suffered in day-to-day life.
**Jim Crow**

One of the ways in which racial segregation was made a part of public life was through the so-called Jim Crow regulations (See chapter 1). Hughes experienced the implementation of various rules, such as access to a park or cinema, during his childhood (CW 13: 43-4).

Although he describes the effects of discrimination and segregation in detail in his work it was not until 1942 that he published a poem which features specifically the limitations dictated by Jim Crow regulations as experienced by African Americans. This poem is “Merry-Go-Round”:

*Colored child at carnaval:*

Where is the Jim Crow section
On this merry-go-round,
Mister, cause I want to ride?
Down South where I come from
White and colored
Can’t sit side by side.
Down South on the train
There’s a Jim Crow car.
On the bus we’re put in the back –
But there ain’t no back
To a merry-go-round!
Where’s the horse
For a kid that’s black?
This poem, which can be seen as a precursor to 1943’s *Jim Crow’s Last Stand*, addresses all aspects of a society under the rule of Jim Crow regulations. It can be considered emblematic of the turning point Hughes is on at this time. While only a few years before the publication of this book he enthusiastically argued for equality worldwide through a communist system, now he turns his eye back to the situation in America and addresses the hypocrisy of the Jim Crow system. “Merry-Go-Round” speaks of the segregated American society as seen through the eyes of a child. This child is fully accustomed to finding its place in a different train car and in the back of the bus, separated from white people. The idea of a world without this divide is what confuses it: there is no back to go to on a merry-go-round. This innocent confusion is exactly where the strength of the poem lies. By refraining from the use of rhyme and using lines that are short and roughly equal in length, Hughes is able to add validity to a poem presented as a child’s question. Rather than blatantly point out anger, hate, dislike, distrust or any other personal emotion Hughes chooses the voice of a child to point out the irony of the idea of freedom under such restrictions. This irony is further emphasized when taking into account the historical context of the poem. It was written during the early years of the Second World War while Hitler conquered Europe. America soon joined the fight and African Americans were faced with a situation where people were willing to fight for the freedom of people an ocean away but not for the equal status of people in their own country.

The reality of society under Jim Crow laws is further described in “One Way Ticket” (CW 2: 188) where the Great Migration is described from the point of view of a single person and features as the cause for the migration the Jim Crow laws. The second half of the poem reads:

I am fed up

With Jim Crow laws,
People who are cruel
And afraid,
Who lynch and run,
Who are scared of me
And me of them.

I pick up my life
And take it away
On a one-way ticket –
Gone up North,
Gone out West,
Gone!

(CW 2: 188)

The speaker in this poem refers to his life as an asset, something to pick up and carry along on the journey away from the South. Life has become something one can lose, something that is not automatically one’s own to decide about.

Another interesting aspect about this poem is the speaker’s understanding of the people who effectively drove him away from his home. The people behind the cruelty are in that sense not just representatives of a hostile society but are recognized by the speaker as being similar to him: afraid of him as he is of them.

The Life and Times of Alberta K. Johnson

The first chapter of 1949’s One Way Ticket consists of twelve poems about Madam Alberta K. Johnson. This collection of poems is noteworthy because it is essentially a series of short stories in the form of poems told by an African American woman who refuses to be treated as
less than equal to the other people in her life. For instance, in “Madam and the Rent Man” she refuses to pay her overdue rent on account of the landlord not having done the necessary repairs (CW 2: 164-65). In “Madam and the Census Man” she asserts herself when the man wants to note her down as Mrs. Alberta Kay Johnson, stating “My mother christened me / ALBERTA K. / You leave my name / Just that way!” and “I’m Madam to you!” (174-75). Her sense of equality and self-worth is further underscored through the depiction of her relation with a former employer. Finding that her employer demands too much of her she not only points it out to her employer but tells her “…I’ll be dogged / if I love you!” (163).

This behaviour is a far cry from what was depicted in for example “Mulatto”. The illegitimate son asked and was denied recognition by his father and brother: he was unequal to them. Madam does not ask to be seen or treated as equal: she expects it and demands it when it is not granted to her. This behaviour is a reflection both of Hughes’s changed view on racial equality and on the changes starting to occur in society. This depiction of Madam’s behaviour is exceptional especially considering the mode of behaviour that was for a long time normal between African Americans and white Americans. Leon F. Litwack describes in How Free is Free?: The Long Death of Jim Crow that African Americans were to “Not only […] be respectful and suppress any anger they felt, but they learned never to question the veracity of whites or behave in any manner that might be constructed as “sassiness” or “impudence.” (Litwack 10). Madam’s behaviour towards her employer would certainly fall into this category and she comes across as being “sassy” by nature.

