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“Words on Fire:” Langston Hughes and the Black Hegelian Poetic in *The Panther and the Lash*

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Abstract

Langston Hughes (1901-1967), the American poet, novelist, playwright, and social activist, is not only a central figure in American literature but also considered one of the pioneers of a distinct African American literary voice. From his integral part of the literary and intellectual scene of the Harlem Renaissance to the American Civil Rights era, Hughes’ powerful and innovative work captured the struggles, joys, and complexities of Black life. While Hughes’ catalog is exhaustive, this study focuses on his final collection, *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), which offers an exemplary depiction of Hughes’ evolving philosophical thought.

His formulation of major racial, social, and political themes and subjects in the collection reveals the profound impact of Hughes’ intellectual mentor, W. E. B. Du Bois, and his study of Hegelian dialectical philosophy. What emerges, I argue, a Black Hegelian poetic—the conceptualization of Hegelian philosophical principles to explore and articulate the complexities of Black experiences and identity, signifying a synthesis of philosophical thought, cultural consciousness, and poetic expression. The analysis of *The Panther and the Lash* showcases Hughes’ ability to intensify differences, negate contraries, and engage in a continual process of formation and re-

formation. Thus, readers can interrogate his Black responses to the historical, socio-political movements and events that have taken place towards the end of his life.

Keywords: Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, Hegel, dialectical philosophy, African American aesthetics, poetry

"Words on Fire:" Langston Hughes ve *The Panther and the Lash'*de Siyah Hegelci Şiir

Öz

Amerikalı şair, romancı, oyun yazarı ve aktivist Langston Hughes (1901-1967), Amerikan edebiyatının önemli isimleri arasında yer almasının yanı sıra, kendine özgü bir Afrikalı Amerikalı edebi sesinin yaratılmasının öncülerinden biri olarak da kabul edilir. Harlem Rönesansı'nın edebi ve entelektüel ortamının ayrılmaz bir parçası olmasından Amerikan Sivil Haklar dönemindeki etkinliğine kadar, Hughes'un güçlü ve yenilikçi çalışmaları, Afrikalı Amerikalıların yaşamındaki zorlukları, sevinçleri ve karmaşıklıkları incelikle yakalayabilmiştir. Hughes'un külliyatı hayli kapsamlıdır, ancak bu çalışma, sadece, yazarın felsefi düşüncesinin güzel bir örneğini sunan *The Panther and the Lash* (1967) adlı son derlemesine odaklanmaktadır.

Derlemedeki başlıca ırksal, toplumsal ve politik yaklaşımlarda, Hughes'un entelektüel akıl hocası W. E. B. Du Bois'in ve onun Hegelci diyalektik felsefesinin etkisi görülür. Burada Siyah Hegelci bir şiir ortaya çıkar. Bu şiir, özünde, felsefi düşünce, kültürel bilinç ve şiirsel ifadenin ilgi çekici bir sentezini sunarak, Siyah deneyimi ve kimliğinin karmaşıklığını ifade etmek için Hegelci ilkelerin kavramsallaştırılması anlamına gelir. *The Panther and the Lash*, Hughes'un farklılıkları yoğunlaştırma, karşıtlıkları olumsuzlama ve sürekli bir oluşum ve yeniden oluşum sürecine girme yeteneğini gözler önüne serer. Böylece okurlar, Hughes'un yaşamının sonlarına doğru gerçekleşen tarihsel, toplumsal ve politik olaylara verdiği tepkileri görebilirler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, Hegel, diyalektik felsefe, Afrikalı Amerikan estetiği, şiir

> Spirit is the "nature" of individuals, their immediate substance, and its movement and necessity; it is as much the personal consciousness in their existence as it is their pure consciousness, their life, their actuality.
> G. W. F. Hegel, The Jena Lectures 1805-6

> and this is my poem. Listen fluently now!
> — Langston Hughes, "Dream Variations"

Introduction: The Social Poet's Multiple Identities[1]

Langston Hughes is a mosaic, a figure entangled within categorizations of race, color, class, and sexuality. According to most biographical accounts, including his autobiography, Hughes elusively hid his complex identity behind a smile (*The Big Sea* xvi)—a facadist move that permeates much of his biographical work. Hughes seemingly would rather focus on the present or point to a future where he can glide over concrete questions regarding his experiences and life.

