Adoption and Adaptation: 
Walt Whitman's Influences on the Poetry of Langston Hughes

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1. Introduction: Whitman and Hughes

Walt Whitman paved the way for many future poets with his 1855 publication *Leaves of Grass*. In this collection of poetry, he loosened previous restraints on both form and subject matter. Whitman also passed down his strong beliefs concerning the function of the poet, which he first asserted in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*. The poet, he declares, must be "the arbiter of the diverse" (318), "commensurate with a people" (316). He insists that the American poet be a seer and fulfill a prophetic role, and, furthermore, that the poet be inclusive of his country. Finally, Whitman, a great innovator of style, demands that the poet write with simplicity and candor:

The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtains. What I tell I tell for precisely what it is. (323)

Whitman insists that at the heart of good poetry is sentiment honestly and candidly expressed. Poetry must be free of formal restrictions. Furthermore, poetry must embody the poet,
himself.

Although he associated himself with the great American bard depicted in his Preface, Whitman was careful to trace the duty of "bards," and in 1860 he published the poem "Poets to Come," which not only encourages future poets, but also thrusts upon them an accountability to himself:

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!
Not to-day is to justify me and answer for what I am for,
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental,
greater than before known,
Arouse! for you must justify me. (In 1-4).

In this poem, Whitman gives everyone who uses language and music a mandate to continue to create art. If they do not fulfill this mandate, Whitman has failed in his job as well.

Finally, Whitman instructs his successors to surpass him in innovation and art. At the conclusion of the poem, the narrator declares that he is, "Leaving it to you to prove and define it,/ Expecting the main things from you" (In 8-9).

One such poet to come, Langston Hughes, was deeply influenced by the writings of Walt Whitman. Early in his life, Hughes "apprenticed" himself to Whitman (Rampersad, Life I 29); therefore, similarities between the two writers should be expected. The number of similarities, both in their writings and their personal lives, however, is immense. Hughes was himself a great innovator, syncopating verse and placing the popular musical forms of blues and jazz within his poetry.
Both men tackle similar subject matter in their poetry. They broach abstract ideas like freedom and democracy, yet are solidly grounded in the depiction of people from all castes of life. Each writer has puzzled biographers and critics with his willingness to openly address sexuality, while apparently lacking any great amount of sexuality in his personal life. Finally, the most important feature Whitman and Hughes have in common is the political nature of their writings. Whitman and Hughes were dynamic writers who called for equality among all Americans in similar historical periods. Whitman was writing just prior to the Civil War and Hughes was an active supporter of the Civil Rights movement.

In his essay "The Good Black Poet and the Good Gray Poet," Donald Gibson suggests the notion that Walt Whitman was privately a racist (55). If this is true, it is highly ironic, for not only did Whitman influence African-American movements such as the Harlem Renaissance through writers like Hughes, but was himself an avid supporter of human equality. In his 1855 Preface, Whitman writes, "The attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots" (326). Whitman was also a fervent supporter of the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, and wrote such poems as "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and "O Captain! My Captain!" in his memory. Gibson attempts to explain this paradox: "Whitman must have recognized the grave contradiction between his personal
feelings and his notions about liberty and equality, and certainly did not wish the poet . . . to appear to be a bigot" (55). Gibson continues to explain that the Whitman Hughes would have been exposed to would not have appeared in any way racist. "Walt Whitman the man might have been a bigot, but Walt Whitman the poet was a thoroughgoing equalitarian" (56).

While in his early fifties, Hughes was confronted with the claim that Whitman was indeed hypocritically racist. Although Hughes denied knowledge of any bigotry in Whitman's personal life, he came to his mentor's defense: "Out of the best of his love, Whitman created the best of his poems. For these, all may be thankful" (Rampersad, Life II 226). The Whitman Hughes knew was the author of such poems as "To You." George Hutchinson points out that this poem seems to be directly addressing slaves (19). At one point the narrator declares, "None but would subordinate you, I only am he who will never consent to subordinate you,/ I only am he who places over you no master, owner, better" (ln 16-7). Later in the poem, the narrator encourages, "Whoever you are! claim your own at any hazard!" (ln 39).

Proof of Whitman's stature with Hughes came in 1923 when Hughes joined the crew of the West Hesseltine, a ship bound for Africa. Hughes had packed among his luggage a box of books for the voyage. Just off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, Hughes was compelled to throw all of his books, and with them the
unpleasant memories of the past, into the ocean. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes claims, "there came a time when I believed in books more than people -- which, of course, was wrong. That is why I threw all the books into the sea" (Reader 332). Arnold Rampersad notes that there was one book which Hughes did not discard, his copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Hughes emphatically declared, "I had no intention of throwing that one away." (Life I 72)

