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The African-American poet's dilemma: Langston Hughes' and Countee Cullen's poetic response to a prejudiced world.

Sibyl Adam

The black poet's identity is directly affected when living in a society of mixed messages caused by segregation laws, where socially he is deemed inferior, and consequently this is reflected in his poetry, as is the pressure of integrating with established white poetics forms. In an attempt to find a place in which to belong, he utilises his African heritage and a feeling of collectiveness within his community, but this is not always successful. More hope lies in his ability to assimilate into the American poetic structure, adding his own input along with the white literary canon.

The area of Harlem, in New York City, during the 1920s and 30s was the cultural centre for the African-American arts movement known nowadays as 'The Harlem Renaissance'.¹ The literary foundations of this movement included the poetry of Langston Hughes, 1902 – 1967, and Countee Cullen, 1903 – 1946. A consideration of their work offers interesting and varied evidence for how these poets felt about their racial identities in the context of when and where they were writing and how they responded to the extremes of the racist society in which they lived. A time of mixed messages: the grandchildren of freed slaves, yet bound by segregation laws. Hughes was one of the most famous and 'most productive poet'² from the movement, whose poetry includes jazz and a

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¹ Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States: from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*. Translated from French by Kenneth Douglas (Urbana; London, 1973), 149

² *Ibid*, 386

certain 'racial romanticism'³ in his earlier years. Cullen was similarly a celebrated poet, who experienced 'a most tormented personality'⁴ due to his issues with his race.

African-Americans had steadily gained freedom and rights, including that to education, since the American civil war, which in turn caused an 'ever-increasing race consciousness.'⁵ They now had the artistic power to verbalise their thoughts on the role of the African-American in modern America, but still faced the challenges of institutionalised racism, Jim Crow laws and the fallacy of segregation 'separate yet equal' laws. It is a good idea to use poetry to investigate how an individual may respond to the extremes of discrimination precisely because the nature of poetry allows for a personal response and a capacity for an abstract consideration of how they feel. Both Cullen and Hughes make copious reference to race within their poetry. This seems inevitable due to the nature of their racial status as 'other'. With a heightened sense of race engendered by an environment of racism, the African-American poet will refer to their race prolifically. This heightened sense of awareness comes from the way they are treated in society, where they can sit on a bus or what doors they can use. Wagner describes how, 'While he is no longer inferior essentially, the self-image thrown back at him by his human environment still mirrors his presumed inferiority.'⁶

We must consider how far their experiences can be understood as extreme. The experiences of their close ancestors stolen from Africa and sold into slavery are uncontroversibly extreme. The violent struggle of contemporaries in gaining human rights is easy to understand as extreme. The day-to-day humiliations and exclusions such as standing on a bus when there is a seat next to a white

³ *Ibid*, 294

⁴ *Ibid*, 283

⁵ Jeffrey B. Ferguson, *The Harlem Renaissance: a Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 16

⁶ Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States*, 14

person, or using a separate, and always inferior, restroom is a form of 'symbolic violence'⁷ on a spectrum of extreme experience. Exposed to these experiences, how do Hughes and Cullen respond? Through collectivism, as an attempt to gain acceptance and power: the individual stands for the nation which is a form of synecdoche. They attempt, not always successfully, to find a place of acceptance through identification with an African heritage. This is problematic as they must rely on hegemonic white poetic forms within their writing, which poses questions about how an African-American poet copes with writing in a field which is traditionally and tyrannically white. How does an African-American show they have the same talent and can write as well as white poets if they are using the white poets' forms? It is the dilemma of trying to establish a different literary form which may never be recognised, the question of whether 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House'.⁸

Searching for a heritage on which they can depend on for dignity, which can make sense of extreme experiences of both past and present, both poets discuss their African identities. Hughes's 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'⁹ and 'Negro'¹⁰ invoke strong images of African origin, where the nameless Negro stands as a symbol for this powerful nation. In 'Negro', the affectionate use of the possessive in 'my Africa'¹¹ emphasises an identity deeply bound with Africa. 'Black' is associated with a deeper cultural experience in 'Black like the depths of my Africa'¹² yet a secretive, not fully realised 'Black as the night is black'.¹³

⁷ James F. Bohman, 'Practical Reason and Cultural Constraint' in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, (ed.) R. Shusterman (London, 1999), 129-152

⁸ Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' in *Sister Outsider, Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA, 1984), 110-113

