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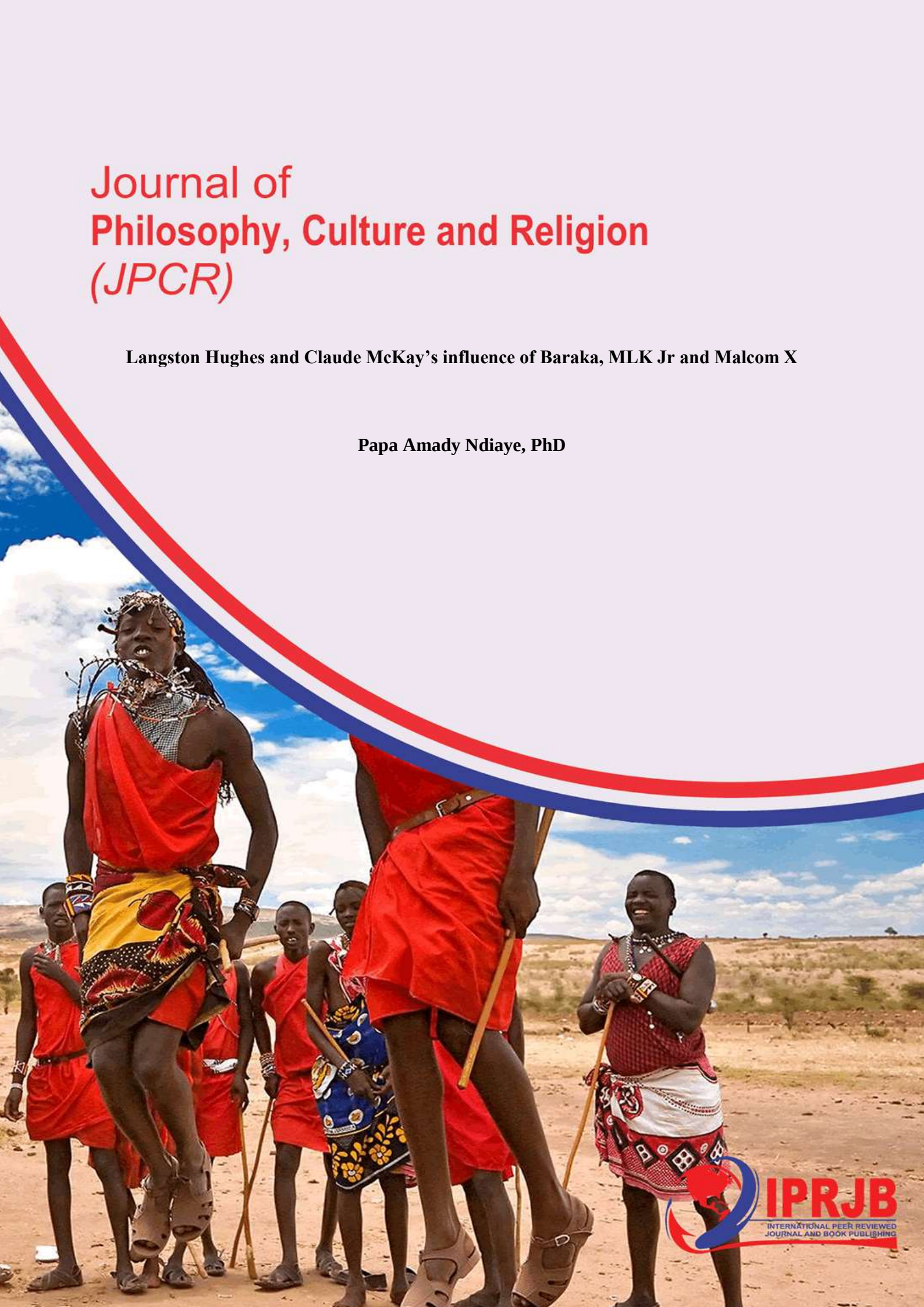

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Langston Hughes and Claude McKay's influence of Baraka, MLK Jr and Malcom X

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the article below is to show that their influence on future Black writers such as Leroy Jones (Amiri Baraka) and the Black Art Movement of the 1960s as well as the leaders of movements protesting Black oppression such as Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X is undeniable.

