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**THE POIESIS OF SUSCEPTIBILITY:
LANGSTON HUGHES AND QUEER BLACK FRIENDSHIP**

Keywords: Langston Hughes, Harlem Renaissance, Queer Solidarity, Susceptibility, Black Poetry

Poem

by Langston Hughes

(To F. S.)

I loved my friend.

He went away from me.

There's nothing more to say.

The poem ends,

Soft as it began,—

I loved my friend.

Langston Hughes is undoubtedly one of the most prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance, not least because of his advancement of *jazz poetry*. This essay will review his poem “Poem” (1925) alongside some parts of his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) and Isaac Julien’s movie “Looking for Langston” (1989) to examine how the phenomenon “Langston Hughes” and his art can until today be understood as “performances of queer citizenship [which] contain ... an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present” (Muñoz 49). While there is a debate about Hughes’ actual

sexual orientation,¹ I am more interested in the effects that his (sexual or political) orientation (whatever it might have been historically) created on his art and thereby on his readers. In A. B. Christa Schwarz's words, the question is how "Hughes produces a multiplicity of meanings, works with an ambiguity of terms, and employs textual strategies, thereby opening up spaces also for gay readings" (72). Although they mention ambiguity and multiplicity, for Schwarz a "gay reading" seems to mean a narrowing down to a singular meaning of the poem. They identify the world created in the poem as "male same-sex space" (72) or "all-male context in which admissions of love supersede a display of hardened masculinity" (73). The third verse ("There's nothing more to say"), they argue, "constitutes a refusal to display further intimate emotions" (73), something they consider to be a potential fall back into a traditional, hardened role of (Black) masculinity.

However, taking Sara Ahmed's thoughts on queerness into account, one can ask whether there is not more to say about the poem "Poem" by thinking about the poem's "potentiality of not following certain conventional scripts of family, inheritance, and child rearing, whereby 'not following' involves disorientation; it makes things oblique, which in turn opens up another way to inhabit those forms" (569). I suggest adding "friendship" to the list of intersubjective relations that are conventionally scripted. What if a queer reading of Hughes' poem does not mean starting from the denotation of a *beloved friend* to end at the connotation of a *sexual partner*, but rather following Foucault and using the potential queerness and ambiguity of the subtext "to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships" (135), at a queer "mode of life" which is much more "disturbing" than any forbidden sexual act could be (136). Foucault suggests that when queer "individuals are beginning to love one another—there's the problem" (137). For is there anything more disruptive to a system based on racism, sexism, and homophobia than the moment when the marginalized subjects build bonds of love among one another?² While modern systems of disciplinary and regulatory power require nation-states to prohibit love and to replace friendship (especially

between groups at the margin of the norms) by law, order, and duty to wage successful wars, there are other regimes that made better use of the affective sphere. For instance, the Sacred Band of Theben, “an elite corps consisting of 150 pairs of [male] lovers and beloveds” (Ludwig 341) used their soldier’s mutual love for one another to create a powerful army based on the idea that soldiers, in the end, will not fight for their nation but to “protect their friends.” Is it then really a “soft” beginning to claim, as a Black, potentially queer man in White supremacist and homophobic America: “I loved my friend”? There is indeed “nothing more to say,” at least not on the verbal level of commands and order, precisely because the poem exceeds that sphere and aims towards the force of the soft, affective, and suggestive. It is a shift that gives way to a disorienting rupture within the existing socionormative *background* upon which Black (and male) bodies could relate to one another.

“He went away from me” points, then, backward to where he came from, how he came into being, maybe even when he “came” (in any possible sense). With Ahmed (549), one might ask: What was his “arrival into the world” of the poem’s “I” and thereby in our world and what conditioned how he emerged as what he “appears to be in the present”? Yet, one might also be excited to gossip about the reasons for his departure. In their Muñoz Memorial Lecture, Judith Butler (2) reflects on gossip mattered for José Esteban Muñoz as a “form of sustained attention and investment made highly communicable,” a means of disidentification, of departing from what forecloses ways of becoming connected by “ask[ing] another to imagine along, build[ing] a reality, mak[ing] it true, if only for the duration of the communication.” For the duration of the poem, Hughes invites us to gossip with him about why and where his friend left, to engage into utopian speech about where he might have arrived now, about his future, his life and death, the very possibility of a Black, male, and queer future in this world.

