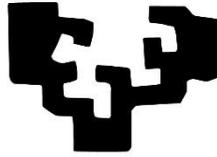


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# Langston Hughes's Poetry: Rewriting the American Dream in the Harlem Renaissance

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## **Abstract**

During the Roaring Twenties, two opposed events took place in the United States: the development of the American Dream concept in terms of white privilege, and the rising of the Harlem Renaissance, an African American cultural and artistic movement based on the fight for racial equality and the inclusion of black people in the American Dream. The African American writer Langston Hughes was a key figure in this movement, and his poetry thus reflects those revolutionary characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance which challenged the bases of the 'white' American Dream. This paper intends to analyze how the ideology promoted during the Harlem Renaissance was present in Hughes's work, in what ways his poetry represented the African Americans and how it questioned the mainstream US society's perception of the American Dream. The main critical framework for the present study will be cultural studies, with a specific focus on the role of ethnicity and race in a selection of Hughes's poems. The paper will examine the way in which Hughes reshapes the American Dream at four different levels. Firstly, particular attention will be paid to the poet's rebellious and critical attitude towards the privileged white section of the American society reflected in his poems, and how that social panorama results in racial injustice. Afterwards, the analysis will center on the visibility of black culture and history, and how it challenges archetypal views about the American Dream. The third section will be devoted to the use of the African American non-standard variety of the English language and how this use contributes to the criticism of the American Dream's notion of a homogenous culture. Finally, the study will focus on Hughes's attitude about the Great Depression and the American Dream's decadence, as well as to the way in which his poetry assimilated a more pessimistic tone than in previous times. In conclusion, Langston Hughes played a key role in the rewriting of the American Dream as an inclusive and achievable ideal lifestyle that should allow African Americans to achieve freedom and equality.

**Key Words:** Langston Hughes, Harlem Renaissance, African American Literature, American Dream.

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# 1. Introduction

Coetaneous to the Roaring Twenties and the rise of the American Dream ideology of the United States society, between 1917 and 1935, an African American cultural movement arose, as a large variety of artists began to acknowledge their African heritage as a source for race pride. Thus, an important group of African American writers' work began to revolve around their culture and tradition, often including features of protest, propaganda, and revolution. This movement was known as the Harlem Renaissance (or Renascence), in reference to where it mainly developed, and marked a milestone in the history of African American art and society. Langston Hughes (1901-1967) was a noticeable figure in the Harlem Renaissance, and his poems illustrate some of the main ideas of this movement. The aim of this paper is to analyze how the ideology spread during the Harlem Renaissance was represented in Hughes's work, in what ways his poetry epitomized the African American community and how it offered a contrast with the mainstream US society in terms of the representation of the American Dream.

The main motivation for the choice of this topic is the uniqueness of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement that in the 1920s and 1930s brought visibility and recognition to a neglected and discriminated community that was traditionally not allowed to believe in the standard American Dream. Moreover, Langston Hughes was a crucial exponent of this movement, and he could be considered one of the most fundamental voices among the Harlem Renaissance artists. Therefore, Hughes portrayed in his poems key ideas related to the meaning and implications of the American Dream for his community during this period.

Cultural studies are the main critical framework used in this paper for the analysis of the American Dream in Langston Hughes's poetry, with an emphasis on race and ethnicity. Furthermore, I will analyze how his poetry represents some relevant aspects of the way of life of African Americans during the Harlem Renascence. Particular attention will be paid to his approach to the main ideas and values of the Harlem Renaissance in some of his best-known poems, for example, "The Weary Blues", "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Let America Be America Again". In this way the reader may know how this

movement challenges or criticizes some of the most conventional ideas and values consolidated in mainstream US society, in particular, the American Dream.

This paper will be divided into four sections; the first one is this introduction. Secondly, a historical and cultural contextualization of the 1920s and the later decades will be provided. The third section will be the main part of the paper, an analysis of the Harlem Renaissance ideology in Langston Hughes's work through a close reading of some of his best-known poems. This section will focus on four different levels: his revolutionary attitude towards American society and the American Dream; his portrayal of black culture and tradition; language and style in his poems; and the influence of the Great Depression in his work. Finally, the fourth and last section will be devoted to the main conclusion of the present paper.

## **2. Historical and Cultural Context**

### **2.1. The American Dream in the 1920s**

Prior to the analysis of Langston Hughes's poetry, it is relevant to delve into the historical and cultural circumstances the American society was experiencing after the First World War (1914-1918). In the postwar era, a drastic social, political, and economic change started to take place in America. The 1920s were characterized by an increased industrialization and urbanization, the extension of popular culture through new technologies and a massive immigration, which led to a notorious growth of the population. The popular image of the 'Golden Twenties' was that of an era of excess and unlimited freedom, a more progressive culture in which ethnic minorities and women were no longer oppressed and had a new prominence and increased freedom. Consequently, people from seemingly less favored locations would search for a more convenient and ideal lifestyle in the United States (*History.com*). As a matter of fact, statistics consistently prove that the years 1922-1929 indeed implied an undeniable economic boom, especially for the upper and upper- middle-classes; there was nowhere in the world where the average quality of life was higher than there (Keller 32).