Hughes' status as an "unknowable" subject, as Shane Vogel writes, is essential for much of the scholarship on the poet (*Scene of Harlem Cabaret* 107). While this ambiguity makes it challenging for Hughes scholars to grasp his identity, it also allows for multiple interpretations of both the person and the artist. It is a stimulating way to think about one of the United States' most famous poets. Author of poems, plays, essays, and short fiction, Hughes often reflected the historical events that he lived through. Hughes' work and life writing, while at times obstruse, captured complex themes and subjects that range from colorism to sexuality. While his contemporaries used different intellectual and artistic mediums to understand Black American consciousness and experience, Hughes sought a more multi-directional aesthetic. Through his poetry and poetic folk-philosophical writing, Hughes hoped to explain what it takes to be a non-conformist in the United States and what identity may represent throughout the world. Juda Bennett echoes what many have said about Hughes, namely, that Hughes is a figure in constant motion (685), a product of his time who experienced life, traveling around the world, at a time

of great transition in the early twentieth century. Likewise, Hughes' work traversed divisions of region, class, race, gender, and sexuality in styles that ranged from the lyrically beautiful to the radically political and social.

This study builds upon (auto-)biographical materials that implicate a kind of philosophical thinking by which Hughes internalizes what he learned from his youth. He amalgamated different aspects that he refined as an artist; from his father, who helped define the constrictions of race and class, to his mother and grandmother, who expanded Hughes' imaginative, poetic disposition (Hughes, *Collected Works* 6). Scholars need to acknowledge the interactions between Hughes' social identities and the impact of these identities upon his creative craft and his poetic voice, and how these developed out of his experiences as a closeted gay[2] Black political and artistic subject in the United States.

Throughout his career, Hughes showed a keen interest in destabilizing normative sexual, racial, and gender subjectivities (Ponce; Jarraway; Barrett). Vogel argues that Hughes' struggle for racial equality was inseparable from battles against class, sexual, and gender normativity (*Scene of Harlem Cabaret* 13). The interconnectedness of these social issues and social categories of identities made sense for Hughes, as he often had to negotiate his race, sexuality, and class positions to locate spaces where he felt free. One such "space" is through his poetic imagination. Poetry became a space where all desired forms of identities could be explored, understood, and practiced, and the results of these multiple interactions produced a symbolized freedom of being. This line of thinking showcases the poet as a dialectician, one who dialectically mediates differing influences and social categories of identification to seek the fulfillment of desire in a form of synthesis.

While Hughes wrote a great many poems, this study focuses on Hughes' dialectical negotiation of his racial, sexual, social, and political identity, and other major themes in his final collection, *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), published towards the end of his life. Here (and elsewhere) in Hughes' work, the influence of his intellectual mentor, W. E. B. Du Bois—the African American writer and thinker whose pioneering studies of race, identity, recognition, and experience are prisms through which countless Americans view the world—is especially visible. It is Du Bois' notions of dialectical philosophy, taken

from his study of the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, that inform how Hughes can “see” and “think” through the complex mediation of his social categories of identification, social and political ideologies, along with the major themes in his writing.

Thus, in *The Panther and the Lash*, readers can flesh out the complexities of Hughes’ biography, to interrogate his Black responses to the historical, socio-political movements and events that have taken place throughout his lifetime. The collection, I contend, introduces two simultaneous dialectical formations. The first is thematic, where Hughes engages with a diverse array of historical, cultural, and political elements in the poetry, and the second is formally, through his vibrant poetic compositions distinguished by intricate imagery, rhythmic eloquence, and the integration of vernacular expressions. Through this dual dialectical articulation, Hughes showcases his intellectual formulation as well as presents his thinking on Black cultural expression and experiences. I argue that this exemplifies what I refer to as the Black Hegelian poetic—a conceptualization wherein Hughes applies Hegelian philosophical principles to explore and articulate the complexities of Black knowledge, experiences, and identities. It signifies a synthesis of philosophical thought, cultural consciousness, and poetic expression within the specific context of Hughes’ work. Through the contemplation of Hughes’ philosophical thought as Black Hegelian in *The Panther and the Lash*, his distinct illustration of dialectical thinking is underscored.

With the diverging poems in *The Panther and the Lash*, Hughes steps outward, demonstrating how these different poems are in relation to one another in dialectical ways. Consequently, the collection is Hughes’ dialectic at work in the way he intensifies the differences in the collected poems while remaining elusive to whether some definitive whole or finality will emerge. Ultimately, I argue that in *The Panther and the Lash,* Hughes’ evolving philosophical thought is made visible in the ways he pushes poetic contraries and negates them when a dialectical opposite is recognized. Hughes transforms words into a simultaneous process of forming, contradicting, and re-formation, towards a unification only to be dialectically turned over again.

