Alonso, Alba Fernández

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LANGSTON HUGHES'S LITERARY AND IDEOLOGICAL TURN IN THE 1930s: POETRY AS A MEANS TO UNDERSTANDING AND CONCEPTUALIZING THE POET'S IDENTITY AND SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Alba Fernández Alonso

Abstract

The connection between narratives, or other means of discourse production, such as poetry, and the capacity of self-development bring to light the extent to which the stories we tell become part of ourselves. Stories can indeed be instrumental in the stability and change of the self if we consider that the construction of narratives constitutes an engine for self-development and a tool for creating a sense of identity (Mclean, Pasupathi and Pals 2006).

The poetic onset of the commonly named leading voice of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes (1902–1967), was based on a strong sense of race pride chiefly focused on depicting the everyday lives of blacks living under the shadow of racism, oppression and injustice. Frustration, subjugation and despondency together with feelings of resilience are featured as the centerpiece of his work during these years. However, towards the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, Hughes "redirected his approach towards a more internationalist view" (Rampersad 2002, 266). His open sympathy to Communist ideology and his condemnation of imperialism were the inspirational bases of his revolutionary red poetry.

This study aims to illustrate in terms of social, political, and ideological grounds how this author exemplified this new perspective through the development of a new revolutionary poetry. The deep understanding of his unprecedented literary turn will shed some light on the whys and wherefores of his refinement as a poet and will give clear proof of the way in which his poetry helped to develop a sense of self-identity and encompassed an engine for self-development.

Keywords

Langston Hughes; Harlem Renaissance; racism; red poetry; communism; self-identity; self-development; understanding

* * *

AMIDST the writers and cultural contributors to the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes (1902–1967) stands out as a voice that succeeded in depicting the situation of African Americans in the United States from the days of his early career beginning in the 1920s. The admiration and respect he had for his people led him to portray a many-sided picture of the American society of his time, highlighting the hardship, oppression, and injustice endured by his African American peers. The development of his legacy concurs with the progression of the social, political, and economic circumstances of the time and reaches its most revolutionary peak at the beginning of the 1930s, a moment when he starts to develop a poetry of a more subversive and radical nature. This point in history coincides with the embracement of the Communist ideology in the United States by a substantial part of the African American community, who saw in its principles and ideas a mechanism to overcome racism in modern America.

The poetry of these years, as evidenced in the present paper, is a reflection of Hughes's stand on the strenuous and burdensome situation of his fellows, summed up in a long-standing racism and the subjugation of the working class. Through this rupture with the foundations of an oppressive society, including the weighty pillar of religion, Hughes guides the reader into an unprecedented turn in his poetry that can be conceived as a means to help the poet get to grips with a new self-concept, as well as a mechanism that provides him with a renewed self-understanding.

1. We Are the Stories We Tell

In one of his interviews, Uruguayan writer and journalist Eduardo Galeano read that human beings are not only made of atoms but also of stories[1] (2017, 0:08). In the same vein the American poet Muriel Rukeyser some years before in her evocative poem "The Speed of Darkness" had suggested that "the universe is made of stories, not of atoms" (1978, 486). In fact, these excerpts underline the importance of stories in our lives and the way they help us shape our own selves. The connection between narratives, or other means of discourse production such as poetry, and the capacity for self-development, bring to light the extent to which the stories we tell become part of ourselves. Stories can indeed be instrumental in the stability and change of the self if we consider that the construction of narratives constitutes an engine for self-development (Mclean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007). All this furnishes evidence of the high degree to which stories and selves relate reciprocally at different levels.

[1] Original quote in Spanish translated into English by the author of the article: *"El mundo no está hecho de átomos, está hecho de historias."*

Scholars have also focused their attention on the characteristics of the stories that are capable of having a long-lasting impact on the self, analyzing the stories more likely to be produced and more likely to impact the self (Mclean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007). As a matter of fact, the experiences more inclined to be storied are those disruptive or unresolved ones, qualities that usually define them as memorable (Labov and Waletzky 1967, Zeigarnik 1935). It stands to reason that sad stories tend to be more captivating than plain boring ones with a lack of events and emotion. What is more, literary masters of all times have always taken advantage of this by evoking sentiments of sadness, grief, and sorrow, thus excavating the minds of their readers by doing so. Following Brunner (1990), narrating the events of distressing and problematic circumstances helps to make sense of the problems, becoming the narrative process by which humans can turn experiences into stories, or in other words, "to render the uncanonical, canonical" (Mclean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007, 272). Besides, individuals tend to draw meaning and reasoning from negative circumstances. Hence, it could conceivably be hypothesized that negative and troubling events favor story qualities and contribute to the development of a self-concept and self-understanding.