Related to this sociocultural situation, there was a generalized idealization of the American way of living, an urge to achieve the ideal model of lifestyle: the American Dream. Even though this term has never been given an exclusive sole definition, there are some notions that every description given to this concept shares: in particular, an inclusive and equitable possibility of success, liberty and democracy (Keller 49). Although this idealized perception of the country had been latent since the colonial period in the history of America, it was James Truslow Adams in 1931 who first coined the expression 'American Dream'. He defined this term as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (qtd. in Keller 49). The American Dream, thus, was the ideal life that could be equally accomplished by anyone, seemingly with the implicit condition of hard work.

Nevertheless, this utopian view of the United States was not as accessible and ideal as was broadly believed to be. As previously mentioned, only a fraction of the American society was actually beneficiary of the American lifestyle during the Roaring Twenties: in most cases, white people from upper and upper-middle classes. The reality was that ethnic minorities, among others, could not experience the liberty and equality promised by the Dream, as the increased immigration led to a rise of nativism and movements against non-natives (Ryan 48). The racist response to the rise of immigration was exemplified by millions of people who joined the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, resurrecting the white supremacist hate-group (*History.com*). How the American Dream and the prominent ideology during the Golden Twenties affected the African American community will be further developed below.

## 2.2. The Other Side of the Coin: Segregation and the Jim Crow Laws

The aforementioned concept of the American Dream which peaked during the 1920s was indeed detrimental for minority collectives, and especially for the African American community. Although the prevailing popularized image of the dream during the decade was one of progressivism, liberty, equality and democracy, the undeniable truth was that average Americans became increasingly more intolerant towards immigrants after the massive arrival of newcomers the American Dream brought with it

(Ryan 49). In fact, politically conservative, eugenic, and white-supremacist ideas spread rapidly among natives, what resulted in notorious events, such as the revival of the KKK or the 'Red Scare', an extensive diffusion of anti-communist propaganda based on fear.

In addition, African American people were simultaneously being discriminated against by another form of oppression: the segregationist Jim Crow Laws. Even though the revision of the US Constitution subsequent to the end of the Civil War (1865) led to the abolition of slavery and the concession of the right to vote to African Americans, the Supreme Court aimed to subvert the progress made. In fact, it legitimized discrimination against this ethnic minority via local laws and codes, known as the 'Jim Crow' laws. This legislation formed a conspicuous division between black and white people in every social situation. In fact, black people were denied access to a large variety of public places and decent services; "Whites only" signs were posted in many facilities, and even marriage between black and white people was prohibited. In fewer words, white Americans were considered superior, and therefore those who were even believed to have African ancestry were mercilessly denied basic facilities or services. This panorama lasted beyond the Second World War, and was not formally reversed until 1965, with the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts (Andrews 44).

The American Dream, which promised equal opportunity and freedom for every American who worked for success, rather resembled the American Nightmare not only for African Americans, but also for every ethnic minority group in the country. However, some action was taken against these discriminatory movements in diverse forms. On the one hand, African Americans and other groups such as bootleggers, immigrants and progressives often employed violence against the Second Ku Klux Klan and riotously disrupted their meetings (Ryan 65). On the other hand, African American activists and other white liberals likewise assembled with the aim to suffocate racial discrimination, funding in 1909 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Andrews 51).

Propelled by this rebellious character of the opposition to the white supremacist ideology, a new artistic movement arose in the African American community, a movement which sought both integration and self-expression of their culture: the Harlem Renaissance (*Renaissances and Radicalism Period*). African Americans wanted both

themselves and their culture to be validated, and the Harlem Renaissance definitely played a key role in the vindication and visibility of this community in the 1920s and 1930s.

### 2.3. A Revolutionary Response: The Harlem Renaissance

During this period some black activists became prominent in the vindication of African American rights, in particular, W.E.B. Dubois. He was the first man of African American ancestry to ever obtain a Harvard PhD in social sciences. W.E.B. Du Bois actively promoted rebellion against racial discrimination. As a matter of fact, he was one of the main promoters and leaders of the abovementioned NAACP. Furthermore, Du Bois defended that African Americans could only accomplish justice by means of an intellectual vanguard; i.e. he always emphasized the relevance of a classic liberal arts education to fight against racism and oppression (Andrews 49). This intellectual vanguard in DuBois's work came indeed in the form of the Harlem Renaissance, in all likelihood the most relevant period in African American intellectual and cultural history (Andrews 52).

Dating approximately from 1917 to 1935, the Harlem Renaissance signified the uprising of black American voices that dissented with the white establishments and were willing to challenge the systematic racial discrimination they were suffering. These voices of the Harlem Renaissance originated as a result of the multicultural and creative panorama that was taking place during the Golden Twenties in Harlem, Manhattan, one of the few areas of New York the Jim Crow laws allowed black people to live in (Andrews 53). This multitude of African American voices, particularly writers, resembled each other in many ideas and experiences, for instance: the view of Africa as a source of racial pride, the use of black heroes in narrating heroic American history events, propaganda of protest and the consideration of black masses in a more understanding rather than apologetic way (*Harlem Renaissance*). Essentially, the Harlem Renaissance artists were pursuing self-expression of their cultural customs, and acceptance and parity of their culture and their people as equals by the rest of America, the former being sought mainly by the younger generation of this artistic current (*Renaissances and Radicalism Period*).

