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THE INTERSECTION OF BLUES AND GOSPEL IN LANGSTON HUGHES'S POETRY

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Abstract

This article delves into Langston Hughes's use of blues and gospel music in his poetry. It explores how his poetry has helped challenge traditional views of African-American art. Hughes promotes African-American identity and culture, and advocates for principles such as freedom, democracy, and brotherhood. Hughes's poetry celebrates both spirituals and the blues, recognizing their power to evoke emotions and capture the essence of the human spirit. Despite the differences between the two genres, Hughes sees a greater bond that unifies them as part of the broader African-American culture. Hughes believes that his poetry should be performed and recited with musical accompaniment to enhance and strengthen communication. In this sense, music serves as a strong and unifying force that can inspire participation, dialogue, and engagement with African-American culture. This article examines how Hughes's poetry reflects the blues and gospel traditions and how his art is not isolating but ultimately unifying. By analyzing specific poems, such as "The Weary Blues" and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," this article demonstrates how Hughes's use of blues and gospel music speaks to a broader cultural context and how it is an integral part of African-American identity. Furthermore, the article highlights how Hughes's work has been influential in promoting African-American culture and identity. Through his poetry, Hughes seeks to challenge traditional views of art and African-Americans by asserting that African-American culture is worthy of artistic representation. His use of music in his poetry helps to underscore the importance of music as a part of African-American culture, and to foster a sense of community and unity among African-Americans. This article illustrates how Hughes's poetry is not only a reflection of the blues and gospel traditions but also a representation of African-American identity and culture. Hughes's use of music in his poetry helps to break down cultural barriers and promote unity and engagement within the African-American community.

Key Words: Harlem Renaissance, African-American culture, blues, and identity

Hughes's interest in music began at an early age, as he was exposed to blues and jazz in the nightclubs and juke joints of his hometown of Joplin, Missouri (Hughes 2). He later moved to New York City, where he became a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance and developed close relationships with many of the era's leading musicians, including Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Louis Armstrong (Rampersad 242). Hughes's poetry reflects his deep understanding and appreciation of African American musical traditions, as well as his belief in the power of music to bring people together and promote social change.

One of Hughes's most famous poems, "The Weary Blues," showcases his mastery of the blues genre (Hughes 38). The poem, which was published in 1926, tells the story of a musician playing a blues song on a piano in a Harlem club. The poem's language and imagery capture the essence of the blues, conveying the musician's pain and weariness as he plays his instrument. The poem's final lines, "I ain't happy no mo' / And I wish that I had died," express a sense of hopelessness and despair that are characteristic of many blues songs (Hughes 39).

Hughes delights in reciting his poetry to musical accompaniment, seeing the performance as an occasion for meaningful interaction that will enhance and strengthen communication. He seeks to infuse much of his poetry with the urgency, the immediacy, of activity and performances. He writes in "Aunt Sue's Stories:"

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Black slaves
Working in the hot sun,
And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night,
And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river
Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of Aunt Sue's voice,
Mingle themselves softly
In the dark shadows that cross and recross
Aunt Sue's stories. (*Selected Poems* 6)

The performance of the poem becomes a nexus, a dialogue, something as old as the inception of the poem but as new as the inflection of the impulse. In the stage directions to *Tambourines to Glory* Hughes suggested that "audience participation might be encouraged- - singing, foot-patting, handclapping- - and in the program of the lyrics of some of the songs might be printed with an invitation to sing the refrains along with the chorus of Tambourine Temple" (184). It would not likely take much to inspire participation for, as Hughes writes in "Spirituals," "Song is a strong thing" (*Selected Poems* 28)

The setting of poetry to music has a long history in the West, dating back at least to ancient Greece, and this practice has continued to be commonplace in the European concert music tradition. Thus, when one adds up all the known recordings of Langston Hughes texts with music, one finds quite a few, perhaps the majority, from composers and performers of concert music. African American composers Florence Price, Howard Swanson, and Margaret Bonds each set several Hughes poems to their compositions, and these have been performed and recorded repeatedly over the years. Bonds, a friend of Hughes, organized and assembled a 1964 tribute on the occasion of Hughes' birthday, that is representative of this thrust, featuring the music of William Grant Still, Harry T. Burleigh, and other major figures of the theater and concert stage.