At the point of the present discussion, and having considered the body of research focused on the ways stories help people make connections between their experiences and their selves and vice versa, we still fail to know what aspects of one's self make the stories we tell more prone to be told and retold. In fact, the answer is more logical than expected: the stories more likely to be told and retold are the ones reflecting the enduring motives or themes of one's life (Moffit and Singer 1994), those that "hold currency one's self and one's audiences" (Mclean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007, 272). What is more, "characteristics of events that make an experience more likely to be storied and told repeatedly also make it more likely to become part of the life story, perhaps because of the opportunity such experiences afford for meaning-making" (272).

Following the approach of self-construction through discourse production, a concept of vital importance emerges and that is plainly the concept of culture. Each culture has its own means and mechanisms to receive emotions through reading in the same ways that authors are, in most cases, aimed at expressing in writing what they know their audiences, in a determined culture or at least a portion of it, will receive and accept willingly and with pleasure. In other words, cultures, and by extension countries and social classes, play an important role in the stories we tell. In their study of this approach, scholars Qi Wang and Martin Conway (2004) posit as an example that Chinese writers are more liable to report fewer details on script-like narratives

and tend to emphasize morality to a greater degree in comparison with Western cultures. Qi Wang and James Brockmeier (2002) suggest that Westerners are more prone to create a self-story with an eye to expressing self-continuity whereas Chinese individuals tend to establish connectedness and adherence to moral principles. All the above-mentioned provides grounds for asserting that witnessing the construction of stories is a device that constitutes a tool for creating a sense of self and identity (Freeman 1997, Hammack, 2008, Josselson 1996, McAdams 1996, 2006, McLean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007, Schiff 2002). Indeed, "sharing stories is the mechanism through which people become selves" (Mclean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007, 275).

The bases of the theoretical frameworks we have reviewed can be applied to support the scope of the present work: analyzing Langston Hughes's most representative poetry of the 1930s as a means to understanding and conceptualizing the author. However, before reaching that point, some clarification on the nature of the analyzed works must be made. When tackling the work of a poet, it stands to reason that we are, by no means, analyzing prose but poetry. Equating prose and poetry by putting them on the same level in terms of form analysis would mean to undertake an arduous assignment that would need further theorizing and the performance of a deeper search and review of the contrasted literature. Nevertheless, if we are to equate prose and poetry by placing them at the same level of content analysis, it goes without saying that both of them can be outlined as expressive and communicative forms of articulating a discourse and therefore constitute authentic forms of expression. Since both poetry and prose are included in the circle of arts such that "however naïve or commonplace, in as far as they succeed, result in a work of art" (Scott 1904, 250), they come to represent the outcome of an attempt to disclose and convey ideas, feelings, and/or experiences. Accordingly, in terms of imagination, creativity, and emotional force, we can assume that prose and poetry rise to the same standards. In connection therewith, some other scholars have even stated that both concepts cut across each other, because "many poems are narratives, after all, and many narratives are poems" (McHale 2009, 12) and have additionally claimed that saying "many poems are narratives drastically understates the case, in fact, most poems before the nineteenth century, and many since then, have been narrative poems" (12). Actually, the huge tradition of narrative poetry is noteworthy and cannot be overlooked, as evidenced by "the entire epic tradition, primary and secondary, oral and written, as well as medieval and early-modern verse romances, folk ballads and their literary adaptations, and narrative verse autobiographies" (12).