There were innumerable artists that took part in this revolutionary movement, artists that for the first time in history had the opportunity to be acknowledged by mainstream America thanks to the Harlem Renaissance, also referred to as the most relevant cultural component of the “New Negro Movement”. Among this host of new artists, we could remark the jazz legend Louis Armstrong, or the folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, who focused on Southern rural black folklore in most of her writing. Regarding specifically the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, it should be noted that despite its rebellious character, overt protest was rather avoided, and these protests often came in the form of literary representations of the social impact of racism and the authors’ own experiences as a black Americans. One of the undeniably most renowned promoters of this movement was Langston Hughes. In his many poems and other works, he attempted to encourage young black artists to rise for their future (Andrews 54). Moreover, Hughes founded a magazine in 1926 with other notable exponents of the “New Negro Movement” –Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman and John P Davis, for instance– orientated towards the black youth. They named it *Fire!!*, so that “it would burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past” (*The Big Sea* 220). The creators of the magazine, the self-named “The Niggerati”, intended to provide an analysis of controversial events in the African American collective. Nevertheless, ironically the *Fire!!* magazine quarters were burned down after the publication of their first issue (Andrews 54). However, even if those opposed tried to extinguish the fire of this “New Negro Movement”, Hughes and other black artists in Harlem continued to keep the flame of African American literature alive.

The prominent tendency of black self-expression and the constant fight for the rights of the African Americans in Harlem did not, however, eliminate the incessant discrimination against black people. In spite of its artistic character, in the course of time Harlem inevitably became marked by poverty and racism. In particular, the Great Depression not only meant the end of the Roaring Twenties, but it also had a very negative impact on the Harlem Renaissance. (Andrews 55). An event that undeniably implied a turning point towards the downfall of the “New Negro Movement” was the Harlem Riot of 1935. This protest erupted after the death of a young black boy who was beaten up to death by the manager of a store the boy had seemingly shoplifted in. Different local groups spread pamphlets informing about this event, and rioters became infuriated with the situation, what led to a considerable crowd of people aggressively raiding the store.

In the end, seventy-five mostly black protesters were arrested, as well as a large number of civilians and police officers injured (Greenberg 3-4). This event, however, was not the sole trigger for this revolt to happen, but just another instance of the many situations of unfairness and inequality suffered by the African American community. As renown activist Nannie Helen Burroughs stated:

The causes of the Harlem riot are not far to seek. They lie buried beneath mountains of injustices done the colored man ... through years of “patient sufferance” on his part. ... The colored man has reached the endurance limit. ... Day after day, year after year, decade after decade, black people have been robbed of their inalienable rights. ... In Harlem the cornered rats fought back. That “long train of abuses is a magazine of powder. An unknown boy was simply the match. ... Colored folks feel that Harlem is their last stand. (qtd. in Greenberg 5)

#### 2.4. Langston Hughes

As mentioned above, Langston Hughes made many prominent contributions to literature and activism during the Harlem Renaissance era. Born on February 1, 1902 (although recent research discusses the possibility of his birth being the previous year), Langston Hughes was raised by his mother and grandmother after his parents’ prompt separation. He moved with his mother to Cleveland after his grandmother’s passing away, after his constant moving to many other cities in the search for a new home. In Cleveland, he wrote what would later become his first published poem: “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”. Published in 1921 in the American magazine *The Crisis*, coordinated by the NAACP, this poem became an instant success and brought notable attention to him (“Langston Hughes”).

Hughes explored Harlem for the first time in 1921-22, after he attended university in New York City, and he became then permanently attached to the city, to which he referred as the “great dark city”. During the 1920 decade, Hughes composed a large number of poems, gained considerable recognition and even was awarded some local prizes for his work. For instance, he published the collection of poems *The Weary Blues*

(1926), and he received a poetry prize from *Opportunity* magazine in 1925 and the Witter Bynner Undergraduate Poetry Award a year later (“Langston Hughes”).

Towards the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the Great Depression period, Langston Hughes adopted a more radical position in his poetry, regarding politics and racial justice. A noteworthy instance of this new approach is his well-known play *Mulatto*, which was even produced on Broadway in 1935. This piece displays the story of a mulatto son who murders his father, the reason being he would not recognize his son as anything other than a slave plantation worker. This tragedy became temporarily the black play that was run for the longest in Broadway, until 1959. It is relevant to remark, however, that Hughes often criticized the play’s (and every other) Broadway representation as “too commercial” and expressed the urge for a national African American and professional spaces for black theater artists, so diverse these voices would reach all Americans (Wintz 80).

In a more general view, what Hughes intended with his literary work was to encourage young black artists to express themselves and feel safe about it, far from fear or shame, as he stated in his text “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. (4)

Langston Hughes died at the age of 65 on May 22, 1967. His notable and extensive literary work undoubtedly echoed the ideas promoted during the “New Negro Movement” of self-expression, African American customs and traditions, and the arguably concealed protest for racial equality. In addition, his literary works also provided a clear reflection of the historical and social panorama in Harlem during several decades in the first half of the twentieth century.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. A Rebellious Attitude towards American Society

The American Dream represented a utopian lifestyle every American person wished to achieve; a great life accessible for every American citizen. The truth, however, was far from that. Black Americans were somehow denied this equal access to the Dream, as were other minority groups. Consequently, Langston Hughes, along with other racialized artists, adopted a rebellious attitude towards the American Dream and its inherent exclusiveness, as well as towards the privileged white American society that benefited from it. In order to explore Hughes's attitudes towards American society, it is worth analyzing the way in which some of his poems show his protest against white supremacy, the inaccessibility to the American Dream for racialized people and the aspiration to be accepted and equal. Some of the best examples of these topics may be found in the following poems: "I, Too", "As I Grew Older" and "White Man".