⁹ Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York, 1988), 4

¹⁰ Hughes, 'Negro', *Ibid.*, 8

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1. 3

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1. 2

The poem lists the identities that the Negro has been, from 'a slave'¹⁴ of Caesar and Washington, to a worker of Ancient Egypt¹⁵ and the modern American buildings, to a singer in 'Georgia'.¹⁶ The overall suggestion is that to have African heritage is to be a part of a long and deep, thus empowering, history. The difference in tense between 'I am'¹⁷ and 'I've been'¹⁸ suggests a solid identity despite the events that have transpired. 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' similarly depicts the Negro experiencing all of his people's history, including in Africa, as a continuous succession with a deep, 'ancient'¹⁹ identity. Jones describes how,

To Blacks who had often suffered from popular misunderstandings of evolutionary theory, it was indeed important to be able to have come from the creators of pyramids and other ancient glories. Too many assumed that the Blacks' ancestors had but lately descended from the trees.²⁰

From this, we can see how Africa is used as an empowering symbol for Hughes, against the context of racism in the society in which he was writing his poetry. His assertion is of an identity as deep as the white and historically European identity.

The 1920s were the first time poets were using Africa as a 'potent positive symbol'.²¹ This symbol induces a feeling of collective identity because of the linking together of people with African descent. In the absence of an accepted

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 4

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 7-8

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 11

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 1

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 4

¹⁹ Hughes, 'Negro Speaks of Rivers', l. 2

²⁰ Norma Ramsay Jones, 'Africa, as Imaged by Cullen & Co', *Negro American Literature Forum* 8.4 (1974), 264

²¹ *Ibid.*, 263

place in American society, Hughes is searching for an accepted place of origin. Jones describes this renewal of interest in Africa as ‘a displaced people were finally discovering their roots.’²² However, this explanation for the use of Africa seems too simplistic. The African-American poets are discovering their roots, yet they are so removed from these roots that it must give little meaning to their modern identities. When Hughes visited Africa they laughed at him and called him ‘white man’²³ because he came from America, which suggests that the African-American can neither belong in Africa nor America, but somewhere in between.

Further problems with using an African identity as a place of refuge can be identified in the poetry of Cullen. Cullen’s ‘Heritage’²⁴ is an African identity conflicted and confused, seen with his repeated question ‘What is Africa to me?’²⁵ Africa is a symbol that is vivid, ‘Copper sun or scarlet sea’²⁶, ‘spicy grove, cinnamon tree’²⁷ and yet distant, ‘Africa? A book one thumbs/ Listlessly, till slumber comes’²⁸ implying an Africa that is not relevant to his reality. Therefore, he asks himself ‘Do I play a double part’²⁹ in his feelings towards Africa, emphasising a split identity at once African and yet not assimilated with his idea of Africa. Africa is integral to his notion of selfhood, ‘dark blood dammed within’³⁰ but ‘dammed’ implies he is ashamed.

Much criticism of Cullen has focused on what Wagner describes as an

²² *Ibid*,

²³ Langston Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Volume 13, Autobiography: The Big Sea* (Columbia and London, 2002), 96

²⁴ Countee Cullen, ‘Heritage’ in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, (ed.) David Levering Lewis (New York, 1995), 244-247

²⁵ *Ibid*, l. 9

²⁶ *Ibid*, l. 2

²⁷ *Ibid*, l. 9

²⁸ *Ibid*, ll. 31-2

²⁹ *Ibid*, l. 97

³⁰ *Ibid*, l. 26

‘impassible barrier between the poet and the people of his own race.’³¹ In other words, Cullen appears to be ashamed of his race and shows a desire to be white. Wagner claims that this reflects the ‘presumed inferiority’³² that the African-American has in society, and so consequently he develops a poor opinion of himself, ‘ends up hating everyone of his own race’.³³ Hughes wrote in his famous essay ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain’ about a Negro poet who wanted to write outside of the constraints of his race, and infers from this that the poet is proclaiming he wants to be white.³⁴ Smethurst claims that this poet is in fact Cullen, as the statement resembles what Cullen said in an interview in 1924.³⁵ If Cullen is showing a desire to be white, then this can only occur in a society where white is seen as superior over black. Indeed, living in a society where one is treated badly due to the colour of one’s skin can produce the negative effect of being ashamed, as well a desire to fight and have pride. Cullen is attempting to show his pride in his reclamation of the African identity, and yet cannot fully commit himself to such a claim, which could be due to the effects of racism on his identity. Carroll describes this as ‘both his distance from Africa and his inability to separate himself from it.’³⁶ This is emphasised by the fact that the version of the poem in the journal ‘Survey Graphic’ had photos of African masks and statues, yet in the ‘New Negro’ version, most of these were removed, leaving the connection with Africa more ambiguous.³⁷