Many critics, however, do not make much of the connection between Whitman and Hughes. Chidi Ikonne, for example, asserts that the three greatest influences on Hughes's writing are Paul Laurence Dunbar, Carl Sandburg, and his teacher Ethel Weimer (166). Other critics insist that there is no significant connection to find between Hughes and Whitman. Harold Bloom states that Whitman "had little real effect upon Hughes's poetry" (1). The true influence, he maintains, is Carl Sandburg. Sandburg's influence on Hughes cannot simply be dismissed. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes explains the consequence of Ethel Weimer's introduction of the writings of the Swedish-American socialist: "Then I began to try and write like Carl Sandburg" (Hughes, Reader 334). Hughes also describes Sandburg as his "guiding star" (Hughes, Reader 334) during his high school years. Therefore, Hughes was definitely touched by Sandburg; however, Sandburg's influence on Hughes does not appear to be as significant or as long-lasting as
Another interpretation is that "Hughes had come to Whitman by way of such midwestern rebels as Carl Sandburg" (Hutchinson 23). This argument implies that Hughes is, in one sense, part of a second generation of authors influenced by Whitman, since Sandburg was clearly an heir of Whitman's: "Sandburg discovered in Whitman an extraordinary alliance of spirit and validation of his own stubborn courage and unorthodox experiments in poetry and politics" (Niven 103). Among other things, Whitman can be credited with leading Sandburg to the use of free verse. Therefore, it is arguable that not only did Hughes's interest in Sandburg lead him to Whitman, but also that much of Sandburg's appeal to the young Hughes were his Whitmanesque elements.

Either way, Hughes clearly admired Whitman and believed that Whitman had helped to shape his career as a writer. On March 1, 1927, Hughes had the opportunity to address the Walt Whitman Foundation. Hughes discussed his interest in modern free verse and asserted his stylistic affiliation with Whitman. He told the audience, "I believe that poetry should be direct, comprehensible and the epitome of simplicity" (Courier Post). Hughes would also publish a poem, "Old Walt," to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Leaves of Grass:

Old Walt Whitman
Went finding and seeking,
Finding less than sought
Seeking more than found,
Every detail minding
Of the seeking or the finding.

Pleasured equally
In seeking as in finding,
Each detail minding,
Old Walt went seeking
And finding.

In the poem "Old Walt," Hughes expresses his admiration
for Whitman as a knowledge seeker. Donald Gibson claims that
at the center of Hughes's relationship with Whitman is "their
sharing common attitudes, certain feelings about what is
worthwhile and valuable" (44). Hughes often took the best of
Whitman and tried to incorporate those attitudes in his own
work. Like Whitman, Hughes values the search for knowledge.
He does not shrink from the condemnation of others nor does he
restrain from celebration.

Whitman, in fact, was such a strong influence on Langston
Hughes's poetry, that even had Hughes not left any biographical
connection between himself and Whitman, many of his poems
themselves could attest to the connection. Whitman's greatest
impact on Hughes's poetry was thematic. In his early years,
however, Hughes also adopted some of the stylistic devices
which he found in Whitman's writings. Finally, Hughes must be
given the most credit for his development as a writer. By
transforming the influences of Whitman and others, Hughes
created a style of poetry which is able to address needs
specific to the African-American community as well as the
literary world in general. He encouraged, through his writings, a preservation of heritage as well as a perseverance into the future. It was these abilities which would eventually earn him the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Spingarn Medal, an election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and unofficial recognition as being the poet laureate of the African-American people.
2. The Thematic Influences of Whitman

Biographically, Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes appear to be quite different: they wrote in different centuries, belonged to different races, and differed in their experiences growing up. Historically, both poets' lives coincided with movements to end injustices done to blacks; however, it is still curious that Whitman's greatest influences on Hughes were thematic. Although writers often look to their predecessors for stylistic guidance, it could be thought that Hughes was involved in an age and a racial experience far too removed from Whitman for Hughes's subject matter to be affected. Yet, careful study of both poets' work reveals that the two men share common beliefs which would form the thematic backbone of their poetry.

Whitman should be credited with helping Hughes shape his beliefs concerning the function of the poet. Although it is not a thematic influence, it helps lead to thematic connections between the two writers. In his Preface to the 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, written on the 100th anniversary of American independence, Whitman names one of the objectives of his writing:

I bequeath poems and essays as nutriment and influences to help truly assimilate and harder, and especially to furnish something toward what the
States most need of all, and which seems to me yet quite unsupplied in literature, namely, to show them, or begin to show them, themselves distinctively, and what they are for. (341-3)

Thus, Whitman's goal in writing is not simply to create art, nor even simply to depict America; his writing is an attempt to help form and define America through his depiction of it. He is both a political and a social poet.

Hughes, therefore, found affirmation in Whitman and his disciple, Carl Sandburg, for the concept that poetry could be political without losing its artistic qualities. Hughes's poetry rapidly became political in nature, a characteristic which provides a strong link between him and Walt Whitman: "In writing poetry Hughes and Whitman felt they were performing a function beyond mere entertainment. Both intended to influence the thinking and actions of men; both intended to change the world through their poetry" (Gibson 51). A major function of Hughes's poetry is to raise people's awareness of racial wrongdoings. Hughes's objective in poems like "Merry-Go-Round" is to enhance the perspective of his audience:

Colored child at carnival:

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?