In light of the above, we can state without hesitation that poetry can be equated to narrative when approaching the characteristics of the latter as described in the theoretical framework of this study. There is no doubt that since narrative has the potential to do so, poetry can likewise constitute the process by which humans find a retort

to tell their stories and from which their authors, and by extension the audience, can draw meaning and reasoning, especially from negative circumstances. Poetry is in this approach conceived as a mechanism that contributes to the development of a self-concept and self-understanding, a way to understand internal troubles and concerns to later shape and materialize them in written form. This statement is unmistakably seen in the poetry at the core of this study, that of Langston Hughes, which is nothing but the reflection of a conflict of a political and ideological nature in the mind of the poet, and whose characteristics of endurance have made it memorable.

2. The Awakening of Communism Among the African American Population in Modern America

In the wake of the Great Depression, the labor movement in America grew considerably both in size and militancy. The decade of the 1930s witnessed an attraction to the left-wing of the American Communist Party among many residents of Harlem, causing the Party to grow in size from "26,000 to 85,000 between the years 1934 and 1939" (Naison 1983, 45). The left-wing movement of the time went beyond the focus of the Communist Party and included other political organizations such as the NAACP and other Marxist groups that advocated social and democratic change. However, it was the Communist Party branch that provided infrastructure and monetary backing and the one that best seemed to materialize the changes minority groups had been advocating for so long, i.e. the end of racial distinctions in America and the advancement of the working class, by giving them tangible shape. The high levels of participation and commitment show the commitment and engagement of those in Harlem to this relatively new political sphere. As stated by scholar and historian Mark Naison (1983), the onset of the Depression sparked the engagement of this population in political activity and by the midpoint of the decade, public demonstrations overflowing with a spirit of determination and militancy filled the streets of Harlem where no prior militant spokesman had succeeded in disturbing post-war peace. The protests and public demonstrations grew hand in hand with the development of the Harlem Communist Party. Already in the 1930s considerable sympathy with The Soviet Union was to be seen among black American intellectual circles (Solomon 1998), and the Soviet intolerance for racism was widely and positively covered by the African American press with close attention, together with the many cases of African Americans leaving the USA and heading to the Soviet Union in those years as artisans, laborers, or engineers.

The efforts of the Party to secure and strengthen African American leadership between the years 1928 to 1935 were met with significant and sizable success.

While the Party mainly focused on training African Americans to be placed in organizational positions, it did not forget to focus its attention on a particularly special group: black artists and intellectuals, "whose creative energies it hoped to tap for political purposes" (Record 1951, 109). A constellation of musicians, painters, novelists, and poets came to the fore and were willingly supplied by the Party. In practice, the Party demanded their *de facto* commitment to the cause while recreating an aesthetic approach to Stalin's definition of nation, i.e. "a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up" (20). However, a great number of the creative African American writers in 1933 still had to face fierce criticism for supplying artwork that allegedly responded to the needs and tastes of white Americans while still perpetuating the stereotype of the black individual as the laughingstock of American society. Among them, the African American activist, journalist, and founder of the literary magazine *Saturday Evening Quill*, Eugene Gordon, found the one and only exception: Langston Hughes (Record 1951). By the same token, James W. Ford, organizer of the Communist Party in the Harlem section, stated that revolutionary black art was not emerging quickly enough. "Among the Negroes, who is there besides Langston Hughes?" he asked. (North 1932, 6). Communist writer, journalist, and former editor of *The Liberator*, Michael Gold, stated that black-American writers were called upon to exploit their talent outside the "gutter-life side of Harlem", and in time "Negro Tolstoys, Gorkys and Walt Whitmans would arise" (1929, 17). The task of this group of writers was at the time to "eradicate the distorted stereotypes of the Negro people prevalent in American literature and drama, to create literature dealing with the struggle of the Negro masses for liberation; to portray the disintegration of the Negro petty bourgeoisie" (Clay 1932, 22). To this achieve this goal, identification with the Communist Party and the program it promoted based on national liberation for African Americans was required.