**Double Consciousness and the Veil**

During the second half of his career Hughes continued to focus what it meant to be African American in America and what the position of the African American constituted in general society. The development in Hughes’s use of these notions has progressed from describing a
world in which double consciousness and the veil separating the races was both normal and accepted to speaking out against it and eventually protesting against it.

By writing poems such as the ones about Madam Johnson and “Merry-Go-Round” Hughes begins creating a world in which double consciousness and the separation between races is no longer a factor. A fascinating aspect about the Madam poems when trying to apply the concept of double consciousness is that Madam does not appear to be subject to it. Madam does not see herself as less than others, rather as equal if not better than others. She maintains the upper hand in almost all situations: the only situation in which she does not retain control is when she meets a potential husband who seems too good to be true. In “Madam and Her Might-Have-Been” Madam admits to not trusting him due having grown up “the hard way” (172-73).

However, while the Madam poems indicate the waning influence of these themes, poems such as “Beaumont to Detroit: 1943” and “Tell Me” indicate that at the time of writing society was still very much under the influence of racism. The veil returns in these poems as the realization that society is willing to help fellow human beings in Europe but is not willing to make a stand against the racism in America. The “dazzling opportunities” (Du Bois 12) Du Bois described almost half a century earlier were still reserved for non-coloured America. Yet all hope is not lost from Hughes’s point of view. The Panther and the Lash features a poem called “Dream Deferred” (CW 3: 145). As discussed earlier, the dream deferred refers to the racial issues present in America, the injustice of racism and being denied opportunities given to white Americans. The poem asks “What happens to a dream deferred?”, to which Hughes’s answers “...does it explode?”. The refusal to give up on attaining equal rights is what has been a constant factor in Hughes’s work and it is this refusal, shared by others, that will eventually lead to the end of inequality and double consciousness.
Conclusion

As an author Hughes spent his life writing about and for the people of his race and he is considered as one of the most active and important poets of his time. As one of the few poets who were connected to the Harlem Renaissance from its beginning, he produced a large body of work in the more than forty years he spent writing poems, essays, articles and other works. Hughes has always maintained his focus on his racial background throughout his work. He continually examined what it entailed to be African American, what a person’s position is in relation to those around him and the importance of attaining the rights awarded to them through the constitution. This focus on who someone is with regard to identity and the position in relation to others emanated from a diverse family background. Raised with the examples of grandfathers strongly involved with the African American cause, Hughes had reason to be proud of his background. Yet he was also raised with the example of a mostly absent mother and a father with clear disdain for his own race. Similarly he was enrolled in a variety of schools, which enabled him to experience social contacts across racial lines in a society that had become increasingly segregated. Hughes used these mixed experiences throughout his work. He wrote to share his views on racial identity and on the African American’s place within society and the world at large.

What has become clear is that Hughes was very much in touch with the world around him. This started at a young age when he read books by W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Laurence Dunbar (Rampersad Vol. 1: 19, CW 13: 46), who had their impact on the content and style of his poetry. At the time of the Harlem Renaissance he began translating his experiences, both positive and negative, into poetry. These experiences are linked to their historical context and history can be traced through his allusions to the Great Depression, communism, the Second World War, the aftermath of the war and eventually the Civil Rights Movement. Similarly the
development of his views on race, inequality, and the position of the African American in society can be clearly traced through his work. This started with *The Weary Blues*, in which he first sought to answer what it meant to be African American. Though equality was important, the first issue to be resolved was the matter of identity. Hughes realized that his racial ancestry was a source of pride rather than shame, a somewhat surprising conclusion given the social context in which he was brought up. Once he established for himself that his past needed little defending, he quickly began to focus more on the position of his race in society.

In addition to that it can be concluded that Hughes through his writing helped create the African American race. His work pointed out that the descendants of slaves in America were neither American nor African but rather a blend of those two races. When taking into account the poems he wrote on African American history the development is clear: although initially the focus lies with the African past, Hughes places increasingly more emphasis on the American chapter of African American history. His construction of the African American identity is as firmly rooted in America as it is in Africa. This view of being part of American history and society led him to continue his efforts to claim what he considered his rightful place. These efforts are reflected in his interest in communism, his protest against the Jim Crow system and his continual demand for equality in all aspects of life.