Firstly, "I, Too" (1926) is a clear instance of racism in America from the perspective of the speaker, a black man. He is denied a seat at a table and sent to eat in the kitchen because of his ethnicity, and thus wants white people to see that he is as American as they might be. This poem advocates for the inclusion of black Americans in American society as equals to white people, and for the acknowledgement of the beauty and strength of the black community. Furthermore, Hughes may as well implicitly express his wish for equal opportunities for African Americans to achieve the American Dream. Throughout this poem, the metaphoric meaning of the kitchen and the table plays an important role: they are symbols for segregation and privilege, respectively. As regards the kitchen, the speaker is sent there to eat when the rest of his family and 'company' or visitors are in the table; he is left alone because of the color of his skin. This resembles the situation going on at that time with the Jim Crow laws: African Americans were denied access to the most quotidian services, only white people could access those places. The table, on the other hand, symbolizes the opportunity to be equal to and respected by the rest of the society. The speaker predicts that in the future, he will be at the table instead of the kitchen, the situation will change, he will become stronger, and he will finally be respected by his family despite being the "darker brother". In other words, African

Americans will be integrated as equals in the American society in the future. Moreover, it is relevant to remark the role of the speaker in this poem, who refers to himself as “the darker brother” in line 2: “I am the darker brother”. This suggests that he is part of perhaps a mixed family, of which he is of a darker skin color than the rest, and he is therefore discriminated and isolated. Specifically, when other people come to their household to eat, he is denied a seat at the table and sent to eat in the kitchen: “They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes” (lines 3-4). By describing this family, Hughes might be establishing a simile between it and the American society itself: an ethnically diverse society, where the “darker brother”, representative of the African American community, is discriminated. Furthermore, the poem refers to the resilience and the strength of African Americans, and it adopts an optimistic tone regarding the situation, implying that someday this “darker brother” will have his seat at the table, he will someday be recognized as a valid part of the American society: “Tomorrow, / I’ll be at the table / When company comes. / Nobody’ll dare / Say to me, / ‘Eat in the kitchen,’ / Then” (lines 8-14). Black Americans will grow strong and be integrated again in the American society. Langston Hughes therefore provides a positive view of the situation, and he hopes for better times to arrive in the future: the American Dream will someday be achievable for black communities, too.

Another poem worth mentioning when analyzing Hughes’s attitudes towards the American society and the American Dream is “As I Grew Older”, part of the collection *The Weary Blues* (1926). Through its symbolic language, the poem expresses Hughes’s frustration with racial injustice and barriers imposed to African Americans, symbolized as a “thick wall” that does not allow the speaker to achieve a dream. When the speaker seems to be giving up, a voice encourages him/her to break through that wall of repression and fulfill the dream. As most of Hughes’s poetry, this poem tackles issues of racism, black identity and overcoming difficulties. In the first part of the poem, the speaker explicitly refers to a dream, perhaps the American Dream, and to how long ago it was there: “It was a long time ago. / I have almost forgotten my dream. / But it was there then, / In front of me, / Bright like a sun, — / My dream” (lines 1-6). The American Dream was once there for the African American community, however, it is not there anymore. Now, a wall has risen to separate the speaker from the dream. This wall is a clear symbol for social injustice, segregation, oppression, and other barriers the African American community encounters in their attempt to achieve equality and the American Dream. The

wall rises until it touches the sky, and then casts a shadow that brings blackness to the speaker, implying that before those social barriers rose, black Americans were not different, every member of the American society was equal: the wall “Rose slowly, slowly, / Dimming, / Hiding, / The light of my dream. / Rose until it touched the sky,— / The wall. // Shadow. / I am black” (lines 11-16). In relation to this, the implications of the title are also relevant. As the title states, the events narrated in the poem took place as the speaker grew older. It is suggested that when African Americans grow up, they lose their naïve perspective of the world; they become aware of the fact that they belong to a different ethnicity and realize the truth: that difference they hold from white Americans results in discrimination and social injustice. This can be furthermore related to Langston Hughes’s own experience with the American Dream. In his adolescence, Hughes was once beaten up when he was passing a white neighborhood in Chicago on his way home; it was then when he realized how little were his opportunities for freedom and justice, how far was he, as a black American, to fulfill his American Dream (Presley 381). In spite of the wall separating the speaker from the Dream, this poem adopts an optimistic tone in its final part, and it encourages African Americans to not give up and break that wall that is separating them from equality. When the speaker seems to be devastated in lines 19-20 (“I lie down in the shadow, / No longer the light of my dream before me”), there is a change in the speaker’s attitude and starts urging his or her “dark hands” to destroy that wall: “My hands! / My dark hands! / Break through the wall! / Find my dream! / Help me to shatter this darkness, / To smash this night, / To break this shadow / Into a thousand lights of sun, / Into a thousand whirling dreams / Of sun!” (lines 24-33). The speaker wants to break through the wall and make the dream accessible again. Through this poem, Hughes encourages the African American community to stand up to social barriers and racial injustice in order to achieve their American Dream.

