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Blues poetry
Langston Hughes and Kevin Young:
The adaptation of blues to poetry

Laureanda
Anna Pizzinali
Matricola
1199564

Relatrice
Renata Morresi

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Abstract in Italian

La nascita del blues può essere considerata uno degli eventi musicali più significativi della storia, in quanto è una testimonianza della creatività e delle emozioni della popolazione afroamericana negli Stati Uniti verso la fine dell'Ottocento e l'inizio del ventesimo secolo. Il genere del blues affonda le sue radici nel trauma storico, a partire dalla schiavitù e nasce come un'aspra denuncia di una vasta comunità di afroamericani che esprime la propria angoscia in un lamento di dolore, un grido provocato dalla miseria e dal senso di oppressione. Il blues diventa una strategia per trasformare la disperazione in musica, per combattere contro il razzismo e l'alienazione della modernità. La sua diffusione ebbe inoltre il potere di far avanzare un cambiamento, favorendo l'emancipazione degli afroamericani.

La tradizione musicale del blues fu incorporata alla poesia per la prima volta nel 1925 da Langston Hughes. Questa operazione sinestetica è stata ripresa dal poeta contemporaneo Kevin Young che ha rielaborato questa eredità.

Questa tesi delinea le origini del blues, il suo ruolo nella comunità afroamericana, viaggiando attraverso la storia. Nato ai margini della società, divenne negli anni Venti del Novecento un genere di successo, uno strumento di autoaffermazione oltre che di espressione per i musicisti che iniziarono ad esibirsi non solo agli angoli delle strade, ma nei cabaret e nei teatri di vaudeville. Questo genere musicale ne originò altri, come il ragtime e il jazz, dando inizio a nuove espressioni musicali che includevano anche canzoni umoristiche e ottimiste. Inoltre, questa tesi analizza l'adattamento del blues nella poesia, dove musica e poesia si sovrappongono e dove mantengono rispettivamente le proprie identità. Questa indagine procede seguendo il lavoro di Langston Hughes e Kevin Young, due poeti appartenenti a due generazioni diverse, ma entrambi dedicati ad onorare la cultura afroamericana.

Le poesie blues possono acquisire la struttura della partitura del blues, prendendone in prestito tecniche strutturali narrative. I versi spesso acquisiscono il ritmo e le rime del blues, e cercano di raffigurare l'ambiente in cui esso viene eseguito, tanto quanto le emozioni che trasmette. Questi componenti possono anche riecheggiare la natura narrativa del blues, raccontando storie umoristiche, così come storie piene di disperazione.

Analisi storica, sociale, musicale e poetica si fondono in questa tesi per spiegare l'importanza cruciale del blues per la cultura americana ed evidenziare la particolare natura della poesia blues, che attinge dalla tradizione poetica afroamericana e la approfondisce.

Introduction

The rise of blues can be regarded as one of the most significant music events in history, as it testifies the artistry and the emotions in a period of economic growth and mechanization such as the end of the Nineteenth century and the beginning of the Twentieth century. The blues genre has its roots in the historical trauma that was slavery in the United States. The blues became the African Americans' strategy to turn desperation into music, to fight back against oppression and exploitation, but also against alienation and the weariness of modern life; and it had the power to advance change, fueling emancipation. The musical tradition of blues was incorporated to poetry for the first time by Langston Hughes in 1925. This synesthetic operation has been taken up by the contemporary poet Kevin Young, who has re-elaborated this heritage.

This thesis outlines the origins of blues, its role in the African American community, navigating through the deep African American history. The blues, a music that was born at the margins of society, became a tool of self-affirmation and self-expression not only at the corner of the streets, but in cabarets and vaudeville theaters. The blues gave rise to other genres, such as ragtime and jazz. And new attitudes: along with the sad tunes, joyful, humorous songs, full of upbeat rhythms were prominent in the blues scene.

