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I, too, am America: The Democratic Poetics of Langston Hughes and Walt Whitman

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Abstract:

The focus of this essay is to examine the poetry of Langston Hughes, specifically his poem *I, too*, and how it attempted to recontextualise the struggle for African American civil rights which would define the Civil Rights Movement of 1950's and 60's America. Hughes draws on the poetry of Walt Whitman, a poet who also employed democratic poetics in the wake of the Civil War. Hughes makes effective use of the poetic form and brevity of *I, too* to convey a clear and succinct microcosm of the US Civil Rights Movement. Both Whitman and Hughes created poetry which were deeply entrenched in the struggles of a people searching for meaning and identity in the wake of national upheaval. Hughes takes the building blocks which Whitman created for the US post-Civil War – which stressed the need for unity and strong leadership in a nation now free of slavery – and applies it to the struggles of African Americans still oppressed under the government of a segregated America.

I, too functions as an empowered cry for freedom and equality for African Americans but also emphasises the need to create a separate and distinct identity – divorced from their status as purely 'Americans' – with their freedom, evoking Hughes' own essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* in its desire for a unique national identity and literary tradition, an idea which shaped the Harlem Literary Renaissance and served to define the growth of black consciousness within the US.

"*I, too, am America.*"

(Hughes. *I, too*, line 18)

The poetry of Langston Hughes is a key body of work through which the reader can view the changing ideas of identity through which not only African Americans, an ethnic minority that "constituted a critical mass large enough to sustain a subculture and to achieve high visibility" (Bremer 48), but also the nation of America, defined themselves. Through his poetry, most notably his 1926 poem *I, too*, Hughes captures the radical, sweeping movement of the Harlem Renaissance, by juxtaposing traditional views of black slaves and the assertions of a growing movement towards equality, while also stressing the need to retain their own identities as African Americans. Hughes' poetry draws heavily on the democratic poetics of Walt Whitman in order to create a body of work concerned with the claiming and recontextualisation of a national identity. As a foundational text of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes' work also helped further the rapidly burgeoning American literary tradition through its representation of the African American, and the growth of black consciousness in the US.

Hughes' poetry, as Hoyt W. Fuller asserts, chooses "to identify with plain black people -- not because it required less effort and sophistication, but precisely because he saw more truth and profound significance in doing so", (Fuller. *The Darker Brother*). The anonymous narrator of *I, too* serves as a vehicle to voice the "search for an adequate sustaining model for the kind of American the Negro might become", (Keller 29) The narrator hearkens back to the traditions of slavery, and the Jim Crow laws, which the African American community is striving to throw off: "I am the darker brother / They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes" (Hughes. lines 2-4) . The shame which the narrator and the community for which he stands feel at being treated as a lesser or inferior version of the white Americans (the "darker brother") in the face of public scrutiny (the "company") is underpinned by the

promise of a growing movement to rise up in opposition against the systemic discrimination the African Americans experience, a promise to "eat well / And grow strong" (Hughes. lines 6-7). The inherent hypocrisy of the segregation movement is exposed when Hughes' narrator states that the people who would not let him sit at the table as equals will "see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed", (Hughes. lines 16-17). The push towards social equality for African American citizens, here captured succinctly within the poem's 18 lines, anticipates Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous 'I Have a Dream' speech of the Civil Rights Movement ("I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood", (King. *I Have A Dream*)). Hughes' work lays the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement, which was galvanised by the inequalities of the Constitution - a document written entirely by wealthy white slave owners - by placing both African American and White American citizens equally at the table, the most traditional site of companionship and brotherhood.

As well as functioning as a poetic representation of the movement for African American social equality, Hughes' poetry also continues and expands upon the literary tradition of the American nation. Hughes continues the poetic tradition of Walt Whitman of "associating democracy", as Patrick Redding affirms, "with the rejection of traditional poetic meter and rhyme", (Redding 671). *I, too* is a poem of eighteen very short lines, some of which are simply one word, only amassing sixty-two words in total, and there is neither rhyming scheme nor metrical system. The short, concise nature of the poem serves to encapsulate its main ideas and themes – that of the social injustices perpetrated against the African American community and the need for equal rights – without losing any of it to ambiguity: the line 'They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes' does not hide behind the subtleties of poetic language, it instead lays bare the awful truth of a segregated America. Hughes' *I, too* also serves as both a successor and a contrast to the poems of Whitman.