One consequence of the political orientation of the two
writers' poetry is that they tend to have universal, as opposed
to personal, theme and narration. As social poets, although
their poems are often grounded in concrete imagery and
situations, Whitman and Hughes often deal with subject matter
that would be understood by a large community of readers.

Because both Whitman and Hughes were social poets writing
in a political vein, they were able to explore a theme that was
not necessarily accessible to other poets: the theme of
democracy. Whitman, of course, is the great bard of democracy.
In "For You O Democracy," Whitman depicts democracy as a woman
to whom he declares his love and promises to serve:

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever
shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
               With the love of comrades,
               With the life-long love of comrades.

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all
the rivers of America, and along the shores of
the great lakes, and all over the prairies,
I will make inseparable cities with their arms
about each other's necks,
       By the love of comrades,
       By the manly love of comrades.

For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you
ma femme!
For you, for you I am trilling these songs.

Hughes derived from Whitman this commitment to democracy. In
the poem "Freedom's Plow," Hughes is highly patriotic and
celebrates a democracy that belongs equally to all participants: "Not my world alone,/ But your world and my world,/ Belonging to all the hands who build" (ln 24-6).

However, neither writer believed that democracy had realized its full potential in the United States. Whitman often referred to his country as being a fledgling nation and Hughes did not believe that democracy could be effective until all Americans could fully participate within the nation. Rather, Whitman and Hughes were both believers "in the possibilities of realizing the American ideal" (Gibson 44). In the first two stanzas of "Democracy," Hughes expresses his belief that democracy has not realized its potential because African-Americans do not have the same amount of freedom as do many whites:

Democracy will not come
Today, this year
Nor ever
Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land. (ln 1-9)

It is important to note that Hughes does not claim that democracy will never come, but rather that democracy will not come through fear and compromise. Hughes believes, or perhaps hopes, that democracy will one day actualize its full potential. According to Hughes, before this can happen, however, African-Americans must achieve relative social and
economic equality with whites. Hughes also attempted to bolster African-American confidence in the American ideals. In the poem "In Explanation of Our Time," Hughes states that liberty, freedom, and democracy are vital words of hope to the downtrodden, and that they are "true anyhow no matter how many/ Liars use those words" (ln 38-9).

In both writers' poetry, a belief in democracy leads to the use of other related themes, including the elimination of social barriers, the hope for a universal community, and the acceptance of differences in others, an acceptance which manifests itself in the works of both poets' which include people of many different social classes.

Donald Gibson claims that "Whitman found democracy so appealing because of its promise to do away with social distinctions. . . . [T]he thrust of a good deal of his poetry is toward the doing away of distinctions between things" (45). Hughes, although wanting to maintain a separate African-American heritage, also wanted to eliminate many of the barriers which separated people, the chief barrier being racism. The poem "Cross" examines the plight of a person with a white father and a black mother. Because of color barriers, the narrator does not know with which race he should affiliate himself, nor does he feel comfortable with either race because these artificial barriers prevent him from fully belonging to either. In the first two stanzas, the narrator expresses a reconciliation with both parents, but the third stanza
demonstrates that in spite of these resolutions, the narrator still feels displaced:

My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black?

Both poets envision the dissolution of racial and other social barriers by insisting upon the natural existence of a universal community. Whitman attempts to create a sense of an expansive community in "Song of Myself": "all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers" (ln 94). In fact, one of the things Hughes found appealing in Whitman's poetry was Whitman's expression that African-Americans would play an important part in American democracy. In his speech to the Walt Whitman Foundation, Hughes stated, "throughout his poems, [Whitman] evidences a great deal of understanding and interest in my people and shows that he believed the negroes would become, as other peoples, an integral part of America" (Courier Post).

A sense of community and brotherhood is also found in Hughes's war-time poem "Freedom's Plow." In the poem, the narrator asks, "Who is America?" (ln 174). He responds to everyone, "You, me!/ We are America!" (ln 174-5). In other poems, Hughes does not express the optimism necessary to believe that a universal community already exists. The history of black enslavement in America and continuing encounters with racism makes such an optimism difficult to attain.
Nonetheless, even poems like "I, Too" express hope for the future of brotherhood. Indeed, it was "Hughes's desire to see unity among people and a social, economic, and cultural equality among the peoples not only of America, but of the world" (Gibson 45).