Furthermore, this thesis analyzes the ways blues and poetry have combined and harmonized, how orality and literacy overlap, and where music and poetry maintain their own identity. This investigation proceeds following the artistry of Langston Hughes and Kevin Young, two poets belonging to different generations, but both committed to honor African American culture. Blues poems can take the structure of the blues, borrowing and manipulating narrative structural techniques from blues forms. The verses often hint to blues upbeat rhythms, rhymes, and depict the environment in which the blues is performed. Blues-inspired poems can also echo the storytelling nature of blues, telling funny stories with playful humor, as well as stories filled with hopelessness and despair.

Historical, social, musical, and poetic analysis are combined in this thesis as to explain the crucial importance of blues for American culture and the particular nature of blues poetry, which draws from and deepens the African American tradition of poetry.

CHAPTER 1 – The genre of blues

1.1. The blues

The blues is a music genre and musical form which was originated by African Americans in the Deep South of the United States, in the Delta region. It evolved from field hollers and work songs sometime around 1890 (Davis 2003, 24). The period between the end of the Nineteenth century and the start of World War I was an era of industrial, economic, and technological expansion. But African Americans were still victims: segregation was enforced in the South, racial discrimination was rampant in the North, and they were exploited as sharecroppers, laborers, and domestic workers. It seems that this was the moment in which the blues was born: laborers of the rural South created a new form of musical expression through which they expressed their anger and pain. The blues arose “among illiterate and despised southern Negroes: barroom pianists, street corner guitar players, wandering laborers, the watchers of incoming trains and steamboats, prostitutes and outcasts” (Handy and Niles 1926, 9). Despite its origin on the margins of society, blues music proved to be a rapidly expanding genre, fancied by the masses and economically successful.

The blues emerged as a result of “social and psychological changes within the Negro group as it moved toward the mainstream of American society” (Baraka 2002, 93) and as a genre it evolved from work songs, field hollers and spirituals, as well as ragtime songs, country reels and Anglo-Scottish ballads (see Davis 2003, 23). Though it might be difficult to tell precisely where and when the blues started, due to the lack of documentation of the primitive blues, the question of how the blues came to be, can be answered. “Many of the first black performers to be marketed as blues singers were, to their own way of thinking, no such thing” states Francis Davis in *The History of The Blues* (Davis 2003, 38). They were, by their own reckoning, “songsters”, or “musicianers” that sang, along with the blues, country dance tunes, songs from the minstrel stage, spirituals, and narrative ballads (Palmer 1982, 41). Davis notices that this repertoire was basically identical to that of the period’s rural white performers (38). Undoubtedly the blues has some African origins, but on account of the white involvement with this music genre, “the blues is Southern music, as well as black music” (Davis 2003, 5). As a matter of fact,

primitive blues was originally meant for blacks only. But with classic blues, the genre became formalized, and started to embody a sense of universality and a broader human experience. The fact that it was *black* experience grew less pointed, and it was largely assumed that “*anybody* could sing the blues” (Baraka 2002, 82). Palmer would rather not call the blues “white-influenced” and expresses that it would be fairer to say that “the music of songsters shared a number of traits with white country music, with musicians of each race borrowing freely from the other” (Palmer 1982, 41). Sadly, the blues at the beginning is also the history of white composers taking credits and profits from music they had heard black artists perform. Often African American bluesmen could not transcribe music, so their songs were robbed and used by white artists for their own records.

Some names of great blues singers can be mentioned: Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, Blind Blake, Papa Charlie Jackson. But acknowledging only bluesmen would be a big mistake. Women dominated the first few years of blues recording, just after the big success of “Crazy Blues”, considered by most experts as the first blues record, composed by Perry Bradford and recorded by Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds in 1920. Blues singers like Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, Bessie Tucker, Clara Smith were veterans of theatrical vaudeville and traveling tent shows, who recorded with jazz instrumentalists. Then, singers and guitarists from Mississippi or Texas or the Carolinas stole the spotlight as they were cheaper to record. They did not require songwriters or backup musicians, sometimes not even a recording studio (see Davis 2003, 62-83).