Methodology: This study adopted a combination of methods such as archival research, discourse analysis, poetry analysis and the review of biographies and literary critics. The study is a deepening of a section of our PhD dissertation entitled Black Nationalism in the Poetry of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, A Comparative Approach defended in 2015 at Dakar University.

Findings: The poems by Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, dealt successfully with the complexities of African American identity and the struggle to end systemic racism and segregation. These themes in fact continues to inspire contemporary African-Americans authors such as the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry winner in 2020 Jericho Brown whose collection entitled 'The Tradition,' addresses the issues of racial equality and social justice and violence in America. Brown asserts that he cannot imagine how he would have ever known to write his win poems had Claude McKay not written his. (Brown, 2022)

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The writings of Hughes and McKay decrying the violence and brutality on African-American resonate deeply with the themes of police brutality and abuses which Black Lives Matter movement has been so staunchly denouncing.

Keywords: *Harlem Renaissance, Hughes, McKay, Legacy, Baraka, MKL, Malcolm X*

INTRODUCTION

Their almost complete connection and confusion between their own personalities and the Black people both in the Americas and in Africa, the Motherland of all Blacks, made Langston Hughes and Claude McKay first and foremost, poets of the Black masses.

In many ways, this close relationship and confusion made two of them the most eloquent Black nationalists of their generation in the field of poetry writing. The various aspects of Black nationalist ideology are clearly expressed in almost all their poems. Rampersad asserts “To many readers of African descent he [Hughes] is their poet laureate, the beloved author of poems steeped in the richness of African American culture, poems that exude Hughes' affection for Black Americans...” (Hughes, 1994) He is also one of the most eloquent Black poets to have committed himself entirely to the ideals of social and political justice for his racial brothers, without ever missing an opportunity to use his verses to expose the wounds caused by racial injustice and oppression on their behalf.

While slavery and the ideology underpinning it, had succeeded in destroying the personality of the Black man, relegating him to the status of sub-human and casting him to the periphery of civilization and the history of mankind, Hughes and McKay were courageously and successfully engaged in the gigantic task of restoring the Black man and valorizing negro identity in America, as well as his African past, at the beginning of the 20th century. At a time when many Black poets, in the style of Countee Cullen, were expressing a deep sense of shame and racial pessimism in their work, the African-American poet and his Jamaican contemporary were proudly embracing their Blackness in their verses, making themselves two of the most skillful exponents of Negro identity through an incessant exaltation of both the physical and spiritual beauty specific to Black people.

And since a race's own past and civilization are a vital part of its identity, the two Black nationalist poets frequently indulge in the glorification of the African heritage of Blacks in America. For both Hughes and McKay, it corresponds to the idea of spiritual and cultural repatriation for Blacks in the New World, through poems on the theme of African atavism, in which the pre-colonial civilization of the mother country and its exotic landscape are often celebrated by the two authors enamored of the land of their ancestors.

Together with his legendary cult of Negritude and his profound Afrocentrism, Hughes' nationalism was also noticeable in his protest poetry, written largely towards the end of his career. Most often penned “under the pressure of events”, (Wagner, 1965), it was poetry that further demonstrated Hughes' Black militancy. For the African-American poet, it was a question not only of attacking and decrying Black racial prejudice in all its forms, from physical violence to economic and sexual exploitation, not to mention the racial discrimination perpetrated against African-Americans, but also of demanding for them the enjoyment of constitutional rights without delay, by seeking to reconcile America with its ideals of freedom and equality, as enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Federal Constitution, and to free them from political, economic and social oppression.