“The poem ends.” Is that an answer, and end to that gossip? Unlike the three previous verses, it does not end with a *period*, but punctuates, with a comma, the opening of a *temporal period* between the moment when “the poem ends” and

the (real?) end of the poem. According to Butler (6), one of Muñoz's greatest contributions, way beyond a Queer of Color Critique, was to critically "ask, who can imagine a future, to whom does the future belong." As not everyone is equally allowed to create and imagine a utopia for themselves, "[t]heories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal" (Muñoz 94). Hence, the question: Why and when does the poem end, and what happens when half of the poem consists of its ending? Maybe it is a rem(a)inder that one century ago what came after Black, queer, intimate, male friendship was nothing ... but death, quite literally the death of the friend, or (taking literally literal) the death of the communication. And not only in that moment but also regarding the future as the archives (or rather lack thereof) about Black, male, and queer friendships show. Is there "nothing more to say" because there is no one left to listen? Neither now nor then?

On the other hand, in his essay on the "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes (30) writes that "[w]e build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves." In other words, it is at the border of the impossible, of speaking to someone who has just left, of writing about (racial, class, sexual) themes that one cannot write about, of imagining a world that is not (yet) intelligible in the existing terms of thinking about the world, it is in this margin (between "the poem ends" and the end of "Poem") where one *susceptibility is made*.

Michel Foucault (137), in an interview about gay friendship, suggests that one should try "not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure" that is to "advance into a homosexual ascesis that would make us work on ourselves and invent—I do not say discover—a manner of being that is still improbable." When Hughes writes about the soft beginning of a Black, male, and queer friendship, he is himself surrounded by very hardened frontiers along the categories of gender, sexuality, race, and class. He writes thus not about overly optimistic about reality, but about the "still improbable,"

rendering us already susceptible to something cannot yet be. In Gary Wilder's words, Hughes' poem could be understood as *anticipatory*, entailing a "state of readiness for any possibility *and* a will to overcome existing arrangements by acting from the standpoint of a not-yet redeemed world" (136). That is, while being aware of the normative framework within which soft and loving friendship among Black, queer men is close to impossible, Hughes insists on reclaiming the imaginative standpoint of transgressing the existing limitations without knowing what this might mean. He has nothing to say about this, except from that it is a soft and loving state of intersubjectivity.

Could this be an "anticipatory illumination of a queer world, [...] a kernel of political possibility" (Muñoz 49)? It is surely not a coincidence that the narrator's voice in "Looking for Langston" begins the biographical outline as follows: "Langston Hughes, friend of Countee Cullen, friend of Bruce Nugent, friend of Alain Locke, friend of Wallace Thurman"? A list of some of the most important figures of the Harlem Renaissance, not presented as atomistic, isolated individuals, but as being *in relation*. Or more precisely, Hughes, "friend of" every one of them, is who binds them together. Friendship, then, is no longer (or was never in the first place) unpolitical, especially not in the context of multiply discriminated groups. What this points to is that the "Negro" (art) movement was not only about liberation from *external* restraints, but most importantly about regaining the *internal* freedom of redefining how to relate to one another and oneself, that is, what *community* and *self* can mean when both are negated and devalued, as Hughes (28) puts it, "in the face of American standardization."³