3. Langston Hughes and the Communist Ideology as a Focal Point of Interest

By the mid 30s, the Communist Party had succeeded in making a substantial impact on African American students and intellectuals who were undeniably affected by its principles not only as men of letters but also as men of political action (Record, 1951) By "impact," a direct joining of the Party is not here implied, but a contact with an eye-opening structure that showed that the solution to the problem of discrimination and racism was inexorably bound to the advancement of the working class and its struggle, which could be shaped into a mass movement, thereby giving

them to understand the sovereign importance of militancy in trade unions. In fact, "Hughes was never a member of the Party, though indeed he once had been sympathetic to it" (Hughes and Berry 1973, xiii). The party would make sure to publicize this racial injustice he was condemning not only within American boundaries but also throughout the world via the skillful stratagems of the Kremlin's propaganda. Whether affiliated or not, the Communist Party raised the interest of those witnessing the ongoing racism in combination with class inequality and unemployment, both in white and black Americans, in the Depression years. Those circumstances provided evidence that the white man was neither the owner of his own destiny any longer, as the struggle was also standing in his way and was leading him, as it was doing with thousands of black Americans, to experience circumstances to an unprecedented degree (Dawahare 1998). Hughes saw in the Communist Party a vehicle against racism supported by a consistent democratic program that could help the masses to arouse, move, and act in accordancewith an alternative to capitalism, the leech of the working class. "If the Communists don't awaken the Negro of the South, who will?", he declared (Hughes and Berry 1973, 142). Hughes glimpsed in the Soviet Union a place to run away from the "racial terrorism" (Baldwin 2016, 386) and an ideological promise that could erase the racial inequalities and would definitely place the African American in the social *stratum* where he deserved to belong. Hughes was in fact not wrong when hoping to find in the Soviet Union a place where laws against racial segregation reportedly worked. In one of his essays in 1946, he remembers his first impression about the non-existent color line in the Soviet Union and compares it with the color prejudice still current in those days in America, emphasizing how the Soviet Union had completely erased any racism both towards Jews and blacks after the Soviet Revolution in 1917: "So there is a clear example in the world to prove to our American experts' in race relations that IT DOES NOT TAKE A HUNDRED YEARS, it does NOT take generations to get rid of ugly, evil, antiquated, stupid Jim Crow practices – if a country really wants to get rid of them" (Hughes and Berry 1973, 86).

Hughes's first manifest involvement with communism dates back to 1931, a complicity that would end with the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 (Jemie 1976). Although officially Hughes never joined the Communist Party, a statement he repeated *ad nauseam* and attested to at the McCarthy Hearings, his commitment to the cause is quite evident in the turn that his poetry adopted in the first years of the 30s and in the extent of his open support to the ideology. Although his first contact with Communist ideology might be traced back to the year 1931, Hughes had already shown an interest in the idea of class together with race in the second half of the

1920s. Poems such as "Johannesburg Mines" (published in *The Crisis* in 1928), "Rising Waters" (*The Workers Monthly*, 1925), "To Certain 'Brothers'" (*The Workers Monthly*, 1925) or "God to Hungry Child" (*The Workers Monthly*, 1925) are a few examples. These poems exemplify Hughes's disillusionment and disappointment with the politics and futile efforts of the Harlem Renaissance period to improve African Americans' status through a resilient struggle materialized in the cultural and literary production in which he wholeheartedly engaged. These verses already show a hint of what would become an irreparable rupture with both capitalism and God, the two pillars of American society. Besides, a growing concern about the injustice faced by the working class pursuing the uncharitable and selfish goals of not only white and black employers, whose only interests lay in exploiting and taking advantage of them, also started to be conceived. Those who had fallen into the clutches of capitalism and were denied the basic principles their religion advocates, especially captivated Hughes's attention and held an outstanding place in his imagery, thus portrayed in his poetry as the victims of the system. The poem "Johannesburg Mines" reports the many workers exploited in the mines:

> There are 240,000 natives working
> What kind of poem
> Would you make out of that?
> (Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 43, lines 2–4)

Simultaneously, he intensely criticizes the oppressors of these victims, as exemplified in "To Certain Brothers":

> Dirt and ugliness
> And rottening hearts
> And wild hyenas howling
> In your souls' waste lands.
> (Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 55, lines 7–10)

and in "Rising Waters":

> You are
> But foam on the sea,
> You rich ones
> Not the sea.
> (Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 48, lines 7–10)

Hughes even resorts to an aggressive irony to make his stand even clearer, as in the following extract of "God to Hungry Child":

