"I, TOO, SING AMERICA": UNDERSTADING BLACKNESS AND IDENTITY IN LANGSTON HUGHES'S POETRY OF PRESENCE

"I, TOO, SINGAMERICA": COMPREEDENDO NEGRITUDE E IDENTIDADE NA POESIA DA PRESENÇA DE LANGSTON HUGHES

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Abstract: This work aims to analyze the American writer Langston Hughes's (1902-1967) poetic language, focusing on the theme of race and identity of African Americans. Associated with the Harlem Renaissance, an emancipation movement of Black Art produced in the 1920s and 1930s in New York, Hughes published poems, dramatic texts, short stories, and essays committed to the notion of enhancing Black identity. What we call poetry of presence is the author's poetic language that highlights the search for black awareness from the deconstruction of themes related to oppression, enslavement, and violence that stigmatized a person's identity. Poems such as "I, Too" and "The Black Speaks of Rivers" present the commitment of Black people to be recognized as part of the American landscape. In this sense, understanding Hall's (2011) concept of identity is primary for the analysis of Hughes's poems. In addition, we rely on the studies by Fanon (2008) and Mbembe (2017) to map the condition of afro-descendants, in Western History. In conclusion, we underline a self-emancipation of Blackness in Hughes's poetry which left a remarkable legacy of cultural and identity resistance.
Keywords: Identity; Blackness; Poetry; Langston Hughes.

Resumo: O presente trabalho tem como objetivo analisar a linguagem poética do escritor norte-americano Langston Hughes (1902-1967) com foco na temática da raça e da identidade do povo negro. Associado ao Harlem Renaissance, movimento de emancipação da arte produzida por negros nas décadas de 1920 e 1930 em Nova Iorque, Hughes publicou poemas, textos dramáticos, contos e ensaios comprometidos com a noção de realçar a identidade negra. O que definimos como poética da presença na obra do autor evidencia-se na poética da busca por uma consciência da negritude a partir da desconstrução de temáticas relacionadas à opressão, à escravização e à violência que estigmatizaram a identidade negra. Poemas como "I, Too" e "The Negro Speaksof Rivers" apresentam a relação de reconhecimento da raça negra como parte da paisagem americana. Nesse sentido, a compreensão do conceito de identidade de Hall (2011) é fundamental para a análise do tema na poética de Hughes. Além disso, contamos com os estudos de Fanon (2008) e Mbembe (2017) para situar a condição de afro-descendentes, posição sensível entre o movimento negro de Hughes e quando nos referimos ao contexto pós-colonial dos afro-americanos na História Ocidental. Por fim, destacamos uma auto-emancipação do negro na poesia de Hughes, deixando como herança uma marcante resistência cultural e de identidade.
Palavras-chave: Identidade; Negritude; Poesia; Langston Hughes.

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Introduction

The act of expressing a voice through poetic language represents the attempt to surpass time in which the poet composes a landscape of images. When an individual voice highlights the aspiration of a social group in the form of verse, poetry gains other means of comprehension, resembling a real presence. Langston Hughes (1902-1967), an African American poet, dramatist and novelist, is a figure who raised his poetic voice to express the identity of his people, Black men and Black women, from the United States. His iconic poem "I, too" is the song that severs a literary poetic tradition, showing the power of a Black American writer in a society of segregation and inscribing the Black self as a presence in culture and history.

In light of this context, the present paper aims to discuss Langston Hughes's poetic voice in relation to elements of race and identity. Author of drama and prose, Hughes also mastered the art of poetry in which the perception of race and identity can be understood as a kind of cartography of what African American writers had produced so far up to the first half of the twentieth century. For this purpose, we selected poems from different volumes published along his career to trace a remarkable shift in the depiction of race and identity in the United States history as Hughes questions, through poetry, the suppression of freedom imposed to Black people in American society. Hughes's poems give voice to those who were silenced historically, subverting the order of discourse and attaining to his poetic language a place where people of color can see themselves as strong and beautiful beings.

