Towards Understanding: The Study of Hughes' Poetry as the Epitome of the Expressive,

Cultural, and Political Elements of African American Literature

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#### Introduction

Literature reveals a great deal about humankind, because each people group has a unique story to tell. Exposure to the literature of a people helps outsiders understand those different from them, which in turn may foster community. Without the literature of a group, people would be unaware about the complexities of a community. Literature may aid in granting unlimited and uncensored access that would otherwise not exist to outsiders of that population.

Unfortunately, a disconnection currently exists between the academic world and the sweet, soulful study of African American literature (AA literature). Because there is limited exposure to AA literature in academics, except for specialized courses in which it serves as the intended focus, most people do not know how to approach it as serious academic study because of its stark differences from Western literature. In sum: African American writers often do not utilize Standard English (SE), so their work is misinterpreted as non-academic in comparison to other Western works of prominence; AA literature tells a different cultural story that most of America does not identify; and the literature often serves as a political platform that authors use to inform the public of their plight. More often than not, the expressive, cultural, and political elements of AA literature are not simultaneously considered in critical analysis of the literature, which leads one to misinterpret it.

Expressive, cultural, and political elements are clearly present in African American works, and their study is a vital part of understanding AA literature. Take, for instance, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who advocates using African derived interpretive tools to dissect AA literature and, consequently, shifts the focus to the African American expressive, cultural, and political aspects. And Terry Eagleton, a renowned literary critic, also argues in *After Theory* that the

political nature or cultural elements of a work cannot be separated from it (23). Nor can the language people use be separated form the literature they produce. John and Russell Rickford, authors of *Spoken Soul*, note that some people wrongly assume that "[African American Language (AAL)] has no dictionary, no textbooks, no grammar, no rules. It is rebellious and outside rule-based language" (91). Suggestively, then, one not only has to study the African American expression and language to better understand the literature, but he also has to accept the language as valid as well. But because the expressive elements are at variance from mainstream literature, mainstream literary critics have a difficult time considering AA literature candidates for serious linguistic study.

Obviously, a need for the proper way to understand and view AA Literature is necessary. Scholars must adopt an entirely new approach to its study that would allow the acceptance of its distinct features and differences. One way to achieve this goal is to embrace not just its political, cultural, and expressive elements, but also provide insightful illustration and analysis of all three. Although all the major writers and fields of AA literature draw upon these three elements to create a distinct literature, this study will focus on the poetry of Langston Hughes to epitomize the inter-relationship of the expressive, cultural, and political elements frequently found in African American works. Hughes is particularly useful because he is a well-known writer whose poetry and works provide an intertextual historiography of the periods of AA literature. His work is a rich blend of expressive, cultural, and political elements, and through a careful study of it, one can easily perceive the different levels of understanding that the literature requires.

Hughes' poetry reflects inimitable aesthetics. Zora Neale Hurston identifies in her article, "The Characteristics of Negro Expression," artistic elements that are most often found in and specific to AA literature. Not surprisingly, most of these expressive aspects concern a

distinct style of language and linguistic expression African Americans use in their writing. In chapter one of this thesis, Hughes' poems, "Mother to Son," "Song for a Banjo Dance," "Evil Woman," "Ballad of Gin Mary," "Mulatto," and "Red Silk Stockings" serve as excellent representations of African American aesthetics. While these poems possess cultural and political features, they showcase what Zora Neale Hurston perceives as distinct elements of African American expression. Examples throughout this chapter show the employment of AAL in AA literature as beautiful and literary (meaning that the language has merit to be used in works of literature).

Some critics, however, view Hughes' linguistics as just a street dialect which lacks strong, cohesive elements of sound form, causing some to regard his poetry as substandard and, therefore, nonliterary. However, Laurie F. Leach discusses the exceptional work Hughes did as a high school student at Central High School in Cleveland, Ohio, and also notes that his career as a poet started with the poem that he gave as a commencement speech for his high school graduation (7). After high school, Hughes gained admission to Columbia University as one of the first black students (Leach 18). He later finished his education at Lincoln University, an all black college in Pennsylvania, all the while publishing poetry and other written works (Leach xv). Hughes' choice to use AAL was not because he was uneducated and simply lacked the ability to write in SE, but because he wanted to signal two truths: that his language is indeed educated, and he intentionally uses this form to fulfill different purposes. People should accept the language as valid and understand the importance of its use by African American authors.

The diverse social conditions in which different speech communities of language exist have caused people to develop stereotypes of others based on speech, proving that "[t]he discrimination of elegant or 'correct' speech is a by-product of certain social conditions"

(Bloomfield 22). However, Rickford and Rickford, among many others, offer strong support to validate AAL. They note that AAL has distinct grammar rules, unique vocabulary, and particular pronunciation guidelines, all of which linguists consider necessary elements in a language (92). The reality is that certain speech communities judge other speech communities as a way to exert power over a particular people group, because language holds so much social power. More often than not, the rich, the educated, or the socially elite are involved in the same speech community and typically but erroneously believe that the language they utilize is far more superior to the type of speech the poor or uneducated man uses to communicate. However, the educated man is not necessarily able to communicate more effectively in general, but perhaps better able to communicate the standard form of his language. William Labov, in *The Study of Nonstandard English*, uses the work of John Kenyon to draw a parallel between the different types of the same language:

In 1948, John Kenyon introduced the distinction between cultural levels and functional varieties of English. He argued that [one] should recognize a colloquial standard and a formal nonstandard, as well as a formal standard and a colloquial nonstandard—in other words, that style and class stratification of language are actually independent. This would seem to be a common sense distinction, and it would obviously be useful and helpful if language were organized in this manner. (22)

Kenyon urges people to view both standard and nonstandard forms of any language respectively, especially AAL in comparison to SE. Respect for a language ultimately manifests itself as respect for the speech community that utilizes it. The continual snubbing of AAL by those who practice the standard form has had disheartening repercussions on the African American speech

community as the rich tradition of AAL is foundational to most artistic elements of the African American literary tradition.

There are two general schools of thought concerning the linguistic roots of AAL which determine its grammar rules, vocabulary, pronunciation patterns, and its ancestry and validity. D'Eloia argues that AAL developed from Southern White English (a division of SE) spoken by some in the Southern U.S. (87). Thus, AAL is a dialect of SE grounded in similar linguistic roots as are Indo-European languages. Labov poses several theories concerning the linguistic roots and similarities of what he refers to as "Negro English" to SE. He sets out to show that AAL is not as different in form from SE as most linguists originally believed; he holds that dialects of a particular language are best understood in relation to the standard form of the language (11). Labov, who originally published his work in 1969, an extremely volatile time in America concerning race relations, sought to link races together on this very primal, basic level, giving validity to AAL by linking it closely to SE.

While there is some linguistic evidence to support the notion that AAL is a dialect of SE, careful examination of the phonetics, grammar, and lexicon of West African languages reveals that AAL has deep roots in Africa, not America. Scholars such as Geneva Smitherman, Arthur Palacas, and John and Russell Rickford argue that there is strong evidence that the linguistic elements of AAL share more of the same language patterns with West African languages than with Indo-European languages; therefore, AAL is not a mere dialect of SE, but a complex language system of West African descent spoken mainly by African Americans. Arthur L. Palacas argues, "At the heart of the differences is the fact that [AAL] is, in many ways, a non-inflectional language and has a remarkably different verb phrase" from that of SE, thus linking it

with West African languages rather than Indo-European languages (335). Palacas poses this viewpoint concerning AAL:

In general, [people], including educated African Americans, have it so ingrained in [them] that Ebonics is just bad, perverted standard English, or the careless and failed production of it, rather than a different language—one structurally, semantically, stylistically, and culturally at odds with English—that [they] have been unable to approach Ebonics-Speaking African American[s]...with dignity, respect, thoughtfulness, and, most practically, the realism that the language difference requires. (345)

AAL is not incorrect English, but a complex tongue with West African roots. Recognizing that AAL has West African roots gives clout to its use in AA literature.

AAL has many different types of verbs and verb usage that are not found in SE. For instance, speakers and writers of SE practice subject-verb agreement while speakers of AAL typically do not, as shown in this example: "Basically, a player hater is someone who is jealous of what another person have that they don't have" (Palacas 330). SE calls for the agreement of the subject with the verb so the verb 'have' should be 'has.' Smitherman supports the validity of this verb use practiced by African Americans: she explains that in this West African grammar rule, users employ the "[s]ame verb form for all subjects" as in "I know," "he know," and "they know" (*Talkin* 7). Therefore, rules concerning subject-verb agreement are different, but not necessarily wrong in AAL when compared to West African languages. Another verb use concerns African Americans' use of the "to be" verb. Smitherman notes, "The most distinctive differences in the structure of [AAL] are patterns using be... These forms are mainly used to indicate a condition that occurs habitually" (*Talkin* 19). But Labov claims that although the use

of this verb is strikingly different from that of SE, it does not make a strong case for huge differences between the two languages (41). While Labov is able to find some similarities in the grammatical foundations of SE and AAL, even he is not able to conclusively explain the invariant "be" that African Americans use. He also writes, almost as a passing thought, that "[s]ome of these extensions may be motivated by an underlying Creolized grammar common to Gullah, Trinidad, [and] Jamaica..." (41). Indeed, the invariance of this verb allows one to use it without regard to rules practiced in SE. Palacas offers an example of this verb use: "At the time I was hating my name because of everyone's criticism" (330). This example shows the invariance of this verb. It expresses any tense, with a singular or plural subject. The way that most African Americans employ this verb is comparable to the way it is used by other African speakers, because this verb is not present in forms of English practiced by white speakers.

One strong argument to support that AAL most closely resembles SE is that both languages use similar words; however, the definitions of these recognizable SE words are strikingly different from those definitions that one finds in a SE dictionary. Some of these same words include, but are certainly not limited to, "bad," which means "[g]ood, excellent, great, fine"; "kitchen," which means the "[h]air at the nape of the neck, inclined to be the most curly (kinky) and thus the hardest part of straightened hair to keep from going back"; and "yelluh, [or] high yelluh," which is "[a] very light-complexioned African American" (Rickford and Rickford 94-5). All of these words are found in a SE dictionary, but have completely different meanings when used by speakers of AAL. However, the user of AAL does not simply take a word and use a different meaning randomly; the way that these vocabulary words are utilized is exclusive to West African languages. Smitherman illustrates this distinction with the word *bad*, which is

commonly used in AAL. This word would typically be used in SE as a negative adjective, but it is understood in AAL as either positive or negative in particular contexts:

This linguistic reversal process, using negative terms with positive meanings, is present in a number of African languages—for example, the Mandingo a ka nyi ko-jugu, which literally means "it is good badly," that is, "it is very good."

This kind of Black Idiom exemplifies words that are loan-translations (calques), in which the literal meaning of the African phrase is retained in Black English, though not always the exact word it-self. (*Talkin* '44)

The rules of AAL vocabulary use resemble those of African languages, and are not always simply borrowed words from the English language. Therefore, vocabulary differences in AAL separate users of the language from standard language users. Rickford and Rickford note that "...one of the many fascinating features of black vocabulary is how sharply it can divide blacks and whites..." (93). It not only divides blacks from whites, but also divides blacks from other cultures as well. However, this divide is not necessarily bad, but provides distinction because the words, like most of the words in the vocabulary of AAL, are distinct to the African American experience; and the only way to properly paint a picture of African American life is by understanding the experience as communicated through the speech utilized in literature.

AAL indeed uses a huge vocabulary and has several dictionaries to prove it; in fact, the very presence of a separate dictionary supports the viewpoint that the words of AAL are often very different from those in SE, or used differently than in SE. For example, there is Geneva Smitherman's *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, and *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African American Slang* edited by Clarence Major. These dictionaries also support what some linguists have recently begun to argue: AAL has not borrowed all of its words

from SE, but speakers of SE have indeed borrowed certain words from AAL. This borrowing of words is referred to as *crossover*. Crossover essentially means that a word idiosyncratic to the African American culture or experience transfers into use in the white community. In *Black Talk* Smitherman uses the work of David Claerbaut to show that "a vast number of uniquely black terms have in recent years been pirated by white society, especially by the white youth culture" (28). The number includes, words and phrases such as "blues," "twenty-four-seven," "don't even go there," "throw down," and "chill" (*Black Talk* 29). The cultural implications of AAL are numerous, so it is imperative that African American authors use this language in their works to convey their culture, if it is appropriate to do so.