Dialectics: Hegel, Du Bois, and Hughes

This study responds to Akiba Harper's call to scholars who have neglected Hughes' inventive philosophical and socio-political commentary within his work (15). Hughes followed Du Boisian inspiration, aiming to artistically synthesize the complex intersubjective relationships of literary, political, and social influences in his work.[3] Du Bois insisted that art functions as propagandistic agitation and protest, and as a racial, historical, socio-economic, and cultural instruction. Du Bois turned to the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel and his dialectical logic for a theoretical framework that accommodates the multiple articulations of these ever-moving concepts.[4] Du Bois turned to Hegel to seek philosophical answers to the social concerns of Black Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, radically adapting aspects of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Although drawn to Hegel's historical analysis, it was his dialectical method or "speculative mode of cognition" (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right* §10) in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* that Du Bois took to diagnose the struggle of competing Black and American consciousnesses in the United States (Adell 15-16).

Now, dialectics is commonly interpreted as a logical framework wherein thinkers, among others, orchestrate contradictions, oppositions, and differentiations—akin to what Hegel elucidated as a dialectical presentation (Darstellung) of differentiation (Hegel PoS 20 § 33; 41 § 66; Cole 44)—among modes of existence, conceptions, and aesthetics, thereby elucidating emergent possibilities. According to Hegel, concepts dialectically reveal themselves in a manner that interweaves with the course of progressive history. The German philosopher Theodor Adorno, while famously critiquing Hegel's view of a "progressive" or positive dialectical result,[5] nonetheless usefully argues that dialectical strategies offer an inconstant form that directs one's thinking to a "constellation" (370), a space where the opposition of concepts, objects, and ideas, and along with their connection to the world, are conceptually expressed. One may conceive of an open dialectic, shaped by contingent events and the deepening of contradictions, rather than by any predetermined or desired endpoint, given Hegel's notorious ambiguity regarding what might emerge on the horizon.

Du Bois and Hughes' notions of dialectical philosophy resonate with these positions. Both see dialectical thinking as providing a method to grasp reality as a dynamic process marked by contradictions, conflicts, and constant change. Du Bois' adaptation of Hegel's dialectical treatment of consciousnesses is especially visible in the way Hughes navigates his multiple social categories of identification in his work. Du Bois offers Hughes different ways of "seeing" the self and non-self through the ways racial identity is formed via a dialectical process of becoming. In Hughes' poetry and writing, from the content and form of his early jazz and blues poetry to his later works like *The Panther and the Lash,* Hughes attempts in his art to dialectically form, contradict, transform, negate, and reconcile, only to start the process over again in search of a unification of multiplicities he saw and identified within his life.

Yet, how they employ their dialectical logic is a point of departure for Hughes, from his intellectual mentor. Du Bois morphs this theoretical structure into his own "dialectical formalism" to investigate Black American subjectivity and to attempt a reconciliation of the effects of slavery and subjugation within Black American consciousness (Zamir 136; Cooppan 308). In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness"—the experience of viewing oneself through the eyes of others (*SBF* 8)—connects, according to Sandra Adell, "to Hegel's metaphysics of self" (13). Specifically, Du Bois responds to Hegel's discourse on the unsettled consciousness-as-self-consciousness in the "lordship and bondage"[6] relationship (Adell 15-16) and uses the struggle and recognition between competing consciousnesses to outline the evolution of Black American self-consciousness shaped by subjugation (Adell 15-16; Zamir 136).

Unlike Du Bois, who is dialectically searching for a more conclusive sense of self-certainty, Hughes is more elusive, understanding identity as a fluid dialectical development that is concretized only to be reinserted back into a dialectic. In fact, it is the formal aspects of Hughes' poetry the represent a point of departure from Du Bois. Hughes envisions a dialectic inherent in poetic form, as demonstrated by his dynamic verse, rich imagery, rhythmic language, and use of the vernacular, enabling deeper thematic oppositions and contradictions within the poetry. According to Hegel, poetry is the "most unrestricted of the arts" and expresses one's "own inner being" (*Aesthetics,* 2: 626).

For Hegel and Hughes, poetry is the articulation of ideas and inner representations and the concretized depth of expressed freedom. Thus, Hughes is able to capture the essence of dialectical struggle, echoing the constant motion and contentious interactions found in both the form and the content that define his philosophical worldview.