The blues poems that Hughes wrote were often thematic rather than associative, and they contained noticeably few references to drugs, sex, and violence in comparison to blues songs recorded both in the field and in the studio, opting for something of a via media in reflecting the themes and images of the folk tradition. His language and images are not often as stark or startling as the best blues lyrics by performers within the oral tradition, but they make excellent use of both oral and written traditions in a way that adds materially to both, making his poetry something quite familiar, yet quite new. Not all of Hughes's blues poems employed blues stanza forms. Hughes called his poem "cross," for example, a poem whose "mood is that of the blues, although its lyric form lacks the folk repetition" ("*From the Blues to an Opera Libretto*"). It is not stanza form, repetition, or the number of measures in a stanza that makes the blues—but the feeling, spirit, attitude, attitude, and approach. And these indoctrinate much of the poetry of Hughes to such an extent that the whine of a bottleneck, or the wail of a harmonica, or the trill of a piano may be regularly inferred as the subtext of his work.

Ask Your Mama, a long experimental poem, published in 1961 is illustrative of Hughes's lifelong engagement with African American music and identity, and their relationships to domestic and international structures of white supremacy, even as the poem's experimentalism eluded the appreciation of critics contemporary and since (Rampersad 343-44). "Blues in Stereo," the fifth section of *Ask Your Mama*, evokes colonialism in Africa and the slaughter in King Leopold's Congo, and alludes to the ways that black music is misheard if not misappropriated by those who consider themselves the superior of people of African descent.

Despite the melancholic themes that are often associated with blues music, Hughes saw the genre as a powerful tool for expressing the joys and sorrows of everyday life. In his poem "Trumpet Player," for example, he describes a musician playing a blues song on his trumpet and creating a sense of unity among the people who hear him play (Hughes 49). Hughes believed that the blues had the power to bring people together and provide a sense of community, even in the face of hardship and adversity.

Gospel music, on the other hand, represents a different type of musical expression for Hughes. While the blues focuses on the individual experience, gospel music emphasizes the collective experience of African American communities. In his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes uses gospel imagery to celebrate the spiritual and cultural heritage of black people (Hughes 7). The poem's opening lines, "I've known rivers: / I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins," (Hughes 7) evoke the powerful and enduring nature of African American culture and history.

Hughes recognizes the spiritual power of gospel music, as demonstrated in his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," which references the biblical story of Moses and the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea. In this poem, the narrator's declaration that "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (9) suggests a connection to a divine presence and a spiritual journey. Critics like Sharon Lynette Jones have noted that "Hughes's poetry shows the ways in which religion and spirituality, like the blues, have been key components in the black experience, allowing African Americans to find strength, comfort, and hope in the face of oppression" (116).

Hughes's use of music in his poetry reflects his belief that art should be accessible and inclusive. He believes that poetry should not be an exclusive, intellectual pursuit but rather should be accessible to all people, regardless of their educational background or social status (Rampersad 280). By incorporating elements of blues and gospel music into his poetry, Hughes is able to reach a broader audience and connect his work to the experiences and traditions of everyday people. The power of the blues lies in its ability to express the universal emotions of pain, sorrow, and struggle that transcend race and class. As James A. Emanuel notes, "The blues is a symbol of the suffering that all men share, and it is the poet's task to find a way to express it" (63).

In his poetry, Hughes often blurs the boundaries between blues and gospel music, using elements of both genres to explore themes of love, loss, spirituality, and community. Critics have noted that his use of music in his poetry serves not only to evoke emotions and enhance the rhythm and flow of his verse but also to connect his work to broader cultural and historical traditions. For example, in his poem "The Weary Blues," Hughes employs blues imagery and language to depict the experience of a black piano player performing in a seedy club:

> Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
> Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
> I heard a Negro play.
> Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
> By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
> He did a lazy sway. . . .

Here, Hughes uses the repetitive, syncopated rhythm of blues music to create a sense of languid, dreamlike atmosphere, while also capturing the feeling of melancholy and weariness that is often associated with the blues.

In his later work, Hughes continued to incorporate elements of both blues and gospel music, but with a greater emphasis on spirituality and community. For example, in his poem "Let America Be America Again," he uses the image of a gospel choir to express his vision of a more inclusive and just society:

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—

Here, Hughes uses the image of a gospel choir to suggest the power of collective action and the importance of unity in the struggle for social justice.

Overall, the relationship between blues and gospel music in Hughes's poetry is complex and multifaceted, reflecting the richness and diversity of African American musical and cultural traditions. Through his use of music in his work, Hughes not only evokes powerful emotions and captures the essence of the human spirit but also connects his poetry to broader cultural and historical traditions, making it a vital and enduring part of the African American literary canon.