Finally, another poem that criticizes segregation and white privilege in the American society is “White Man” (1936). In contrast with the two poems previously analyzed, instead of providing a positive attitude and an optimistic tone in view of a better future, “White Man” is mainly an example of protest against racial stratification. The first part shows experiences of black people in contrast with the more privileged lives of white Americans. There could be an implicit critic of the American Dream’s accessibility for black people: whereas the “White Man” takes all the good jobs and nice houses, the “Negro” gets the leftovers; while the African American men do the hard work, white

people benefit from it. In the final part of the poem, Hughes relates those rich white people with Capitalism in Marx's Communist Manifesto. The general idea of the poem is that the American Dream is only reachable for white people, and no matter how hard African Americans work, white people will have already taken everything from them, they will only have the leftovers. In the poem, Hughes establishes very clear distinctions based on race; white and black appear as binary oppositions: "You're a White Man / I'm a Negro" (lines 2-3). In addition, he illustrates these distinctions with quite specific situations of achievement and success in a white person's life and an immediate contrast with the lives of African Americans, e.g.: "You have a good time in a big house at Palm Beach / And rent us the back alleys / And the dirty slums" (lines 7-9). Towards the final part of the poem, Hughes implies that capitalism is the real origin of racial injustice by directly linking the figure of the "White Man" to the term itself: "Is that true, White Man? / Is your name in a book / Called the Communist Manifesto? / Is your name spelled / C-A-P-I-T-A-L-I-S-T?" (lines 24-28). All throughout the poem, the "White Man" is constantly benefitting from economic superiority, therefore, this poem suggests that if the economy would not allow people with higher status to benefit from those less privileged, racism would not have such an influence on society. A clear instance of this is the situation depicted in the poem with the black musician Louis Armstrong, whose music is taken advantage of by white producers, in lines 13-15: "Let Louis Armstrong play it — / And you copyright it / And make the money". Essentially, he is establishing a relation between class struggle and racism, implying that racial injustice and oppression is strongly linked to black people's economic situations. That is, racial injustice is connected to the power and money the privileged race holds, and this privileged race is the only one with access to a more advantageous lifestyle: the American Dream. For Hughes, however, the American Dream ought to be reachable for every person. In fact, he insisted that the American Dream of democracy, brotherhood, equality and freedom involved not only every race in America, but also the rest of the world (Presley 382).

### 3.2. Black Customs and History

As previously mentioned, one of the main issues the Harlem Renaissance focused on was the importance of acknowledging and preserving black culture and history. Throughout many of his poems, Langston Hughes both represents black heritage and

encourages African American artists to do the same. In doing so, Hughes challenges the conception of the ideal society spread by the American Dream, that of a uniform and homogeneous culture. As noteworthy instances of how Hughes portrayed black history and culture in his work, three of his poems will be analyzed in this section: “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921), “Aunt Sue’s Stories” (1926), and “The Weary Blues” (1925). Particular attention will be paid to three main issues: the history of slavery, oral tradition and storytelling, and jazz and blues musicality.

Regarding the history of African American slavery and how those circumstances had an effect of their culture and tradition, “The Negro Speaks of River” provides an interesting overview of black history, from the early eras of human civilization to the present day. The poem gives instances of glorious days for black communities and instances of awful situations. The speaker of the poem, although in first person singular, represents the whole black community throughout history, as the speaker states: “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins” (line 2). The speaker then narrates the history of black civilization, from the early communities near the Euphrates River, to the time when Abraham Lincoln travelled to New Orleans on the Mississippi River: “I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young” and “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” (lines 4, 7). In other words, those historical events illustrate the speaker’s identity as a black person. Additionally, in order to symbolize those past black civilizations and their experiences, Hughes uses the image of several rivers, each of those rivers metonymically symbolizing the communities that lived near them. With this symbolic overview of black history, Langston Hughes gives visibility to the origins of African Americans and, furthermore, connects those origins with their culture. In the poem, the speaker’s “soul has grown deep like the rivers” (lines 3, 10), establishing a relationship between those rivers (i.e., those communities and their histories) and the speaker’s own soul or identity. Thus, the souls of African Americans are made of the history of their own people. In other words, history creates their souls, what serves as a symbol of their culture as well. Illustrating this with a specific example of how their history shaped their culture, we may connect their oral tradition in literature with slavery: reading and writing was forbidden for slaves, and as a result, their common culture (beliefs, customs, and practices) was memorized and spread orally. For slaves, “to speak was to make something come into being” (*Oral Tradition*).