In Hughes' poetic imagination, similar to Hegel's conception of poetry, meaning and truth are never fixed but are always in process. Through his poetic thinking, Hughes contends that so much of his life and work responds to the constant state of flux of life. Through dialectical thinking, then, Hughes envisions a philosophical way of thinking that places elements in relation to one another in that constant motion. To identify what is self, for Hughes, is to place things in contentious interaction with one another dialectically and recognize what results may occur. Selfhood, for both Hegel and Hughes, is a social product developed out of a dialectical process of consciousness-as-self-consciousness interacting with elements of the immaterial (meaning concepts, ideas, thoughts) and the material world. As Hughes' identity is constructed out of the confrontations of limits, a contest of self and non-self, so too then is this dialectical struggle expressed in his poetry. In turning to my study here of Hughes' *The Panther and the Lash* will indicate, Hughes formally adds a dialectical poetic to manage and mediate on the multiplicity of influences that appear in the collection of poetry.

This study now turns to Hughes' *The Panther and the Lash* (1967) to showcase how Hughes places concepts of the self, philosophical ideas, historical events, and the things of life into a dialectical process, both in theory and in practice. I argue that the collection forms a sort of dialectical structure, and out of this philosophical formation, Hughes' Black Hegelian poetic emerges. In particular, the philosophical poetic materializes via the dialectical interaction of influences and elements within Hughes' poetry and the form in which that poetry can take. Hughes' broad philosophical perspectives and questions embedded throughout his work, and the relationship these perspectives and questions have with one another, point to a desire to understand both his place and that of the place of his subjects, in the world around them. In the collection, Hughes dialectically juxtaposes contrasting poems and interjects his social, political, and historical ideas contained within his poetry, both against and in conjunction with broader contemporary African American perspectives. It is precisely through the use of his

dialectical reasoning that Hughes expresses Black subjectivity—subjectivities of the complex interplay of historical, cultural, social, and political factors that shape the way Black Americans perceive themselves and their place in the world—by placing multiple ideas, influences, and concepts against and with one another in his poetry.

***The Panther and the Lash*: Hughes' Dialectical Collection**

The Panther and the Lash subtitled "Poems for Our Times," is dedicated to Rosa Parks and features more "open protest" poems than any of Hughes' previous volumes (Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* 6). The title stems from two manifestations arising from racial dynamics in the United States. These include the Black Panthers, the revolutionary organization established by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale that demanded economic and social justice, better housing, and improved education for Black communities. Additionally, it encompasses the white backlash to the Civil Rights movement driven by cultural resentment towards the dismantling of segregationist structures, and anxieties surrounding the changing social and political landscape. The volume's poems are both old and new, but all "appropriate to the violent age" of the collection's publication in the late 1960s (Rampersad Introduction 10), in the time of the Black Power movement, urban riots, and increased activism challenging systemic racism and discrimination. The organization of material by Hughes highlights, as Rampersad writes, the tension between Hughes' "desire to be a poet and his desire to move society on the question of social justice" (Introduction 10). In fact, it is essential to understand Hughes' attempts at political work in his poetry when reading *The Panther and the Lash,* as Rampersad underscores in an unpublished note that Hughes himself wrote (in the third person) for the collection: "It is impossible for him to be 'above the struggle' or for his art to fail to reflect the vibrant circumstances of his life" (*Life of Langston Hughes Vol. II* 410).

In the collection, Hughes expresses his political and social ideologies of struggle and freedom embedded in his poetry, what Ron Baxter Miller described more broadly as an attempt to bring "the ideal to the real, and the universal to the particular" (*Art and Imagination* 2-3) He insinuates an oppositional division between the cultural expressions

of the social, political, and aesthetic and then puts forward the idea of dialogue to achieve a unified understanding. Thus, the collection presents a dialectical attempt to amalgamate those cultural expressions to produce some notion of freedom for Black Americans.

The Panther and the Lash is divided into seven sections, and all depict various aspects of Black life, structural violence, and the struggle against systemic and institutionalized racism in the United States. The language in *The Panther and the Lash* employs repetition, alliteration, rhetorical questions, and couplets, creating a register for engaging differing social, political, and aesthetic ideas through dialectic engagement. Philosophically, viewed in its totality *The Panther and the Lash* illustrates Hughes' dialectical form of how multiple elements come together and are placed against one another in many poems, to emerge as a unity.