The pronunciation of words in AAL is different from that of SE, and is one of the most essential elements of the language both in form and style. Pronunciation may seem an unimportant element, but this is simply not true because, believe it or not, "...[m]ost Americans, especially black ones, can almost always tell that a person is black even on the phone, and even when the speaker is using standard English sentences," says McWhorter (133). Even law cases countered this, claiming racial stereotyping. But the complex pronunciation patterns that the African American uses in his speech and writing are not the result of one simple rule, or by simply ignoring a rule in SE. As Toni Morrison explains, omitting the "g" in a word like "going," to pronounce it "goin," does not classify the writing as distinctly African American—the pronunciation patterns are much more complex and make the language different (2288). Claude Brown argues that AAL has unique pronunciation patterns:

There are specific phonetic traits [of AAL]. To the soulless ear, the vast majority of these sounds are dismissed as incorrect usage of the English language...To those so blessed as to have had bestowed upon them at birth the lifetime gift of

soul, these are the most communicative and meaningful sounds ever to fall upon human ears: the familiar "mah" instead of "my," "gonna," for "going to," "yo" for "your." (88, 160)

These pronunciation patterns are different from SE. Rickford and Rickford agree with Brown, and believe that the pronunciation "...system allow[s] any word in 'conventional English' to be converted to the sounds of black vernacular..." (99). While not all elements of AAL pronunciation can be examined, there are a few occurrences worthy of examination as they are the most recognizably distinct from SE.

Rickford and Rickford note that pronunciation patterns used most often by African Americans, which are therefore the most familiar, are like those utilized by Caribbean Creole English speakers (101). For instance, at the very basic level of pronunciation, African American speakers show more difference in "...inflection,' variation in pitch and rhythm,' intonation,' and 'tone'" (102). Variation in inflection and tone, without a specific reason, is not typically practiced in SE. In AAL, however, these pronunciation patterns all have to do with style. A user of AAL adopts certain pronunciation patterns to make his spoken and written language distinct. AAL is not just following the rules of the language but incorporating style into its use. Smitherman notes that AA speakers use 'd' in place of 'th' as in "dem for them" (*Talkin*' 17). She also notes one of the most well-known pronunciation patterns is the omission of most final consonants from words such as *hoo'* for "hood" (17). Rickford and Rickford support Smitherman's view that this is perhaps one of the most well known of the pronunciation patterns specific to AAL, but also elaborate on the rules one has to use when dropping these consonants: "Not just any consonant cluster at the end of the word can be simplified... In order to produce the correct vernacular pronunciations in each case, speakers of [AAL] have to attend to whether the

corresponding [SE] pronunciations are voiced or voiceless" (104). The African American, just like any speaker of a particular tongue, uses these patterns daily without a thought, so oftentimes people think these rules for pronunciation do not exist because speakers are not always aware of them.

The general consensus of AAL matches closely to the viewpoint of the Rickford and Rickford contributor, because most people view AAL as "'just a bunch of slang" (91). This is because people have developed what Bloomfield refers to as speech communities: "[a] group of people who use the same system of speech-signals..." (29). These speech signals allow a group of people to interact with one another in a way that is sometimes universal and other times understood by only that particular speech community. Smitherman concurs, noting that the language of black America brings the black community together (*Talkin'* 19). People apart from a particular speech community do not always understand or accept various languages, especially if they are not the standard. Because language connects members of people groups together on a common ground, it has evolved as a method used to determine different characteristics about a person or people group. Smitherman expresses the power that language possesses stating that "[l]anguage is both deep and surface structures; it is both words and what one does with the words. It is both the spoken (or written) communication itself and the underlying socio-political and cultural realties, such as thoughts, values, culture, history, and consciousness, that give rise to the words" ("Language" 17). Therefore, language is the best indicator of a particular speech community's culture and experience, so the importance of AAL in AA literature is immeasurable.

The poetry of Hughes showcases the cultural story of the African American found so often in AA literature. Chapter two discusses the undeniable cultural aspects of the poetry; it

shows how African American authors almost always incorporate African American culture that traces to the period of slavery and foregrounds the direct and conscious intertextual connections between the past and present cultural elements. Some of the cultural elements include slavery or the concept of African American culture as one of struggle, The Great Migration<sup>1</sup>, blues<sup>2</sup>, rootlessness<sup>3</sup>, The New Negro<sup>4</sup>, The Harlem Renaissance<sup>5</sup>, Afrocentricity<sup>6</sup>, and the darker brother<sup>7</sup>. These elements are evident in the work of Langston Hughes, because although he is a post-slavery author, his work thematizes and embodies the vernacular tradition and the struggle of bondage and slavery so relevant to African American culture. Some of Hughes' poems that thematize African American culture include "Po' Boy Blues," "The Weary Blues," "I, Too," and "Afro-American Fragment." The ideas of Rom Harré and Catherine Belsey help connect language and culture, thus providing purpose for the African American author's inclusion of culture in his writing. They argue that language communicates culture, and that language speaks people—that ism shows who they are. Therefore, African American writers, especially Hughes, purposely include African American cultural elements in their work to communicate their culture and identity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In America in the 1920s, a great number of African Americans moved north to pursue their lives post-slavery. Moving north was also symbolic to moving up the social ladder in America.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Blues is a distinct African American music genre that incorporates unique rhythms and beats.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The African American's arduous journey west to America stripped him from his ancestry in Africa, and in America he was treated as less than a human; consequently, he lacked feelings of security and found that he did not have a place to call home; he could not go back to Africa and he did not fit within America.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The term "The New Negro" was coined by Alain Locke and symbolizes the African American post-slavery in his heyday during the Harlem Renaissance. During this time, a great number of African Americans moved north, and some participated in the explosion of creativity that took place in Harlem.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The Harlem Renaissance was a period of time in the 1920s when "The New Negro," who braved the move and traveled north, contributed some of the most unique and important artistic contributions (music, art, etc.) that remain important not only to the African American community but to America.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>African Americans with an Afrocentric outlook believe that the tradition and culture of Africa are important to the African American community.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> "The darker brother" was an African American with bloodlines both of a white and black person. However, because he had dark skin, he was not treated as well as his white brothers that were full-blooded white.

In order for an African American writer to earn esteem from his community and show respect for his people, he communicates the African American culture; consequently, African American writers are burdened with what J.M. Coetzee refers to as the "burden of representation" (296-8). This burden of responsibility encourages the African American writer to keep true to his community while at the same time producing a work that receives widespread attention and recognition. The burden of representation also demands that African American writers communicate like African Americans do both in language and content. Some authors believe that "...every culture of which [one knows] has been a story-telling culture," which means all cultures come from oral cultures (Brockmeier and Harré 42). Therefore, an African American author might include the struggle of the African American community in his writing, because it is his responsibility as a member of the community to do so. It is difficult for one to come across AA literature that does not contain some element of the cultural experience of the African American people. If an author remains oblivious of this responsibility—or worse yet ignores it—then his discourse community will not hesitate to ostracize him and label him as an 'Uncle Tom' or a traitor. This is because it is through narrative that people connect and grapple with their identity, history, experience, and memories (Brockmeier and Harré 40). African American literary works explain a great deal about the African American community and culture, so the best way to preserve the culture of the African American lies in expressing it through literature which describes the cultural experience.

The discussion of Hughes' poetry in chapter three embodies the political nature of AA literature. The chapter explains the nature of the political elements of the literature, and also shows the interconnectedness of the expressive, cultural, and political elements of it. Du Bois, among others, advocates a political responsibility for African American writers, and he proposes

this political agenda in his "Criteria of Negro Art" (22). Hughes' "Harlem Night Club," "Harlem," "Dream Variations," "Dream Boogie," and "Christ in Alabama" epitomize the political nature of AA literature. These poems illustrate political issues that plague the African American community: namely, slavery, freedom, equal rights, and social status.

The literature contains too many complex components of tradition and culture to be mixed into the mainstream study of English, yet also contains elements of artistry, redemption, and human importance to be placed so far away from the mainstream study of literature, lest the work ends up forgotten, or worse yet, misunderstood. To make this seeming paradox a reality, scholars must adopt an entirely new approach to the study of AA literature that would allow its integration into mainstream literary studies while still maintaining its distinct features. The literature not only presents the political struggle of the African American community, but it is used to create a space, and more importantly, a voice for the people. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his article, "Canon Formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition," supports this desire African Americans writers have to not only establish their literature in the canon, but to separate it from other literary genres. Gates notes that "[w]e must, I believe, analyze the ways in which writing relates to race, how attitudes toward racial differences generate and structure literary texts by us and about us" (176). Gates vehemently argues throughout this article that AA literature has its own literary merits and must remain as a separate study so that it does not get lost amongst mainstream literary works.

It is no wonder if one looks to the slow pace of The Civil Rights movement that people have just recently begun to examine the elements of AA literature and the theories that surround it. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. presently stands as the leading theorist of AA literature. He has sparked great debate in his field, and whether or not one agrees with his political approach that

creates a separate place for African American works in academia, what he argues fuels major literary ideas in the area of AA literature. The space is preserved for the African American community to claim a piece of academia that they have been denied in the past, as Louden confirms: "... African Americans have remained apart from the social mainstream, either by virtue of the distance imposed by slavery and other forms of social exclusion stemming from racism, or for reasons of choice on the part of the victims of this racism" (235). One can understand why proponents of AA literature feel the need not only to promote exclusively in the arena of literature. Thus current criticism, and perhaps the exclusiveness of this criticism, developed out of a backlash toward a society intolerable of AA literature. Diane Ravitch, promotes in her books and articles on school curriculum that AA literature, or for that matter any other type of ethnic literature, should not be separated from mainstream works. She believes a distinction does not exist between ethnic literature and mainstream literature, and that one should not use an approach which encourages distinction to examine literature ("A Different Kind" 98-106). Ravitch's concern is valid, because she does not want to see ethnic literature discriminated against, so her solution is an integrationist approach for all literature (98-106). However, her outlook is dangerous for African Americans, because if it does not remain distinct from mainstream literature, it ends up getting lost among it.

In response to ideas like Ravitch's, Gates' recent work is helpful because it identifies an aspect of the politics of AA literature and explains that it remains politically charged because it has created a place and space for African American studies in academia. African American literary theory practices are relatively new because of only recent, albeit minimal, recognition of African American texts in academic circles. And this criticism involving exclusive African American roots is imperative, because the works of African Americans are sometimes ignored;

as Wright echoes, "White America never offered these Negro writers any serious criticism" (45). However, Gates' and others' insightful analysis of the African Americans' work have changed the way AA literature is viewed. In fact, Griffin notes that "[s]ince the founding of African American studies at the University of Pennsylvania 30 years ago, [there has been] an explosion of literary production by people of African decent" (165). Furthermore, Ward states that "[b]lack criticism at the present time is in transition, and black critics are developing a new awareness of the transactional nature of reading and criticism, of the dimensions of Afro-American literature..." (23). Gates claims in *The Signifying Monkey* that the key to understanding AA literature is found when one views it in relation to the Signifying Monkey, because "...the Signifying Monkey is the figure of black rhetoric in Afro-American speech community" (53). Gates notes that "[t]ales of the Signifying Monkey seem to have had their origins in slavery," so Signifyin(g) is an element of African American literary tradition deeply rooted in the spoken word and exclusively practiced and understood by the black community (51). This exclusivity makes AA works unavoidably political.

Toni Morrison speaks with passion concerning understanding the exclusiveness of the political nature of AA literature. She discourages viewing AA literature in opposition to society; she suggests that readers should consider it useful, because it highlights humanity's struggle (2289). This view will no doubt encourage a wholesome, purposeful kind of criticism. Furthermore, in the attempt to make AA literature accessible and intriguing to all groups, Morrison encourages the view that AA literature need not be written or read only by African Americans to fall under the category of AA literature (2288). Morrison recognizes that exclusivity of her own work and the work of other African American authors is not intended to encourage separation but unity.