1. Understanding Blackness as identity

The poems "Afro-American Fragment", "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", "Negro", "American Heartbreak", "I, Too", and "Democracy", by Langston Hughes, are gathered for analysis in this paper because they portray the rise of a black voice against a context of oppression, social apartheid, and violence which were imposed to African American communities in the United States. Some of those social injustices were even legalized by Southern states by passing laws of segregation such as Jim Crow Laws.[2]

[2] Leslie V. Tischauser (2012, p. 1) explains that Jim Crow Laws refers to laws passed by Southern states from 1877 to 1965 legalizing the segregation of individuals based on race, gender, religion or class in the United States. In this way, Blacks were banned from social interaction with white people due to racial separation facing violence and lack of freedom. According to Tischauser (2012, p. 1), the origin of "the name Jim Crow came from a song and dance routine performed by an actor in one of the very popular minstrel shows touring the country from the 1820s to the 1870s." In one performance, the actor depicted a

The outbreak against such segregation program in the 20th century has much to do with the enactment of a new intellectual consciousness in art which served as basis for the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

As a matter of fact, the literature produced by African Americans in the 1920s brought social achievements and political shifts on the verge of a new generation that was being emancipated. The publication of the book *The New Negro* in 1925, which was conceived and edited by Alain Locke (1886-1954), became a turn point for Black artists and intellectuals. According to Richard Gray, "the term the New Negro […] had been in use since at least the late 1890s" but "[…] it was this book that gained it currency as the term of choice to describe a new sense or racial pride and personal and cultural selfhood" (GRAY, 2012, p. 476). The power of such a new consciousness brought by *The New Negro* stood as an opportunity for arising firmly multiple voices that revolutionized the way race was being portrayed before, thus, putting confidence and autonomy in the new discourses that inscribed Black identities as the central place of poetic and intellectual creation in 20th century.

In confluence with modernism, Langston Hughes experiments language using blank verse and the rhythm of blues and jazz as the heartbeat of Black people. Thus, he became an eminent poet in the time. Besides poetry, Hughes wrote novels (*Not Without Laughter*, 1930; *Tambourines to Glory* 1958), plays, short stories (*The Ways of White Folks*, 1934), and autobiographies (*The Big Sea*, 1940; *I Wonder as I Wander*, 1956). His most famous collections of poems are *The Weary Blues* (1926), *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), *Harlem* (1942), and *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) (GRAY, 2012). For the present paper, we shall discuss the aforementioned poems from the book *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1990), chosen by the author himself, and published by Vintage Classics.

First of all, to understand Hughes's poetry in terms of race (Blackness) and identity, it is required to point out the concepts which are attached to such aspects. Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall and Achille Mbembe are intellectuals who attained great effectiveness in interpreting racial events that are intertwined with identity and culture. Taking into account those issues, we shall look to Hughes's poems and understand how he bridges his poetic voice with the elements of race and identity as a conscientious

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black character named Jim Crow with "blackface"on stage. Such performance became very popular among whites and later was used to political and ideological purposes of racial segregation.

process to overcome Black people's condition, emphasizing African American traditions and experiences as a way to reconnect the ancient Africa to America. When Hughes traces back all the voices which were erased or forgotten, especially the poet's ancestors, he produces a collection of poetic images of Black souls by which we call poetry of presence, that is, the poetic-like form of black experiences sung throughout time.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon is concerned with the importance of language as "[…] it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other." (FANON, 2008, p. 8). In this sense, to speak is to become visible not only to your group but being a presence in a territory occupied by many "others". Fanon also points out that for the Black man, language has two dimensions: "one with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro." (FANON, 2008, p. 8). The author believes that this difference in behavior is the outcome of colonialism, which changed the way one interacts with the other. This is also a concern to Hughes when in 1926 he wrote the essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." The poet observed that many Black artists devoted their energy subconsciously to express themselves not as Blacks, but as a kind of American white standardization.