> Hungry child
> I didn't make this world for you.
> […]
> I made the world for the rich
> And the will-be-rich.
> Not for you,
> Hungry child.
> (Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 48, lines 1 and 6–10)

These chosen poems evince how Hughes was already starting to adopt a firm approach based on race and class rather than on race alone, as he was not able to abide any longer the ethnic nationalism that blues aesthetics embraced (Dawahare 1998). This was an issue that led him to sacrifice art for politics, a shift that would imbue his literary career from then onwards and would shape him as a revolutionary writer and poet. In an effort to satisfy his audience, his critics, his publishers, and himself, Hughes "faced an ongoing inner struggle between what he wanted to write and what his audience expected him to write, between his public image and private self, between his performance and his integrity" (Hughes and Berry 1973, xi-xii). Before finding himself at these crossroads, he had already decided to devote his career to making his living as a writer. "I'd finally and definitely made up my mind to continue being a writer, and to become a professional writer, making my living from writing", he would declare in his first autobiography (Hughes 1940, 335). This was in fact what Hughes always wanted to be, as he himself stated "a writer, recording what I see, commenting upon it, and distilling from my own emotions a personal interpretation" (Hughes 1988, 400-401). In this regard, and as his literary character Jesse B. Simple stated, it can be understood that Hughes was also "observing life for literary purposes" (Hughes 2015, 12) and fundamentally living "in terms of the external world and in with it" (Culp 1987, 240).

In that state of floundering and presumably overcome by the circumstances surrounding him, Hughes felt he could not support any longer what was being asked of him by his critics and particularly by his patron, who had always sought in Hughes the essence of the primitive, though he had never really felt it:

> She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an

> American Negro who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa, but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. (Hughes 1940, 325)

In fact, this split with his patron, who supported him from 1927 to 1930, and whose name – Charlotte Osgood Mason – he never revealed in writing, is one of the pillars on which Hughes's first autobiographical work rests. Hughes himself describes the rupture with his patron and subsequent ideological turn in the making of his memoir by writing "that winter became the skein of poet and patron, youth and age, poverty and wealth-and one day it broke! Quickly and quietly in the Park Avenue […] in the end it all came back very near to the old impasse of white and Negro again, white and Negro-as do most relationships in America" (1940, 324–325). The defining moment of their split became more evident with Hughes's publication in 1931 of the poem "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria" that satirizes the opening of the luxurious hotel in Park Avenue, built between the high-class elite of the area and the thousands of homeless beaten by the consequences of the Depression. Before writing this poem, Hughes had seen this blatant contradiction when witnessing how the city had become a two-sided place hosting winners on the one hand and victims on the other. His patron wanted him to avoid writing about the Depression, something that just did not fit into Hughes's commitment to literature, based on the principle of writing plainly for and about his peers. The following excerpts from the long "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria" show how Hughes mastered irony and double entendre as a normal part of his poetic discourse and efficiently succeeded in mixing them with sarcasm by attacking capitalism and religion:

> So when you've no place else to go, homeless and hungry
> ones, choose the Waldorf as a background for your rags –
> (Or do you still consider the subway after midnight good
> enough?)
> (Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 144, lines 15–18)
> […]
> Hail Mary, Mother of God!
> the new Christ child of the Revolution's about to be
> born.
> (Kick hard, red baby, in the bitter womb of the mob.)
> Somebody, put an ad in Vanity Fair quick!
> Call Oscar of the Waldorf – for Christ's sake!!
> (lines 97–102)

His inclination to Communism not only implied the dismissal of socialist and capitalist patterns, but also the rejection of the moral religious codes that had always

treated the black individual as a second-class commodity. This turning down of values is by far best exemplified in his poem "Goodbye, Christ!":

> Listen, Christ,
> You did alright in your day,
> I reckon –
> But that day's gone now.
> They ghosted you up a swell story, too,
> Called it Bible –
> But it's dead now.
> (Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 166, lines 1–9)

This extract is a declaration of the intent to break with the foundations of religion and thus the collapse of the moral of the dominant and oppressive society, allowing a new conception of man to be created (Wagner, 1973).