# Chapter One

## The Expressive Nature of African American Literature

While African American authors blatantly convey in their writing a political and cultural message that confronts the experience of their people, the literature is still aesthetically pleasing; unfortunately, some of these aesthetic elements are not held in high esteem. Interestingly, Hughes himself expressed great concern regarding the issue of the professional or the academic community's refusal to seriously accept or understand the African American author's need to use expressive elements unique to his culture in his literary works. Hughes sometimes wrote under the pen name of Jesse B. Simple—a "...beer drinkin, rappin, profound thinkin Harlemite..." (*Talkin*' Smitherman 32). Under this pen name, Hughes published a satirical piece regarding the use of African American expressive elements in African American literary works. A few lines from the work explain Hughes's stance on the issue:

"I have writ a poem," said Simple.

"Again?" I exclaimed. "The last time you showed me a poem of yours, it was too long, also not too good."

"This one is better," said Simple. Joyce had a hand in it, also my friend, Boyd, who is colleged. So I want you to hear it"

"...I agree the sentiment of your poem is correct," I said. "But I cannot vouch for the grammar."

"If I get the sense right," answered Simple, "the grammar can take care of itself..."

"You have something there," I said. "So keep making your poems, if you want to. At least, they rhyme."

"They make sense, too, don't they?" asked Simple.

"I think they do," I answered.

"They does," said Simple.

"They do," I corrected.

"They sure does," said Simple. (Talkin' Smitherman 32-4)

In this excerpt, Hughes conveys to his readers, through Simple, some of the most recognizable elements of African American expression. Simple starts his conversation by first giving his work credibility; he does this by mentioning that his friends who are college-educated helped him with the work. Then he says that he wants the narrator to "hear" it, expressing the importance of the oral nature of African American works; it is written with a dramatic essence. not bound to the page, but playing out on stage or in the mind of the reader (Hurston 32). Simple also argues that the sentiment is in the poem, although the grammar may not be. He is appealing to the narrator to consider that the way he writes does not require correction, because he is the voice of his people. He represents them by using AAL; he hopes that the man will have the dignity to look past the grammar and look to the truth of his story. The possessive "your" that the narrator uses in reference to Simple's poetry signals that he feels that the poetry that Simple writes is solely that of the African American people. It also alludes that the narrator is not African American, which explains his reluctance to accept Simple's work throughout their conversation. Perhaps the most vital part of this conversation between the narrator and Simple occurs at the end. Simple refuses to accept the narrator's correction of his grammar use. He uses repetition as reinstantiation<sup>8</sup> to enforce the distinct qualities of the AAL and to demonstrate his refusal to conform to what is typically acceptable. The political, cultural, and expressive

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Reinstantiation occurs when a line is repeated and it remains the same except for a slight difference. An example of this style occurs in Hughes' poem, "Song for a Banjo Dance": "Shake your brown feet, honey/shake your brown feet, chile."

elements of AA literature must remain inseparable to facilitate a proper understanding of the literature, so understanding the expressive elements unique to AA literature is imperative in understanding the work.

The main aesthetic element of AA literature is the presence of drama, or a dramatic essence, and this dramatic essence makes the aesthetics of AA literature expressive; Zora Neale Hurston, a popular and extremely talented African American writer, explains that drama is an expressive practice of the African American that transfers to the literature. This drama is extremely significant for effect, because "[e]very phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out. Unconsciously for the most part of course [sic]. There is an impromptu ceremony always ready for every hour of life. No little moment passes unadorned" (Hurston 31). It is interesting that Hurston, as an author herself, identifies the presence of drama as one of the main elements of "Negro expression" indicating that the writing was never intended to remain on the page; rather, it is dramatized to create "a show in the head of the reader." The dramatic aim of the African American's work requires him to utilize specific language devices that most certainly capture the attention of his audience and make his work stand out. These expressive or dramatic elements of the literature demonstrate that African American authors strive to not only deliver a political and cultural message, but in doing so, provide some of the most pleasing and entertaining pieces through dramatic expression. African Americans have the artistic ability to dramatize their writing because, according to Hurston, "...the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics," meaning that African Americans, because they think in pictures, express the written word differently than whites (32). Hurston's explanation of the African American's seemingly inherent ability to successfully transfer actions to paper explains why so many African American authors use these expressive techniques in their writing.

The metaphor is perhaps the most recognizable, most often used, and arguably the most important of the literary devices in AA literature; and Hughes uses metaphor throughout his poetry. The use of metaphorical language in African American works gives the literature appealing, rich, and diverse facets. For example, "Mother to Son" is a generational poem in which the mother addresses her son and her people as an elder, and also displays perhaps Hughes' best use of extended metaphor:

Well, son, I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor—

Bare.

But all the time

I'se been a-climbin' on,

And reachin' landin's,

And turnin' corners,

And sometimes goin' in the dark

Where there ain't been no light.

So boy, don't you turn back.

Don't you set down on the steps

'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.

Don't you fall now—

For I'se still goin', honey,

I'se still climbin',

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair. (60)

Through metaphor, a few words can represent a number of different concepts; the central metaphor of the poem, the crystal stair—viewed both positively and negatively—carries great significance in the African American community. Through this poem "...Hughes uses a single image, the 'crystal stair,' to evoke simultaneously the painful history of blacks in America while pointing to the tradition of faith and hope that has sustained them through it all" (Wasley). One of the positive connections of the crystal stair is its relation to "Jacob's Ladder" (Wasley). This ladder is the stairway that Jacob, a patriarch from the Old Testament, sees leading to heaven and the Promised Land (Wasley n.pag.). Jacob's people, the Jews, were persecuted as the African Americans were, so Hughes' parallel is easy for the African American community to relate. The ladder represents freedom and redemption, so it is an image of hope for the African American community. The mother encourages her son and her people to continually climb this stair, because she believes that God will grant them the redemption and freedom that they deserve.

Throughout this poem, the mother is speaking to her son about the struggles of their people, so the crystal stair also represents bondage. She uses a crystal stair to represent the good life, while conversely describing her life through unpleasant and dangerous objects such as a bare floor with tacks and splinters. Hughes "often used [metaphor] to bear witness that life for the black masses 'aint been no crystal stair'" (Rickford and Rickford 18). The mother is speaking to her son as the member of the older generation; she is the one that bears the weight of

slavery, and she is telling her son of the struggles that she had to endure. However, while the mother "...equates the history of the African-Americans with an endless flight of broken-down stairs...," she still encourages her son to keep climbing up that crystal stair (Wasley). The woman uses elements found at the foundation of a home (stairs, floors), because the house is the central gathering place of a family. The home is described in shambles to signal the very desperation the woman feels for her son. Her voice is not just that of a mother to her son; but, "...in some sense, the voice of African American history itself..." (Wasley n.pag.). Therefore, the crystal stair represents a life of ease that white America automatically travels up throughout life that unfortunately the African American community is not automatically granted access to.

While the use of metaphor adds an expressive element to "Mother to Son," which makes it aesthetically pleasing, metaphor also aids in conveying the struggle of the African American woman; metaphor reveals the cultural position of the African American woman. John Parker notes that Hughes wrote "Mother to Son" in part to reveal "...the plight of the American Negro woman," and her struggles (196). The woman, generally considered the more domestic of the sexes, usually has the duty of keeping the house in order. That is, it is her job to make sure that her family has a comfortable home to live in, but the African American woman's place is much different. Her responsibility includes playing the role of the "mule of the world," meaning that she bears the duty of carrying the burden of her people. The nature of this responsibility demands that the African American woman assumes the role in her household of the African American man. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the woman in this poem is speaking to her son and not to her daughter. The African American mother has to teach her son how to lead his people. She seeks, as the mother does in this poem, to prepare her son for the life that he will lead and the trials that he will encounter in his journey to becoming a man. In other cultures it

may seem appropriate that a mother communicates especially to her daughter, and a father to his son, but in the African American culture, the mother is oftentimes the only parental figure present in the life of her children. One author notes that "[t]he most cruel and dehumanizing impact of slavery on the lives of black people was that black men were stripped of their masculinity" (hooks 20). Because African American men were not permitted to develop their masculinity, "...slave fathers often had little or no authority" (Blassingame 172). The mother, not the father, is the one that is responsible for the mental, physical, and spiritual growth of her son, so her warnings throughout this poem are not overly dramatic, but necessary for the survival of her son and people. When an African American uses any type of language device in his writing, he does not use it only for artistic expression but for cultural and political reasons as well.

The double descriptive and other forms of repetitious language, including repetition as reinstantiation, are other forms of expressive language found almost only in AA literature. These forms of repetition are unique to African American works because they are a "carryover" from African tradition. Some examples of double descriptive language that Hurston provides in her article are: "[h]igh-tall," "[l]ady-people," "[k]ill-dead," "[h]ot-boiling," and "[l]ow-down" (33). The use of double descriptive language reinforces or emphasizes a noun, verb, or adjective in literature, and also gives a dramatic element to the literature that makes the works come alive to the reader. Hughes utilizes the double descriptive, as well as other distinct forms of repetition in the poem "Song for a Banjo Dance" in which Hurston's ideas about African American expression are exemplified:

Shake your brown feet, honey,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> A "carryover" is a unique African tradition that survives in America as part of African American tradition. See Smitherman's *Talkin' and Testifyin'* and *Black Talk*.

Shake your brown feet, chile,

Shake your brown feet, honey,

Shake 'em swift and wil'—

Get way back honey,

Do that low-down step.

Walk on over darling,

Now! Come out

With your left.

Shake your brown feet, honey,

Shake 'em, honey chile. (30)

In this poem, Hughes uses the same double descriptive that Hurston provides in her article: he uses "low-down" to describe a dance step that he wants the woman in the poem to do. (This poem also incorporates an element of the African American culture: dance). Such vivid imagery allows the reader to actually picture the dance step in his mind: not only is the woman going low, but she is so low, that she is "low-down." He also uses repetition in this poem in a slightly different way than Hurston exemplifies, but the method is much the same. In this poem, he keeps repeating "Shake your brown feet, honey/ Shake your brown feet, chile/ Shake your brown feet, honey." This repetition is referred to as reinstantiation. Hughes' constant repetition captures the minds of his readers, so that they visualize this poem and possibly shake their feet as they read. Just as Hurston points out, the use of the double-descriptive gives the reader a vivid description of the actions that are written about in the poem.

Hughes is well known for using patterns of asymmetry in his poetry. Hurston notes that in African American poetry "[t]he presence of rhythm and lack of symmetry are paradoxical, but [present]" (35). In the poem, "Evil Woman" Hughes employs asymmetry:

I ain't gonna mistreat ma

Good gal any more.

I'm just gonna kill her

Next time she makes me sore.

I treats her kind but

She don't do me right,

She fights an' quarrels most

Ever night.

I can't have no woman's

Got such low-down ways,

Cause the blue-gummed woman

Aint de style now days.

I brought her from the South

An' she's goin' on back,

Else I'll use her head

For a carpet track. (99)

This poem does not have a distinct meter, yet it still has a bluesy feel. As a Harlem Renaissance poet, Hughes fought to make his literature different to show that African American expression is important in America. This cultural experience influenced the aesthetics of his own poetry. It determined the meter in which he wrote. In fact, the presence of a particular meter usually

indicated the type of poem Hughes was trying to write. Steven Tracy explains the blues patterns in Hughes' poetry:

In some of his best 'experimental' blues poems, Hughes used varied stanzas, line placement, and typography to convey both the spirit of the oral performance and a psychological or sociological complexity that stood up to such literary treatment on the page. He employed traditional twelve-and eight-bar stanzas, sometimes with his own literary touches, experiments with stanza patterns after the manner of the vaudeville composers, and free-verse poems with touches of blues to give those poems an unmistakable blues quality. (*Blues* 144)

Hughes utilized asymmetry just to incorporate a particular rhythm in his poetry indicative of blues. He made blues a part of the African American cultural story by using it repeatedly as an expressive element throughout his poetry. This poem symbolizes the inseparable nature of African American works, because Hughes used the expressive element of blues to tell part of the cultural story of the African Americans. The bluesy quality of the poetry also gives it an element of orality, thus showing that Hughes' aim was that people would perform this poem with the dramatic quality unique to African American works.