Considering Hughes's poems, we understand the different length his works have in order to manage the right communication with his fellow readers. One cannot leave behind the notion that "to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization." (FANON, 2008, p. 8). In this way, Hughes seems to map Africans' cultural traditions by recreating them using poetic language.

Another Hughes's concern is the intellectual's position in regard to representing his social group. Gayatri Spivak (1988) asserts in the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" the controversies of one who speaks for the other, mainly as a means of a white man's investigation on a[n] [female] individual who is silenced. Spivak defends that the intellectual's role is to hear what marginalized people have to say. It is necessary to listen to their voices and understand their conflicts. That is a political act. Hughes's intellectual and poetical position represents another version of history as he is concerned with the depiction of Blackness; thus, a Black writer represents a poetic spirit that

escapes from one's self to be part of forgotten voices of the past, those voices of oral traditions that called for freedom but were forced to be shut up. For this reason, Hughes criticized the American Negro, especially from middle-class, who moved toward whiteness, as Hughes puts it, "going outside his race".

Therefore, language can be used as a means to speak about how strong one's race is; and how race itself is close to one's identity. Fanon (2008, p. 9) continues: "a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power." The problem on display is that when being part of a colonization process, Black people were taken from their homeland – Africa – and sent to colonies overseas having their own cultural backgrounds torn apart; they also faced the language of the colonizer. They were forced to abide a new language and a new culture to which they should learn and follow. Thus, the former slaves had to forget their own languages and oral traditions in order to speak the white man's language.

Although "every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation […]" (FANON, 2008, p. 9), this new language – that represents a dislocation and a replacement – will also provide other tools to evoke the existence of a new direction, especially for future generations who learned European languages in post-colonial lands.

The process of assimilation inscribes the individuals – children of the survivors of slavery – with a call on their race, emphasizing that "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (FANON, 2008, p. 25), thus, addressing the dilemma of how to express oneself using the colonizer's language while, at the same time, keeping one's identity. If we consider language and culture as aspects of someone's identity, what we perceive from these conditions is that enslavement and the African diaspora may have contributed to the fragmentation of identity, operating conflicts in terms of the self and acceptance, as Black men and women had their cultural traditions and ancestor's languages replaced by different linguistic roots and cultural ties. But what kind of language does Hughes's poetry speak? Does it take on black culture with it? We shall come back to those questions later when analyzing Hughes's poems.

In “The Question of Cultural Identity”, published in 1992, Hall discusses the conceptions of identity in postmodernism and asserts that the modern individual is fragmented due to a series of cultural shifts which decentralized the individuals from fixed structures. Hall tries to understand the transformations that set fragmented identities considering three concepts of identities: Enlightenment subject; sociological subject and post-modern subject. Each concept reflects a different kind of existence. The first one was based on the idea of a unified individual; the second reflects the complex condition of the modern world; and the last concept, the post-modern individual, represents an unfixed identity, being fragmented and in a continuous transformation or in a crisis (HALL, 2011, p. 10-13). Other questions we come up with are: has slavery of Black people had impact on the process of fragmentation of human identities, especially in regard to Blackness? Has the process itself undermined race consciousness due to centuries of widespread exploitation?

Thus, the so-called “crisis of identity”, understood as a set of displacements and dislocation discussed by Hall (2011, p. 9), may have its roots, as we have asserted briefly above, during the colonization processes, when Black people were part of a mechanism of incredible displacement. This should not be taken as an idea which imposes that Black identities have been fixed sometime in the past; actually, they have always been open (MBEMBE, 2017, p. 6); however, the constitution of slavery put Black people in a constructed condition very much attached to an inferior and vulnerable identity and violent social inheritance. Considered and represented as an inferior race due to the color of the skin, with no intellect or soul, by the “official History”, Black folks were not only victims of physical violence, but also suffered a strong symbolic violence that stigmatized their existence.

The Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe reflects that, somehow, “the fundamental meanings of Blackness and race have always been existential” because “for ages, the term ‘Black’ in particular flowed with incredible energy, at times connoting inferior instincts and chaotic powers, at others serving as the luminous sign of the possibility that the world might be redeemed and transfigured.” (MBEMBE, 2017, p. 6). The depiction of Black race, then, is complex and must be studied according to such existential layers.

The history of Blackness is also related to the experiences Black people went through during centuries of racial domination. As Mbembe accounts,

> In addition to designating a heterogeneous, multiple, and fragmented world – ever new fragments of fragments – the term "Black" signaled a series of devastating historical experiences, the reality of a vacant life, the fear felt by the millions trapped in the ruts of racial domination, the anguish at seeing their bodies and minds controlled from the outside, at being transformed into spectators watching something that was, but also was not, their true existence. (MBEMBE, 2017, p. 6).

Thus, as we have begun discussing before, the combination of domination and displacement has produced physical violence and symbolic violent effects because Black individuals were part of a process of colonial exploration that erased oral-based languages, traditional cultures, and knowledge originated within African landscapes. All those elements were interpreted as "barbarous", not belonging to white "civilization", in order to deterritorialize Africans from their original cultures and places making it easy to deploy social, ideological and economical control. Given the background, Mbembe believes that racial domination was the beginning of modern capitalism, as it turned the Black body into a product that was sold worldwide. According to the author,

> The term "Black" was the product of a social and technological machine tightly linked to the emergence and globalization of capitalism. It was invented to signify exclusion, brutalization, and degradation, to point to a limit constantly conjured and abhorred. The Black Man, despised and profoundly dishonored, is the only human in the modern order whose skin has been transformed into the form and spirit of merchandise— the living crypt of capital. (MBEMBE, 2017, p. 6).

Therefore, Black identities should be understood within a historical process that took place in the European colonies. This circumstance also reaches unconscious levels of individual fragmentation and lack of belonging to a group or a place in face of all the events which occurred throughout the years of slavery. Hall's definition of identity, then, can work accurately with Blackness when he portrays that identity is also formed through unconscious processes over time and it will always remain incomplete (HALL, 2011, p. 38). Considering this racial perspective, African Americans inherited profoundly the effects of colonization as thousands of Black individuals were brought to America for about three centuries, and even after the end of slavery, left the former slaves' children living in segregation based on state laws. Consequently, the consequences of subconscious and spiritual desire to perceive whiteness as the main beauty standard have been perpetrated throughout time.

Based on the concepts discussed above, we shall interpret Hughes's poems and understand elements related to Blackness and identity, highlighting what ways both

aspects are interwoven in the author's poetic language. By considering such perspective, the vision of Hughes's poetry becomes a presence as it spreads throughout history and grows in songs, shaping the creation of African American perception for their own identity and self-emancipation.

2. Blackness and identity in Langston Hughes's poetry of presence

Langston Hughes was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. Then he moved to New York where developed his literary career and became part of an art movement known as the Harlem Renaissance in the early 20th century, a period in which Black culture was celebrated and integrated to different artistic views. Besides writing literature, Hughes was also an activist for the cause of African Americans, and late in life he took part in the civil rights movements. The writer died in 1967 in New York, leaving works in drama, prose and poetry.

