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DEMOCRACY AND DIFFERENCE: THE US IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Filologici

SOMMARIO

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DEFERRING THE DREAM: LANGSTON HUGHES'S CRITIQUE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Throughout his career, Langston Hughes developed a consistent critique of the strategies used by dominant white culture in order to exclude African Americans (but also workers, women, and other ethnic "minorities") from enjoying the American Dream of Democracy for All. Among his best known protest poems are "Good Morning Revolution" and "Goodbye Christ" (1932), that led him to be denounced for anti-Americanism, and "Let America Be America Again" (1935)—in Arnold Rampersad's words, "some of the most radical poems ever published by an American, as well as some of the most poignant lamentations of the chasm that often exists between American social ideals and American social reality" (Rampersad, 1994: 4). Still in 1951, when his political positions were already much more moderate, in order to denounce the obstacles African Americans had to face when trying to actually realize the right to hope in a better future (the "pursuit of happiness") stated in the founding document of American democracy, the Declaration of Independence, Hughes created the fortunate figure of the "dream deferred."[1] Toward the end of his life, in December 1964, in the unpublished manuscript "Draft Ideas," he wrote: "Politics in any country of the world is dangerous. For the poet, politics in the world had better be disguised as poetry" (qtd. in Rampersad, 2002: 385). That politics was dangerous, Hughes was even too well personally aware: he had only to remember the occasions when he had been subjected to the investigations of the FBI and the McCarthy's subcommittee on subversive activities. Nonetheless, in this note he does not state that politics must be erased when writing poetry: he says quite the opposite, that the only way for the poet to deal with politics is precisely to *inscribe* it in his or her poetry, but in a *disguised* form. This strategy of *disguising* the poet has to make use of in order to say things that might be too dangerous if openly declared cannot but recall the rhetoric of *signifying* which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (see Gates 1988) identifies as an important modality of expression in African American literature. A variant of this strategy was used by the poet in 1953, during his interrogation by the Senate's Sub-Committee on Investigation, at the presence of Senator McCarthy himself. Hughes did not in any unequivocal way attack Communism, deftly "avoiding the leads of the questioners when they challenged his deeper sense of intellectual and ethical decorum"; during the interrogation his "dignity had been largely passive, perhaps supine," and his rhetorical triumph was somehow "at the expense of a victory of the spirit" (Rampersad, 2002: 219), but Hughes did not hesitate in reasserting "the right to oppose in speech or writing those who would make of democracy, or religion, a reactionary, evil, and harmful mask for anti-Negro,

[1] The reference is of course to the famous 1951 collection of poems, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

and anti-American activities" (qtd. in Rampersad, 2002: 215), thus equating anti-Americanism not with Communism but with racism.

The procedure of saying (or dodging to say) one thing while covertly implying another may be found operating also in Hughes's most overt endorsement of a radically revolutionary ideology, the reportages he sent from the USSR in 1932-33, while involved in the project of shooting a film about race relation in the USA that eventually never saw the light. In these writings, Hughes compares the social and cultural landscape of the Soviet Union, which he sees as a country spectacularly projected towards a utopian future of freedom and equality, to the harsh and depressing situation of his motherland after the 1929 Great Crisis. Here the real target of Hughes's writing is the deconstruction of the American ideology of inequality as inherently un-American, while paradoxically the progresses of the Soviet Union show how the "original" American Dream of Democracy may be actually realized. This also means that Hughes, far from being the radical Communist he pretended to be in those years, was rather a typical example of the dissenting artist whose final aim is not to dismantle the American Dream but to reinforce it by denouncing its present betrayal (a political and intellectual typology Sacvan Bercovitch sees at work, in American culture, since its Puritan origins). On the other hand, it is precisely by adopting the stance of so many representatives of white culture that this African American Jeremiah may also be able to turn the rhetoric of the Jeremiad upside down by way of the oblique strategies of Black "signifying"—by showing with his personal experience and example that accepting the values of the dominant ideology does not bring a final integration into the society and culture that ideology represents and defends, but a further exclusion, or at least a "deferring" of the entrance into the American Dream of Democracy.

In one of the (supposedly) clearest examples of Hughes's acceptance of the values of American democracy, the poem "America" (1925), the poetic self envisions a nation where both the "Little dark baby" (l. 1) and the "Little Jew Baby" (l. 2), may finally become "brothers" (l. 28), "one" (l. 29), "America" (l. 30). This dream of a future America where Blacks and Jews can look at the sky "Seeking the stars" (l. 20) is balanced by a retrospective glance to the past history of African Americans, in order to demonstrate how that dream is deeply rooted in the origins of American democracy. In ll. 35-37, the poetic self blends his identity with those of the most representative African American historical figures engaged in the fight for freedom: "I am Crispus Attucks at the Boston Tea Party; / Jimmy Jones in the ranks of the last black troops marching for democracy. / I am Sojourner Truth preaching and praying for the goodness of this wide, wide land." Attucks (who did not actually participate in the Boston Tea Party, because he was killed in the Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770) and the generically named Jimmy Jones, standing for all the Black soldiers who served on the European front during the First World War,[2] here are not battling for *their own* freedom but for that of the American colonies or of the Western democratic world, and even the famous