Another theme resulting from Whitman's belief in democracy is the acceptance of different types of people. Whitman did not shy away from the portrayal of people who were outside the realms of societal norms or moral standards. In "Song of Myself," he not only depicts lunatics and prostitutes, but accepts and sympathizes with them:

The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs
on her tipsy and pimpled neck,
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other,
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you;) (In 305-7)

Hughes also writes about people on the fringes of society and about those who violate the moral standards set by the community. "What?" is about a pimp; "Natcha" is about a prostitute. In a rejoinder to criticism about his poem "Red Silk Stockings," Hughes calls the work "an ironical poem deploring the fact that in certain Southern rural communities there is little work for a beautiful colored girl to do other than the selling of her own body -- a fact for one to weep over rather than disdain to recognize" (Emmanuel 70). Like Whitman, Hughes not only depicts people outside of societal convention, but also does so in an understanding manner. The theme of
acceptance of others is also repeated in his poem "Motto":

    I play it cool
    And dig all jive.
    That's the reason
    I stay alive.

    My motto,
    As I live and learn,
    is:
    Dig And Be Dug
    In Return.

Another major thematic influence of Whitman on Hughes is freedom. Freedom is, in one sense, a correlative of democracy. In order for democracy to work, everyone must be an autonomous individual. Hughes, like Whitman, realized that freedom was an essential prerequisite for a true democratic nation. In the poem "To You," Whitman asserts the importance of having no master "beyond what waits intrinsically in yourself" (ln 17). Hughes even more fervently sings the importance of freedom. In "Freedom Train," Hughes uses a narrator who desperately hopes for complete freedom yet is skeptical as to whether it will not remain tainted with garments of racism such as the Jim Crow laws:

    If my children ask me, Daddy, please explain
    Why there's Jim Crow stations for the Freedom Train?
    What shall I tell my children? . . . You tell me--
    'Cause freedom ain't freedom when a man ain't free.
    (ln 31-4)

The narrator continues to explain how he and others would react if freedom were attained, describing a true Freedom Train:

    Then maybe from their graves in Anzio
    The G.I.'s who fought will say, We wanted it so!
    Black men and white will say, Ain't it fine?
    At home they got a train that's yours and mine!
Then I'll shout, Glory for the Freedom Train!
I'll holler, Blow your whistle, Freedom Train!
Thank God-A-Mighty! Here's the Freedom Train!
Get on board our Freedom Train! (In 59-69)

In recalling the fallen soldiers of Anzio, Hughes captures a feeling that was preceded by Whitman in Canto 34 of "Song of Myself" and in Drum-Taps. Hughes not only celebrates the greatness of freedom, but also remembers those who risked their own lives to preserve freedom for future generations of Americans.

As in other parts of "Freedom's Plow," Langston Hughes wrote powerful verse that was often based on a specifically African-American experience. Politically, his poetry is often designed to advance the cause of black America. However, his inspiration to become a social poet is largely derived from Walt Whitman. Hughes also was influenced by Whitman in some of his most central beliefs, and his poetry is often thematically descended from Whitman. However, as George Hutchinson points out, "Hughes was not simply in the Whitman tradition (although he may have been happy with such a characterization); rather, he practiced an African-American-based poetic syncretism that Whitman's ["Song of the Answerer"] explicitly invited" (20). Hughes adopts Whitman's thematic conventions yet does so in a uniquely African-American manner.
3. The Stylistic Influences of Whitman

Whereas Langston Hughes would use Whitmanian themes throughout his career as a poet, the stylistic influences of Whitman on Hughes are most noticeable in his earlier poetry. In fact, most of Hughes's poems that resemble Whitman's form, with a few notable exceptions like "Freedom's Plow," were written in the first part of his career. It is also notable that Hughes's poems which tend to be most Whitmanian in content are also the most Whitmanian in style. However, even Hughes's jazz and blues poems, with their short, often rhymed lines, contain some of Whitman's ideas regarding style. Hughes derives four major stylistic devices from Whitman: the use of an inclusive narrator, the achievement of rhythm through syntactical repetition of line, simplicity of language, and the treatment of the English language as music.

An extremely significant stylistic device used by Whitman is the use of an inclusive narrator. Whitman claimed the use of the inclusive "I" to be his most important innovation (Hutchinson, 29). Furthermore, although it is technically a stylistic device, the universal narrator is deeply connected to the political content of his poetry. The end result of this device is to make the poem a shared experience. It elevates the poem from a personal to an universal level. Hughes fully appropriates this device in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." The narrator declares, "I bathed in the Euphrates when the dawns
were young" (ln 3) and "I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans" (ln 6). Therefore, the narrator cannot be taken literally as the participant of the events in the poem. Rather, the "I" of the poem is an attempt to share, as well as share in, the events which are described.

The inclusive "I" is particularly effective because of its transcendent qualities. By the very manner of its narration, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" bridges not only gaps of sex and age, but also those of time and place. Whitman attempts to explain this phenomenon in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

\[
\text{It avails not, time nor place--distance avails not, I am with you, you men and women of generation, or ever so many generations hence, (ln 20-1)}
\]

Although "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" focusses on past events, Hughes would expect present and future readers, especially African-American readers, to be able to experience the same emotions as its first readers did.