Harold Bloom, in his introduction to *Langston Hughes* (Bloom's Modern Critical Views), asserts that "Hughes's profound, almost selfless love for his own people […] makes him an authentic and heroic exemplar for many subsequent Black American writers." (BLOOM, 2008, p.2). However, Bloom considers Hughes's achievements as a poet less powerful than his own life as a Black literary pioneer. Such an account results from a misreading of the author which usually separates his fiction writing from his own life experience. In a short poem as "Refugee in America", Hughes is able to depict the condition of an American Black man who is eager for freedom and liberty, experiences that are believed to be within American tradition since independency but were denied to African Americans. The words "Freedom" and "Liberty" reveal the poet's quest that also represents his people's dream:

> There are words like *Freedom*
> Sweet and wonderful to say.
> On my heart-strings freedom sings
> All day everyday.
>
> There are words like *Liberty*
> That almost make me cry.
> If you had known what I knew
> You would know why. (HUGHES, 1990, p. 290).

"Afro-American Fragment" is another poem that can be understood in light of the ideas of freedom and identity. The poem highlights the thin line of experience that links both continents, Africa and America, as it evidences the lack of memory

throughout history. “Afro-American Fragment” starts with verses which explore the very musical fabric of poetry:

> So long
> So far away
> Is Africa.
> Not even memories alive
> Save those that history books create,
> Save those 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. (HUGHES, 1990, p. 3).

The fragments of memory have been lost, subdued by identity displacement; however, there is lyric recollection in fiction books and in songs that like jazz beat still lives into the blood. If we admit memory and identity are inextricably linked, as Candau (2012) notes, the poem is embedded with vanishing memories that have impact on the formation of Black identity today. However, Hughes outlines the presence of a “strange un-Negro tongue” which seems to depict the soul’s movement back to Ancient Africa; on one level, this tongue works like a beat that is heard everywhere and can be felt through those whose blood is ancient enough to feel the presence of Africa. On another level, responding to the previous questions, it takes on original African cultures with it and vibrates them with musicality. The language of poetry speaks of presence; particularly, Hughes’s poetry speaks of presence. It understands and recognizes the language of the ancestors and their dark faces. The second part of the poem sums up the idea of a lost link from the past that has been reconciled through poetry: there is no place else where one might belong to save the inner songs felt by the soul:

> 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. (HUGHES, 1990, p. 3).

Again, Hughes's poetry pursuits the invisible song that lives up to finding the other part that has been forgotten and can only be felt through the strange language of poetry. To speak this feeling, therefore, is a way to fill the void. An important aspect in Hughes's poetry is that "his style often dramatizes how language shapes the poem's social perspectives." (PATTERSON, 2008, p. 138). In this way, the poem embraces a myriad of racial identities from modern-days African Americans to African ancestors.

Reading the poem "Negro" the crucial trajectory of resistance through the idea of Blackness emerges in the poet's identity acceptance that also alters the perception of remaining generations of Black people who had to keep fighting against racial domination. The identification of the word "Negro" with Black Africa points out to a condition determined by the color of the skin, endorsed by a brutal displacement caused over many years of slavery. When the lyric portrays the verses "I am a Negro", "I've been a slave", "I've been a worker", "I've been a singer", "I've been a victim", and "I am a negro" in the beginning of every stanza, it is understood that the only aspect that does not shift is being a Negro; all the other references are transitory because they are not inherent to Blackness, recalling Mbembe's term. Understood this way, Hughes's poetry cannot be taken as a poetic voice distant from his own experiences for being a man of color in the United States. Therefore, Hughes's poetic language works as presence because it celebrates life itself; it entitles African American culture and identity by representing experience from past to future. That said, one cannot view Hughes's poetry as a literary achievement separated from the poet's life. In addition, it is emphasized Black bodies and souls have experienced many social implications in different geographies simultaneously, putting in evidence the mobility these individuals went through caused mainly by enslavement during colonization; such condition resonates in the literary production.

Reintroducing Hughes's essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", to the discussion, it is dominant the author's identification with racial ideals. Hughes's makes clear that denying his own race is out of question; his own life experiences run through the lines of his poems, creating jazz music that enters into the Black literary tradition. Hughes writes in the 1926's essay, published in The Nation magazine:

> Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. I am as sincere as I know how to be in these poems and yet after every reading I answer questions like these from my own people: Do you think Negroes should

> always write about Negroes? I wish you wouldn't read some of your poems to white folks. How do you find anything interesting in a place like a cabaret? Why do you write about Black people? You aren't Black. What makes you do so many jazz poems? (HUGHES, 2002, p. 35).