How else can these individualities—who are deemed to never be—find recognition than in friendship, in a supporting community of beloved and loving others (be they, more broadly speaking, queer, Black, feminist, disabled, ...)? Within such a (queer) sphere of *being-friend-of* a "crashing wave of potentiality" (Muñoz 185) arises and takes form which eventually allows for simply *being-oneself*. It further demonstrates clearly the interdependency of individual's identity formation, for only within "awkward, fractious movement that

continues by moving and being moved” (Butler 13), only within this common space the frames of susceptibility get transformed such that the priorly unequal allocation of recognition can be ameliorated. The poem shows this: having been moved by the loved friend’s departure, the poet reacts by bringing-into-existence (ποίησις, *poiesis*), through words, what had not been there before: a susceptibility for feeling interdependently bound to the friend, who goes away and continues to be loved. “Poem,” the title of the poem, might be the hopeful wish of anticipation of what *could* be when it ends: *poiesis* of frames for love, softness, and friendships. Butler (14) puts it like this:

Perhaps we have the grammar wrong: maybe the structure of that susceptibility is the utopian, and that utopia is neither an object nor an aim. If so, then susceptibility is the capacity to catch the wind that comes from elsewhere, to give way to the protest that arrives damaged and dismissed in advance as impossible. What is deemed impossible within a given horizon turns out to be the potential to break apart the constraining force of that horizon, [...] it does not ask for recognition within the terms of the existing world; it arrives, unrecognizable, to force a reconfiguration of time and space.

Going back to the beginning of “Looking for Langston,” one encounters a visual suggestion of how this temporal and spatial reconfiguration expresses a liberating potential and how, in the case of Hughes, it is interlocked with Black, queer, male friendship. The movie begins outside, in the White, cis-heteronormative world, presenting a productive rhythm and rational spatialization. Then, the scenery changes and the viewers are invited to join the private moment of the memorial of Langston Hughes. Synchronous with the narrator finishing the phrase “mind and heart,” a teardrop is running down a Black man’s face. The camera moves to the body, played by the director himself, and finally zooms out to show that *nobody* is moving ... but the smoke rising in the air. Now, using the structure of the poem, one could retell the same scene as follows: A loving friend (Verse 1) is commemorating a loved friend who went away (Verse 2). In silence, without further words to be said, one engages in collective mourning (Verse 3) and thereby renders and is rendered by each other

mutually susceptible to what (or who) had “arrive[d] damaged and dismissed]” and left “unrecognizable” (Butler 14). Like rising smoke (Verse 4), this moment might be ephemeral, but it can provoke a teardrop to roll down one’s face (Verse 5), i.e., ex-press/exteriorize a friend’s *inner* state of being-moved (Verse 6) and hence move others. Therefore, the poem (as genre and as specific “Poem”) calls for and engages in a reconfiguration of the frames of *who can be moved by whom*. Via the artistic practice of anticipating that what *could be* (although being not yet allowed to in *this* world) might be deemed less unrecognizable. What Hughes teaches in his poem, then, are utopian practices aiming for individuality that is not yet allowed to be: recognizing the force of softness, setting free the power latent in loving friendships in the margins, and engaging in the *poiesis* of susceptibility.

Endnotes

1. A. B. Christa Schwarz (69–70) writes about whether Hughes should be named and/or identified himself as homosexual or asexual. I would, first, like to remind of the term “bisexual” (or “bi” as an umbrella term) for attraction to more than one gender which is sadly left out of the (scholarly) discussion here. Schwarz (84), in this sense becomes object of their own criticism by seeming to “shift emphasis in [...] [sexual] stereotypes rather than transcend them.” Thus, when I use the term “queer” instead of “gay,” I mean explicitly to include bisexuality (As One of many terms of desire indicating a transgression of the homo-hetero dichotomy) in the set of sexual identities. Second, I take Hughes to be “queer” in the sense that he “tends towards” repeatedly being somewhat oblique or strange in relation to the “straight line.” This “nonalignment produces a queer effect” (Ahmed 557), no matter the “orientation” of the historical figure Hughes.

2. Take for instance many current ambitions by right-wing parties in the US or Europe to ban drag and police and punish trans* existence. Apart from the fact that these topics function as successful, scapegoating methods that distract from other issues (like the influence of the gun lobby on politics obscuring the sad truth that more children are endangered by weapons than drag performers), it also serves to separate more conservative, often White from left, intersectionally discriminated queer people, thus dividing the community and preventing friendships and cross-categorical solidarity to be built (which could actually be a danger to the rise of right-wing movements).