What I set out to examine is how Hughes used the themes of racial identity and racial equality in his work. I chose these themes because these were some of the most important themes of his time. For a man who grew up reading Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, the question of who he is to himself and through the eyes of others must have been important, especially given his social and historical context. The ideas Du Bois introduces in *The Souls of Black Folk* all revert back to race. Notions such as double consciousness and of a veil separating the races in America can be seen echoing through Hughes’s work. What I have
concluded is that Hughes is aware of the reality of these notions but eventually grows to break the cycle. Du Bois’s realization that an African American person sees himself both through his own eyes and through the eyes of white society around him becomes Hughes’s realization that African Americans deserve and are owed more than that: they are equal to all others and it is no longer a request to be given full freedom and equality but rather a demand. This development can be traced through early poems such as “Mulatto” and “Epilogue”, which still focus on the African-American’s lower status as compared to white society, to a poem such as “Dinner Guest: Me”. This poem, published in The Panther and the Lash, is similar to “Epilogue” in that it focuses on the people invited to a dinner table. However, while “Epilogue” figures the African-American speaker as being forced to eat in the kitchen, the speaker in “Dinner Guest: Me” finds himself the guest of honour, wined and dined by Park Avenue’s high society. The contrast between these two poems reflects the degree to which Hughes has changed his way of looking at the world. An interesting facet about “Dinner Guest: Me” is that the poem’s speaker appears to feel a certain disdain for his hosts. The speaker is no longer focused on reaching a sense of identity or equality: he knows who he is and who he is with respect to those around him. Hughes clearly states through this poem that there is no longer a need to see oneself through the eyes of white society, in fact, he states that his host is “…so ashamed of being white.” (CW 3: 173). This sentiment is also present in Hughes’s Madam poems. The speaker in these poems feels no need to proof her worth to those around her and stands up for herself regardless of who might be her opponent.

“Dinner Guest: Me” and the Madam poems effectively give a reversed picture of the world Du Bois described in The Souls of Black Folk. The society that separated the two races and that constructed a system in which those of colour were fundamentally different and of lesser value than those with white skin has now reached a point where it has become ashamed of its own system. Although it is equally clear that the issues Hughes and his peers had been
fighting for most of their lives had not yet been solved, the end is in sight. This conclusion is supported by history itself: the 1964 Civil Rights Act declared all forms of discrimination on the basis of race and gender to be criminal (Commager 205-7). This marked the beginning of the end of segregation, the veil and double consciousness not only in publics but also among society itself. Hughes’s work reflects the development both the African American race and American society at large went through that will eventually render Du Bois’s ideas as part of the past. It was the work of writers such as Hughes and Du Bois who helped further the African American cause and helped to achieve their common goal: full freedom and equality for the African American race.

The analysis of Hughes’s poetry in terms of equality and identity functions to add further insight into understanding both Hughes’s poetry and to create a deeper understanding of African American history. To be able to do that fully the research into his work needs to widened to include his other works: essays, plays, novels and columns. Hughes was a prolific writer who chose to write about what was most important to him and this unremitting focus can prove exceedingly valuable into understanding not only American history but worldwide history in general.
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Appendix

The Negro Speaks of Rivers
(To W.E.B. DuBois)

I’ve known rivers:
I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
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.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Goodbye Christ
Listen, Christ,
You did alright in your day, I reckon –
But that day’s gone now.
They ghosted you up a swell story, too,
Called it Bible –
But it’s dead now,
The popes and the preachers’ve
Made too much money from it.
They’ve sold you too many

Kings, generals, robbers, and killers –
Even to the Tzar and the Coassacks,
Even to Rockefeller’s Church,
Even to THE SATURDAY EVENING POST.
You ain’t no good no more.
They’ve pawned you
Till you’ve done wore out.

Goodbye,
Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,
Beat it on away from here now.
Make way for a new guy with no religion at all –
A real guy named
Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME –

I said, ME!

Go ahead on now,
You’re getting in the way of things Lord.
And please take Saint Gandhi with you when you go,
And Saint Pope Pius,
And Saint Aimee McPherson,
And big, black Saint Becton
Of the Consecrated Dime.
And step on the gas, Christ!
Move!

Don’t be so slow about movin’!
The world is mine from now on –
And nobody’s gonna sell ME
To a king, or a general,
Or a millionaire.