As Gray (2012, p. 489) puts it, "Hughes made Black people his subject, especially 'low-down folks, the so called common element'." Besides, "his poetry shows him more interested in the ordinary men and women of the fields and streets, and in particular of Harlem, than in the black bourgeoisie […]" (2012, p. 489). Thus, Hughes shows his devotion towards Blackness represented by common folks by committing himself "[…] to the notion of a separate and distinctive Black identity, a sense of shared presence of African Americans" (GRAY, 2012, p. 488) in the United States history. The music of jazz in the author's poetic voice works as a symbol of reconnection between present and past or as he writes, it is "the eternal tom-tom[3] beating in the Negro soul – the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile." (HUGHES, 2002, p. 35).

Gray also reminds us that Hughes's identification and imaginative empathy with his people resembles the way Walt Whitman created his multiple voices using the philosophy of Transcendentalism. Gray argues that Hughes is "[…] a dramatic poet, speaking through a multiplicity of voices – a young schoolchild, perhaps, a smart and sassy older woman, or a dying man – so as to capture the multiple layers, the pace, drive and variety of black American life." (GRAY, 2012, p. 489). However, the connection between Hughes and Whitman is not reduced to such dramatization. Hughes learned from his fellow poet a certain feeling of self-emancipation and self-discovery (GRAY, 2012) that arose from Whitman's "Song of Myself". The Harlem poet rewrites "Song of Myself" and presents the poem "I, Too", inscribing the black perspective that is not present in Whitman's dramatic poem. Hughes's poem is no doubt a shift of perspective in which a Black self also sings America proudly:

> I, too, sing America.

[3] Patrick Bernard (2002, p. 35) defines the tom-tom as "a mnemonic device to inquire into the complex nature and scope of memory as a psychological and cultural construct." This implies that Hughes uses such verbal modernist rhythm in order to recreate the social memory of African traditions, besides engaging it as "[…] the discursive possibilities of memory and connections it establishes among ideas, experiences, images, and symbols that eventually coalesce into the memorials individuals and communities create to remember and represent their past." (BERNARD, 2002, p. 35).

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, sing America. (HUGHES, 1990, p. 275).

"I, Too" is the manifestation of a growing consciousness committed to becoming part of a world that belongs to African Americans as well. It is endowed with force and energy revealing the beauty of Black identity: "They'll see how beautiful I am". The "darker brother" who had suffered all sorts of violence and humiliation back then has regained his strength now, being ready to conceive his own place and utter his voice. The freedom "I, Too" evokes also finds echo in the poem "American Heartbreak": "I am the American heartbreak – / Rock on which Freedom / Stumps its toe – / The great mistake / That Jamestown / Made long ago." (HUGHES, 1990, p. 9). The verses reveal the fierce history America has had with Black culture since Jamestown, the first British settlement in the colony, where the first mistake was made and generated the suppression of freedom. For Hughes, that history cannot be put aside by the Black artist. Again, in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", the poet writes: "An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he must choose." (HUGHES, 2002, p. 35). This sense of responsibility Hughes assumes prepares him to climb the "Racial Mountain" so he will be able to be seen and be heard by his own people. He represents an influential voice and image essential to Black Art as a way to lift all those fellow companions who were subjugated and were ashamed to recognize themselves as Blacks. Hughes claims in his essay:

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

> not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (HUGHES, 2002, p. 36).