Following the remarkable importance of orality in black culture, the poem “Aunt Sue’s Stories” describes how Aunt Sue, an old woman, tells stories about experiences of slaves to a young child. This poem is an undeniable reflection of how oral tradition and storytelling, due to slavery, are the way of preserving and passing down black history and culture through generations. It is interesting to analyze, thus, the role of Aunt Sue and storytelling in the poem. In the beginning of the poem, Aunt Sue is presented as a woman full of stories to tell: “Aunt Sue has a head full of stories. / Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories” (lines 1-2). Aunt Sue could be thus interpreted as a source for storytelling, a figure that enables history to be preserved. Furthermore, the fact that the events occur in a familiar environment and the stories are narrated to, apparently, her nephew, gives importance to preserving family memory and to the connection between generations by means of storytelling and oral tradition. In order to acknowledge the history of their people and preserving their culture, it is essential to pass those stories on through generations, and for that, the figure of the storyteller (Aunt Sue, in this case) is crucial. As stated in the *Handbook of African American Literature*, storytelling “is an interdependent relationship between the speaker and the African or African American society. The storyteller is like an oral archive of the culture's customs, beliefs, values, and practices” (*Storytelling*). Focusing as well on the content of the stories mentioned in the poem, it is worth noting that those stories revolve around the history of slavery and the hazardous conditions African Americans lived under during the times of slavery: “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” (lines 6-11). This leads us, once again, to the importance of being aware of one’s own history and the legacy and impact of slavery on later generations: knowing what their predecessors experienced, allows African Americans to achieve a better understanding of their own lives. Along with the abovementioned oral tradition, storytelling likewise contributes to the recognition of the black American history. Opposed to this acknowledgement of the black culture and traditions in Hughes’s work, the American Dream often promulgated the idea of American society as a melting pot, where all the different ingredients melted together, suppressing every difference between the diverse components (Zangrando 143-144). In other words, the American Dream is against multiculturalism or pluralism, and the relevance given by Hughes to black customs, storytelling and the oral tradition of the African American community is undeniably opposite to that. Additionally, it is also worth mentioning that

“the melting pot” analogy seems not to pay proper attention to African American culture. In fact, black people and their customs are rather disregarded as unworthy of being American and therefore their characteristic features are urged to be eliminated. As a result, American identity is solely related to whiteness, and other cultures must submit to white cultural hegemony and supremacy (Bush 5) in order to achieve the ideal lifestyle promised by the Dream.

Finally, undeniably related to oral tradition and the trends established during the Harlem Renaissance, musicality was another cultural property constantly present in Hughes’s poetry. In fact, Hughes was keen on jazz, blues and musicality as well, as he himself states in his work “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”:

But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. (4)

Among his many poems, “The Weary Blues” (1925) best illustrates the influence of jazz on his poetry. This poem describes a black pianist performing a blues song in a club in Harlem. The blues song, sad and slow, reflects the injustices and the suffering black Americans often experience, but this suffering is afterwards transformed into beauty. “The Weary Blues” is, therefore, a reflection of the beauty of black art and the pain and suffering that lie beneath it. Among the “musical” features in the poem, it is worth mentioning its meter and rhymes, as well as its poetic devices. As regards its meter and rhyme scheme, it is interesting to note that there is no established meter (there are two lines of more than ten syllables, as well as lines of two): “He made that poor piano moan with melody. / O Blues!” (lines 10-11), eleven and two syllables, respectively. Furthermore, there is an uneven rhyme pattern as well, the poem does not follow an established pattern, there are many irregularities. These irregularities in both the meter and the rhyme scheme of the poem are, however, intentional: they intend to imitate the improvisational and beautifully chaotic character of the blues music. Besides, by means of devices like alliteration and repetition, apart from simply describing the blues played by the black pianist, the poem also imitates its music. The blues is recreated through words. A clear instance of repetition and alliteration in the poem may be found respectively in lines 23 and 34: “Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.”;

“While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.” In terms of the content of “The Weary Blues”, the pain suffered by the artist due to racial injustice in society is reflected in the black piano player’s music: “Ain’t got nobody in all this world, / Ain’t got nobody but ma self. / I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’ / And put ma troubles on the shelf. / [...] / Got the Weary Blues / And can’t be satisfied— / I ain’t happy no mo’ / And I wish that I had died” (lines 19-22, 27-30). African American music, literature and art in general are undeniably influenced by the suffering of black communities all throughout their history. Black artists, however, decide to turn the pain that social injustice, racism and oppression cause into beautiful and cathartic black art. In “The Weary Blues”, Hughes illustrates once again the adversities, misery and pain of African Americans, in a more artistic manner. Once more, he focuses on African American customs in order to oppose the American Dream and its notion of American identity as ‘whiteness’.

### 3.3. Language and Style: The Use of a Vernacular Variety

In Langston Hughes’s poetry, apart from the use of jazz and blues musicality in the rhyme patterns of his poems, in terms of style, it is also relevant to emphasize the role of African American English as an enhancer of black culture and customs. Langston Hughes’s employment of a non-standard variety of the English language (African American Vernacular English or AAVE) is another relevant issue to analyze in relation to his critical view of the American Dream. Racial pride is the main trigger for his use of dialectal variations of the language: he aims to embrace his African American culture and identity (Chambers 112). The American Dream intended to establish a uniform society with a homogenous culture, and this notion of the ideal American society was clearly challenged by the use of a variety that differed from Standard English. In fact, the emergence of “American English” during the early 1900s entailed a significant influence in the shaping of American identity and would later result in an “English-only” movement among white people. Consequently, those who would speak anything different from Standard or General American English would be regarded to as less “Americans” and unworthy of the American Dream (Bush 4). A sociocultural barrier was, once again, preventing the African American community from achieving the Dream; nevertheless, black artists would still resort to dialectal variations in order to challenge this pursuit of linguistic –and cultural– uniformity.