The Jamaican author was not to be outdone in this field. Although he was born and raised in Jamaica, an island under the yoke of White domination, it was in the United States, where he moved to pursue his vocational training, that McKay was truly exposed to racial hatred and violence in its worst forms. As a result, he became acutely aware of the plight of his racial brethren on US soil. That's why his poems, often called “American poems”, are so virulent in tone and hatred that they are unmatched by any other Black poet in the United States. Indeed, he was more poignant and virulent than his African-American contemporaries in their poetic

efforts to confront White violence, discrimination and insolence. For this, he inherited the nickname “the poet of hatred”. Wagner confirms this appellation, observing that “Among all Black poets, he [McKay] is par excellence the poet of hatred (...)”, hatred being from his point of view “a compensating factor that gives balance to his personality and enables him to adapt satisfactorily to the world in which he lives.” (Wagner, 1965)

HUGHES’ LEGACY ON AMIRI BARAKA

Hughes' poetry had a huge influence on the writing of a generation of Afro-American authors such as Amiri Baraka, Richard Wright, Hoyt Fuller, Ron Karenga and others, who in later years also raised the torch of Black nationalism in America, notably through the Black Arts Movement, of which Baraka was the most prominent figure. “Hughes prefigures the cultural nationalism of the writers of the 1960s and 70s” (Onwuchekwa, 1976). Despite the somewhat troubled relationship between Baraka and Hughes, with their divergent political views, the poet of the Harlem Renaissance exerted a strong influence on the poet of the Black Arts Movement, particularly in terms of poetry aesthetics. According to Sylvanise, it was Langston Hughes' influence and his nationalist conception of poetry that led Baraka to write only in free verse. (Sylvanise, 2009). Hughes' nationalist ideas in his 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, in which the Harlem Renaissance poet invites his fellow artists to draw literary material from the folk resources of the African-American community, have been the guiding principles throughout Baraka's poetic efforts.

What's more, Baraka's frequent use of Black vernacular in his poetry is no surprise given his reading of Hughes' dialect poems and his interpretation of his predecessor's Black nationalist philosophy, according to which Black dialect, i.e. Negro speech, is a form of self-assertion and expression of Black identity on U.S. soil.

Yan Han shares our point of view, stating unequivocally that “Baraka belongs to the young generation that Hughes had helped and encouraged, notably through the use of rhythms inspired by Black forms of musical expression, in particular jazz and blues” (Han, 2011)

Onwuchekwa (1976) explained the legacy that Baraka and the Black writers of his generation owe to Hughes as follows: “Baraka’s voice is duplicated and amplified by the youngest Black poets who came to maturity in his tight and potent shadow in the late 60s. These poets, are along with Baraka direct inheritors of Hughes’ legacy. They worked on the same principle Hughes did… Most of their work, too is racial in theme and treatment derived from the life [they] know. In their work, they too try to grasp and hold some of the meaning and rhythms of jazz as well as of rhythm and blues.

Amiri Baraka himself has on several occasions confessed his lifelong attraction to Hughes' poems, notably 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' and 'Dream Variation', two pieces that the figurehead of the Black Arts Movement considers to be the true masterpieces of the Harlem Renaissance poet.

However, it was in McKay that Baraka identified more as a poet concerned with the emancipation of his Black brothers from the yoke of the White oppressor. Indeed, the Jamaican island poet and the African-American nationalist poet of the 1960s shared a certain fierceness of tone and verbal “insolence” in their verse which Hughes was unprecedented in castigating the injustice of racial oppression. Kalamu Salaam points out that: “Amiri Baraka often uses references from Home to Harlem in order to portray the significance of many themes in his works. Claude McKay's works have an everlasting effect on contemporary writers similar to him [Baraka]” (Salaam, 2008) Baraka acknowledged that by imitating McKay's poetic form

early in his long career, he came to embrace the Jamaican author's nationalist views. McKay's poetry helped Baraka hone his claws against racism. « When Claude McKay focuses on certain forms that describe his philosophy those then become my philosophy. I began to see that being influenced by him allowed me to be inspired by his content » (Salaam, 2008).