Mulatto
  *I am your son, white man!*

Georgia dusk
And the turpentine woods.
One of the pillars of the temple fell.

  *You are my son!*
  *Like hell!*

The moon over the turpentine woods.
The Southern night
Full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.
  Juicy bodies
  Of nigger wenches
  Blue black
  Against black fences.
  O, you little bastard boy,
What's a body but a toy?
The scent of pine wood stings the soft night air.

What's the body of your mother?
Silver moonlight everywhere.

What's the body of your mother?
Sharp pine scent in the evening air.
   A nigger night,
   A nigger joy,
   A little yellow
   Bastard boy.

Naw, you ain't my brother.
Niggers ain't my brother.
Not ever.
Niggers ain't my brother.

The Southern night is full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.
   O, sweet as earth,
   Dusk dark bodies
   Give sweet birth
To little yellow bastard boys.

Git on back there in the night,
You ain't white.

The bright stars scatter everywhere.
Pine wood scent in the evening air.
   A nigger night,
   A nigger joy.

I am your son, white man!

   A little yellow
   Bastard boy.

Let America Be America Again

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)
Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean--
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become.
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be my home--
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay--
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again--
The land that never has been yet--
And yet must be--the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine--the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME--
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose--
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath--
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and theft, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain--
All, all the stretch of these great green states--
And make America again!

Epilogue
I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I’ll sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody’ll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.

Besides,
They’ll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,

I, too am America

October 16
Perhaps today
You will remember John Brown.

John Brown
Who took his gun,
Took twenty-one companions
White and black,
Went to shoot your way to freedom
Where two rivers meet
And the hills of the North
And the hills of the South
Look slow at one another –
And died
For your sake.

Now that you are
Many years free,
And the echo of the Civil War
Has passed away.
And Brown himself
Has long been tried at law,
Hung by the neck,
And buried in the ground –
Since Harper’s Ferry
Is alive with ghosts today,
Immortal raiders
Come again to town –

Perhaps
You will recall
John Brown.

The Bitter River
(Dedicated to the memory of Charlie Lang and Ernest Green, each fourteen years old when lynched together beneath the Shubuta Bridge over the Chicasawhay River in Mississippi, October 12th, 1942.)

There is a bitter river
Flowing through the South.
Too long has the taste of its water Been in my mouth.
There is a bitter river Dark with filth and mud.
Too long has its evil poison Poisoned my blood.

I’ve drunk of the bitter river
And its gall coats the red of my tongue,
Mixed with the blood of the lynched boys
From its iron bridge hung,
Mixed with the hopes that are drowned there
In the snake-like hiss of its stream
Where I drank of the bitter river
That strangled my dream:
The book studied—but useless,
Tool handled—but unused,
Knowledge acquired but thrown away,
Ambition battered and bruised.
Oh, water of the bitter river
With your taste of blood and clay,
You reflect no stars by night,
No sun by day.

The bitter river reflects no stars—
It gives back only the glint of steel bars
And dark bitter faces behind steel bars:
The Scottsboro boys behind steel bars,
Lewis Jones behind steel bars,
The voteless share-cropper behind steel bars,
The labor leader behind steel bars,
The soldier thrown from a Jim Crow bus behind steel bars,
The 150 mugger behind steel bars,
The girl who sells her body behind steel bars,
And my grandfather's back with its ladder of scars
Long ago, long ago—the whip and steel bars—
The bitter river reflects no stars.

"Wait, be patient," you say.
"Your folks will have a better day."
But the swirl of the bitter river
Takes your words away.
"Work, education, patience
Will bring a better day—"
The swirl of the bitter river
Carries your "patience" away.
"Disrupter! Agitator!
Trouble maker!" you say.

The swirl of the bitter river
Sweeps your lies away.
I did not ask for this river
Nor the taste of its bitter brew.
I was given its water
As a gift from you.
Yours has been the power
To force my back to the wall
And make me drink of the bitter cup
Mixed with blood and gall.

You have lynched my comrades
Where the iron bridge crosses the stream,
Underpaid me for my labor,
And spit in the face of my dream.
You forced me to the bitter river
With the hiss of its snake-like song-
Now your words no longer have meaning-
I have drunk at the river too long:
Dreamer of dreams to be broken,
Builder of hopes to be smashed,
Loser from an empty pocket
Of my meagre cash,
Bitter bearer of burdens
And singer of weary song,
I've drunk at the bitter river
With its filth and its mud too long.
Tired now of the bitter river,
Tired now of the pat on the back,
Tired now of the steel bars
Because my face is black,
I'm tired of segregation,
Tired of filth and mud,
I've drunk of the bitter river
And it's turned to steel in my blood.