One poem that particularly captures many features of the African American Vernacular English is Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues" (1925). On the one hand, the poem contains many morphosyntactic settings that are distinctive from AAVE, for instance: the use of the particle *ain't* to form negative sentences (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 222), negative concord or double negation (Wheeler 49), and the dialectal variation of certain verb forms. In particular, the construction *ain't* is used in various instances of the poem, as in the pianist's blues in lines 19-20 ("Ain't got nobody in all this world, / Ain't got nobody but ma self"), or later in line 29: "I ain't happy no mo'." In addition, there are many instances in this poem of the phenomenon known as negative concord or double negation, the use of more than one negative element in a sentence with a negative meaning, for instance, the words *ain't* and *nobody* in lines 19 and 20: "Ain't got nobody in all this world, / Ain't got nobody but ma self". Another morphosyntactic AAVE feature in the poem is Hughes's use in line 21 of the word *gwine* ("I's gwine to quit ma frownin'") a distinct verb form for the past participle of the verb 'to go', a dialectal present participle form ("Gwine"). On the other hand, the poem as well presents phonological features of this variety, for instance: cluster simplifications or consonant dropping and monophthongization of the /aɪ/ diphthong (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 236). As an example, many word-final consonant clusters are reduced or simply dropped in AAVE; in fact, speakers of this variety tend to drop the final -g in words with -ing endings (Wheeler 51-52): in line 21 of "The Weary Blues", the word *frownin'* is used instead of its standard counterpart *frowning*. Moreover, the monophthongization of the /aɪ/ diphthong into an /a/ sound can be clearly illustrated in Hughes's first-person singular possessive determiner, which is not the standard *my*, but the monophthongized variant *ma*: "And put ma troubles on the shelf" (line 22).

All in all, in using those settings of the African American variety of English, Hughes distances himself and his art from the conventional or standard language and gets closer to African American folk, which he is allowed to do in a more accurate manner due to the use of the original language of this black American folk (Pizzinali 44). In relation to the American Dream, as it has been previously mentioned, this linguistic property of Hughes's poems challenges the Dream's ideology in two different ways: first, it gives visibility to a culture different from that of the white American society; secondly, it defies the notion of American identity or "Americanness" based on a homogeneous

standard variety of American English. The American Dream aimed to establish a uniform society based on white culture and language, and Hughes's poems' form and style contradicted that.

### 3.4. Decadence and the Great Depression

At the end of the Roaring Twenties in the US, a generalized feeling of disenchantment with the Dream spread among the American society: the Great Depression. The disillusion with the American Dream and the fight for the rights of African Americans in Hughes's poems did not differ much with that general disappointment all throughout the country. In fact, it is interesting to be acquainted with how Hughes himself perceived and described the downfall of the Harlem Renaissance. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes stated: "I was there. I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it wouldn't last long... For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever?" (217). Just as the Roaring Twenties, the Harlem Renaissance was undergoing a phase of decadence and disillusionment. In contrast with Hughes's attitude with the Dream during earlier times, which was one of hope and determination to fight for equality and opportunities, in these later times his poems exhibited a more negative tone. However, it is important to remark that despite the generalized disenchantment, Hughes maintained his hopeful attitude towards a possible better future, though less prominent than in earlier times. To illustrate this new partially pessimistic character of Hughes's later works, it is relevant to examine the following poems: "Let America Be America Again" (1935) and "Harlem" (1951).

In "Let America be America Again" (1935), Langston Hughes expresses his disappointment with the American society, and implies that America has not succeeded in providing its people with freedom and equality for everyone, as promised by the American Dream. There is a non-conformist attitude towards America, and the American Dream is portrayed as a failure. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker suggests that America is lost, and sarcastically implores America to become again as glorious as in its past: "Let America be America again. / Let it be the dream it used to be" (lines 1-2). The speaker does so in an ironic manner, as it is later implicitly clarified that this speaker does not agree with that conception of a once great America. Hughes employs comments or

explanations between parenthesis in order to reveal the reality African Americans endured during those “great” times: “(America was never America to me.)”; “(It never was America to me.)”; “(There’s never been equality for me, / Nor freedom in this ‘homeland of the free.’)” (lines 5, 10 and 15-16, respectively). Additionally, Hughes makes reference as well to the ideas promulgated by the American Dream and how they damage society. In fact, different groups who have been deceived by the American Dream are mentioned: “I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart, / I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars” (lines 19-20); “I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek— / And finding only the same old stupid plan / Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak” (lines 22-24); “I am the man who never got ahead, / The poorest worker bartered through the years” (lines 37-38). All of them refer to people who aimed for a more favorable lifestyle and tried to achieve the American Dream, and were afterwards unsuccessful, betrayed by the Dream itself. Despite the promises of the American Dream, the poor will most likely continue being poor, the immigrant will not get the life they sought and ethnic minorities will remain discriminated, no matter how arduously they work to accomplish their goals. In the final part of “Let America Be America Again”, Hughes makes a call to action, encouraging those oppressed communities to rise up and revolt for America’s reshaping, freedom and equality: “From those who live like leeches on the people’s lives / We must take back our land again, America!” (lines 72-74). Langston Hughes, despite the resentful tone of the poem, additionally adopts a positive and optimistic attitude and gives assurance that this restoration will take place and the American Dream will be fulfilled: “America will be!” (line 79). Further to this, the content of the poem is somehow reflected in its structure and formal aspects. The poem begins following a traditional rhyme pattern and ends up in a free verse, probably simulating the chaos and instability of the American society at that time.