Unlike the other stylistic devices Hughes would borrow from Whitman, the use of an inclusive narrator is also profoundly tied to theme. Whitman, a Caucasian, is presumptuous enough to speak for all people, even nature and the universe. Hughes, however, by the very nature of his race and the time at which he was writing, was generally confined to speaking for the African-American people. He uses this voice effectively, depicting the most powerful experiences, as in "I, Too." When the narrator claims, "I, too sing America" (ln 1),
he is insisting that all African-Americans are a part of America and, furthermore, that whites will eventually come to appreciate "the darker brother" who is sent to the kitchen when guests come (ln 2-4).

The use of an inclusive narrator fit easily into Hughes's blues poetry. George B. Hutchinson writes, "Hughes was the first African-American poet to sense the affinity between the inclusive "I" of Whitman. . . and the "I" of the blues and even of the spirituals" (21). The device manifests itself in poems like "Hope" and "The Weary Blues," part of which he heard in an actual song as a child in Kansas (Rampersad, 65):

"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied--
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died." (ln 25-30)

As in his other poems using inclusive narrators, Hughes uses a generic voice and expresses sentiments which are conceivably universal.

The other stylistic devices Hughes derives from Whitman are much less political in nature and revolve chiefly around the creation of music. When Walt Whitman abandoned the use of conventional rhyme and meter in favor of free verse, he was faced with the task of finding a way to make his poetry rhythmical. He needed to establish that he was writing poetry and not merely segmented lines of prose. One of the methods Whitman used to create rhythm was the repetition of syntactically similar lines. There are many prime examples of
this in Whitman's poetry, one of which is in Canto 31 of "Song of Myself":

In vain the buzzard houses herself with the sky,
In vain the snake slides through the creepers and logs,
In vain the elk takes to the inner passes of the woods,
In vain the razor-bill'd auk sails far north to Labrador, (ln 679-82)

An excellent example of this device in Hughes's work can be found in one of his most anthologized poems, "The Negro Speaks of 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. (ln 4-7)

Hughes would have been drawn not only to the music of this form, but also to its versatility. The use of repeated syntactical lines is ideal for the inclusion of ideas, as in Canto 16 of "Song of Myself," as well as for the creation of emphasis. In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes utilizes the stylistic device to juxtapose different historical times to give an overall sense of the black experience.

Hughes also discovered variations of this stylistic device. Repetition of entire syntactical lines as well as syntactical fragments create both rhythm and emphasis in the first stanza of "Aunt Sue's Stories":

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.
Summer nights on the front porch
Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories. (ln 1-5)

Hughes continues to use this concept, in combination with other elements in his blues poems. This device was not original to blues as a musical form; Chidi Ikonne points out that Hughes's poetry conformed to the already existing "three-point movement of a typical blues stanza: affirmation, reaffirmation, determination" (156). However, the fact that blues incorporated a style Hughes was already comfortable with in his own work would have made his transition into blues poetry all that much easier.

Another stylistic device emerged from Whitman's belief that English is inherently musical. Consequently, he regularly attempted to capture the natural music of language, to evoke sounds and rhythms. "Hark to the musical clank," Whitman declares in "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" (ln 2). In "Song of Myself" Whitman celebrates "The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the promenaders" (ln 154). Hughes mimics this in "Freedom's Plow" when he sings about "the warp and woof of America" (ln 165).

Hughes inherited a belief from Whitman that it is possible both to evoke the language's own musical qualities and also to create music through language. In "Danse Africane," Hughes uses English to create a sense of music:

The low beating of the tom-toms,
The slow beating of the tom-toms,
    Low . . . slow
    Slow . . . low--
Stirs your blood.
Dance!
A night-veiled girl
Whirls softly into a
Circle of light.
Whirls softly . . . slowly,
Like a wisp of smoke around the fire—
And the tom-toms beat,
And the tom-toms beat,
And the low beating of the tom-toms
Stirs your blood.

By using free verse, Hughes must find alternatives to rhyme and meter for creating rhythm. Although the poem utilizes repetition of syntactical lines, Hughes also attempts to capture rhythm through a natural cadence of sounds. Through language, Hughes is even able to capture changes in tempo and mood.

Hughes also discovered that spoken language has specific, inherent musical qualities. George Hutchinson partially attributes Hughes's discovery to Walt Whitman:

Though Hughes would later, for the most part, turn away from the Whitmanesque style of free verse, the example of Whitman's break with traditional definitions of the poetic, his attempts to achieve an orally based poetics with the cadence and diction of the voice on the street, at the pond-side, or at the pulpit, provided a partial model for the young black poet looking for a way to sing his own song, which would be at the same time a song of his people. (21).

This concept led Hughes to continue experimenting with dialect
poems even after they had fallen into disuse with other black poets. In these dialect poems, such as "Mother to Son," Hughes captures, and in doing so glorifies, the natural rhythms of African-American voices. In the poem "Dime," it is possible to hear both the tired music of the grandmother's voice and the more playful, although equally disappointed, voice of the grandchild:

Chile, these steps is hard to climb.