THE IMPACT OF McKAY'S "FEROCITY" ON BARAKA AND MALCOLM X

Upon reading If We Must Die, it's no surprise to be won over by those who describe the Jamaican poet as "virulent" or "hate-filled", due to his radical tone and unequivocal call for the Talion Law. Filled with wrath at the injustice and violence targeting his racial brothers, he calls for tit-for-tat. He asserts:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs

Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,

While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,

Making their mock at our accursed lot.

If we must die, O let us nobly die,

So that our precious blood may not be shed

In vain; then even the monsters we defy

Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!

Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,

And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!

What though before us lies the open grave?

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (McKay, 2004)

This poem echoes many of the speeches by Black Nationalism leader Malcom X in which he urges a more aggressive stance from the racial brethren in the face of the racism. In his capacity as a spokesperson of the Nation of Islam, and then as an independent activist, Malcolm X exposed the reality of police violence and racial segregation. Unlike leaders as Martin Luther King Jr who rejected the tit-for-tat approach as a way to confront police violence, Malcom X asserted that African-Americans had the right and duty, to fend off unjustified attacks, including from the police. One of his most famous slogans, "By any means necessary", was a statement of his commitment to equality, even if it entailed meeting violence with violence to protect one's own self and others. In Malcolm X's view, non-violence in the face of this illegal crackdown was nothing short than a weakness, and he encouraged therefore a more aggressive stance. He outspokenly labelled the police as an instrument of White oppression, and harshly criticizes the justice system which he deemed overtly biased against Blacks.

In Enslaved, the poet's rage and hatred become more explicit as he confronts the oppression of his racial brothers by white society.

Oh when I think of my long-suffering race,

For weary centuries despised, oppressed,

Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place

In the great life line of the Christian West;

And in the Black Land disinherited,

Robbed in the ancient country of its birth,

My heart grows sick with (McKay, 2004)

Amiri Baraka seemed to be picking from where McKay left off. Born LeRoy Jones, Baraka was a poet, playwright and Black nationalist activist. His virulent writing often aroused strong emotions and reaction because of the radicalism of his tone. Even though Baraka's style evolved throughout his career, reflecting his changing ideologies, he consistently used his art to challenge systemic racism, social injustice and imperialism. His radicalism sometimes met with criticism for being extremist and divisive. But his inflammatory rhetoric was the outcome of his burning commitment to denouncing and dismantling oppression “We want poems that kill. / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot / Guns." (Baraka, 1979)

He once defined the African-American writer’s role as follows:

The Black Artist’s role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society, and of himself in that society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering and, if they are black men, grow strong… and if they are white men, tremble, curse, and go mad, because they will be drenched with the filth of their evil. (Onwuchekwa, 1976)

Baraka's writings frequently addressed police brutality, economic inequality and systemic racism, all themes that were addressed with eloquence and frequency in McKay's poetic work. Like his Jamaican predecessor, Baraka's tone often conveyed a sense of urgency and indignation, reflecting the harsh realities facing African-Americans. His 1967 poem “Black People” expressed the frustration and anger of a community fighting for survival. : « All the stores will open if you say the magic words. / The magic words are: Up against the wall motherf****r this is a stick up!” (Baraka, 1979)

It is however worth noting that, it's neither the White man nor America that McKay hates, but rather the evil that the White man inflicts on his racial brothers that arouses his wrath. Ultimately, it's the injustice suffered by his racial brethren at the time that he hates.

HUGHES AS A MORE “CONCILIATORY” POET

Langston Hughes is sometimes referred to as an “accommodating” poet. However, this depends on the context in which the term is used. Whilst Hughes never shied away from addressing racism, social injustice and the struggles of African-Americans, he often adopted a more conciliatory and optimistic tone than some of his contemporaries, such as Claude McKay or Amiri Baraka.