Finally, the poem “Harlem” belongs to Hughes’s collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), where he details the experiences of the black community in Harlem, the constant racial injustice they suffered. Specifically, the main issue addressed in “Harlem” is the constant postponement of a dream and how this fact affects society. Seemingly, that dream can be identified as a symbol of the American Dream and its equal opportunities to every American citizen, the black community included. In the poem, Hughes depicts how that dream is constantly being delayed, or ‘deferred’. In the beginning of the poem, the speaker refers to the dream’s outcome with images or similes of decadence and

putrefaction, implying how the image of the American Dreams has lost its strength as a result of an unfair and racist society, as well as the resulting damage caused to the African American community: “Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?” (lines 2-3); “Does it stink like rotten meat?” (line 6). Ironically, as the title implies, the poem refers to Harlem, which Hughes once described as a magnet of black people; however, even there, “the American Dream is frayed and ragged” (Presley 383). In contrast, the last stanza provides a different image of the dream, the possibility of the dream exploding: “*Or does it explode?*” (line 11). The dream stops being depicted as something rotten and decaying, to be portrayed instead as something strong bursting, exploding; a hope for the small possibility of the dream finally coming true for the black community. In addition, this interpretation of the poem’s content is supported by the general expression of uncertainty in it, verbalized mainly as rhetoric questions. In fact, the entire poem consists of questions with no answer, with the exception of the third stanza. This constant uncertainty about the fate of the American Dream, along with the poem’s pessimistic tone, may suggest there is no reason to protest for inclusion and justice, as a greater future is not guaranteed at all. Nevertheless, a small beam of hope can be perhaps found in the last stanza: “*Or does it explode?*”. The speaker opens the possibility of the dream finally exploding, of the American Dream finally being reachable, and even makes this stanza more salient than the rest of the poem using italics and situating it at the final position, pursuant to the only stanza lacking rhetorical questions. It is therefore relevant to note that although Hughes displays a defeated attitude when referring to the American Dream throughout “Harlem”, this last verse provides a small ray of hope for the Dream to finally escalate and reach the African American community. Moreover, the formal aspects of this poem are likewise relevant to note: a reflection of jazz and blues rhythm and musicality, and the meaning this conveys. As a matter of fact, the poem’s form and rhyme patterns intend to resemble those of the “Bebop” Era, a new revolutionary musical movement that rose as part of the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance during the 1940s. Jazz critics referred to Bebop musicians as “insurgents”, and to Bebop music as music of revolt against commercial music. Bebop music, then, was considered an expression of rebellion and defiance against the norm as well, a spirit of defiance and revolt (Farrel 57). During this era, racial injustice happened in the form of police brutality and repression, in addition to the already existent segregation and generalized racism. Langston Hughes, along with other very few black intellectuals, sympathized with those most aggrieved people in Harlem (Farrel 58) and was inspired by the Bebop movement when composing his poetry.

In fact, in the preface of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), where the poem “Harlem” belongs to, Hughes stated that the aim of his poem’s form and style was to assimilate to the Bebop musicality and rhythm:

[This collection of poems] like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, ... broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by ... the music of a community in transition.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the way in which Langston Hughes and his poetry represented the African American community and its culture at the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Particular attention has been paid to Hughes’s approach to the American Dream from an African American perspective. In fact, it may be argued that Langston Hughes represents the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance and the voices of those African Americans that were oppressed during the American Dream. In doing so, he somehow challenges and criticizes the ideas promulgated by the Dream and the values it wanted to instill. In particular, Hughes reshapes the American Dream in three different levels: protest and criticism towards inequality in American society, vindication of African American culture and language, and an overall pessimistic approach during the Great Depression and later times.

As regards Hughes’s critical attitude towards American society, his poems “I, Too”, “As I Grew Older” and “White Man” are an evident reflection of the struggles of the black community in America and the discrimination, barriers and injustice they must face in order to achieve the American Dream. Nevertheless, in these poems Hughes exhibits an optimistic tone and an urge to fight for the more favorable future.

With respect to the acknowledgement of black culture and language varieties, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, “Aunt Sue’s Stories” and “The Weary Blues” display a remarkable number of references to the history and customs of African Americans, as well as those cultural features themselves. In fact, Hughes makes significant allusion to the history of slavery, oral tradition and storytelling as the main sources of literature in

African American culture and history, jazz and blues musicality, and African American Vernacular English. All those cultural features distinctive of the African American society entail an opposition to the ideal society the American Dream aimed to establish in the country: a homogenous and non-diverse society, with a culture based on white customs.

Finally, Hughes's attitude concerning the era of the Great Depression and the American Dream's downfall are clearly illustrated in "Let America Be America Again" and "Harlem". The Great Depression had a relevant impact on Hughes's tone in the poems of that era, and the messages conveyed through his works were more pessimistic than those of earlier times. However, although less noticeable or evident than previously, a small beam of hopefulness and faith was still perceivable in those poems; a will to make a final effort to fulfill the American Dream, despite the generalized disillusion during the Great Depression.

Overall, Langston Hughes's poetry places him as a prominent artist in the fight against racial injustice in the African American community and an undeniable model of the values and ideas promoted during the Harlem Renaissance. Additionally, with his revolutionary ideas, Hughes challenged the established values in the American Dream and advocated for an alternative version: an American Dream that included every ethnicity, social status, and culture.

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