Grandma, lend me a dime.

Montage of a dream deferred:

Grandma acts like
She ain't heard.

Chile, Granny ain't got no dime.

I might've knowed
It all the time.

The music of this poem comes from its attempt to escape the harsh convention of printed word and capture the less formal music of spoken language.

The belief that language can approximate music with qualities of its own is certainly applied in Hughes's blues and jazz poetry. The concept is not quite as significant in his blues poetry, because in the blues form there are many things which create the music of the poem; they possess a fixed rhyme scheme, have repeated syntactical lines, and usually have some sort of fixed meter. Jazz on the other hand is a musical form which is spontaneous and improvisational. Onwucheka Jemie explains that jazz is "for the most part instrumental and
aggressive" as opposed to the "vocal and mellow" form of blues music ("Jazz" 61). This means that finding a natural rhythm combined with the hard and soft sounds of words is particularly important in creating good jazz poetry. Although Jemie concurs that Hughes's jazz poetry is within a school begun by Whitman (62), ironically these poems, with their short, fast-moving lines, appear not at all Whitmanian.

Onwuchekwa Jemie also gives a description of Hughes's poetry which would suggest, as with his dialect poetry, that Hughes's jazz poems are an attempt not only to capture music with language, but also to capture the music of his people's language:

The jazz poem drives from oral performance and music. Its relaxed attitude reflects the informal atmosphere in which the music thrives, and its open verse form is reminiscent of the improvisational latitude of the music. Its language -- swift-paced, informal talk -- aids the impression of spontaneity. The language is most often colloquial, sometimes the hip talk of the musician, almost always the language of the common people, rarely the language of the academics. ("Jazz" 62)

The poem "Dream Boogie" demonstrates both Hughes's imitation of the jazz form and his use of colloquial language to create musical verse with a spontaneous edge:

Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:
You'll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a--

You think
It's a happy beat?

Listen to it closely:
Ain't you heard
Something underneath
like a--

What did I say?

Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away!

Hey, pop!
Re-bop!
Mop!

Y-e-a-h!

Hughes uses the freedom of form afforded him by Whitman, then attempts to capture a type of music notable for its looseness of form.

Finally, Hughes derives his simplicity of language from Walt Whitman. Whitman strongly urges poets to be plain in their language and clear in their ideas. In his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes, "Nothing is better than simplicity. . . nothing can make up for excess or for the lack of definiteness" (323). In reviewing *Fine Clothes for the Jew*, Margaret Larkin praises the simplicity of Hughes's poetry and holds it up as an example "of what can be done with simple technique and 'every day' subjects" (51). Hughes very
consciously avoids frilly and unnecessary language. In a 1960 interview, Hughes explained that ninety percent of his work was designed to "explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America" (Emanuel, 68). Therefore, in order to accomplish his goal, he had to keep his poetry clear and concise. This simplicity of language is readily visible in the first two stanzas of "Ku Klux":

They took me out
To some lonesome place.
They said "Do you believe
In the great white race?"

I said, "Mister,
To tell you the truth,
I'd believe in anything
If you'd just turn me loose."

Although Hughes's simplicity manifests itself in short economical lines and Whitman's manifests itself in long inclusive lines, both poets have the same stylistic goal: language unfettered by complexity.

Thematically, surface connections between Whitman and Hughes are relatively easy to find. Furthermore, although the two writers' poems do not generally look similar on the page, they also share several fundamental stylistic elements. Ultimately, though Hughes does not appear to be as stylistically influenced by Whitman as he is thematically, Whitmanian elements are central to Hughes's early stylistic development as well as his later innovations.
4. Hughes and the African-American People

Langston Hughes acquired many of his ideas on subject and style from Walt Whitman; however, his motivation for writing distinctly African-American poetry came much earlier in his life. Hughes had many prominent African-American relatives including, on his mother's side, a grandfather who had been killed in John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry. These relatives "demanded, from the moments his elders recognized the boy's intelligence and began to talk to him about Duty and The Race, that he had a messianic obligation to the Afro-American people, and through them to America" (Rampersad, Life I 4).

Therefore, Hughes's poetry was written predominantly with race in mind. Some of his poetry is completely non-racial. Ikonne asserts that "Suicide Note" could have been a product of Alfred, Lord Tennyson (163). However, the overwhelming majority of Hughes's best work is that which confronts race. One reviewer, prompted by Hughes's celebration of black America, compares him to Robert Burns: "I think that Hughes is doing for the Negro race what Burns did for the Scotch--squeezing out the beauty and rich warmth of a noble people into enduring poetry" (Larkin 51). Arnold Rampersad argues that while usually racial interests act as impediments to good poetry, in Hughes's work it helps to create a richness of verse:

For many writers, perhaps even most, race is a
distracting, demoralizing force. Hughes's genius, or his good fortune, consisted in his ability to accommodate race harmoniously within the scheme of creativity common to all major poets, and to turn it from an anomaly into an intimate advantage. (Origins 189)

Ultimately, Langston Hughes's distinction as a poet comes from his ability to write about his people, as both distinct from and part of America as a whole, in well-crafted, innovative verse.