Oh, tragic bitter river
Where the lynched boys hung,
The gall of your bitter water
Coats my tongue.
The blood of your bitter water
For me gives back no stars.
I'm tired of the bitter river!
Tired of the bars!

**Beaumont to Detroit: 1943**
Looky here, America
What you done done--
Let things drift
Until the riots come.

Now your policemen
Let your mobs run free
I reckon you don't care
Nothing about me.

You tell me that hitler
Is a mighty bad man.
I guess he took lessons
from the ku klux klan.

You tell me mussolini's
Got an evil heart.
Well, it mus-a been in Beaumont
That he had his start--

Cause everything that hitler
And mussolini do,
Negroes get the same
Treatment from you.

You jim crowed me
Before hitler rose to power--
And you're STILL jim crowing me
Right now, this very hour.

Yet you say we're fighting
For democracy.
Then why don't democracy
Include me?

I ask you this question
Cause I want to know
How long I got to fight
BOTH HITLER--AND JIM CROW.

**Ballad of the Landlord**

Landlord, landlord,
My roof has sprung a leak.
Don't you 'member I told you about it
Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,
These steps is broken down.
When you come up yourself
It's a wonder you don't fall down.
Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
Ten Bucks you say is due?
Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
Till you fix this house up new.

What? You gonna get eviction orders?
You gonna cut off my heat?
You gonna take my furniture and
Throw it in the street?

Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.
Talk on-till you get through.
You ain't gonna be able to say a word
If I land my fist on you.

Police! Police!
Come and get this man!
He's trying to ruin the government
And overturn the land!

Copper's whistle!
Patrol bell!
Arrest.
Precinct Station.
Iron cell.
Headlines in press:
MAN THREATENS LANDLORD
TENANT HELD NO BAIL
JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL!

One Way Ticket
I pick up my life
And take it with me
And I put it down in
Chicago, Detroit,
Buffalo, Scranton,
Any place that is
North and East,
And not Dixie.

I pick up my life
And take it on the train
To Los Angeles, Bakersfield
Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake—
Any place that is
North and West,
And not South.

I am fed up
With Jim Crow laws,
People who are cruel
And afraid,
Who lynch and run,
Who are scared of me
And me of them.

I pick up my life
And take it away
On a one-way ticket—
Gone up North,
Gone out West,
Gone!

Madam and the Rent Man
The rent man knocked.
He said, Howdy-do?
I said, What
Can I do for you?
He said, You know
Your rent is due.

I said, Listen,
Before I'd pay
I'd go to Hades
And rot away!

The sink is broke,
The water don't run,
And you ain't done a thing
You promised to've done.

Back window's cracked,
Kitchen floor squeaks,
There's rats in the cellar,
And the attic leaks.

He said, Madam,
It's not up to me.
I'm just the agent,
Don't you see?

I said, Naturally,
You pass the buck.
If it's money you want
You're out of luck.

He said, Madam,
I ain't pleased!
I said, Neither am I.
So we agrees!

**Madam and Her Madam**
I worked for a woman,
She wasn't mean--
But she had a twelve-room
House to clean.

Had to get breakfast,
Dinner, and supper, too--
Then take care of her children
When I got through.

Wash, iron, and scrub,
Walk the dog around--
It was too much,
Nearly broke me down.

I said, Madam,
Can it be
You trying to make a
Pack-horse out of me?

She opened her mouth.
She cried, Oh, no!
You know, Alberta,
I love you so!

I said, Madam,
That may be true--
But I'll be dogged
If I love you!
Dinner Guest: Me
I know I am
The Negro Problem
Being wined and dined,
Answering the usual questions
That come to white mind
Which seeks demurely
To Probe in polite way
The why and wherewithal
Of darkness U.S.A.--
Wondering how things got this way
In current democratic night,
Murmuring gently
Over fraises du bois,
"I'm so ashamed of being white."

The lobster is delicious,
The wine divine,
And center of attention
At the damask table, mine.
To be a Problem on
Park Avenue at eight
Is not so bad.
Solutions to the Problem,
Of course, wait.