Hughes' exploration of the connection between blues and gospel music is not limited to his poetry, but can also be found in his essays and other writings. In his essay "The Negro and the Racial Mountain," Hughes asserts that "the Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites" (221). Hughes believed that the blues and gospel music were authentic forms of African-American expression that had been suppressed by mainstream culture, and saw himself as part of a larger cultural movement to reclaim them.

Hughes' commitment to promoting African-American culture through music is also evident in his role as an editor and promoter of jazz and blues music. He helped to organize the Newport Jazz Festival in 1956 and was a frequent contributor to jazz and blues magazines such as Down Beat and Metronome. His collaborations with jazz musicians such as Charles Mingus and Duke Ellington further demonstrate his belief in the power of music to bring people together and break down cultural barriers.

Critics have long recognized the importance of blues and gospel music in Hughes' poetry. In his book The Poetics of National and Racial Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature, John D. Kerkering argues that Hughes' use of blues and gospel music in his poetry "served to challenge the racial hierarchies of the dominant culture and to assert the cultural integrity of African Americans" (117). Kerkering also notes that Hughes' use of blues and gospel music is particularly effective because it "allowed him to tap into the emotional intensity of African-American culture and to give voice to the pain and suffering of his people" (118).

Other critics have focused on the role of blues and gospel music in Hughes' literary aesthetics. In her book Langston Hughes: A Study of the Short Fiction, Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper argues that Hughes' use of blues and gospel music is "a crucial component of his poetics of musicality, which allowed him to capture the cadences and rhythms of African-American speech" (66). Harper notes that Hughes' use of music in his poetry reflects his belief in the importance of orality in African-American culture, and his desire to create poetry that could be performed and heard as well as read.

Langston Hughes' poetry is a testament to the power of music to connect people across cultures and generations. Hughes' use of blues and gospel music in his poetry reflects his deep commitment to promoting African-American culture and challenging the racial hierarchies of mainstream culture. Through his poetry, essays, and collaborations with musicians, Hughes helped to shape a new literary aesthetic that captured the cadences and rhythms of African-American speech and music. His legacy continues to inspire writers and musicians to this day, and his poetry remains a powerful reminder of the enduring cultural and political significance of blues and gospel music in American life.

However, Hughes's use of blues and gospel music in his poetry is not just a celebration of African American culture; it is also a critique of societal norms and values. In his poem "Let America Be America Again," Hughes criticizes the false promises of democracy and freedom that have been denied to African Americans and other marginalized groups. The narrator's declaration that "America never was America to me" (3) highlights the gap between the American dream and the reality of

systemic oppression. The poem concludes with a call for unity and solidarity among all people who have been marginalized by the dominant culture, including African Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, and the working class.

Through his poetry, Hughes uses the power of blues and gospel music to comment on the human experience and to critique societal norms and values. His poetry celebrates the universality of human experience while also highlighting the specific struggles of African Americans and other marginalized groups. Hughes's poetry reminds us of the resilience, creativity, and humanity of African Americans in the face of oppression and challenges us to confront the systemic injustices that continue to exist in our society today. As Arnold Rampersad notes, "Hughes's poetry is an act of courage, a testimony to the endurance of the human spirit, and a call to action" (xvii).

In conclusion, Langston Hughes's use of blues and gospel music in his poetry serves as a powerful commentary on the human experience and a critique of societal norms and values. His poetry celebrates the universality of human experience, while also highlighting the specific struggles of African Americans and other marginalized groups. Through his use of these musical genres, Hughes captures the emotions of pain, sorrow, struggle, and hope that transcend race and class, making his poetry accessible to a broad audience. Hughes's poetry is a testament to the power of African American culture, and it challenges us to confront the systemic injustices that continue to exist in our society today.

Moreover, Hughes's contributions to American literature go beyond his poetry. His plays, essays, and novels further explore themes of race, identity, and culture and provide a nuanced understanding of the African American experience. Through his works, Hughes reminds us that African Americans have been and continue to be a vital part of American society, despite centuries of oppression and discrimination.

In today's world, where racial injustice and inequality continue to be major issues, Hughes's poetry remains relevant and powerful. His call for unity and solidarity among all people who have been marginalized by the dominant culture remains crucial, as we continue to work towards a more just and equitable society. As Hughes writes in "Let America Be America Again," "O, let America be America again / The land that never has been yet / And yet must be—the land where every man is free" (75-77). Hughes's poetry continues to inspire us to strive towards this vision of America, where all people are truly free and equal.

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