His aim was to reach a wider audience, including members of the mainstream society, so as to better to sensitize them to the unbearable situation of the Blacks in America. All the while, he has never ceased to advocate racial pride and social change.

Hughes' poems, such as “I, Too, Sing America”, “Let America Be America Again”, “The Dream Keeper” ' “Dreams” address issues of racism and inequality in a rather optimistic way, invoking the shared ideals of democracy, justice and freedom for all as expressed in the American Constitution. Hughes emphasized the possibility of an inclusive America, rather than focusing solely on strife and divisiveness. Among the poems that confirm the accommodating nature of the Hughes pieces, “I, Too, Sing America” is a case in point. In it Hughes calls on his white brothers to appreciate the beauty of the black brother who, despite his humiliations, looks forward to the day when he will cease to be a second-class citizen

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. (Hughes, 1994)

It’s especially because of his somewhat conciliatory approach in the face of the racial oppression that Hughes identifies more with Martin Luther King Jr who advocated non-violence and rejected the law of the Talionis to confront injustice.

HUGHES’ CONNECTION AND DISCONNECTION WITH MARTIN LUTHER KING

In his verses, the African-American nationalist poet frequently deplores the disintegration of the dream of social advancement for the Black minority in the United States, while urging his racial brothers not to give in to the temptation of surrender in their fight for a dignified place within the mainstream society. It is precisely in this respect that the African-American poet has taken on the mission of “The Dream Keeper” of the legitimate socio-political integration aspirations of the racial community to which he belongs.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that the leader of the Civil Rights Movement, the equivalent or one of the replicas of Black nationalism on American soil, drew inspiration from Hughes' poetry to give an idealistic perspective to his fight for justice for the Black community in the United States. It's no coincidence that Martin Luther King long emphasized the dream of the ideal of racial justice in his speeches. “Hughes clearly knows what would happen if a dream is

deferred. African American people's dream towards democracy and freedom should not be deferred like “a raisin in the sun,” or like “a heavy load.” Except believing in their dreams, African American people need, in a sense, to be encouraged by their dreams and work hard together to fulfill their dreams.” (Han, 2011) For this reason, both African-American leaders spared no efforts in their writings and speeches to exhort their racial brethren to cling to their ideals of justice and freedom, despite the barriers erected by a predominantly racist and discriminatory society.

The Civil Right Movement leader used the poems if Hughes as a source of inspiration and a shared form of language. The poet’s work addresses eloquently the issues of racial pride, social justice and equality, in a way that resonated deeply with Martin Luther King and others committed to the struggle against segregation and discrimination.

For Hughes, the celebration of African-American culture and heritage enhanced a sense of racial pride and identity. Early in his long poetic career, Hughes wrote “I am a Negro/Black as the night is Black/Black like the depth of my Africa” . This need for self-affirmation and a sense of racial pride was at the heart of the civil rights movement. In his What's Your Life Blueprint speech, delivered to an audience of young African-Americans, Martin Luther King insisted on the self-confidence of the Black man. He urges “I want to suggest some of the things that should begin your life's blueprint. Number one in your life's blueprint, should be a deep belief in your own dignity, your worth and your own somebodiness. Don't allow anybody to make you feel that you're nobody. Always feel that you count. Always feel that you have worth, and always feel that your life has ultimate significance.” (King, 2017)

Even though there was no record of face-to-face interaction or personal collaboration between the two leaders, their ideals and visions overlapped. Hughes was also a lifelong supporter of the Civil Rights Movement, and his works were appreciated and often quoted by Dr King.

The African-American author wrote several poems in tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. expressing his admiration for King's fight for equality and civil rights. These works reflect King's impact on American society and his central role in the struggle for social justice.

“Brotherly Love” was composed by Hughes in the context of the Montgomery bus boycott, and pays heartfelt tribute to Martin Luther King Jr.'s commitment to non-violent activism and brotherly love in the fight against racism and racial segregation. The poem highlights the challenges King faced, including resistance and hostility, while emphasizing the importance of love as a transformative force.