Hughes's celebration of the African-American people exhibits itself in one of his earliest poems. "When Sue Wears Red":

When Susanna Jones wears red
Her face is like an ancient cameo
Turned brown by the ages.

Come with a blast of trumpets,
Jesus!

When Susanna Jones wears red
A queen from some time-dead Egyptian night
Walks once again.

Blow trumpets, Jesus!

And the beauty of Susanna Jones in red
Burns my heart a love-fire sharp like pain.

Sweet silver trumpets,
Jesus!

The language of the poem is excited, and it captures the narrator's feelings about the girl as well as evoking the religious zeal present at a church revival. The brown color of the girl's skin is not shameful to Hughes or even
inconsequential; rather it "is made both timeless and regal by references to ancient Egypt and its queens" (Emanuel 148). The poem attempts to glorify African-American beauty, color, and voice.

Hughes captures an entirely different African-American voice in "Mother to Son," namely the loving maternal voice of a woman trying to prepare her child for life in a hard world. Although she is not presented as being physically beautiful or exciting like Susanna Jones, the mother in the poem is equally ennobled:

Well, son I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor--Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now--
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

The mother, in giving her son love and encouragement, earns for herself dignity and nobility. She possesses the which James Emanuel claims that the durability which is an essential trait of Hughes's African-Americans, comparing her to Dilsey in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury (148). It is also significant that Hughes chose to write this poem in dialect,
for by doing so he is able to demonstrate the wisdom and esteem of someone who presumably had no formal, higher education.

Ironically, Hughes tended to be accepted much quicker by the white literary world than by the black. Although Hughes got his start with Brownies' Book and W.E.B. DuBois' Crisis, many African-Americans publically or privately criticized Hughes and his poetry. A review of Fine Clothes for the Jew in the Pittsburgh Courier was particularly biting:

If this is poetry then verily Shakespeare, Keats, Poe, Dunbar, McKay, were Ainus or Australian Bushmen. But, of course, this book, like The Weary Blues, is designed for white readers and their preconceived notions about Negroes. (Rogers 47)

Several of Hughes's critics claimed that he catered to whites, citing the fact that Carl Van Vechten, a white patron of the arts, wrote the introduction to Hughes's first book. Hughes throughout his life demonstrated that he would not compromise his writing for any group. In an essay titled "How to be a Bad Writer (In Ten Easy Lessons)" Hughes disproves the argument that he catered to whites. Lesson number two sarcastically states "If you are a Negro, try very hard to write with an eye dead on the white market -- use modern stereotypes of older stereotypes -- big, burly Negroes, criminal, low-lifers, and prostitutes" (Hughes, Reader 491).

This criticism soon gave way to somewhat more lasting complaints. "The source of Hughes's trouble with some black
critics was not that he was not being Negro, but that his work was too Negro self-expressing" (Ikonne 152). Black critics did not like the fact that Hughes wrote about pimps, prostitutes, and other undesirable aspects of black America, and then published the poems for the world to see.

Hughes defended himself, writing, "My poems are indelicate. But so is life. I write about 'harlots' or 'gin-bibbers.' But they are human. Solomon, Homer, Shakespeare, and Walt Whitman were not afraid or ashamed to include them" (Emanuel 70). Hughes believed that if he were going to be the poet of a voiceless race, he should also be the poet of the voiceless people within that race.

Although he continued to have critics throughout his career, Hughes also accumulated many admirers. Richard Wright declared that Hughes was both an artistic "forerunner" and a "cultural ambassador" (67). Hughes continued to depict African-Americans of many different castes. Some characters, like those of "Letter" and the "Madam" poems, although poor, are clearly meant to be admired. In "Ballad of the Girl Whose Name is Mud," Hughes depicts a woman with admirable traits even though she acts against her community's social norms. Even the figure in his poem "Wine-O" is not so much criticized as he is pitied for the monotony of his existence.

In addition to depicting black America, Hughes also was not afraid to point out ways in which America had failed the African-American people. Poems like "Porter" and
"Share-Cropper" depict people who are legally free, yet socially and economically are not much better off than slaves. In "Share-Cropper," blacks are "driven" to the fields, work the cotton, then do not get adequate pay. The narrator laments, "Year by year goes by/ And we are nothing more" (In 11-2). Hughes does not condemn his country or its system for these problems but asserts the need for the problems to be fixed. In "Harlem," Hughes tries to envision the consequences of long-term neglect of racial problems and social inequalities:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Although Walt Whitman strongly reinforced Hughes's belief in democracy and his country, Hughes wrote during times in which it was exceedingly difficult to be distinctly African-American as well as American. Furthermore, while some blacks in the early and mid 1900's insisted on severing ties with Africa and attempting to fully blend into American society, others, like Marcus Garvey, were set upon abandoning American culture and creating a "once again powerful African homeland" (Jemie, "Black" 97). One of Hughes's greatest contributions to
African-Americans was his insistence that it is possible to maintain strong ties with Africa while remaining fully American.