Where Whitman's poems, such as *Song of Myself*, assert their democracy through their length, *I, too* is democratic through its brevity. Both the poetry of Whitman and Hughes are concerned with the construction of a national identity. Whitman's poetry was concerned with, as Allen Grossman posits, the

> [...] reconstruction of [his] common human world – the Union as a just and stable polity – at a time when the elements necessary to the intelligibility of that world seemed fallen, in Seward's words, into "irrepressible conflict" (Grossman 183).

Hughes' poetry, however, strives to recontextualise this narrative of nationhood through the lens of the growing African American consciousness, giving us, in Arthur P. Davis' words: "an index to the changing attitude of the Negro during the last quarter of the century", (Davis 276). By drawing on Whitman, Hughes' poetry has a foundation grounded in democratic poetics to further the literary revival that accompanied the Harlem Renaissance.

In deliberately evoking Whitman, Hughes also combats a large part of the othering of African Americans. *I, too* achieves this through its opening and closing lines: "I, too, sing America. […] I, too, am America", (Hughes. lines 1, 18). Hughes' narrator draws on an idea extensively espoused within the body of Whitman's work, that the act of singing is in itself a declaration of identity, a "vehicle for transforming an inner identification into a public, national one as well" (MacPhail 135) - cf. *Song of Myself*, *I Sing the Body Electric*, *Still Though the One I Sing*. The narrator, and, by extension, the African American community is asserting itself through the medium of song; they, too, are singing "with open mouths their strong melodious songs" (Whitman 13, line 11). The opening line's assertion that the voices of African American citizens were as equal a part of the song of America as the White Americans, feeds into the double interpretation of the poem's closing line. This act of singing asserts their existence as people in the face of a segregated country ("I, too, am"), but also as

citizens of America, just as equal as their white compatriots. *I, too* uses the device of singing as a means to declare their existence, both as people, and as Americans, while furthering the growing anti-segregation sentiments of the time. Hughes achieves this by drawing on the poetics which helped define America as a nation after the emancipation of slavery, while also stressing the need for further rights for African American citizens.

While Hughes' poetry strove for equality between African Americans and White Americans, it did, however, not want African Americans to lose their own sense of identity, or to give up what makes them unique. As Hughes himself sets out in the opening of his essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*:

> One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.
>
> (Hughes. *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*)

Hughes here voices what he sees as the greatest concern facing the growing African American consciousness and the push for equal rights: the subsuming of African American identities into the larger 'white' American identity. By rushing to "pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization", they are forgetting the atrocities committed against their people, and subject them to slavery once again, this time to a past which they did

not learn from. They would always be “the darker brother”, but *I, too* wants them to live free in a world where white oppressors from the past would “ see how beautiful [they are] / And be ashamed”. Hughes urges that African American citizens not be complacent, but instead seek, as Elsa Honig Fine states, “recognition and compensation for centuries of subjugation and discrimination” (Honig 32). Though the narrator of *I, too* advocates for social change - again the instruction to “eat well, / And grow strong” as change happens - Hughes does not want him to lose that which defines him as an African American. Hughes states at the end of *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* that he wishes his narrator, and indeed all African American artists, to “stand on top of the mountain, free within [themselves]” (Hughes. *The Negro Artist*). The art which the Harlem Renaissance gave birth to needed to have, as Hale Woodruff stated in 1968, “a non-white quality which presents the Negro artist as being unique and therefore different from other artists” (Woodruff. *Artists in an Age of Revolution*) to make sure that it was African American art, not simply ‘American’ art. This sentiment is succinctly summarised by Hughes himself in the closing lines of *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*. The new wave of African American artists “intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame” (Hughes. *The Negro Artist*). It is imperative, as outlined by Hughes in *I, too*, that African Americans are free in all things - not just with civil liberties, but also with artistic liberties. Their sense of pride and self representation should not be dependent on their former oppressors, (“If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.” (Hughes. *The Negro Artist*)) In the new world, full of the songs of African American citizens, the right to self-representation through art is just as important as any in the Constitution.

Langston Hughes’ poem *I, too* is a rallying cry for social change in the Harlem Renaissance. It advocates for equal treatment and rights for the African American

community, while also stressing the need to remain African Americans. Hughes does this by drawing on the established traditions of Whitman's democratic poetics, but changing and recontextualising them to better fit a more contemporary landscape for a smaller group of people facing a crisis of national identity. The poem shows the link between Whitman's America and that of Hughes through the actions of a populace declaring themselves as people, who should be afforded as equal treatment as their compatriots. Hughes' *I, too* does this admirably through the juxtaposition of a traditional idea of African American slavery against the promise of a different future where their oppressors will see their value as equal citizens, and be ashamed for their previous treatment of African American citizens.

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