[2] As a matter of fact, African American "flocked into the American army during the war and served with enthusiasm and hope… This loyalty and hope was rewarded by a hardening of the lines of discrimination, by increased humiliation, and by the bloody Red Summer of 1919, which saw major race riots in city after city" (Levine, 1993: 91). Anyway, at the beginning of the Second World War, and when he had already given up his most radical position, Hughes saw no great differences, as he states in "Democracy, Negroes, and Writers" (1941), where he denounces "the trend toward suppression and censorship" of "Negro newspapers": "Negroes, like all other Americans, are being asked at the moment to prepare to defend democracy. But Negroes would very much like to have a little more democracy to defend" (Hughes, 2002: 211).

abolitionist Sojourner Truth is here portrayed as doing what she can for the welfare of the whole country, and not only of her community. In Hughes's mythologization of the history of the USA (and world) democracy, the African American is an active component *inside* the dream from the very beginning, and if the recognition of his or her presence has been so far deferred, the primary task of the Black poet is to make it visible once again. The spatial image of democracy Hughes builds is one of concentric spheres, where the sphere of the African-American movement for democracy (abolitionism) is at the centre of the sphere of American democracy, and American democracy is entrenched at the core of the sphere of (the fight in defense or diffusion of) world democracy; that is to say, the African American plight is the very heart (and test) not only of what the American Dream pretends to be, but of what Western civilization as a whole ought to be.

If the poems "Good Morning Revolution" and "Goodbye Christ," written during Hughes's stay in the USSR, manifestly display the intention to promote the Socialist cause, and in so doing tune down almost to silence the vindication of the rights of African Americans, the articles he wrote in the same period insistently stress how the Soviet Union managed to accomplish what in the USA could be only dreamed of—total equality of Blacks and Whites. We should of course exercise the utmost caution in interpreting what Hughes wrote about the USSR, but also consider that he never recanted his description of Russian life and customs[3]—as he instead did regarding his most blatantly iconoclastic poems. In the first of his reportages, "Moscow and Me" (published in 1933), Hughes lists the differences between the USSR and the USA, emphasizing how the most American of political credos, democracy, is much more widely spread in the Soviet Union than in the land of the free. The main difference between the two systems is that in Russia social differences seem to have been abolished—as regards not only class, religion, and gender, but above all race: one of the things that make "Moscow different from Chicago or Cleveland, or New York, is that in cities at home Negroes—like me—must stay away from a great many places—hotels, clubs, parks, theatres, factories, offices, and union halls—because they are not white. And in Moscow, all the doors are open to us just the same, of course, and I find myself forgetting that the Russians are white folks" (Hughes, 2002: 60). Even the representation of African American culture in literature fares much better in the USSR than in the USA:

> The big American bourgeois publications are very careful about what they publish by or about colored people… Our American publications shy away from the Negro problem and the work of Negro writers.
>
> In Moscow, on the other hand, the editors welcome frank stories of American Negro life… Large audiences come to hear colored writers lecture on their work, and dinners and testimonials are given in their honor. There is no segregated Harlem of literature in Moscow. (Hughes, 2002: 61)

Just a few years before, in the most famous of his essays, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), Hughes had deplored that not only "white editors," but also "the Nordicized Negro intelligentsia" did not favor at all "honest American Negro literature" (Hughes 2002, 34). In the USSR, instead, he could enjoy a "critical and financial success" that did not come "from godmotherly patronage but from radical work" (Rampersad 1986: 268). Also in the field of film production the relationships between blacks and whites in Russia was something that greatly marvelled Hughes. In

[3] Arnold Rampersad underlines Hughes's "unflagging love of the Soviet Union—whatever his opinion of its government as opposed to its people" (Rampersad, 2002: 95).

his second autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), he remembers his surprise when he saw that *white* teachers of the Turkmen film-workers' institute were instructing *black* people "about the making of films from the ground up—the building of sets, the preparation of scenarios, acting, camera work—and I could not help but think how impregnable Hollywood had been to Negroes"; when he told this to his colleague writer and Communist activist (soon to repudiate his leftist faith and to become a convinced reactionary) Arthur Koestler, the latter did not seem much impressed: "But I was trying to make him understand why I observed the changes in Soviet Asia with Negro eyes. To Koestler, Turkmenistan was simply a primitive land moving into twentieth-century civilization. To me it was a colored land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites" (Hughes, 2003: 135).