Another expressive element of AA literature is the presence of a specific form of dialect utilized mainly by the African American community. According to Hurston, the African American author's use of "dialect," or AAL, is one of the greatest contributions of expressive language utilized in African American literature (32). Rickford and Rickford note the major elements of AAL include its distinct grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation—all of which allow the writer to convey style. AAL is not only a functional language, but a stylistic one that brings African American works to life. Smitherman agrees, noting that "...[AAL] consists of

both language and style...language is the words, [and] style is what [one does] with the words" (*Talkin*' 16). While the African American reigns supreme at conveying his style through his spoken word by using AAL (and music including blues and hip-hop, as well as sermons), his literary works also convey this same style through his use of AAL, giving it aesthetic appeal. There are countless examples of AAL use in Hughes' poetry exemplified in "Mother to Son," "Evil Woman," "Homesick Blues," "Ballad of Gin Mary," "Mulatto," "Red Silk Stockings," and "The Weary Blues."

Rules of grammar remain the most important to the mechanics and form of most languages, so the differences in AAL are easy to notice especially by speakers of the standard form; the poem, "Ballad of Gin Mary," shows Hughes' mastery of the grammar of AAL:

Carried me to de court,

Judge was settin' there.

Looked all around me,

Didn't have a friend nowhere.

Judge Pierce he says, Mary.

Old Judge says, Mary Jane,

Ever time I mounts this bench

I sees yo' face again.

O, Lawd! O, Lawd!

O, Lawd...Lawdee!

Seems like bad licker,

Judge won't let me be.

Old Judge says you's a drunkard.

Fact is you worries me.

Gwine give you eighteen months

So licker'll let you be.

Eighteen months in jail!

O, eighteen months locked in!

Won't be so bad in jail

But I'll miss ma gin.

O, please sir, Judge, have mercy!

Have mercy, please, on me!

Old hard-faced Judge says eighteen months

Till licker'll let you be. (87)

In this poem, Hughes exemplifies verb use unique to AAL in the line, "Old Judge says you's a drunkard." He is using the invariant form of the "to be" verb used by African Americans. SE would call for "you's," which is "you is," to be written as "you are." Also the line, "Ever time I mounts this bench" exemplifies the rules concerning verb tense practiced in AAL. Some may wrongly assume that Hughes uses grammar rules specific to AAL in his poetry because his educational background did not equip him with the ability to properly master SE, but this assumption is wrong. Hughes indeed was an educated man, well versed in SE, but one does not have to look to his educational background as proof of his competence in SE. He demonstrates knowledge of SE throughout his poems. For example, he uses an apostrophe in "yo" to signal to his readers that he is aware that in SE there are other letters in the word, but he chooses to omit them. Evidently, Hughes knew both SE and AAL well, and he switches the language in his poetry to color his work with African American expression and flair.

African American authors use the vocabulary of AAL because it, like the other elements of the language, expresses aspects of the African American experience and condition. An excerpt from "Mulatto" demonstrates the way in which Hughes uses the distinctive vocabulary of AAL:

Sharp pine scent in the evening air.

A nigger night,

A nigger joy,

A little yellow

Bastard boy. (104)

The word "nigger" is a racist term in SE, so it is politically incorrect for people to use the term. One may then wonder why Hughes chooses to use this word in his poetry. Hughes is not using the word to encourage racism and the verbal abuse of his community; and his manipulation of this tautology is not only for artistic purposes. He chooses to use it in this poem to reclaim it for the African American community, making the concept that he is referring to as distinctly African American. He uses it as an adjective to describe the dark night and a type of joy. Describing joy as "nigger joy" gives the African American ownership of his joy. This joy, because it is labeled "nigger," belongs to the black man and cannot be taken from him as it was during the time of slavery and years following. Hughes is asserting, through AAL vocabulary, that the black man has joy to claim. Therefore, this vocabulary use is also political and cultural. Evidently, the simple use of vocabulary tells so much about the African American cultural and political story.

Pronunciation patterns of AAL color Hughes' poetry with flair. The use of AAL entails pronouncing and even misspelling words such as you ("yuh"), I ("Ah"), or going ("guine") among many other words (Hurston 43). While some may view these pronunciation patterns as

lazy, the intonation given to the words which makes them sound different than they normally would, sets the language apart and thus the literature. Pronunciation patterns of AAL are used throughout Hughes' work as epitomized by "Red Silk Stockings":

Put on yo' red silk stockings,

Black gal.

Go out an' let de white boys

Look at yo' legs.

Ain't nothin' to do for you, nohow,

Round this town,—

You's too pretty.

Put on yo' red silk stockings, gal,

An' tomorrow's chile'll

Be a high yaller.

Go out an' let de white boys

Look at yo' legs. (105)

When one reads this poem and examines the message that Hughes seeks to convey, it is not difficult to understand why he uses pronunciation patterns unique to AAL. In this poem, Hughes describes this type of African American as a "high yaller" who tries to fit in more with the white community than she does with the black community. Throughout the poem he does not try to hide his disgust with her willingness to conform to the white community and her attempt to attract white men by wearing red stockings. The pronunciation that Hughes uses in this poem works with the message that he tries to convey: while he is disrespecting the black woman for voluntarily distancing herself from the black community, he speaks to her in AAL. When

Hughes uses the pronunciation patterns, he is almost using a type of code that he wants only the African American community to understand; therefore, one can assume that his intended audience is the African American community. The language pronunciation adds a forceful jab—it is powerful in expressing the presence and importance of the African American community.

The expressive elements that Hughes uses in his poetry, including the use of metaphor, double descriptive, asymmetry, and dialect are not coincidental, but purposeful in conveying the experience of the African American community. Certain expressive elements of AA literature concerning language are indicative of African American literary works. Therefore, the expressive elements that Hughes and other African American authors use are not employed by these authors randomly; rather, they are used as a way to express their condition and experience. And the realness of human experience is expressed through the narrative and language patterns: "According to a wide-spread view, especially in traditional psychology, but also in sociology, literary theory, and other human sciences, there is something out there in the world which is taken to be the reality of human beings. Our knowledge of this reality, and through this reality itself, is represented, among other means, by language" (Brockmeier and Harré 48). A user of these expressive elements manipulates language to convey the African American experience. Using one's special language techniques to tell his people's collective story is perhaps the most effective way to discover oneself in relation to the greater context of the world.

Conveying the African American experience allows an African American author to write convincingly and authentically, thus promoting an important purpose of prose—to convey truth.

W.E.B. Du Bois, renowned writer and critic of the African American condition, writes, "I am the one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can

conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable" (19). Elements of truth and authenticity make a work good and beautiful, and a way that the African American author conveys the truth of his condition in his works is by using African American elements of expression. All of the different expressive modes that the African American author uses are language related, and through these expressive elements, narratives unique to the African American are created. Jens Brockmeier and Rom Harré offer some interesting viewpoints regarding the importance of narrative in relation to the human experience:

It is the intimate merging of these frameworks of interpretation that serves to understand and create the meanings we find in our forms of life. As far as human affairs are concerned, it is above all through narrative that we make sense of the wider, more differentiated, and more complex texts and contexts of our experience. It is essentially this notion that has been both generalized and broadened as well as specified in a wide spectrum of inquiries that include studies on the ways we organize our memories, intentions, life histories and ideas of our "selves" or "personal identities" in narrative patterns. (40)

People discover their humanness through the narrative. There does not seem to be a more true way of expressing oneself than through his narrative. If narratives provide the best way to communicate humanness and the human experience, then the author of the narrative ought to remain true to his own understanding. One way that an author succeeds in doing this is by communicating his works in familiar language. The African American author's use of each of these expressive elements allows him to communicate his unique experience to his audience, which includes issues such as slavery, freedom, bondage, and racism, among others.

## Chapter Two

## Cultural Influence in African American Literature

The culture of a community is greatly influenced by the language, and similarly, the language explains important elements of that particular culture. Culture and language then form a symbiotic relationship, thus shaping individuals in that culture; therefore, as Harré notes, "The person that [one is] depends on the language which [he] speak[s]" (*Personal* 87). People determine the words that they use and what those words mean in relation to their realm of experience. Amiri Baraka agrees. He adds that "[w]ords' meanings...seek their culture as the final reference for what they are describing of the world" ("Expressive" 64). Obviously, then, African American culture determines the unique elements of AAL, and because the literature is written in the language, the culture greatly influences the literature as well. So one cannot fully or properly understand the many facets of AA literature without including the study of the culture, because although "[w]ords have users, [ultimately] users have words" (Baraka "Expressive" 63). Some elements of the African American culture in this chapter include, slavery/culture of struggle, The Great Migration, blues, rootlessness, The New Negro, The Harlem Renaissance, Afrocentricity, and the "darker brother."

Hughes' poem, "Po' Boy Blues," tells one of the most important elements of the cultural story of the African American, his struggle with his identity as an African in America, and all of the problems that he encounters with that label:

When I was home de

Sunshine seemed like gold.

When I was home de

Sunshine seemed like gold.

Since I come up North de

Whole damn world's turned cold.

I was a good boy,

Never done no wrong.

Yes, I was a good boy,

Never done no wrong,

But this world is weary,

An' de road is hard an' long...

Weary, weary,

Weary early in de morn.

Weary, weary,

Early, early in de morn.

I's so weary

I wish I'd never been born. (78)

This poem was published in Hughes' collection, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. One critic excitedly proclaims that the book was a "splendid' work in which 'Jacob and the Negro came into their own" (Spingarn qtd. in Rampersad "Fine" 150). Spingarn, a Jewish man, compares the plight of the African Americans as similar to that of Jacob's people, descendents of Abraham confronted with years of oppression and exile from their own land. This story is one that, while marked with great struggle, is also marked with great triumph, just as the African American community is. Undoubtedly, "Po' Boy Blues" expresses the African American's feeling of restlessness and conveys desperate emotions of sadness and loneliness; however, part of the theme of this poem, and the entire *Fine* collection is the African American's emergence as "The New Negro." Alain

Locke called the African American post-slavery, "The New Negro." The African American was going through a lot of change during the 1920s. He began creating a space for his community and making his own decisions. Coombs explains Locke's "New Negro" as the African American figure who "...heralded a spiritual and cultural awakening within the Afro-American community. This awakening was manifested by a creative outburst of art, music, and literature as well as by a new mood of self-confidence and self-consciousness within that community" (153). Hughes himself was labeled as part of "The New Negro" movement and a major player in this era, so his poetry thematizes this cultural shift.

The man in "Po' Boy Blues" laments his struggle acclimating to life in the North and participating in The Great Migration, because this move results in his feelings of rootlessness. The Great Migration, an element of history and thus the cultural story of the African American, took place in the 1920s when a great number of African Americans moved north to attempt to escape the nightmares of the South, find their identity, and claim a place in America. While the North held the promise of the African American's dream of fulfilling his cultural identity as "The New Negro," the move was not an easy one. Coombs explains the importance of this migration:

For the first time in history, thousands upon thousands of individual Afro-Americans had made a basic choice concerning their own existence. They refused to remain victims of an impersonal and oppressive system, and, as a result, they deliberately pulled up their roots, left their friends and neighbors and moved north to what they hoped would be "the promised land." (154)

This "promised land" was most often symbolized as the city of Harlem. Harlem "...refers not only to the suburb of New York City of that name but alludes metaphorically to all places typical

of African-American communities in the United States" (Abarry 394). James Weldon Johnson, a writer in Locke's *The New Negro*, proclaims Harlem as the center of "The New Negro's" creative energy, and thus the cultural center of the African American community (301-11). However, this city was far from the comforts of the South. Harlem was a façade for most members of the African American community who found it difficult to adjust to life in the North. William Grimes, author of *Life of William Grimes, The Runaway Slave*, describes the North the same way that the narrator of "Po" Boy Blues" does:

When I arrived at New Haven, I found that all the money that I had left had amounted to no more than seventy-five cents. The next morning I went to work for Abel Lanson, who kept a livery stable. He sent me to work in a ledge of rocks, getting out stone for a building. This I found to be the hardest work I had ever done and began to repent that I had ever come away from Savannah, to this hard, cold country. (85)

Grimes reveals that he does not feel at home or free in the North, but desolate and lonely. Similarly, the man in this poem (much like other members of the African American community) has claimed his place in the North to establish a sense of permanence, but his heart remains in the South, the place that he and his people have inhabited for so long. His sense of homelessness causes him to realize his disconnection from his history, which is why he describes his days as cold compared to those he used to experience in the South that were full of sunshine. However, this nostalgia for the South is misleading, because the man in this poem felt the need at some point in his life to go in search of a better life. Therefore, a notable cultural element of the African American community concerns their issue of feeling a sense of rootlessness. That is,

they are a people without roots, because their roots are in a place other than America. This causes the community to constantly travel in the quest of finding home.

