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Hughes, Firefly, and Jackson: A Dedication to Heritage

Pamela Drexler

Respecting one's heritage is a concept characteristic of any people. Thus African-Americans adhere to this principle as something central to their existence. Although the black experience is different from the experience of the majority of Americans, it is well represented in American poetry. Langston Hughes, John Firefly, and Angela Jackson, although not contemporaries, all wrote poetry is the importance of continuance and passing on to generations a sense of pride in being African-American. While conveying similar messages, these poets do so in different ways. But all show a respect for their African origins. While each poem written by Hughes, Firefly, and Jackson is central to the poet's work in some way, it is also important to American poetry and to the American experience in general in that it gives the reader insight into the African-American experience through the eyes of the only individuals capable of relating it accurately: African-Americans.

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is a poem illustrative of this concept. In this poem, Hughes does not speak as poet to audience but as all people of African origin. The voice he uses is one of quiet dignity and wisdom. Although a brief poem, it encompasses the entire history of the African people, including their experience in the United States. The main idea transmitted in this poem is that the African-American has a strong heritage. When the speaker says, "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human/blood in human veins" (2-3), he refers to this strong cultural background. When Hughes says he has known rivers that are as old as the world, he seems to imply that he is one with all of the African people extending back to the beginning of time. he also says the people of his race are survivors. They "bathed in the Euphrates," built huts near the Congo, and constructed pyramids near the Nile. Just as significant as the recollection of these rivers, is that he "heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln when Abe Lincoln went down to / New Orleans" (8-9). Survival is once again implied because his ancestors survived the journey from Africa to slavery in the new world. Hughes does not just mention randomly selected rivers, but the most important rivers. Not only is his choice of rivers significant, but also the fact that he continuously uses the river as an image throughout the poem. First of all, rivers are natural phenomena that have existed from the beginning of life. Secondly, a river can be seen as an image of fertility; it fosters life. Thirdly, a river is a long and winding body and continues to flow, just as the African people survive. A river can also transport things, in this case, the

African traditions. So, although the speaker of the poem has known many different rivers along the way, his race is still united as a people with a strong background. When the speaker says, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (4), he means that he is a part of his African roots and that these run deep in his soul as a river runs deep in the land. It is perhaps significant that in the opening and closing lines of the poem he uses the rhyming words "known" and "grown," which suggest an accumulation of experience and a resulting richness of his heritage.

The tone of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is peaceful. The poet focuses on such elemental things as bathing, building, sleeping, working, listening to singing, and seeing beauty at sunset. A broad audience could relate to these common images. Also contributing to the poem's sense of peace and simplicity is that the speaker does not mention any of the problems or injustices that his race has encountered. Nor does he express the need for others to share his pride and recognize the richness of the heritage. The tone is not urgent or persuasive. The poem is simply a recognition and appreciation of the heritage.

This poem is significant in the contexts of both Hughes' poetry and American poetry in general. It is significant for Hughes because in this poem he finds a poetic voice. He seems to become a proponent of the "black is beautiful" idea. He is telling everyone who reads his poetry that his race is of great worth and has a strong heritage and that he is proud that his soul is rooted in this African heritage. In the large scope of American poetry, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" demonstrates the attitudes of many black Americans during the Harlem Renaissance that they should be proud to be black. With the many disadvantages that had faced African-Americans in America during that time, a poem advocating an appreciation of the African heritage instead of a desire to assimilate in society through attempts at being white would be very important in contributing to the identity of African-Americans.

One poet who embodies many of Hughes' ideals is John Firefly. His poem "Fried Okra," although written much later than Hughes' work, expresses similar sentiments. In this poem, the speaker is not a generalized African-American, but a reader is informed that fried okra is a dish which Firefly's mother learned to prepare when she picked cotton in the south. Firefly's mother learned to prepare her she might not walk again, but that she did, and she had children and made them fried okra. This overcoming of her physical disability illustrates the strength of the African-American race. The fried okra serves the same function as the river in Hughes' poem; it sustains life and allows for the continuance of traditions to generations. This poem is important to Firefly because it shows how the fried okra his mother made put him in touch with his ancestry. He says, "...if a poem could reach past the grave,/mama, that fried okra/you made with your/black fingers, while/telling me about

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some/great-grandfather Choctaw Indian, / was a wonder full thing”(16-23). So, a two words “wonder” and “full” instead of “wonderful” to describe the fried okra, which show that he is in awe of it and that it is rich, full of significance. Firefly is appreciative of the mother for providing this heritage. And a realization of his background “did / impress upon [him] like / the hands of an / experienced artist”(69-72). The mother has the skill to create a work, her son, who will continue the traditions. The reader of this poem is encouraged to try fried okra, but asked to “eat it with your / black mother tender fingers, / those cosmic fingers that / always beckon / beyond the grave...”(60-64). In other words, one should eat with the intention of appreciating the African heritage. After one has finished eating, one should “kiss those / fingers an lick those / fingers an suck those / fingers, those black mother / tender fingers”(65-69). The words savor the African heritage, to appreciate it with enthusiasm. By the end of the poem, the okra has become a symbol of the African heritage. This gives John Firefly strength so he can say proudly “I’m a Firefly, ” a declaration made frequently in his poetry. While Hughes expresses reverence for the African heritage, Firefly in addition appeals to the reader to share this appreciation.

The tone of “Fried Okra” is colloquial, unlike the elevated language of Hughes. But the fact that it is different shows that there is still a need of Firefly to find his own voice as a poet. This poem shows that there is still a need for black poets to find an identity and a voice that is representative of their experience as blacks. Using his heritage as a foundation for a black identity, John Firefly goes on a mission into the night with a “black pen,” with which he will be able to interpret life from the black experience.

The title of Angela Jackson’s poem “To The Generations” suggests a similar focus on the African-American heritage and a plea to respect that heritage. But in this poem, Jackson is speaking to the future generations, not of her whole race, but of the poets of her race. Unlike Hughes and Firefly, she does not express and appreciation of poets of her race. Unlike Firefly, she does not appeal to the reader to have an enthusiasm for the heritage. But she does ask the new poets to carry on the mission in their own unique way. The speaker requests the new generation to reject her poetic voice: “Dig up my ashes then. / Renounce my root” (1-3). She does not want them to echo her voice: “Throw down my spectral wailing, / laugh at my hauntings / if I burden your reach / with cowardice / coveting the bravery / in your young branches”(6-11). She also says to tell the sun, which helps make things grow, to forget her. She instructs the generations to “Disregard the shape of [her] last leaves. Find your own”(15-16). She does not want them to be held back by her poetic style, but try something new and

different. And even though Jackson and later poets her descendants, will not be the same, as no generations are, she does not plead with them to honor their poetic heritage: "Take Courage. You are not my kind. You are some new tree"(19-22). It is significant that Jackson uses a tree in her poem, just as it is significant that Hughes uses nature imagery. A tree is something universal that all people can relate to, something that has been around for a long time, something that stands up straight and proud, and something that continually gives lift to new leaves. Jackson's poem has a colloquial tone as "Fried Okra" does, but this poem is more of a call to action. She does not tell the generations to abandon their African heritage, only to be expressive of it in a new way.

Although each of these poems is different, the effect of each is that the reader has a greater appreciation of the African heritage and a somewhat greater understanding of the African-American experience. All of these poems are significant in their own right as poems, but also significant for the African-American people. Every race must have strength to survive and these poems have strength to inspire. They can unite a race as a people and promote understanding between races. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Fried Okra," and "To The Generations" represent something very central not only to the black experience, but to the American experience.