The connection with Africa which Hughes and Cullen make is undermined

³¹ Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States*, 283

³² *Ibid.*, 14

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Langston Hughes, ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain’ in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 91

³⁵ James Smethurst, ‘Lyric Stars: Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, (ed.) George Hutchinson (Cambridge, 2007), 112

³⁶ Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image and the New Negro* (Bloomington, 2005), 177

³⁷ *Ibid.*

when we closely inspect the images of Africa they used. Jones argues that the image of Africa must have been gained through pictures of African art such as the African masks seen in the popular anthology 'The New Negro',³⁸ widely held notions of Africa and a 'form of wish-fulfillment'.³⁹ Some of the images of Africa in Cullen's 'Heritage' are primitive, savage images, such as 'wild barbaric birds/Goading massive jungle herds'⁴⁰ and 'Tread the savage measures of/Jungle boys and girls in love'.⁴¹ Arguably, these are classic white and largely negative images of the primitive Africa. This begs the question of how it can positively reinforce an identity created by African-Americans if it is just reusing white stereotypes. This suggests a fundamental flaw in the conception of African identity as a way of gaining dignity in the social environment of prejudice, because it is based on negative white stereotypes. Furthermore, I would argue that to summarise 'Africa' within a poem as one generalised representation is impossible; similar to the difficulties one would have in summarising 'America' or 'Europe' in such a way. Many African-Americans had roots in slavery from different areas of Western Africa and often had white relatives. Many descendants of slaves would have found it difficult to trace their roots, which means that using Africa for a specific, personal connection would be difficult to achieve. However, importantly Jones points out that 'What they conceived Africa to be is just as important as what Africa really is.'⁴² suggesting what is really important is that they have chosen this symbolic African identity rather than it being forced upon them. The implication is that this is only important as an empowering symbol. If this symbol is not a real connection then arguably it is flawed in its inception. Hughes' later poetry relied less on the theme of Africa, which hints that he increasingly began to feel it was an imperfect connection.

³⁸ Alain Locke (ed.), *The New Negro* (New York: Atheneum; New York; Oxford, 1925; repr. 1992)

³⁹ Jones, 'Africa, as Imaged by Cullen & Co', 264

⁴⁰ Cullen, 'Heritage', ll.13-14

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, ll.13-14

⁴² Jones, 'Africa, as Imaged by Cullen & Co', 264

The African-American can cope with the environment of institutionalised racism by forming a collective strength through joining together with one's fellow African-Americans. Both Hughes and Cullen demonstrate a will towards a collective identity. In Hughes' 'Negro' and 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' he identifies a collective African-American identity and symbolic universality. In, 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers', the rivers of Africa and America are what links the collective 'I'⁴³ which transcends time from bathing 'in the Euphrates'⁴⁴ to raising 'the pyramids'⁴⁵. Similarly in 'Negro', the 'I' encapsulates the African-American people in one, through history and geography. The nameless figure implies an 'every man'. The 'Negro' has been 'a slave...a worker...a singer...a victim'⁴⁶ but ultimately always a 'Negro'. This highlights a specific attitude espoused by Hughes, a common one amongst discriminated groups of individuals, of solid racial identity despite the outside events that may transpire.

Hutchinson describes how 'increasingly, African-Americans came to feel a common identity regardless of region or social status.'⁴⁷ He claims this was due to immigration, as well as intensification of racism and firm segregation. This collective nature can be seen in anthologies of poetry, essays, and pictures published, such as Alain Locke's 'The New Negro' in which both Cullen and Hughes are featured, as a growing need African-Americans felt at the time to express collectively what they wanted in American society. Nonetheless, this attitude creates serious problems. The issue with this collectiveness is it threatens 'an implied homogeneity';⁴⁸ that there are certain features all African-Americans share. In turn, this implies an exclusion of those members of the

⁴³ Hughes, 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers', l. 5

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, l.7

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 4, 7, 10, 14

⁴⁷ George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1997), 10

⁴⁸ Carroll, 'Word, Image and the New Negro', 157

race that do not fit in, which contradicts the positivity that the collectivism is trying to promote in the first place. The same problems arise with the collective identity as with the African identity, in trying to generalise a group of individuals. This collective identity is linked with Pan-Africanism, which seeks to unite Africans from all over the world together. This raises questions of generalisation of African-Americans with different roots; incurring issues of how collective they can be as a race, and whether this collective identity is detrimental. It is perhaps not possible for a group of people so varied in origins and opinions to be classified as having the same view.