3. On this note, let me “gossip” for a second and do *as if* the person behind the initials “F. S.” to whom the poem is dedicated was the German author and critic Friedrich Schiller. In his series of letters about Aesthetics, he addresses Immanuel Kant’s ideas on this topic and argues (very roughly summarized) that art takes over the great responsibility to

educate the human being to become *more susceptible* to beauty. Schiller believed that poetry, as *poesis of susceptibility*, will hence make humans also more moral and ethical beings in the political arena. To some degree, Hughes's poem could be understood as both honoring of this politicized tradition of Aesthetics and at the same time as extension towards a more intersectional understanding of what that political arena looks like.

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Abstract

The essay interprets the poem "Poem" by Langston Hughes drawing both from biographical material about the author (e.g., the biopic *Looking for Langston*) and from political writing about queer friendship and solidarity, notably Sara Ahmed, José Esteban Muñoz, and Judith Butler. Instead of engaging in a close reading that tries to do justice to the queerness of the "historical" Langston Hughes, the text tries to identify the power of the poem in providing suggestions of how marginalized individuals can challenge societal norms and open spaces for alternative modes of being. Referring to Michel Foucault's ideas of gay friendship as a disruptive mode of resistance to existing structures of power, the essay develops a more nuanced idea of how Hughes's poetry subscribes to a *poesis of susceptibility*. In other words, the article argues that the poem allows for a shift away from the dominant mode of subject-formation within oppressive norms by presenting utopian speech and new modes of interrelation, namely Black, male, and queer friendship. Hence, it rethinks how those to whom the future does not belong can try to reclaim it by creating spheres where potentiality, difference, and otherness can exist and individuals can make themselves intelligible who were previously unrecognizable. Poetry functions in this process as tool that builds and reconfigures the

frames of susceptibility allowing for friendships and softness that found no place before or outside of those.

Niniejszy esej poddaje interpretacji wiersz „Poem” Langstona Hughesa, czerpiąc zarówno z materiałów biograficznych na temat autora (np. filmu biograficznego *Looking for Langston*), jak i z tekstów politycznych na temat queerowej przyjaźni i solidarności, zwłaszcza takich autorów jak Sara Ahmed, José Esteban Muñoz i Judith Butler. Zamiast szczegółowej analizy, mającej wykazać queerowość „historycznego” Langstona Hughesa, niniejszy artykuł stara się dostrzec siłę tego utworu w stworzeniu przestrzeni umożliwiającej zmarginalizowanym osobom rzucenie wyzwania normom społecznym i otworzenie jej dla alternatywnych sposobów bycia. Odnosząc się do idei Michela Foucaulta dotyczących gejowskiej przyjaźni jako destrukcyjnego sposobu oporu wobec istniejących struktur władzy, esej rozwija bardziej zniuansowaną koncepcję tego, w jaki sposób poezja Hughesa wpisuje się w *poiesis of susceptibility* (co można przetłumaczyć jako poetykę wrażliwości lub podatności). Innymi słowy, artykuł udowadnia, że omawiany wiersz pozwala na odejście od dominującego sposobu formowania podmiotu w ramach opresyjnych norm poprzez przedstawienie utopijnego języka i nowych form wzajemnych relacji, a mianowicie przyjaźni Czarnych queerowych mężczyzn. Tekst poddaje pod refleksję to, w jaki sposób ci, do których przyszłość nie należy, mogą próbować ją odzyskać, tworząc przestrzenie, w których potencjalność, różnica i inność mogą współistnieć, a jednostki, które wcześniej były nierozpoznawalne, mogą stać się inteligibilne. Poezja funkcjonuje w tym procesie jako narzędzie, które buduje i rekonfiguruje ramy podatności, pozwalając na przyjaźnie i miękkość, na które nie było miejsca wcześniej ani poza nimi.

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