Another cultural element of Hughes' "Po' Boy Blues" is the language that it is written in, AAL; this language use communicates the unique blues culture of the African American community. Rampersad notes that "Po Boy Blues" as part of the *Fine* collection shows "[m]ore and more [Hughes] let the common people, and not the poets deemed great by the master culture. guide him" ("Fine" 148). One way Hughes does this is by conveying the cultural experience through language. Geneva Smitherman notes that it was the African American who invented the word blues (Black Talk 29). AAL communicates certain emotions unique to the African American community that SE simply cannot; therefore, blues is not just a genre of music or poetry but an emotion invented by the African American community<sup>10</sup>. It would be difficult. then, if not impossible for him to describe the word blues without using AAL. AAL helps promote the cultural story of the blues, so its presence in blues poems signals an intimate relationship with, comfort in, and awareness of African American culture that Hughes possesses. While the language is a form of aesthetic expression which provides the poetry with an artistic element, the use of AAL in the poetry of Langston Hughes promotes cultural unity and shows distinct cultural difference.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Levy's study of the Tahitian peoples' vocabulary and customs demonstrates the importance one's language has on his culture and vice versa:

In [the Tahitian] culture the people seem to have no word that could be rendered as 'sadness.' Without an ethnographic correspondence this fact in itself is of small significance, since there are many cases of lexical impoverishment that are remedied by indirect means. [But] the Tahitians seem to have no 'sad' behavior or rituals or customs that would embody the emotion. Given the joint evidence of lexical absence and cultural non-representation, [one] can say with some confidence that the emotion 'sadness' does not exist in Tahiti. (Mÿhlhÿusler and Harré 13)

Language makes such an impact on the culture of the Tahitians that they do not have an emotion as universally represented and understood as sadness.

"The Weary Blues" incorporates examples of African American cultural characteristics, oral tradition and blues. This poem represents, through the rhythm of blues, the African American man's song:

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,

Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,

I heard a Negro play.

Down on Lennox Avenue the other night

By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light

He did a lazy sway....

He did a lazy sway....

To the tune o' those Weary Blues.

With his ebony hands on each ivory key

He made that poor piano moan with melody.

O Blues!

Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool

He played that sad raggy tune like musical fool.

Sweet Blues!

Coming from a black man's soul.

O Blues!

In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone

I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—

"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."

Thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.

He played a few chords then he sang some more—

"I got the Weary Blues

And I can't be satisfied.

Got the Weary Blues

And can't be satisfied—

I ain't happy no mo'

And I wish that I had died."

And far into the night he crooned that tune.

The stars went out and so did the moon.

The singer stopped playing and went to bed

While the Weary Blues echoed through his head

He slept like a rock or a man that's dead. (23)

Hughes says of this poem: "...I wrote a poem called 'The Weary Blues,' about a piano-player I heard in Harlem..." (*The Big Sea* 92). The first few lines of the poem describe Hughes observing a man busy singing and living out the weary blues. As he is rocking back and forth and singing the tune of the weary blues, he captures the attention of those who have come out to watch him. Hughes paints the picture of a familiar figure recognizable in the African American community—the man in this poem is an actual representation of the blues, and his characteristics tell some element of the cultural story of the black man. Chinitz says that "Hughes was attracted to the blues particularly by what the music represented to him: an expression of the resilience

and tragedy of the African-American lower class" (178). Rampersad says that Hughes also "...finally wrote himself and his awkward position accurately in a poem" (*Life* 65). Beavers believes that Rampersad's assessment of this poem allows one to gather that "Hughes's aural aesthetic employs the externality he felt in the African American community. That he was a writer and not a musician, preacher, or dancer meant that his artistic project was to record artistic expression..." of the African American community (99). And this artistic expression, according to Coombs, sits at the foundation of African American culture, because it is an element of both African and European traditions (52). Therefore, the blues is representative of one area of American culture that the black man owns because of his undeniable skill and passion for the music. Hughes' own feeling of disconnection from his culture serves many purposes: it makes Hughes' work representative of the culture, meaning that he felt the duty to write about it. It also then makes his writing a part of African American culture.

Hughes' blues poems capture the African American's culture of struggle, but promote the strength of the community. Switzer boldly asserts that "...the blues has been above all a response to racism" (29). The African American community, during the time of publication of Hughes' blues poems, and even now, views the woes of racism as a roadblock to their success and sometimes happiness. The response to slavery appears in the experience, mood, and tone the blues crooner conveys in the "The Weary Blues." The crooner cries, "Ain't got nobody in all this world/And I can't be satisfied/I ain't happy no mo'/And I wish that I had died." These feelings of remorse likely stem from racism. Racism keeps the African American feeling like an outsider in America, leading to feelings of inadequacy, sadness, loneliness, despair, or more simply put, feelings of blues. Hughes says regarding his blues poems, including "The Weary Blues," "I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street—gay songs, because

you had to be gay or die; sad songs, because you couldn't help being sad sometimes. But gay or sad, you kept on living and you kept on going" (*The Big Sea* 209). The attitude of survival then echoes the very nature of blues, to combat racism, because racism brings an imminent emotional, spiritual, and sometimes physical death of the African American community. Blues poems act as public displays of strength; in this poem, even after the man stops playing for the night, the blues still continues to echo through his head to stop him from meeting death; the blues have the power even to sustain this man in his sleep.

"The Weary Blues" also showcases an essential element of African American culture: the use of oral textual features or orality. African American poetry is understood best when one understands the importance of the author's intention that it should be delivered orally. Abarry summarizes Asante's work, and explains that orality in African American writing is best defined as "the corpus of oral discourse created by African peoples in a variety of forms to deal with various exigencies and rhetorical situations" (380). He goes on to note that "[i]t ranges from the spirituals, the blues, and the work songs to the sermons, proverbs, and tales" (380). Orality serves an even more specific purpose in the blues. Switzer notes that through a personal correspondence, Lamont (a blues enthusiast) informs him that "...the blues is a type of oral poetry which takes a satirical stance against the present' that 'holds up to the present vision of what is and what is to come..." (28-9). In a sense, blues poetry, then, carries as much significance for future generations, as well as generations passed. Abarry informs his readers about the meaning of the oral-literary nature of the African American blues culture:

Any meaningful discussion of the literary creations of Africans in America must, of course, begin with their orature...These oral-literary forms have, in one way or another, affected the minds and hearts of Americans of all races. They have become a common

pool of emotional experience on which contemporary American writers of African decent draw according to their idiosyncrasies, talents, and vision. (380-1)

The oral-literary forms found in African American works are central to the cultural story of the African American, because they represent and distinguish his place in America. The rhythm and syntax—which give the literature an oral-textual feature—convey cultural expression, because the culture itself determines the rhythm and syntax (Baraka "Expressive" 64). However, it can be contested that the orature of Hughes' blues poems makes them not like literature, but more like a song or a performance. But, one author notes that "Langston Hughes was the first writer to grapple with the inherent difficulties of blues poetry, and he succeeded—not always, but often—in producing poems that manage to capture the quality of genuine blues in performance while remaining effective as poems" (Chinitz 177). While Hughes' ability to successfully write blues poems that transfer well to paper shows mastery of Western forms of literature, in those cases when it does not, he redefines the concept of literature with the oral-literature practices unique to his culture, making his works distinct.

The first line of "The Weary Blues," "Droning a drowsy syncopated tune," signals to the reader that the poem is one that can be acted out to rhythm as well as read out loud. Hughes purposely provides a picture of the black man playing and singing to promote orality when reading the poem. Smitherman asserts that the oral tradition "...preserves the Afro-American heritage and reflects the collective spirit of the race. Through song, story, folk sayings, and rich verbal interplay among everyday people, lessons and precepts about life and survival are handed down from generation to generation" (*Talkin'* 73). "The Weary Blues" has the oral-textual elements that Smitherman writes on. The man in this poem, through song, tells his listeners that he is sad and lonely, but he says that "I's gwine to quit ma frownin'/And put ma troubles on the

shelf." He sings out loud hoping to encourage others to be happy, or pretend to be happy, when they are sad. The man tells a story about survival that serves a purpose for his people and is relevant from generation to generation. Thus, poetry in this culture is functional and alive when it is recited out loud.

Hughes' poems have heavily influenced and encompassed the culture of music in the African American community, because his poems not only involve blues style rhythms but others as well. One author notes that in his book, Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz, "...Langston says exactly how the [poem] should sound...He had music in his ears, and dictated a kind of soundtrack in the margins of the poem that included everything from blues to German lieder to gospel and Latin music, all together" (Lunden n. pag.). Hughes incorporates a myriad of sounds in this collection that may not have been labeled as African American sounds, but they were notable sounds in Harlem at the time. Norman, a man starring in the play that showcases Hughes' poetry on stage, excitedly proclaims in Lunden's article, "All of these names, all of this music that Langston Hughes heard in Harlem at the time, the newer immigrants from Latin America and people coming to this country from Africa that were making their music that he was hearing'" (Lunden n. pag.). Hughes used all of the sounds of Harlem, and made them part of the African American culture. Smitherman notes an interesting tie between past and present forms of African American poetry tradition: "As a literary genre, poetry, both traditionally and now, is written to be recited, even in a sense 'sung,' in such a way that its creator becomes a kind of performing bard before the group. Thus poetry is the form that can most effectively go where black people are at, for it combines orality, music, verbal performance, and brevity..." (Talkin' 180). The poems that Hughes wrote in Harlem between the 1920s and 1960s helped establish the style of African American musical poetry. Therefore, Hughes' experimentation with the

sounds of his poetry has most likely helped influence modern forms of African American music, including rap, hip-hop, and R&B.

One of the most difficult issues in the life of the African American presently, and during the time when Hughes published the poem, "I, Too," is the color-line in America. Hughes laments this challenge:

```
I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—
```

I, too, am America. (1295)

The "brother" in this poem, or the African American man, is upset because he is forced from the dining room where the family dines, to eat in the kitchen. The kitchen in this poem symbolizes every area that the African American is kept from in America because of his dark skin. This exclusion affected the relations that the "darker brother" had with his people and American society as a whole. Hughes tries to reconcile this figure with American society through "I, Too." Hutchinson explains how Hughes' poem approaches the plight of the "darker brother" in the American household and American society:

In the American family home, the "darker brother," disowned by white siblings, has been cast out of the common room to the servants' space, where he nonetheless grows strong...In this epilogue to his first collection—a poem with which he often concluded poetry readings—Hughes registers his own distinctive poetic identity as both black and American. (108)

This poem conveys Hughes' own reconciliation with his identity as a black man and an American, so through the poem he encourages his people to do so as well. Hutchinson notes that Hughes' use of the "inclusive I" in this poem "...provided a partial model for the young black poet looking for a way to sing his own, which would be at the same time a song of his people" (107). Interestingly, he does not pity the well-known figure of the tragic mulatto who feels lost because he does not seem to fit into a white man's or a black man's world, but he features the woes of the "darker brother" who most of the African American community can connect with. This poem symbolizes the arduous upward climb that they face, because it successfully conveys the issue of remaining African American in America. Abarry reveals, echoing Hughes' poem, that "[i]n America, the African American was the 'dark' brother who ate in the kitchen but the future would see him welcomed to sit at the table when company comes" (392). This poem

demands that the reader see the African American in a different light: he is the new face in the brotherhood of Americans, and his beauty can finally shine through.