A further flaw with the African-American poet speaking collectively for their race as a solid positive force in the face of racism is the pressure on them to represent their race in a positive light. Hughes says that,

The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. "Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," say the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you," say the whites.⁴⁹

This means that because he is representing his race and his race's response to the extreme experiences of the past and present, the African-American poet has a larger responsibility than if he were to represent only himself. This seems doomed to fail, as the abstract nature of poetry in itself is often open to different interpretations. A guarantee can never be made of poetic success. The pressure to speak for the whole race is perhaps why in 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' and 'Negro', Hughes has felt the need to emphasise the great things, like Pyramids, that his race has created. We can see an example of this type of demand in the critic Harry Alan Potamkin's 1927 article on Cullen, in which he reproaches 'Cullen for not having been more notably the spokesman of his entire race, as if the collective experience should necessarily absorb the

⁴⁹ Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', 94

individual's creative activity whenever the individual does not enjoy the privilege of being white.'⁵⁰ Further problems with the collective African-American identity include the fact that it only emphasises the difference between black and white poets. It encourages this type of frame of mind, and encourages white poets and literary critics to see it in the same light.

An issue that cannot be ignored when discussing the African-American poets of the 1920s is the relation to their white counterpart. They are writing in a white-dominated field, with the outlines of European poetic traditions to compete with, so how do they respond in a manner in keeping with the positivity of the African identity and the will towards collectiveness? The problem with defining oneself as 'Negro' in 20th century American literature is that this is not always as distinct from 'white' as one might presume. Indeed, proclaiming one's African 'Negro' collective identity using a white literary form could be seen as undermining any distinction one is attempting to proclaim. Furthermore, African-American poetry is often critically analysed in light of white literary and cultural assumptions. In fact, it is difficult to analyse without the framework of the white literary canon purely because it is seen as the default, as Hutchinson points out, 'the only way to accomplish or even envision the shape of such a transformation is in the context of disputes between positions in the general, white-dominated cultural field'.⁵¹ This would have been especially true in the time of publication of Hughes and Cullen because of the lack of previous African-American literature and literary criticism, compared to modern day. Indeed, perhaps a distinct African-American poetry is impossible. Schuyler declares that American black and white art are identical in that they show 'more or less evidence of European influence.'⁵² Warren recently declared in an article titled 'Does African-American Literature exist?' that the literature created in the times of Jim Crow laws was a needed reaction,

⁵⁰ Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States*, 292

⁵¹ Hutchinson, 'The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White', 7

⁵² George S. Schuyler, 'The Negro-Art Hokum' in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 97

Because segregation rested informally on claims and beliefs about racial difference and inequality, it lent coherence to the notion of a collective race interest. That also meant that the publication of a work of literature or the success of a particular black individual could call attention to the falsity of racist beliefs and, through argument or demonstration, conceivably affect all blacks regardless of their class status.⁵³

Although Warren's claim that African-American literature does not exist in the present day because it is firmly situated in a historical time frame of inequality is far-fetched, his point that African-American literature from the Jim Crow laws era exists purely as a form of reaction against racism is interesting. It suggests it is distinct because of its reactionary content. In other words, it is distinct from white poetry because it is a reaction to a prejudiced world where white poetry is not.

If we look closely at the language used in Hughes 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' and 'Negro' both poems show 'a plain, almost colloquial, but not conversational character'⁵⁴ similar to Carl Sandburg, a major white poet. In fact, Smethurst claims that rather than writing in a markedly African-American diction, it is more, like Sandburg and Walt Whitman, 'a generic "American" language posed against a "high" literary diction like that of Cullen's that is more or less British in its derivation and alleged sensibility'.⁵⁵ In other words, Hughes and Cullen are choosing to represent themselves using a classically white poetic manner. Ferguson, writing a year after Smethurst, similarly compared Hughes to Whitman and Sandburg.⁵⁶ They are not alone in using white poets to analyse

⁵³ Kenneth W. Warren, 'Does African-American Literature exist?' February 24, 2011 <http://chronicle.com/article/Does-African-American/126483/> [Accessed February 15, 2012]

⁵⁴ Smethurst, 'Lyric Stars', 120

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 12

⁵⁶ Ferguson, 'The Harlem Renaissance: A Brief History with Documents', 14

Hughes and Cullen. David Kirby, in 1971, called Cullen's 'Heritage' a 'black Waste Land'.⁵⁷ This pattern seems to suggest an established practice of criticism of the poets. However, Hughes and Cullen may have been consciously using these white poetic forms. Cullen's 'Heritage' displays simple rhyming couplets, a traditionally white, European form of metre seen, for example, in Shakespeare's sonnets. To have thought of writing in this manner, Cullen must have been conscious of its history in white, European poetry and would have known he was exerting the cultural and literary associations by writing in that metre.