The collection, through its subdivisions, forms a kind of dialectical relationship with itself. Each section can be read as a response to or progression with the other. The titles of the sections, therefore, reflect an antagonistic nature to the work: "Words on Fire," "American Heartbreak," "The Bible Belt," "The Face of War," "African Question Mark," "Dinner Guest: Me," "Daybreak in Alabama," each denoting larger themes of problematizing race, community, politics, and culture, which Hughes intends to tackle. Hughes' interjection in *The Panther and the Lash* therefore employs a dialectical rationale to reconcile these multiplicities through his poetic imagination--a resolution that similarly mirrors that of Hegel's "reconciliation" in art (*Aesthetics Vol. 2* 1173). Through the literary dexterity of placing interests against one another, a mediated after-effect is available and visible to those who read. Likewise, Hughes' collection starts from one position, discovers contradiction and negation, and ends at a "newly" opened theorized location. The ultimate unity is generated by and through the tension that Hughes sets up between the differing representative forces, the struggle of opposites, found within the poetry. A more unified positionality visible at the end of *The Panther and the Lash* arrives through the collection and conflict of heterogeneous elements and ideas.

Beginning with "Corner Meeting," where the "speaker catches fire, / looking at the listeners' faces," (12) Hughes signals his readers of the intent of the volume. These are "Words on Fire" (11), the dialectical velocity of thought attempting to understand itself. Hughes' poems in

the first few sections initiate Black perspectives of history, Harlem, the South, and the contemporary socio-political moment, signaling what Hegel called the point of fixity or the moment in the dialectical process where understanding (*Verstand*) reaches a temporary stability or closure by establishing a fixed opposition between concepts (*EL* § 80). Thus, Black histories, or specific locations like Harlem and the South, serve as starting positions for dialectical analysis but are ultimately negated as the dialectical process progresses. For *The Panther and the Lash*, this is the point where the subject comprehends the social, political, and cultural history of Black America, and borrowing from Du Bois, looks through the shimmering veil, which motivates the dialectical movement toward and engagement with that encompassing social, political, cultural, and historical subjectivity.

At the beginning of *The Panther and the Lash,* Hughes identifies positions of uncertainty that destabilize the Black subject in the themes and aspects of Black American history:

> So we stand here
>
> On the edge of hell
>
> In Harlem
>
> And look out on the world
>
> And wonder
>
> What we're gonna do
>
> In the face of what
>
> We remember. (13)

The "edge of hell" here is a metaphorical or symbolic state of anguish or turmoil experienced by Black Americans. "Harlem" corresponds with Hughes' famous rhetorical "what happens to a dream deferred?" ("Dream Deferred" 23), and thus in conjunction with the "edge of hell," the endpoint of the deferred dream, signifies the depths of despair that individuals and communities face when their hopes are repeatedly dashed. By juxtaposing the "edge of hell" and "a dream deferred" with "How many bullets does it take to kill me?"

at the beginning of the next poem "Death in Yorkville" (24), Hughes continues to underscore the existential and physical dangers that African Americans confronted in their daily lives. Moreover, Hughes asks further, in doubt, who will save or protect him, as a stand-in for Black America— "the Lord," (25) the "Black Panther[s]" (27), or himself in "Final Call," if "nobody comes, send for me" (30).

"Final Call" is the last poem in the first section, and it is where Hughes points to the reconciliatory power through direct action. He recalls the actions of figures such as John Brown (36) and Frederick Douglass (38) to achieve freedom. The action here, for Hughes, signals the negation stage of the dialectic. His image of freedom, "I do not need my freedom when I'm dead. / I cannot live on tomorrow's bread," ("Freedom" 86) must follow the negation that undermines Black subjectivity. The poems in "The Bible Belt" portion of *The Panther and the Lash* suggest a turning point for Hughes' dialectical collection. This is the moment where both negation and preservation happen simultaneously, what Hegel terms sublation or *aufheben* (Hegel *PoS* § 113; *Encyclopedia Logic* § 95) in the dialectical process of *The Panther and the Lash*. The subject contests the negative through struggle, and direct action to overcome the negation found in its way.

Additionally, the poems in "Face of War" (56-63) point to how direct action overcomes the negation to achieve some unity. Hughes recognizes as Black Hegelian, that action is necessary to transcend one's station. Action, a reoccurring theme throughout the collection, is most clearly articulated in "Militant" (44) and "Down Where I Am" (55). In "Militant," Hughes aggressively seeks to challenge white oppression:

> For honest work
>
> You proffer me poor pay,
>
> For honest dreams
>
> Your spit is in my face,
>
> And so my fist is clenched
>
> Today—
>
> To strike your face. (55)

Note the materialized nature of that oppression in work, "honest pay" and "honest dreams," are met with spit, to which Hughes strikes, with a clenched fist. This physical action denotes the negation of the negation (Hegel, *PoS* § 79) stage of the dialectic, where the subject confronts the other—not only in perceived violence but also in labor. For Hughes, as a Black Hegelian, "work" in the poem is key here as he determines that both directed action (in "Militant," work is also a form of violence) and work are formed in which interrelated subjects confront one another. Hughes describes outright violence in "War" with "Death is the broom / I take in my hands / To sweep the world / Clean" (63) and in "History," "The past has been a mint / Of blood and sorrow" (70). He also uses time and waiting as metaphors in depicting conflict, that time mediates when one can effectively begin to fight. This negation of the negation process of confrontation, however, is perhaps best illustrated in "Down Where I Am," which serves as a midpoint to *The Panther and the Lash*: 'Bout out of breath. / I got my fill. / I'm gonna plant my feet / On solid ground. / If you want to see me, / Come down" (55). Hughes' powerful invitation, "If you want to see me, come down" transitions the collection towards war and resolution through conflict, negating the negative.