While it may seem at first read that "I, Too" is only the voice of a man complaining about not being allowed to eat in the kitchen, this poem also symbolizes the African American man's struggle to establish a strong role within his immediate family and ultimately in the greater context of America. His role as father, husband, and provider is constantly called into question because of slavery. The American stereotype of the kitchen dictates that it is the woman's domain. However, Robertson offers a different view to contrast the common stereotype:

Cookery was indeed a woman's pastime in the majority of households whether it was the housewife herself who was engaged in it or a female employed on her behalf...At the wealthier levels of society things were different. In the sixteenth and earlier seventeenth century, men acted as cooks, scullions and household servants in general...The cooks needed to be weightlifters, while the heat from the fire was so intense that those workers in the kitchens were only half dressed. (10-11)

For a slave or an African American man to have to work in the kitchen was demeaning, because, as the author notes, the work in the kitchen was typically a woman's job, except for those that were wealthy and needed help because of the volume of people they had to serve. The men were chosen to work in the kitchen not because of their capability to cook, or for another specific skill, but because of their brawn and ability to withstand harsh conditions. Consequently, usually the women had to take on the more masculine role, and the men took on what were considered as more feminine roles. African American men and women developed relationships with a completely different dynamic than was practiced by the culture in the rest of America. The

women assumed a haunting persona that still continues to plague the community: "In trying to avoid playing into the hands of those who would malign black women, African American writers moved toward safe images, safe patterns of representations. The most dominant pattern led to the creation of strong black female characters" (Harris 19). Because the black woman is constantly portrayed as strong, tough, and capable, the black man's place in the home has suffered: he is not able to fulfill his God-given role in the house, so he fades into the background. This poem conveys the struggle that the black man faces not only in the greater context of America but within his deserved role as the head of his household. It is clear that the man, when he conveys his desire to eat outside of the kitchen, also demands respect that is long overdue.

Hughes' poems prove that one of the most distinct elements of African American culture is the African American's disconnection from the land of his heritage, Africa. Hughes wrote the poem "Afro-American Fragment" to express the African American's lack of connection to and knowledge of the continent from which he came:

So long,

So far away

Is Africa.

Not even memories alive

Save those that history books create,

Save those that songs

Beat back into the blood—

Beat out of blood with words sad-sung

In strange un-Negro tongue—

So long,

So far away

Is Africa.

Subdued and time-lost

Are the drums—and yet

Through some vast mist of race

There comes this song

I do not understand,

This song of atavistic land,

Of bitter yearnings lost

Without a place—

So long,

So far away

Is Africa's

Dark face. (122)

The title of this poem suggests that the African American is a fragment of both African and American cultures. His heritage, ancestry, and some of his traditions are African; however, he lives, works, grows, and thus creates new traditions in America, but he still needs to know about the place from which he came to truly know his cultural story. Abarry reveals that this poem "...portrays[s] African Americans as aliens in America, permanently estranged and profoundly nostalgic about their sunny and beautiful African home. [In this poem], the superiority of African beauty and wisdom are highlighted together with the 'foolishness and the pale washed-out looks' of Euro-Americans" (395). The African American finds himself, for the most part, a foreigner in America. He remains disconnected from his continent of origin, and is therefore in

constant quest for his heritage. Therefore, one major cultural element of the African American thematized in the literature is the connection, and obvious disconnection, with Africa. Coombs adds that the best way for people to understand the culture of the slaves or for African Americans to understand their own heritage is to understand the culture of West Africa (23). However, the man in the poem finds nothing true or real about Africa from what he has read in history books, because he does not seem satisfied with the information the books provide—he longs to experience and live the culture of Africa.

Hughes describes in this poem how difficult it is for the African American to preserve his African heritage in America. He laments that his African heritage is in his blood, but it is released through bloodshed during the beatings he receives. Although the man in the poem is constantly being broken against his will, his mind still goes back to Africa. Hughes creates an unforgettable mental image (that is not easily dismissed) of slavery and the master's attempts to break the will of the slaves; he shows how slavery has affected the history and heritage of those in his generation and future generations. The personification at the end of the poem refers to Africa as having a "dark face" to match her inhabitants, thus portraying Africa as the black man's home.

Langston Hughes, who lived out the cultural story of an African American, conveys many elements of the culture. In his introduction to Hughes' works, Rampersad praises Hughes for representing the African American culture in his poetry, because he "...looked directly into the faces and hearts of black men and women and sought to assure them of the beauty of their bodies and their souls" (*The Collected Works* 7). It was important to Hughes as an African American writer to represent the culture of the African American, to make his people feel valuable, and to educate non-African Americans about African American culture. Hughes paved

the way for other African American writers to express the beauty of African American culture through poetry, thus revealing what is true and beautiful of the community.

## Chapter Three

## The Political Platform of African American Literature

Hughes' work especially portrays the political elements one finds in AA literature. because he ushered in the epic creative explosion of the African American community: the Harlem Renaissance. Editors such as Arnold Rampersad and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. consider authors of the Harlem Renaissance, including Langston Hughes, players in the modernist movement ("The New Modernists: African American Writers of the Harlem Renaissance" 27). Ironically, Hughes was one of the first authors to officially usher in the modernist movement in literature, but one of the last authors to be formally considered part of the movement; it was not until October 1999 that Hughes was officially classified a modernist author (27). The article goes on to explain the significance of the African American author's place in this literary movement: "Modernism, the early twentieth century arts movement, emerged in response to the fragmentation of society and culture just before, during, and after the horrors of World War I. In their writings modernists struggled to understand war, technology, urbanization, and their own personal disillusionment" (27). The modernist African American author conveys the expressive, cultural, and political elements of the literature to communicate truth and educate others about his community. Adu-Gyamfi points out that "[t]his integration is a focal point of similarity between works by Africans and those by writers of African descent, and it is in this sense of cultural and political commitment that these modern writers have begun to consider their art in sacerdotal terms, useful only when in the socio-political service of their race and culture" (8). Therefore, the political, cultural, and even the expressive elements cannot go unnoticed in African American literature as they all add to the modernist tradition the poetry was written in.

AA literature has become segregated from mainstream literature thus promoting a political agenda. The story of the African American—one marked with struggle, triumph, bondage, freedom, and survival—is best told through the pen of the African American himself, and this exclusivity is one of the reasons why the literature of the African American most always includes his political story. Hughes' poetry communicates the important political message evident in AA literature. "The New Modernists: African American Writers of the Harlem Renaissance" article indicates that "[t]he standard literary theory is that black writers of the Harlem Renaissance were able to assert their collective identity by means of unique language, expression, and energy" (27). Writers like Langston Hughes established a new identity in the African American community through their writing. Adu-Gyamfi agrees, noting that the Harlem Renaissance is the "[f]irst collective literary movement/expression of African Americans." It therefore created "...a new confidence and racial pride..." for the community ("Harlem" n.pag.). With this pride and recognition came political tension, because AA literature, especially during and after the Harlem Renaissance, created a place for the African American community not only in the academic sphere, but also within the greater context of America.

This exclusivity has caused both positive and negative repercussions for the African American community. This separation gives a platform for African American works which have in the past been denied the African American community, and many African American authors supported this separation. Larry Neal confirms that Du Bois, in the hope of creating a space within the greater context of America for the African American community, "advocate[s]...the development of the black community as a separate entity" (72). Du Bois believes that the African American must separate himself from mainstream works and create a space uniquely his in the study of literature to ensure that it will receive recognition and express African America.

This representation of African America comprises all of the elements of the literature, including "...cultural, social, political, sexual, aesthetic, and linguistic systems long muted by the history of colonialism..." and slavery (Adu-Gyamfi 7). While this exclusive position continually puts AA literature and the author at odds with mainstream literature, it is beneficial to the community. Moreover, separating African America from mainstream America is not entirely unnecessary. because the whites did not always allow blacks or their works into academia (Wright 45). In fact, White America refused to accept the African American "...oral tradition, especially denying its literary value, [so] the very act of presenting [AA literature] as something worthy, with [its] own artistic models, narrative structures, and intertextualities, becomes an act that decolonizes Black literatures, providing writers with both a distinct literary voice and a strategic position from which to speak" (Adu-Gyamfi 7). Tired of waiting for revolution, African Americans instead use AA literature to create a unique place separate from mainstream literature. Therefore, African American works carry an unavoidable political significance and message because the African American community refused to wait for the white community to accept and praise their literature; they instead removed it from the white community and made it a separate study.

One of the greatest political issues that Hughes confronts in his poetry is the African American's constant quest to attain the "American Dream," and throughout his poetry Hughes links attaining or losing this dream with the city of Harlem, the race capital of African America. Arthur P. Davis, author of, "The Harlem of Langston Hughes," notes that because of Hughes' immense love for the city of Harlem, examining this theme where it is used in his poems helps explain their purpose (276). Hughes shows that the eminent rise or fall of the African American

community is directly linked to Harlem. "Harlem Night Club" was written when Harlem was the picture of opportunity and excitement for the African American community:

Sleek black boys in a cabaret.

Jazz-band, jazz band,—

Play, plAY, PLAY!

Tomorrow.... who knows?

Dance today!

White girls' eyes

Call gay black boys.

Black boys' lips

Grin jungle joys.

Dark brown girls

In blond men's arms.

Jazz-band, jazz band,—

Sing Eve's charms!

White ones, brown ones,

What do you know

About tomorrow

Where all paths go?

Jazz-boys, jazz boys,—

Play, plAY, PLAY!

Tomorrow....is darkness.

Joy today! (28)

Hughes included this poem in a collection that he published in 1926 called *The Weary Blues*. Most of these poems in this collection depict the hope of the African American community in Harlem despite the political climate of America at the time. The Weary Blues Harlem is a picture of hope and encouragement to the African American community (Davis 280). Harlem symbolizes Black America as the place where African Americans can "play, plAY, PLAY." "Harlem Night Club" carries a political tone because it promotes Harlem as a place where African Americans go that separates them from the rest of America. Since the narrator's refuge is in Harlem, the city carries political significance. This Harlem is a nation within a nation where jazz flourishes, "all paths go," and people "Sing Eve's charms." It may be considered counterproductive in American society for the African American to escape to his own world apart from White America, because people fought for African American people to gain freedom and ultimately assimilate into America. However society did not truly desire to assimilate and extend equal treatment to African American people, so African Americans had no choice but to create a separate place apart from America. This is why the Harlem of Hughes' poetry carries such political significance.

After slavery was abolished, African Americans found themselves hoping to establish their own identity within America; "Harlem Night Club" captures this desire. Interestingly though, this poem depicts both blacks and whites celebrating together, thus depicting a reversal of race hierarchy. The African Americans in this poem celebrate with other African Americans as well as white people; however, while the city brought the races together, the black man still owned it. That is, Harlem is the place where blacks dominate and whites are the minority. The African American created his own world in Harlem where he set the standards for both the white and black community to respect. Not surprisingly, Harlem became the center for African

American culture, art, and politics—a hopeful place where the black community could flourish and find its identity. Johnson insists throughout his article, "Harlem: the Cultural Capital" that Harlem was a promising city in the early 1920s (301-11). It was in this city that African Americans were able to relax and party, despite how people may have viewed it. Coombs captures the attitude of the African American in Harlem, maintaining that [he] did not want to leave America, but "...still wanted to withdraw from white society into a world of [his] own choosing and making" (122). A part of this separation involved the black man's art. The African American community held that American society should not force them to discard all of the cultural elements that made their people unique, like their literature and music. They instead hoped to showcase the distinctness of their art thinking that it would be accepted, but not become lost among mainstream works and practices. This hope, however, did not materialize right away in the United States, so African Americans who wished to retain an element of their African identity flocked to Harlem en masse. Harlem "...had become the Mecca of all aspiring young Negro writers and artists. This so-called Renaissance not only encouraged and inspired the black creative artist, but it served also to focus as never before the attention of America upon the Negro artist and scholar" (Davis 276). Perhaps the most intriguing element of "Harlem Night Club" is the narrator's feelings of safety and the sense of identity he finds in Harlem that he does not find anywhere else—his place of solace lies in Harlem.