In 1941, Hughes would attempt to defend himself of the accusations of atheism by writing an essay "Concerning Goodbye, Christ", stating that he had written the poem as a consequence of witnessing the injustices and the rights African American citizens were denied during a tour through the American south. "To me, these things appeared unbelievable in a Christian country. Had not Christ said, 'Such as ye do unto the least of these, ye do it unto Me?'. But almost nobody seemed to care" (Hughes and Berry 1973, 133). He adds that his subsequent sojourn to the Soviet Union strengthened this view in the setting of Marxist ideology, but that the poem, however, never represented his own personal views, though written in the first person singular.

In the same vein of "Goodbye, Christ!," the poem "Christ in Alabama" (1931) constitutes one of his most radical poems tackling race, a hallmark that would go out of circulation by not being reprinted in his anthologies (Nelson, 2003). Hughes wrote this poem as a response to the public controversy about the Scottsboro Boys case, and actually entailing a manifest protest against the legacy of slavery in the south, being out of the protection of the Lord depicting "Christianity as a form of tyranny" (Nelson 2003, 73). Notwithstanding Hughes's dogged attitude towards religion, it has been suggested that poems of the nature of "Goodbye, Christ!" and "Christ in Alabama" proved to be passing and temporary because his religious poetry, in a broad sense and without considering these "exceptions" is inspired by the folk traditions of his people, an essence Hughes could never have criticized (Wagner, 1973). This viewpoint arises in connection with the critics and scholars who consider Hughes's poetry of this decade not representative of his aesthetics and have widely ignored or dismissed it. As stated by Faith Berry in her introduction to Hughes's "Good Morning Revolution, Uncollected Writings of Social Protests" (1973), "his revolutionary prose represented

an aberration, an isolated phase of his early career" although judging by his subsequent works, "the 'phase' actually lasted as long as he lived" (xi).

At the same time as Hughes was literally saying "goodbye" to religion, he was also saying "hello" to the revolution. His poem "Good Morning, Revolution" is a statement that sets revolution as the alternative to the contradictions experienced by African Americans calling for a new form of organization with the same goal: bringing down capitalism. This poem is a friendly address to a personalized revolution:

> Good morning Revolution
> You are the best friend
> I ever had.
> (Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 162, lines 1–3)

It, as well, gives testimony of Hughes's poetic voice "that is not that of the individual narrator's consciousness, but of a simultaneously unitary and multiple urban community" (Smethurst 1999, 94). At this same moment, the strong class consciousness starts to intertwine, as shown in his poem "Union",

> Not me alone –
> I know now –
> But all the whole oppressed
> Poor world
> White and black
> Must put their hands with mine.
> (Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 138, lines 1–6)

This poem highlights the wretchedness of the global working class who are to stand together as the international proletariat to get rid of capitalism. Likewise, the following excerpts of the poem "Always the Same" suggest how the workers worldwide are summoned to go into action:

> Their faces, black, white, olive, yellow, brown
> Unite to raise the blood-red flag that
> Never will come down!
> (Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 166, lines 46–49)

But Hughes's keen eye for observing the mechanisms through which industrialism can result in the detriment of a social well-being did not awaken upon the emergence of Communism in America. In fact, it had already been manifested from an early age. The poem "Steel Mills", written by Hughes at the age of fourteen "with

a lucidity seldom found in a child" (Wagner 1973, 427) gives a hint of what he would develop more firmly in his adulthood and conforms a sample of his responsive attitude towards any kind of injustice.

> The mills
> That grind and grind,
> That grind out new steel
> And grind away the lives
> Of men, –
> In the sunset
> Their stacks
> Are great black silhouettes
> Against the sky.
> (Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 43, lines 1–9)

In a similar vein, Hughes gave a speech at the Public Session of the First American Writers' Congress in June 1935, where he outlined the guidelines that African American writers should follow in their work in order to show their skills as writers of the first order. Those skills could therefore lead them to enforce the potential they had to transform their realities.