While the process of confrontation, and negation shapes much of *The Panther and the Lash* to this point, the conflict and struggle Hughes describes, sets up his attempt at the unification of subjectivity in the final section, "Daybreak in Alabama" (91), and in particular in the final poem of the same name (104), which ends the collection. Hughes' previous symbolism of flowers and blossoming leads to his last image of the collection, of daybreak, marks a kind of determinate finality of the dialectical progress of his Black subjectivity. In this final section, Hughes is signifying the resolution of the conflict that is taking place throughout the collection. Daybreak also doubles as a metaphor for Hughes' concluding remarks on the state of race relations in the United States in the face of Black militancy, "Stokely / did I ever live / up your / way?" ("Stokely Malcolm Men" 90), and white hegemonic response to that militancy (Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes* 410). Daybreak proves to be a potent image suggesting a vision of synthesis of unity from the negating processes between contesting subjectivities. Likewise, daybreak is merely a stage of the day, and therefore, suggests the beginning of another process of transformation to come. While the dialectical process is never-ending, Hughes nonetheless searches for a

symbol of dialectical unity. In “Daybreak in Alabama” (104), the final of the collection, this unity appears as harmony; a harmony that is in music, nature, and people.

Music, always a key focus of Hughes’ broader poetic imagination, here in “Daybreak in Alabama” likewise presents his “human and social dream” (Miller, *Art and Imagination* 49)—of people living and working together in harmony. Placing the “music” in Alabama, a place full of historical racial segregation and murder, Hughes turns from what Ron Baxter Miller calls “an Apocalyptic future” towards “romantic harmony in Nature” (“A Mere Poem” 30). The poem’s musicality also showcases Hughes’ dialectical thinking. Musical expressions of movement found throughout the poem, of crescendos and rifts, such as “rising out of the ground” and “falling out of heaven” (97), equally conveys dialectical action that mirrors those movements.

Consequently, Hughes begins the poem as a composer who places multi-racial subjects outdoors to perform a laborious task. It envisions an attempt at synthesized racial integration, and the poem reads dialectically like the ingredients of a song placed in some relation with one another:

> When I get to be a composer
>
> I’m gonna write me some music about
>
> Daybreak in Alabama
>
> And I’m gonna put the purtiest songs in it
>
> Rising out of the ground like a swamp mist
>
> And falling out of heaven like soft dew.
>
> I’m gonna put some tall tall trees in it
>
> And the scent of pine needles
>
> And the smell of red clay after rain
>
> And long red necks
>
> And poppy colored faces

And big brown arms

And the field daisy eyes

Of black and white black white black people

And I'm gonna put white hands

And black hands and brown and yellow hands

And red clay earth hands in it

Touching everybody with kind fingers

And touching each other natural as dew

In that dawn of music when I

Get to be a composer

And write about daybreak

In Alabama. (97)

The harmonious picture of arms and hands, "white hands / and black hands and brown and yellow hands," touching one another "with kind fingers," showcases a sensuous intensification of contradictions. Hughes displays racial and social barriers being negated in the sensual moment of multi-racial hands touching one another, "as natural as dew." This is akin to the intense corporeal interactions of his youth, where subjects became something new or different in the dark of the cabarets (Tracy *Langston Hughes and the Blues*; Vogel *Scene of Harlem Cabaret*).

Hughes' use of synecdoche in the poem is significant, allowing the poet to explore the tension between coherence and fragmentation, particularly in the context of Daybreak's gesture toward societal harmony. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within a community while acknowledging their distinctiveness. Each body part represents a unique person with their own experiences, struggles, and aspirations. Philosophically, the synecdoche of faces, arms, eyes, and hands transcends their literal meaning to symbolize broader themes of humanity, unity, and freedom. They represent more than just

their individual parts; collectively, they form a kind of whole while simultaneously resisting coherence. Although touching and seemingly "unified," these fragments remain incomplete, reflecting the enduring presence of fragmentation within unity.