Hughes expresses his conscientious poetic writing as a movement that conflates the perception of memory and identity into one discourse (BERNARD, 2002). Such comprehension can be addressed to what Candau (2012, p. 15) writes in regard to the illusion of memory: not all past events are gone definitely because they can be accessed through remembrance. Candau suggests that an individual can gather the pieces of what once was in a new image that might help him to face present life. Hughes is aware of that, and if Black artists, willing to follow white standards, deny their own past history and memories, Black identity will be no longer recollected. Thus, it is vital to acknowledge Black race as the excitement of life, of resistance, and of rebellion against all kinds of instituted and intricate structures of oppression. The capacity of poetry to produce a certain sense of pride and energy, culture and tradition, linguistic emancipation and existence is endowed by the idea of an eternal rhythm of Black life. Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" marks such literary arrangement when the author writes "My soul has grown deep like the rivers", revealing the profound existential waters Black people have been swimming since creation of man. In a few verses the poem tells a short version of history that Blacks have been facing:

> I've known rivers:
> I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
> flow of human blood in human veins.
>
> My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
>
> I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
> I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
> I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
> I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
> went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
> bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
>
> I've known rivers:
> Ancient, dusky rivers.
>
> My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (HUGHES, 1990, p. 4).

The poem casts light on the pass of civilization and all the places where Black humans have been constructing their memory, from ancient Egypt to Mississippi, in the New World. Hughes marks the presence of those human beings as part of the world

landscape. The poet's engagement with cultural identities shaped imaginatively in the poems help to redefine history, drawing ever-lasting experiences in poetic form. According to Gray, with the use of a narrator that provides repetition ("I've known rivers, I bathed, I built, I looked, I heard"), Hughes creates "a sense of meditation" in which

> The vision unfolded is at once accurately historical and elemental, mythical, since the rivers, as they are named in order, recall some of the civilizations the black race has helped build, while rehearsing the ancient idea that the same deep forces run through the body of the earth and the bodies of men and women. Knowing the rise and fall of cultures, Black people have known the tale of time. (GRAY, 2012, p. 491).

From this angle, Hughes's poetic language highlights the presence of black traits that work as a mosaic of fragmented memory. What the poet tries to do is to put the pictures back together and reveal the whole cultural image of Blackness in history from an open perspective. When the poem portrays Mississippi and New Orleans as American places where African Americans have been dislocated to, it engraves the view that those folks have stood on the ground. Recording Fanon's words, they have assumed a culture in American landscape, the so-called land of democracy where freedom is portrayed as an individual right.

At this point we shall evoke Hughes's final poem "Democracy", where he writes: "Democracy will not come / Today, this year / Nor ever / Through compromise and fear / I have as much right / As the other fellow has / To stand / On my two feet / And own the land." (HUGHES, 1990, p. 285). This perception of the Black self belonging to American land depicted in Hughes's poetry flows toward the idea of poetry as presence. In other words, the author's poetic language connects Blackness identity to where it exists then and now. In face of the confines of oppression, Hughes sings the presence of Black lives in American soil where they are empowered by language, as the final verses of "Democracy" summons, being able to say "Freedom / Is a strong seed / Planted / In a great need. / I live here, too. / I want freedom / Just as you." (HUGHES, 1990, p. 285).

Conclusion

Hughes awakens the Black community in the United States to value their own identities and grasp the memory of those folks from the past who were forced to cross the Atlantic – a journey which many perished on the way. Their voices should not be

forgotten but reimagined as presence through poetry. In addressing Fanon's, Hall's and Mbembe's point of views concerning language and the concept of identity intertwined with Black race, we were able to picture a brief context of Blackness throughout history and place Langston Hughes's poetry as part of it in the 20th century.

In conclusion, Hughes senses he is himself responsible to trace the original voices of Africa in order to reconstruct their social memory in American literary landscape. Besides, writing the presence of Blackness in poems such as "Afro-American Fragment", "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", "I, Too" and "Democracy", Hughes confronts oppression and claims a cultural territory of identity where Black people can speak freely by experiencing and representing themselves under the realm of poetic language, where their beauty can be seen as if it were shining up on top of a mountain.

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