In another article published in 1933, "Negroes in Moscow: In a Land Where There Is No Jim Crow," Hughes emphasizes once again how race differences melt away in Russia, accomplishing what the myth of the America Melting Pot promised but did not make true:

> colored people mix so thoroughly in the life of the big capital that you cannot find them merely by seeking out their color. Like the Indians and the Uzbeks and Chinese, the Negro workers are so well absorbed by Soviet life that most of them seldom remember that they are Negroes in the old oppressive sense that black people are always forced to be conscious of in America or the British colonies. In Moscow there are no color bars. (Hughes, 2002: 67)

If the problem of the 20th century was the color line, according to what W.E.B. Dubois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), its absence in the USSR was for Hughes the evidence that the problem was not unsolvable, even in the USA.

The comparison between America and Russia becomes the organizing structural principle in the long essay "A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia," published in 1934. On the train that is leading him south towards Tashkent, he cannot but think that "in the thirty years of my life I had never gotten on a train without being conscious of my colour" (Hughes, 2002: 72), and talking with a man he meets who is "almost as brown as I am" he learns that

> there were many cities in Central Asia where dark men and women were in control of the government– many, many such cities. And I thought about Mississippi where more than half of the population is Negro, but one never hears of a Negro mayor, or any coloured person in the government. In fact, in that state Negroes cannot even vote. And you will never meet them riding in the sleeping car. (Hughes, 2002: 73)

Looking at the vast Turkmen cotton fields, he notes how vast is the "difference between Turkmenistan and Alabama," because there is "a world between" (Hughes, 2002: 76) the "share-crop system, this mass robbery of the Southern Negro workers in the American cotton fields" (Hughes, 2002: 77), and "the cotton lands of Soviet Central Asia," where "the landlords [are] done with forever" (Hughes, 2002: 78). In this as in all the other comparisons Hughes draws between the USA and the USSR, we see a configuration of opposing time-spaces which is built on the inversion of what we might call the time-values we usually attach to each space. The American space should be at the very head of human progress, the point of the arrow of time signalling to all other civilizations what direction to take: but what we read here is the indictment of an outrageously backwards America, whose social customs and economic institutions look as still rooted in the enclosed (secluded, segregated) time-space of the plantation

system, the most primitive form of primitive accumulation. What should be the most backwards of all time-spaces, the remotest regions of Central Asia, is instead presented as a vanguard that America (and especially African America) should imitate in order to reassert the impulse towards the future of its founding ideals. In an address to the first American Writers' Congress, in 1935, "To Negro Writers," Hughes rehearses those ideals, and their declination for the sake of the rights of African Americans, resorting to a typical rhetorical device, the list of absences in American cultural life, that writers such as Hector St. John de Crévecoeur, Nathaniel Hawthorne or Henry James already used in order to stress what (fortunately or unfortunately, but in the latter case there is often a strong ironical slant) America lacks: "We want a new and better America, where there won't be any poor, where there won't be any more Jim Crow, where there won't be any lynchings, where there won't be any munition makers, where we won't need philanthropy, nor charity, nor the New Deal, nor Home Relief" (Hughes, 2002: 133). Now, these are precisely the things he just witnessed as being absent in the Soviet Union: in 1941, when he was already trying to reconfigure his public persona as that "of the dedicated American citizen committed to the ideals of democracy" (De Sanctis, 2002: 14), in an article written in order to defend himself from the charge of anti-Americanism he comes to the point of stating that "Goodbye, Christ" does not "represent my personal viewpoint" (Hughes, 2002: 209), but first he takes care to justify himself by saying that at the time his polemical attitude was enflamed by the fact that he had had the opportunity to see a country where "white and black, Asiatic and Europeans, Jew and Gentile stood alike as citizens on an equal footing protected from racial inequalities by law. There were no pogroms, no lynchings, no Jim Crow cars as there had once been in Tzarist Asia, nor were the newspapers or movies permitted to ridicule or malign any people because of race" (Hughes, 2002: 208). In following a long and honored line of writers enumerating the absences of America, Hughes dislocates these absences elsewhere, in the USSR, and these "signify" a sort of redoubling absence, an absence of absences, because what should be absent in America is not absent at all—it is clear and present.

To imitate the USSR, then, was not to betray the American Dream, it had to be the attempt to make it finally true. In 1939, in the speech made at the Third American Writers' Congress, titled "Democracy and Me," he had concluded a similar list of what he did not want to see in America with the peremptory exclamation: "We want America to be really America for everybody. Let us make it so!" (Hughes, 2002: 206). The prophetic stance here and elsewhere Hughes takes, and the recurrent use of the trope of the Jeremiad in the comparisons between the USA and the USSR, might of course concur to identify him as one of the many dissenters contributing to the consensus, controlled and enclosed within the elastic walls of the American Dream of Democracy. But the systematic highlighting of the differences between what has been accomplished elsewhere (and this of course undermines the basic notion of dominant ideology, that of American exceptionalism) and the deferral of those goals at home might also recall to everyone that the American Dream, if deferred for too long, could finally dry up or even explode, once and for all.

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