The lack of coherence produces a sort of binding element, held together by difference, rendering them as a determinate structure. A determinate structure signifies a stable, coherent, and definite form that arises from the dynamic interplay of opposing forces. It signifies a moment of resolution and stability within the dialectical movement, only to be reinserted into the dialectic and give rise to new contradictions. The binding element in the poem is not synthetic unity, implying a forced or artificial cohesion, but rather a coherence dialectically forged through contradiction and difference. It's through embracing these differences and recognizing the value of each element's contribution that a determinate structure, symbolizing collective agency and freedom, emerges.

In terms of freedom, the synecdoche of interacting and interrelated subjectivities in "Daybreak in Alabama" produces a coalescing of parts that work towards something analogous to "Black American freedom" (Miller, Art and Imagination 81). For Hughes, one must hold this vision of difference with the vision of unity at the same time. So that the unity can be imagined only in negative relation to the fragments, and therefore the fragments make sense only in relation to a possible unity. This is the negating the negation process of the dialectic, symbolizing development, a unification found within the advancement of development, and then the arrival of something fresh or new, only to be subjected to dialectical reevaluation. This elevates Hughes' vision beyond a characterless harmony, as the idea of freedom is born from its negation. The fragments and differences detailed in the "Daybreak in Alabama" are more than just a celebration of difference for the sake of difference because it is pulled toward a future moment of unity.

Ultimately, the depiction of hands and arms, touching and working together in the soil, illustrates Hughes' closing call for an attempt at resolution. That, in both "Daybreak in Alabama" as well as in the entire *Panther and the Lash* collection, the struggle by active participants against racial strife presents a movement towards equality and harmony in the United States. What appears at the end of the poem here isn't a resolving of contradictions, though, but rather a "dawn of music," a turning of potentialities into something else in the future. The

fact that the poem presents a hypothetical future, to be read as "futuristic" (Miller "A Mere Poem" 30), also indicates that Hughes' vision of unity is still in the foreground, that the vision is incomplete, and therefore not an achieved unity. In Hughes' hopeful refrain, he uses "when" instead of "if," indicating the ongoing need to create and recreate the egalitarian dream. Perhaps after the "dawn of music" turns and is turned through the dialectic, that dream of freedom may be attained.

Conclusion:

"Sweet words that take / Their own sweet time to flower"

The collection proves to be a seminal text for study, as *The Panther and the Lash* produces the complexities of Hughes' interrogation of black subjectivity under the duress of historical, and socio-political pressures at the end of his life. The collection demonstrates the sweeping way in which Hughes develops his philosophical thought as a final poetic and philosophical response to the racial, cultural, historical, and socio-political moments that took place in Hughes' lifetime. The *Panther and the Lash*, with its dialectical formulation of historical, cultural, and political elements in poetry, is an example of his expression of a Black Hegelian poetic. It is a dialectical space where Hughes gives some conceptual articulation of the confrontation of concepts, objects, and ideas, and their relation to the world. In his logic, Hughes assembles a poetry that deals with itself, a collection of dialectical operations of contradiction. It is through this logic that Hughes traces the production of black subjectivity in its opposition to itself. It is an ongoing process that does not simply signify a subject opposed to something outside itself, but a black subjectivity that becomes other to achieve what Hughes conceives as a sense of freedom.

This is the essence of Hughes' Black Hegelian thought, the philosophical manner in which he pushes poetic contraries and negates them when a dialectical opposite is recognized; pressing words, poems, themes, and subjects, into a process of transformation, contradiction, and re-formation, pushing these elements towards a final association only to be dialectically transformed again. This logic stems from the self-being determined out of the dialectical arrangement of the intangible (notions, concepts, philosophies) with the material world. Hughes outlines, in his poetry, the dialectical process that first conceptualizes that social product

and then endeavors it towards a unified self from all the socio-political and philosophical influences it encounters. The result is a social product that is then transformed again (and again) when placed back into the dialectical system again.

In *The Panther and the Lash,* the Black Hegelian poetic showcases this system both in a single poem, such as "Daybreak in Alabama," and in the collection itself. In the poem, Hughes seeks a harmony engineered from its negation. The fragments and differences described in the poem are drawn toward a "daybreak," what Hughes conceives of a possible moment of unification, a "dawn" of freedom. More broadly, *The Panther and the Lash* is a collection of poetry that is in a concurrent process of forming, contradicting, and transformation, indicating a poetry that presses towards a union only to be returned to the dialectic again. Ultimately, Hughes becomes a Black Hegelian not merely through his philosophical perspectives and the representation of that philosophical understanding in his poetry, but within the formal aspects of his poetry as well. It is in the way Hughes internalizes a Hegelian (by way of Du Bois) dialectical logic in his thinking and his writing. In Hughes' poetic imagination, like Hegel's conception of poetry, meaning and truth are never fixed but are always in process.