"Harlem," on the other hand, describes Harlem in a much different light. Hughes questions the struggle of the African American's inability to experience freedom and fulfill the "American Dream":

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?* (74)

The title of the poem is "Harlem," yet Harlem is not directly named in it at all; however, Harlem carries great political significance, because it represents the dreams, both filled and unfulfilled, of the black community. The poem expresses the true feelings of Hughes and the black community during this time period. Davis confirms that "One Way Ticket (1949) and Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951), especially the latter work, [where "Harlem" appears], bring to a full cycle the turning away from the Harlem of The Weary Blues" (280). The Harlem of The Weary Blues was one of hope, promise, and celebration, and Hughes' later collections reveal that while Harlem still holds opportunity, the black man must fight for it; he is no longer in a celebratory place, but he assumes his position in America as a fighter for his equality. Indeed, Hughes expresses the fading hope of the African Americans' dreams in "Harlem," but that does not mean that he believes that there is no hope for the African American people. Through the questions that he poses throughout the poem, he calls his people to take action. In the first line of the poem, Hughes asks his readers, "What happens to a dream deferred?" The question becomes a

rhetorical one as he continues to describe through simile the possible fate of his community's dreams. Essentially, he conveys to his people that their fate in America will either be "like a syrupy sweet" or "stink like rotten meat." He reminds his people that their destiny is in their own hands—they must claim it and fight for it. That is why his last line "Or does it explode?" reads as a call to action for his people. Hughes reveals in this poem that the life and dreams that he described as easily attainable in poems like "Harlem Night Club" have changed. But this change is not one that will hinder the community. This poem presents the seriousness of the African American plight, but it also carries a message of hope. Not everyone was receptive of this work, however.

Hughes wrote "Harlem" in the 1950s and published it in a collection entitled *A Montage of a Dream Deferred* (Rampersad *Collected* 6). All of the poems in this collection confront the issue similar to the one in "Harlem," (which is the problem of attaining the "American Dream," or any element of it) for members of the African American community. He paints the African Americans' dreams as unattainable, and it would seem that he appeals to his African American audience with this idea. Rampersad points outs that "[a]nother black reviewer reported only 'a mélange of self-pity, grief and defeatism" (*Collected* 6). And, Babette Deutsch, an esteemed writer, called the collection "...a facile sentimentality that stifles real feeling as with cheap scent" (23). It may seem odd that the African American community considered this poetry collection sad, but it is actually understandable why some may have felt this way. Hughes wrote this poem during a time when the country was confronting several political issues that the African American community was facing. In opposition to the 1896 ruling of "separate but equal" in the case of *Plessey v. Ferguson*, one of the most integral cases for the plight of the African American community was brought to trial; and in 1954 the case of *Brown v. Board of* 

Education deemed the "separate but equal" clause unconstitutional (Coombs 191). These cases were great victories for the African American community, and while they did not change the country overnight, most African Americans considered the 1950s a hopeful time, or at least the beginning of a long overdue revolution. Still, one can counter Hughes' critics, because "[a]lthough the Harlem of the 1949-51 period has far more opportunity than the 1926 Harlem ever dreamed of, it is still not free" (Davis 280). And ultimate freedom is what Hughes desires for his community.

Racism still continues to plague the African American community as one of the greater political issues. In "Dream Variations" through the use of purposeful vocabulary and realistic depictions of everyday life, Hughes uncovers the disease of racism:

To fling my arms wide

In some place of the sun,

To whirl and to dance

Till the white day is done.

Then rest at cool evening

Beneath a tall tree

While night comes on gently,

Dark like me—

That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide

In the face of the sun,

Dance! Whirl! Whirl!

Till the quick day is done.

Rest at pale evening . . .

A tall, slim tree . . .

Night coming tenderly

Black like me. (33)

This poem overtly deals with the issue of race. Rampersad highlights the importance of "Dream Variations" to Hughes' career and the African American community noting that "what made Hughes distinct was the highly original manner in which he internalized the Afro-American racial dilemma and expressed it" in this poem ("Origins" 62). Rampersad calls attention to this poem because Hughes highlights the paradoxical nature of race relations in America and the conflicting dreams that each race holds. The African American man's dream rests in tasting equality in the working world after slavery ended, and perhaps an element of the white man's dream is to continue to employ workers for less to continue to improve his financial situation. The man in the poem says, "That is my dream! /To fling my arms wide/In the face of the sun /Dance! Whirl! Whirl!/Till the quick day is done." The African American man desires to feel free during the day, not just the night when he escapes from work and white people. The poem conveys the difficulty that African Americans faced making peace or friends with white people when they had to continue to work for them. The poem shows that after slavery ended, relations between whites and blacks remained practically unchanged. African Americans felt free only when they separated from the white community.

Racism is a political issue that often finds its way into the writings of African Americans. It carries political significance, because it was socially acceptable in America. Words are used to promote racism against the African American community, so it is difficult, if not impossible, for an African American author's works not to embody politics. Interestingly, the African American

uses poetry, and inevitably words, to fight the injustices of racism. Throughout "Dream Variations," Hughes uses word play to describe racism, and he highlights inequality by creating a hard dichotomy in this poem between the white and black community. "Till the white day is done" is perhaps the most revealing line of this poem. This line tells a great deal about Hughes' purpose for this poem, because it reveals a stark and purposeful contrast between black and white, light and dark, and night and day. The connotation of these words carries the idea of success and failure, or good and bad. Hughes manipulates vocabulary to promote a political message concerning the African American people and their prosperity. Everything light in this poem symbolizes the white race, and conversely, everything black represents the African American community. In the same way Hughes uses the word "white" to describe the day, he also uses the word "dark" to describe the night. The African American in this poem views the day as the white man's, but this view is not positive. Only when the day is done can the black man celebrate, because the narrator of this poem knows that he has "...to wake up sometime and face the harsh reality of daylight and everyday living" (Davis 277). He is responsible for doing the white man's work, which only further advances the white community rather than his people. Conversely, in the place where Hughes and his people can celebrate, "[t]here is no daytime...no getting up and going to work," because the darkness is the black man's light of day (277). The night is depicted as gentle throughout this poem, which is not the common conception of night. In literature, especially the Bible, night and darkness usually symbolize death and fear, while day and light symbolize rebirth and hope: "...weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5). Hughes flips this popular symbolization and promotes the nighttime as good, and the African American's time.

Hughes writes on race, the black author, and the importance of the black community in his essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." Hughes boldly proclaims that "[m]ost of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know" (39). In the beginning of this essay Hughes expresses the grief he feels when he encounters an African American writer who wanted to write not like an African American, but as an American, or a white American. Hughes is upset by this young writer's admission, because he believes that the desire to write white and be white is one and the same (36). This is truly devastating, because the black author has something to add to the literary world that is unique and exciting. He mentions two gifts that the Negro writer can contribute to the study of literature in "To Negro Writers." an article he wrote in 1935:

We can reveal to the Negro masses, from which we come, our potential power to transform the now ugly face of the Southland into a region of peace and plenty. 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, and which are a part of the useful heritage that we place at the disposal of a future free America. (41)

Claiming the title of "African American Writer" serves as a benefit not only for the black community but for the white as well, because it breaks down stereotypes through awareness; people learn about other people through literature. Moreover, Hughes thinks that it is extremely important for African Americans to just be black poets, because "[t]hey furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they sill hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations" ("The Negro Artist" 37). It is this very separation, both intended and not, that makes African American literature distinct and also provides hope. The literature provides hope, because it gives the African American artist a place of honor and

American, and the politics behind attaining a palpable manifestation of that hope. That is why Hughes is "...ashamed...for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange unwhiteness of his own features. An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose" (40). Hughes must relay this message of injustice and hopelessness so that the community can receive hope and justice in return.

While the presence of African American Language indicates a work is African American, "Dream Boogie" shows how Hughes uses language as a political tool:

Good morning, daddy!

Ain't you heard

The boogie-woogie rumble

Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:

You'll hear their feet

Beating out and beating out a—

You think

It's a happy beat?

Listen to it closely:

Ain't you heard

something underneath

like a—

What did I say?

Sure,

I'm happy!

Take it away!

Hey, pop!

Re-bop!

Mop!

Y-e-a-h! (27)

This poem is one of six "boogie" poems that Hughes published in *Montage of a Dream* Deferred. According to Tracy, it is one of the six poems that share "...an intricate series of interwoven 'improvisations' over a set boogie-woogie rhythm, with Hughes modulating and modifying rhythm, words, imagery, moods, and themes, and constructing a complex interrelationship between music, the musical instrument, the performance, and a set of attitudes exemplified by them" ("Midnight" 65-6). Because all these poems share not only a serious message, but also an upbeat rhythm, Hughes links them together to forcefully convey a message concerning the inequality that the African American continually experiences as a citizen in America. Tracy also notes that "Dream Boogie' is a poem of beginnings: besides being the first poem of the sequence, it is the poem that greets at the beginning of the day and poses the nagging and disconcerting questions dealt with repeatedly in the other poems" ("Midnight" 71). The poem, like most in the *Montage* collection, probes the African American issue of a deferred dream. It is the mix of both questions and the assertion of facts which makes this poem both upbeat and serious simultaneously. This technique does not make Hughes seem threatening or condescending, but an everyman who not only writes to his community, but identifies with them also. While "Dream Boogie" questions America's treatment of the African American

community, Hughes encourages his people, in this poem, to approach white Americans without using violence. He does not advocate riots, but encourages activism through non-violent means such as poetry and music. He demonstrates the power that his poetry has in conveying the plight of inequality that plagues the black community.

"Dream Boogie" is one of the poems in which Hughes specifically speaks to the African American community. This is a jazz poem and Hughes employs the use of jazz rhythm, a unique element of African American expression. Hughes employs jazz rhythm in this poem by referring to a deferred dream as "The boogie-woogie rumble." Instead of the African American plight remaining on the page, Hughes turns it into a song or a beat. He makes a deferred dream musical by using varied stanzas, and commanding his readers to "listen closely." Tracy gives an extensive analysis of this poem. He mentions that Hughes also explicitly and purposely "...employ[s] "the black jive slang..." when he uses "Daddy! and 'Hey Pop! Re-bop! Mop! Ye-a-h!" The vocabulary and jazz rhythm "...[demonstrate] the influence of oral culture on Hughes' work, giving the distinctly black flavor to the poems necessary to suggest encoded messages appropriate to a segregated group of people." The type of dialect Hughes uses helps determine to whom he is speaking to and for what purpose. Since his vocabulary is "...readily identifiable with the black culture,...his message is directed at blacks..." For instance, Hughes' use of 'daddy' reveals that the narrator addresses her daddy, so the term becomes personal, familial, and racial. Tracy says that the use of the term 'daddy,' and not 'daddy-o,' indicates that the speaker is female, and a female speaker is common in Hughes' blues poems. Tracy goes on to explain the importance of a female speaker in Hughes' blues poems:

The suggestion is that the problems of blacks connected with deferred dreams is not simply an intricate artistic stance of the author, [or men], but the

representative stance of sensitive blacks, both male and female, who, especially in terms of the sexual theme of the [poem], will be creating future generations. ("Midnight" 70-1)

Through the use of a female voice, Hughes speaks and relates to the entire African American community. By reaching out to the community instead of just men through vocabulary, he makes his poetry appealing and useful.

As an African American, Hughes has responsibility to convey the truth, and one way he remains authentic throughout his writing is by using his dialect of AAL to convey his experience. However, just as using the language gives the literature cultural clout, the use of the AAL in the literature provides the language power: "[o]ne can therefore use dialect literature as a good indication that a certain form [of language] does occur, and that it has a social value great enough for it to be noticed by the author" (Labov 62). Therefore, the literature is not African American without the language, and similarly the language is not African American unless African Americans use it in their works. This is especially true of African American works, because African Americans utilize an oral-literary tradition, so the everyday spoken language is reflected in the literature more so than with most other cultures. Because users of AAL concern themselves with elements of style, there are elements of it that are extremely different from SE; thus, the use of the AAL initially creates and preserves a place for the African American in literary studies. Therefore, if one of the chief characteristics of AA literature is the use of dialect, then the African American author must use it without hesitation or fear of castigation.

Hughes is not the only credible African American author to write in AAL. Educated African American writers use AAL as a form of rebellion and, furthermore, those who are educated and do not use the language, or worse yet, critique it, reveal self-consciousness and

African American writers to receive recognition for his literature, "...though well-educated, he wrote many of his poems in plantation dialect—the early twentieth century literary version of the vernacular [AAL]..." (Morgan 326). It was considered unacceptable for Dunbar to show his knowledge of SE (the white man's language) in his writing because he was a black man; therefore, he had to write in the language used in the everyday speech of his people. What is interesting is that in Dunbar's time, the black man was discouraged from using SE to demonstrate his literary mastery of the language, but authors after Dunbar, such as Hughes, although educated in SE, prefer to write in AAL, because it preserves a vernacular tradition that helped create a space for AA literature centuries ago. However, just as Dunbar was forced to write in "plantation dialect" to appease his white audience and mask his knowledge of SE, Hughes writes in AAL not only to carry on a vernacular tradition, but also in opposition to the white and black audience and critics that demanded he write his works in the literary language of SE.