> We can reveal to the white masses those Negro qualities which go beyond the mere ability to laugh and sing and dance and make music. […] Negro writers can seek to unite blacks and whites in our country, not on the nebulous basis of an interracial meeting, or the shifting sands of religious brotherhood, but on the *solid* ground of the daily working-class struggle to wipe out, now and forever, all the old inequalities of the past. […] We can expose to the sick-sweet smile of organized religion-which lies about what it doesn't know, and about what it *does* know. (Hughes and Berry 1973, 125)

This speech shows a resemblance to his previous essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) where Hughes criticized the black artists intending to serve the wishes and likes of white Americans ignoring that they "have an honest American Negro literature already with us" (Hughes 1985, 3):

> 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. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (4)

This might be one the most evident examples of the display of the development of a black aesthetic in Hughes's works. By calling African American writers to create a literature of a racial nature born out of their own black culture and the expressive forms thereof, Hughes made clear the distinction between black and white Americans based mainly on their different forms of art, advocating that their art is "a recognition of the fact that Afro-Americans are distinct people within the American nation" (Jemie 1968, 103).

However, in this new decade the temples that Hughes referred to nine years before seemed to have been larded with a certain expression of militancy and determination, strong-willed enough to commit to the proletarian revolution. Hughes's purpose of unifying white and black Americans as a mass had a clear goal: making the world understand "the hypocrisy of philanthropy and of organized religion, the betrayal of workers by white labor leaders, and of the black masses by false Negro leaders who were controlled by the ruling class" (Jemie 1976, 13), and that could only be done by joining the revolution. "A Little Dialogue Between the Poet and the Revolution", a poem by Rafael Alberti, with whom Hughes shared ideological views, clearly illustrates the goal of joining the cause as a means to eventually overcoming fears and doubts. This is the poet's retort in this dialogue with the revolution:

> I'll follow your example and look at you,
> because if I lose you, red glory,
> red glory, it's because I've lost myself.
> (Alberti and Hughes 2014, 189, 12–14)

4. Conclusion

The poetry of this study is nothing but a reflection of a conflict of a political and ideological nature in the mind of the poet, and its characteristics of endurance have made it memorable. In fact, the enduring motives reflected in these poems constitute an opportunity for meaning-making (Moffit and Singer 1994), a process through which Hughes understands and makes sense of the social and historical events around him and about his own self. The poems revealed in the previous paragraphs, tightly bound to the cultural, social, and political context provided, will be the means through which the author understands and conceptualizes himself and also constitute the engine for his self-development both ideologically and literally. Moreover, this approach will help us to shed light on the whys and wherefores of the author in his refinement as a poet.

Taking up again Galeano's and Rukeyser's words and reflecting on the fact that we are the stories we tell, by extension we can say that Langston Hughes's

poetry of this time is, for better or worse, a reflection of his own self and spirit, and creates a sense of identity. Narrating the distressing and problematic circumstances that back people encountered before and after the Depression years helps Hughes to make sense of the problem. By turning the negative experience into poems, Hughes succeeds in drawing meaning and reasoning and leaves a remarkable story as a legacy, a story depicted as memorable because of being disrupting and unresolved that somehow shows the self-continuity Hughes wants to express by writing what is his life-story and his peers'.

I personally believe that as well as serving the purposes of this study, Hughes's poetry of these years should be regarded highly as it helps us reflect on our historicity, and serve as a means to understanding the life of black Americans in a historical context because, as stated by Nelson, "every poem [is presented] to us together with a history of its reception" (Nelson 2003, 1).

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Alba Fernández Alonso (1987), University of Burgos (Spain)
Bachelor Degree in Translation and Interpreting (EN, DE>ES) in 2010, University of Valladolid. Master’s Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, 2012, University of Burgos. Master’s Degree in Medical and Biosanitary Translation (EN<ES), 2014, University Jaume I. Enrolled in the PhD program of Humanities and Communication, University of Burgos, since 2017.

Currently combining an Assistant Teacher position in the English Philology Department of the University of Burgos and freelance work in sworn translation and interpreting EN<ES services.

Alba Fernández’s PhD dissertation focuses on the literary production of Hughes during his time in the Spanish Civil War as a war correspondent. However, she has also explored and published part of her research on the resilience detected in Hughes’s early poetry, the aesthetics of the notion of dream in his works, and Hughes’s literary turn in the 1930s towards a more radical and revolutionary verse.

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