> "In line of what my folks
> Say in Montgomery,
> In line of what they're teaching about love
> When I reach out my hand,
> Will you take it
> Or cut it off?" (Hughes, 1994)

The African-American poet's “I Dream a World” was written before the era of the civil rights movement. Yet it reflects ideals similar to those King championed throughout his life. It expresses a dream of a world without hatred and oppression:

> "I dream a world where man
> No other man will scorn,
> Where love will bless the earth
> And peace its paths adorn." (Hughes, 1994)

These lines resonate with King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech when he states: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood" (King, 1963). This illustrates how both men shared a vision of a better future.

As early as 1956, King recited Hughes' "Mother to Son" from the pulpit to honor his wife Coretta, who was celebrating her first Mother's Day. That same year, Hughes wrote a poem about Dr. King and the bus boycott titled "Brotherly Love." At the time, Hughes was much more famous than King, who was honored to have become a subject for the poet. (Miller, 2018).

With a view to encouraging his young brothers and sisters never to surrender in their uphill battle to achieve racial justice and equality, Dr King ending his speech "What's Your Life Blueprint" quoting at length "Mother To Son" shows how deep the influence of Hughes on him was.

The Civil Right leader was nevertheless compelled to keep Hughes at bay in the public eye, as the African-American poet was branded by many as a Black communist, based on his adherence to the Communist ideals of ushering in a world without class without race-based exploitation. Hughes had been for a long time stigmatized in the mainstream press as a member of the Communist Party.

Miller (2018) asserts that during the most turbulent years of the civil rights movement, Dr. King never publicly uttered the poet's name. Nor did the reverend overtly invoke the poet's words. You would think that King would be eager to do so; Hughes was one of the Harlem Renaissance's leading poets, a master with words whose verses inspired millions of readers [including Dr King].

In his essay entitled "Martin Luther King, Jr. from a Humanist Perspective", Norm Allen highlights Hughes' pivotal role in the shaping of Dr. King's activism for the emancipation of the Black masses. « His [Hughes] poetry … influenced one of the most popular Black figures in America, Martin Luther King Jr. Although Hughes was non-religious and some of his poems were deemed blasphemy, his poem "I, Too", "Dream America", inspired King's "I Have a Dream" speech. (Allen, 2008)

HUGHES AND McKAY'S INFLUENCE ON THE BLACK ART MOVEMENT

In the New World, Black Nationalism reflects a profound sense of pride and assertiveness of Black identity among peoples of African descent. It is also an ideology that advocates the political, economic and social independence of blacks from predominantly white society.

In the USA, this movement reached its peak in the 1960s as a more radical extension of the famous Civil Rights Movement. Nonetheless, Black Nationalism on American soil dates back to the 1920s, with political leaders such as Henry McNeal Turner, Martin Delany, Paul Cuffe, Marcus Garvey and others. A black Jamaican and a leading figure in the struggle for the restoration of black dignity and emancipation, Garvey, through his UNIA "Universal Negro Improvement Association", has remained to this day one of the greatest Black Nationalists, with over eleven million members espousing his philosophy and joining his association.

In Hughes and McKay, Black Nationalism finds its most "perfect poetic expression" (Emanuel, 1970). The theme of Black Nationalism occupied an important place in their poetic works. The Black condition is central to their work, not only through racial pride and the reclamation of African heritage, but also through the exposure of and protest against racial prejudice, and the demand for the immediate implementation of civil and political rights for Black Americans.