In many poems, Hughes uses religious symbols to challenge social injustice. "Christ In Alabama," as one can guess by the name, is one of Hughes' most controversial poems:

Christ is a nigger,

Beaten and black:

Oh, bare your back!

Mary is His mother:

Mammy of the South,

Silence your mouth.

God is His father:

White Master above

Grant Him your love.

Most holy bastard

Of the bleeding mouth,

Nigger Christ

On the cross

Of the South. (155)

When one first reads this poem, he can assume from the content that Hughes is blaspheming Christ and also the Christian religion. However, that assessment is incomplete, and quite frankly, wrong. While Hughes openly discusses his phony conversion experience at a young age in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, his aim for this poem is not to criticize the Christian religion; his aim is purely political, and he references Christ as an advocate for his people. Although Hughes wrote many religious poems, "[p]erhaps the most powerful of Hughes' poems with a religions reference, however, are those which use Christ as a central figure. In the poetry of Hughes, as well as other black poets, Christ is sometimes white, symbolizing the oppressors and acting as their accomplice; at other times he is black, the image and friend of the lynched Negro, and one who suffers with him" (Culp 242). In this poem, Hughes compares Christ to persecuted African American people to get society's attention. However, when Hughes first presented this poem publicly, he was persecuted, and denied a fraction of his pay, because people were outraged that he referred to Christ as a "nigger" ("My Adventures as a Social Poet" 208). He points out that the treatment extended to the black community by society fails to line up with the values of the Christian faith. While referring to Christ as a "nigger" or "bastard" is audacious, Hughes finds this reference fitting for the social situation that the African American was facing.

Hughes was witnessing many social crimes against the African American community that led him to write "Christ in Alabama," so he writes this poem fiercely hoping that people will read his poem, take notice, and take action. These injustices were putting the well-being of the African American community at risk. Culp lists the atrocities that were taking place at the time of publication of this poem:

...[A] recent graduate of Hampton Institute had been beaten to death by an Alabama mob for parking his car in a white parking lot. In the same week [Hughes] learned of the death of Juliette Derricote of Fisk University, who had been involved in an automobile accident in Georgia and had been refused treatment while in a white hospital. In addition, the Scottsboro case had affected Hughes deeply. Nine Negro youths were in Kilby prison in Alabama, accused of raping two white prostitutes in a coal car traveling through the state. (244)

These events are appalling, and it is hard to believe that U.S. citizens were treated this way just because of their skin color. Obviously, the African American community desperately needed a voice, and Hughes was one of those who served as a voice for the collective community. Hughes himself notes in response to this poem specifically that "[a]nything which makes people think of existing evil conditions is worthwhile. Sometimes in order to attract attention somebody must embody these ideas in sensational forms. I meant my poem to be a protest against the domination of all stronger peoples over weaker ones" (qtd. in Culp 244). The African American could not lobby to politicians, or law enforcement, so they wrote for the greater good of the community. Hughes responds to the horrors he is witnessing in the hopes that someone will hear the cries of his people and help them; he welcomes the opportunity to write controversial poems for the sake of the African American plight.

AA literature carries political significance, because it has remained separate from mainstream literature. Morsberger notes that "[f]or the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the poetry anthologies completely overlook the Harlem Renaissance, [in which Hughes was a major player], and more recent notable Negro poets," revealing in some cases, the African American was forced to separate his works from mainstream works in order to receive recognition he was obviously denied (5). Therefore, the African American created his own genre separate from the mainstream. Thus, to the African American author, especially Hughes, the political nature of works makes them literary. Parker enlightens people on Hughes' stance on the purpose of literature:

As a social poet, he insists that poetry fulfills its chief purpose when it serves as criticism of life. Hence, over the years he has been concerned not nearly so much with moonlight and roses, sweetness and light, as with problems that beset men here and now—share-croppers, the way of the ghetto, color-lines, dead-end streets, restrictive covenants, and the ultimate freedom of the human soul, race and previous condition notwithstanding. (197)

Hughes saw his duty as a poet to write politically. The very politics of African American works make them unique works of literature. Although the African American has been forced out of mainstream studies in the past, the literature now remains purposely separate from mainstream works because of the distinct expressive, cultural, and political elements.

Unfortunately, while the political nature of AA literature has afforded the community space, respect, and recognition, instead of encouraging political awareness, in some cases the politics of AA literature create and encourage an unhealthy exclusivity which has adversely affected the way some people view it. As a result, some do not approach the literature, or they

misjudge it, as with Hughes' "Christ In Alabama." It surely is not the intention of most African American authors that their works be enjoyed only by African Americans—after all, Hughes says that he writes to educate people about social injustice. Toni Morrison sheds some light on how one must approach all African American works in her article, "Rootedenss: The Ancestor As Foundation." Although she recognizes the importance and impossible avoidance of politics in AA literature, she also writes that one must not let the politics overtake the purpose of the literature (2290). She further notes that a work labeled as African American need not be written by or enjoyed by an African American, but must embody elements of form and content that are fundamentally considered African American. These elements include expressive literary techniques, the inclusion of the culture's history and ancestry, and, of course, the plight similar to that of the African American community as a whole. AA literature, although inevitably political, must be presented in such a way that it appeals to the mainstream audience without getting lost among other works.

AA literature inevitably bursts with political energy. It presents the struggle of the African American community, because this struggle is unavoidably political, encountering such issues as race, class, and economics. Baraka says that African American literature "...must be hot as fire and as relentless as history" (14). The literature must therefore not stop at mere aesthetic appeal, but it must serve a purpose by spreading awareness of the African American community, thus inevitably acting as a mode of decolonization elevating and separating African American works from the mainstream. Hughes and others then assume the responsibility of lobbying for the black community through literature. As Hughes notes in "My Adventures," he is a self-proclaimed political writer:

Poets who write mostly about love, roses, and moonlight, sunsets and snow, must

lead a very quiet life. Seldom, I imagine, does their poetry get them into difficulties...Unfortunately, having been born poor—and also colored—in Missouri, I was stuck in the mud from the beginning. Try as I might to float off in the clouds, poverty and Jim Crow would grab me by the heels, and right back on earth I would land...Some of my earliest poems were social poems in that they were about people's problems—whole groups of people's problems—rather than my own personal difficulties...And certainly, racially speaking, my own problems of adjustment to American life were the same as those of millions of other segregated Negros. The moon belongs to everybody, but not this American earth of ours. That is perhaps why poems about the moon perturb no one, but poems about color and poverty do perturb many citizens. Social forces pull backwards or forwards, right or left, and social poems get caught in the pulling and hauling. Sometimes the poet gets pulled and hauled... (205)

Hughes points out that he lacks the ability to write poetry that is flowers and moons, because that is not the life that he knows. As an African American writer, he is not only telling his story, but the story of so many others. His concerns for the greater good of his people are obvious through the content of his works, and he openly admits that his poetry is purposely political in part, because "[n]arrative...is the most powerful mode of persuasion" (Brockmeier and Harré 41). He chooses to express the political issues that plague the African American people through writing, because one of the main goals of the literature is to "...[plead] with white America for justice" (Wright 45). He presents politically charged poetry not in the hopes of being political necessarily, but out of duty to his community to convey the truth.

## Conclusion

AA literature portrays, in a realistic manner, the great despair that many African Americans experience throughout their lives, so the literature remains a topic of much discomfort; therefore, the content of the literature promotes an unavoidable platform of social politics. Consequently, misunderstanding the true meaning of AA literature, or failing to adopt a proper way to read the literature, continues to inhibit people from enjoying its richness and beauty. The academic community must adopt a new way of viewing this field of literature so that people may properly approach it. An effective way to approach the literature is to embrace not just its political, cultural, and expressive elements, but to embrace all three as integrated, all encompassing elements. Awareness and understanding of AA literature as a complex study of these elements—simultaneously—can finally lead people in understanding this literature. One can and should examine all of these elements concurrently, because they do work with one another. That is, the expressive, cultural, and political elements of the literature overlap. Through careful study of the elements concurrently, one can easily enter into the different levels of understanding that the literature requires. Although the content of AA literature is inevitably political because of the cultural struggles, one should perceive it as an excellent example of artistic expression adorned by distinct markers of the African American experience. Further, one should not view this artistic expression as uneducated, but as the distinct marker or discourse of a community.

There are several areas of study this inclusive approach to the AA literature can support. For instance, areas of future study could include those of African American female authors and their acceptance in the academic community in comparison with a male author, such as Langston Hughes. Of course there are several scholars that continually lobby for more inclusion of women

in serious academic study. Debra McDowell, for instance, lobbies for consideration of Phyllis Wheatley's narrative as the standard for the Slave Narrative genre over Fredrick Douglass's (36-58). Considering women is especially significant because of the different experiences they live. Reading a woman's writing under the same aesthetic, cultural, and political consideration gives readers knowledge about the entirely different lives of African American women. Also, considering the expressive, cultural, and political nature of AA literature might work well when applied to other ethnic works. Another area of study evolving from this thesis might be comparing AA literature with that of other minority groups in America. Using literature from a different ethnic group could link the similarities and differences in the cultural, political, and aesthetics between two different types of minority literature.

The work of this thesis shows the importance of the oral tradition in African American works, so it can help argue that one needs to read the literature out loud to capture a fuller understanding of the literature. The expressive chapter shows how African American writers dramatize different types of literary devices to encourage one to either read the literature out loud or perform it if possible. Throughout this thesis there are examples of Hughes' poems in which he shows the importance of the oral tradition. Most notably, there is a section in "The Weary Blues" in which Hughes puts the man's song in quotation marks signaling to the reader that he must sing that section of the poem out loud to achieve the dramatic element that Hughes purposely attaches to the poem. The oral tradition is a distinct part of AA literature that sets it apart from others, so showing its significance is imperative.

Developing the proper way to read AA literature educates people about the African American community, encourages diversity, and therefore unites communities. Scholars need to accept AA literature for its distinct qualities and separate place in the study of literature, while

accepting the fact that they themselves need to cross cultural lines and social boundaries in order to better understand it. When one understands the literature of a people group, one better understands that people group; therefore, an integrationalist approach to reading AA literature promotes unity among races thus encouraging unity in diversity. Eugenia Collier, a contributor in Gates', "The Black Person in Art," reveals the intended nature of literature when she states, "The only obligation [of the text] is [to convey] truth. An artist must tell the truth about the world as he/she sees it, must be absolutely and mercilessly truthful (and this is not easy, is often painful but purifying), must filter out wishful thinking, [and] personal conflicts that are unresolved, ego trips...The artist must never, never trade honest convictions for the popular or saleable" (Gates 318). What Collier states is so simple, yet to most it is complex: convey truth, the ugly and the disturbing if necessary, and the text will reach people in a positive way. She advocates realism in AA literature while maintaining, "An artist should not even think in terms of 'best' and 'worst' but in terms of truth," and this is because the truth is always appropriate, for all truth is God's truth (Gates 19). When one reads African American narratives, spirituals, and stories, the truth is exactly what the author tries to convey. David Krasner, who wrote an article about the struggle of blacks in aesthetics and art, uses the work of Aida Overton Walker, a black actress, to promote her thoughts about the purpose of black literature and artistic expression: "Walker wanted to capture the attention of the white audiences, but equally, if not more, she wanted to foster an awareness of the conditions which African American performers had to endure" (321). Walker's experience on stage is similar to the hardship endured by black writers. The purpose of African American art on some level is to raise awareness of the African American condition which inevitably emerges as not just social or political, but spiritual; furthermore, the spiritual condition plagues all of humanity, not just one particular ethnic group.

AA literature makes the world aware of the story of the African American community, a story of survival, unity, and celebration—if it is read properly. Only when people approach the literature the proper way can they begin to understand the beautiful differences that God created in all people.

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