The Panther and the Lash showcases Hughes' dialectical articulation in the manner of placing different poems (and themes, subjects, concepts) in relation to one another, intensifying the differences in those poems in the collection. The poetry is not just different in arbitrary ways and neither does it appear in a way where one poem is more powerful than the other. Instead, the poems appear as steps toward a conclusive finished form, a multidirectional path that coheres to difference. This is Hughes' determinate thinking; pressing and deepening those different forms, remaining open to which path the poetry may definitively take. Hughes was not simply a poet with a gift of words, but an artist with ideas. A philosophical artist who dialectically negotiated and mediated his social, political, and aesthetic ideas of Black consciousness in his creative writing. *The Panther and the Lash* is such a collection, producing a Black Hegelian poetic that allows for his philosophical interpretation of major subjects and themes to his readers. As Hughes dialectically reminds us in "Question and Answer," when confronted with a world full of struggle, we do so because "there is a world to gain" and crucially it is a world for us to "remake" as well (75).

Notes

[1] Hughes. *Phylon (1940-1956),* vol. 8, no. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1947).

[2] While not a major aspect of focus in this paper, questions of Hughes' sexuality stem from Arnold Rampersad's exhaustive two-volume biography, *The Life of Langston Hughes* (333-338). Despite Rampersad's hesitation, most scholars tend to view Hughes as queer or closeted (see Bagoo; Gates Jr, "Black Man's Burden;" Gates Jr and Appiah; Chauncey; Borden; Carbado; Somerville; Summers; Reimonenq; Schwarz; Tracy *A Historical Guide*; *Langston Hughes and the Blues*; Collins; Ponce; See; Vogel "Closing Time: Langston Hughes and the Queer Poetics of Harlem Nightlife" and *Scene of Harlem Cabaret*. Donnelly and Best suggest "read[ing] him through his closeting" since his writing and biography denies a stable sexual identity. Two recent biographies, W. Jason Miller's 2020 *Langston Hughes* and Shane Graham's 2020 *Cultural Entanglements: Langston Hughes and the Rise of African and Caribbean Literature* revisit and contextualize Hughes' sexuality as well.

[3] Du Bois and Hughes' relationship has been long studied by scholars and biographers. Suffice it to say that they were well acquainted with each other's work and were often in dialogue and discussion about historical, cultural, and aesthetic matters. Hughes, like many others of his and Du Bois' time, possessed a thorough familiarity with Du Bois' profound impact on African American history and culture, and formed, albeit unofficially, what Benedict Anderson might call a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (16).

[4] One major source of discussion and debate for many commentators and scholars of philosophy, literature, and cultural studies is over the intersections of Du Bois and Hegel (Williamson; Adell; Zamir; Reed Jr., Allen Jr; Gooding-Williams; F. Kirkland; Shaw, P. Kirkland; Basevich; Banker; Harris). Additionally, several scholars have long interrogated and criticized Hegel for racism (Neugebauer; Moellendorf; Bernasconi; Hoffheimer; Purtschert; de Laurentiis; Sanguinetti; McCarney; Bonetto). Most recently, Daniel James and Franz Knappik helpfully have done both, in their 2020 work "Exploring the Metaphysics of Hegel's Racism: The Teleology of the 'Concept' and the Taxonomy of Races." Ultimately, I argue that Du Bois moves beyond Hegel and his racism in the philosophical-aesthetic traditions he prepared that many Black American artists

relate to (Banker). This presents, I contend, what Jürgen Habermas would call a general interpretation as opposed to a general theory (Henry 101).

[5] Adorno, in contrast to Hegel, envisions a dialectical logic of unfolding to challenge history. In his work *Negative Dialectics* (1966), Adorno examines what he sees as the positive aspects of Hegelian dialectics, arguing that the outcomes of dialectical processes do not inevitably lead to the emergence of a revelatory or transcendent new idea. He contends that 'dialectics unfolds the difference between the particular and the universal' and 'serves the end of reconciliation' (6). Here, reconciliation perhaps implies resolution, but it does not necessarily emerge from the contradictions themselves.

[6] Also known as the Master/Slave dialectic, which describes the development of self-consciousness through the encounter between two distinct self-consciousnesses. In this process, each must recognize the other to achieve self-recognition, a recognition that must be earned rather than freely given (Hegel *PS* § 187).

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