The possession of African heritage espoused by Hughes is visible in such poems as "Negro": "I am a Negro:/ Black as the night is black,/ Black like the depths of my Africa" (ln 1-3). Chidi Ikonne explains that in Hughes's poetry, the past is a crucial part of the black's present being: "Langston Hughes's Afro-Americans recognize and affirm their relations with Africa, whose heritage and experience they cherish and revere as sources of pride-inspiring characteristics" (12). Thus, Hughes provides examples of how to view Africa via the characters and narrators of his poetry.

Hughes also provides examples of how to view America. His characters do not repudiate America but rather attempt to become full-fledged participants:

Hughes's black Americans, whose attitudes his first-person speakers voice, have no illusions either of the remoteness of Africa both in time and space or of their unquestionable right to full American citizenship. They all 'sing America'; they are all Americans, the darkness of their skin notwithstanding. (Ikonne 161)

In the poem "I, Too," Hughes's narrator declares "I, too sing America" (ln 1). Although the narrator is in a servant's role and is kept out of the sight of presumably white company (ln
2-4) he does not relinquish his membership as part of the whole. Hughes and his black characters recognize the paradox of being separate from white Americans while sharing strong bonds of history, citizenship, and even friendship with them. Although it is not always popular with some members of both races, it is resolved that this unity must be recognized, as in "Theme for English B":

So will my page be colored that I write?  
Being me, it will not be white.  
But it will be  
a part of you, instructor.  
You are white--  
yet a part of me, as I am part of you.  
That's American.  
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.  
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.  
But we are, that's true!  
As I learn from you,  
I guess you learn from me--  
although you're older-- and white--  
and somewhat more free.

One of the things which attracted Hughes to Whitman was Whitman's belief in a universal community. In "Song of Myself," Whitman calls himself, "Walt Whitman, a kosmos" (In 4979), and later declares, "I am large, I contain multitudes" (In 1326). Whitman's aim was to be the voice of all Americans, and beyond Americans, mankind in general. However, when Hughes looked at the African-American community, he realized that, for whatever reason, they had been partially excluded from the universal community envisioned by Whitman. They had been, in a sense, disenfranchised. Therefore, a large portion of Hughes's poetry is designed not only to give black America a sense of culture and community, but also to help them rise within the
community he found in Whitman's writings. The poem "I, Too," also titled "Epilogue," captures Hughes's sense that blacks were separated from America. However it also demonstrates his belief that with perseverance the situation would improve:

But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.  

Tommorrow,  
I'll be 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. (ln 4-14)

This poem clearly has undeniable connections to Whitman in it, however, the tone and theme have been reshaped to address a specifically African-American experience. The poem is not celebratory but both sad and hopeful. The narrator asserts his affiliation with America, yet insists that a greater affiliation is still to come.

In addition to insisting upon black involvement within the universal community, Hughes also insists upon their distinctiveness and beauty as he does in "I, Too" and "My People":

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.

Hughes also wanted to capture African-American culture within his verse. Unlike many black writers, Hughes was successful with his use of dialect, and poems like "Aunt Sue's Stories" nicely portray the oral tradition. However, Hughes was not satisfied with conveying the same cultural distinctions as his African-American predecessors in the nineteenth century. Onwuchekwa Jemie points out that jazz and blues poetry were the logical forms for black writers to pick up, especially as African-Americans were making large migrations from the rural South to northern cities:

As might be expected, the younger generation of writers took their cues from Dunbar and Chestnutt, but they soon discovered that dialect was too old and crumbly to survive a face lift. It was impossible to use dialect and avoid the stereotypes. But fortunately for them, their coming of age coincided with the boisterous jazz and blues age, and it was in the contemporary life, language, and the music of the city, rather than in the South and the past, that they found what James Weldon Johnson has called "form[s] that will express the racial spirit by using symbols from within rather than by symbols from without . . ." (63-4)

Therefore, although Hughes found some of Whitman's stylistic beliefs to work smoothly within blues and jazz poetry, and even
celebrated Whitmanian themes within the forms, for Hughes they were a way to express a uniquely black American culture.

Ultimately, Hughes, like Whitman, wanted to be a writer of and for the people. He struggled to find a way to remain an American poet while also maintaining his African-American identity. In the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman described what he believed to be the litmus test of a successful poet: "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (336). Although neither poet specifically attempted to please others with their poetry, they have since been recognized as two of America's finest poets. The link between Whitman and Hughes, however, stems not from their country's willingness to absorb them, but from their willingness to absorb each other. In his poetry, Whitman pulled the African-American community into his universal community. In turn, Hughes absorbed the works of Whitman. He adapted Whitmanesque content and style to address his people in the manner Whitman invited him to: both as distinct from and part of the whole.
Works Cited