An avid reader of the works of the Harlem Renaissance to which McKay and Hughes belonged and which could be considered the cultural and literary equivalent of Black Nationalism in the 1920s-1930s, the poet and playwright Imamu Amiri Baraka, born Leroy Jones, decided to found the Black Arts Movement in the wake of Malcolm X's assassination on February 21, 1965. Its aim was to create the conditions for the creation of poetry, novels, visual arts and theater that would better reflect pride in black history and culture. This new orientation was an affirmation of the autonomy of black artists to create Black art for Black people as a strategy for awakening Black consciousness to achieve liberation and social ascension. “One of the most radical and complete examples of self-acceptance is to be found among the writers of the writers and critics associated with the Black Consciousness Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. (Onwuchekwa, 1976)

The official creation of this movement, which has had a considerable impact on poetry and theater, dates back to 1965, when Baraka opened the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem. Although it began in the New York and Newark area, it rapidly made inroads in Chicago, Illinois, Detroit, Michigan and San Francisco, California. In Chicago, Hoyt Fuller and John Johnson edited and published Negro Digest (later Black World), which promoted the work of new black literary artists. In 1969, Robert Chrisman and Nathan Hare founded The Black Scholar, which was the first academic journal to promote black studies within the university community.

The movement didn't rest on its musical laurels either, particularly among jazz musicians such as John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Archie Shepp and others. Cultural nationalists regarded jazz as a typically black art form, more politically appealing than soul, gospel, rhythm and blues and other black music genres. Baraka himself has claimed to have been greatly inspired by the poetry of Langston Hughes in his poetic creation (Sylvanise, 2009).

However, the BAM could not really resist the winds of change brought about by Communism in the mid-1970s. Many black artists were attracted by Marxism's promises of justice and equality. Yet the Movement left behind many timeless and moving literary, poetic and theatrical works. In addition, the Black Arts Movement helped lay the foundations for modern spoken word and hip-hop.

CONCLUSION

Beyond the United States, the influence of the two Black nationalist poets was felt by the French-speaking Black poets at the origin of Negritude, the literary and cultural movement that emerged in France in the 1930s and whose main aim, just like Black nationalist ideology, was the glorification of Black people. Indeed, the familiarity of Aime Césaire and Leopold Sedar Senghor, two of the leading figures of Negritude, with the works of Harlem Renaissance writers, particularly McKay and Hughes, is no coincidence with the nationalist resonances of the Francophone literary movement. Louis Thomas Achille confirms this in the following terms: « For several centuries, the Black Man seemed to have been born only to work (as a Negro) and to work for others. Then came a period of about twenty years at the beginning of the twentieth century, when a new Black man found himself positioned on both sides of the Atlantic, but first and foremost in the United States. A New Negro who challenged the White world's traditional image of him. A man who suggested another, somewhat mysterious way of being a man. (Sylvanise, 2009)

However, beyond the issue of the liberation of Black Americans in the United States and the Black peoples of the Diaspora, justice and equality for all the peoples of the world, whatever their race or ethnicity, remained one of the African-American poet's major concerns. Indeed, Hughes dreamed of a world where love and brotherhood would prevail, a world where all races - Black, White and Red - would share in the bounties of the earth. The Black poet summed up his objective as follows « My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind » (Hughes, 1994) he says, summing up his goal in his poetic work.

McKay says no different when he expresses his confidence in the impending end of the injustice suffered by Black people, and hence the flourishing under the sun of all the races known to mankind in these terms: « I cry my woe to the whirling world, but not in despair. For I understand the forces that doom the race into which I was born to lifelong discrimination and servitude. And I know that these forces are not eternal, they can be destroyed and will be destroyed. They are marked for destruction. Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Carthage Arabia, Babylonia, Tyra, Persia, Rome, Germania. The whole pageant of the human race unfolds before me in high consolidation. (Cooper, 1996)

The poems by Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, dealt successfully with the complexities of African American identity and the struggle to end systemic racism and segregation. These themes in fact continues to inspire contemporary African-Americans authors such as the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry winner in 2020 Jericho Brown whose collection entitled 'The Tradition,' addresses the issues of racial equality and social justice and violence in America. Brown asserts that he cannot imagine how he would have ever known to write his win poems had Claude McKay not written his. (Brown, 2022)

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