Arguably then, it was not the goal of Hughes or Cullen to write in a distinctly African-American style. In fact, they were attempting to write in a style that embraced both black and white literary styles and associations to produce something distinctly American. Hutchinson claims that "white" and "black" American cultures as intimately intertwined, mutually constitutive'.⁵⁸ There is a strong theme of American nationalism in Hughes' 'I too' with the association of being 'beautiful'⁵⁹ as an American, and in 'America' where the country is described as 'the dream...the vision'.⁶⁰ Also, in Cullen's 'Heritage', his pride of his Christian values shows an affinity with America, 'I belong to Jesus Christ'.⁶¹ In 'America', the display of Hughes saying 'I am American'⁶² shows a reclaiming of an origin in America. Hanchard discusses the importance of nomenclature to African-Americans, and how self-definition and names affects identity.⁶³ His discussion is surrounding the label 'African-American', but the same investigation can be made into the labels Hughes uses. The move from 'Negro'

⁵⁷ David K. Kirby, 'Countee Cullen's 'Heritage': a black 'Waste Land', *South Atlantic Bulletin* 36.4 (1971), 14

⁵⁸ Hutchinson, 'The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White', 3

⁵⁹ Langston Hughes, 'I Too' in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, l. 15

⁶⁰ Langston Hughes, 'America' in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ll. 8-9

⁶¹ Cullen, 'Heritage', l. 89

⁶² Hughes, 'America', l. 7

⁶³ Michael Hanchard, 'Identity, Meaning and the African-American', *Social Text* 24 (1990), 31

to 'American' in his poetry gives evidence to his need to be assimilated properly and fairly into American society. 'Negro', which is the Spanish and Portuguese word for black, represents solely colour and therefore appearance. Adopting 'American' gives a greater sense of belonging.

Hutchinson suggests that the authors did not believe an autonomous African-American literary genre was possible.⁶⁴ The poets seem to be consciously, even possibly proudly, imitating white literary style. In Hughes' 'America', he concludes with 'I am my one sole self,/American seeking the stars.'⁶⁵ that strongly emphasises the unity of the American people named in the poem, whether black or white. Along with 'I too', these poems show an ideology similar to the ideology of the 'American Dream', showing how the speaker values himself as part of this. Schuyler says of the African-American writers that 'their work shows the impress of nationality rather than race. They all reveal the psychology and culture of their environment – their color is incidental.'⁶⁶ Hughes is possibly doing this to criticise racial injustice⁶⁷ which suggests therefore a political motivation in using the white literary canon to assimilate the African-American people within America. He is suggesting a way in which he wants to see his society: the assimilation of black and white, as a replacement of the of segregation laws. Furthermore, writing in white literary forms effectively and with talent to produce what is recognised as excellent poetry seems to only highlight the absurdity of racism, and the apparent inferiority of the African-American poet.

It is a strange and interesting time for the African-American poet: the freedom to write, to receive recognition for one's poetry yet to experience the lingering prejudices, racism and laws that give a reality far more unequal than they

⁶⁴ Hutchinson, 'The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White', 5

⁶⁵ Hughes, 'America', ll. 63-4

⁶⁶ Schuyler, 'The Negro-Art Hokum', 98

⁶⁷ Jeff Westover, 'Africa/America: Fragmentation and Diaspora in the Work of Langston Hughes', *Callaloo* 25.4 (2002), 1207

proclaim. We can see Hughes' and Cullen's poetry as a reaction to this situation, and the ways in which they cope with it as individuals, especially sharing a common heritage. They respond to extreme experience and ancestral experience by seeking heritage in an African origin, and strength through unity and collectiveness. Yet their experience of Africa is highly ambivalent. It is impossible for the poets to escape a vision of Africa through a white lens just as it is impossible to escape the white literary canon in their poetry. The very term 'Harlem Renaissance' implies that one should measure its cultural production against the Renaissance, the upsurge of artistic and scientific culture of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. Naming it thus, in modern day criticism, invites us to understand it as 'the other' Renaissance, to be considered against the white European Renaissance. The poets' great awareness of their race can be seen with the extent to which they allude to race, but this is surely inevitable due to their racial status as 'other'. They seek ways of understanding and living with the past whilst looking to an African-American future. Finally, we can see an attempt to rectify this status as 'other' by using established white literary forms, and showing a love for America as a place for both black and white.

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