The blues evolved with time, historical events, people, culture and location, and became one of the most important influences on the development of popular music throughout the United States. Each performer sang a different blues, as though each artist had their own way of playing and singing. Nevertheless, some characteristic features can be mentioned. The blues is defined by Webster’s Dictionary as a type of music characterized by usually 12-bar phrases – 3-line stanzas in which the words of the second line repeat those of the first – and continual occurrence of blues notes in melody and harmony. The term “blue note” is used to refer to the flattened third of the blues scale, that is, according to American writer and musicologist Palmer, just a melodic tendency (Palmer 1982, 34). The voice or instrument always approaches the notes from above or below, conveying the music a sense of obliquity (see Baraka 2002, 31).

However, the notion of blue notes has come to metaphorize something more than pitch discrepancies, conveying the personal authentic feeling of “playing the blues” or “having the blues” (Weisethaunet 2001, 113). This means that the concept of the blue note embraces the idea of personifying each note, which “has to mean something”, as described by B.B King in *Blues Guitar Method*:

I think in terms of not just playing a note but making sure that every note I play means something. You need to take time with these notes. If you just play notes and not put anything into it, you’ll never have a distinctive style.

(King 1973, 15)

The twelve-bar chord progression is accompanied by an AAB lyrical structure that recalls the characteristic African call-and-response pattern of work songs from which the blues originated (see Baraka 2002, 62), where a lead vocalist sings a theme, and a chorus responds. The lyrics of work songs and even later blues forms were largely improvised: the first line is repeated, often with a slight variation, and the third line answers to the previous two verses.

The primitive blues was a vocal music since work songs and hollers were acapella. But soon, an instrumental accompaniment was taken into consideration. The banjo, introduced to America by African slaves, and the guitar were the most used among blues singers and they were played as to make the strings sound like a human voice (see Baraka 2002, 69-70). With time, the blues widened the range of instruments by including tubas, clarinets, flutes, trombones, trumpets, bass and drums; and even these musical instruments, says Palmer, tended to imitate “either meaningful verbal phrases or onomatopoeic nonsense syllables” (Palmer 1982, 29). The blues song consisted in a sort of musical conversation between the performer and the instrument. Since the words of the song usually occupy about one-half of each line, a space of two bars is left for either a sung answer or an instrumental response (Baraka 2002, 68).

The blues originated as an expression of individuality and raw emotions such as loneliness, anger, grief, happiness, and pain, in vocal as well as in instrumental performance. The term “blues” is derived from “having the blues”, a slang expression descriptive of melancholia that can be traced back to “the blues devils” (Palmer 1982,

25). The blues devils were psychotic hallucinations resulting from withdrawal or abstinence from alcohol. Later, the term “blue” started to indicate not only a state caused by alcohol intoxication, but also a general state of sadness, depression, restlessness, and melancholy. Hence, in blues lyrics “one finds an expression of virtually every emotion except solid satisfaction with life” (Handy and Niles 1926, 10). Blues musicians sing about their malaise:

The blues, is a low-down shakin' chill, yes, preach 'em now
Is a low-down shakin' chill
You ain't never had 'em I, hope you never will

Well, the blues, is a achin' old heart disease
Do it now, you gon' do it? Tell me all about it
The blues, is a low-down achin' heart disease
Like consumption, killing me by degrees

Robert Johnson, “Preaching Blues (Up Jumped the Devil)”, 1936

The main themes of blues music are love, sex, tragedy in interpersonal relationships, death, travel, loneliness, anger, etc., implying that the blues cover a wide range of subjects, among which religion, violence and sex, which tend to be the most controversial. Robert Johnson’s verses are referred to by Davis as “satanic” (Davis 2003, 131) for the abundant devil imagery, and by reason of the themes of death and the supernatural covered. In “Ramblin’ on My Mind”, Johnson tells listeners that he has “mean things all in my mind” and in “Me and the Devil Blues”, explicit violence in the lyrics can exemplify what some of those “mean things” were:

Me and the Devil
Was walkin' side by side
Me and the Devil, ooh
Was walkin' side by side
And I'm goin' to beat my woman
Until I get satisfied

Robert Johnson, “Me and the Devil Blues”, 1937

The blues was not just an expression of discomfort and anxiety, but also an attempt to forget all sorrows. Given that, to use Davis' words, the blues was "dance music even at its most downhearted" (Davis 2003, 243). It was known that blues musicians would play and sing in order to "get rid of the blues", with the intent to free themselves from their low state of being. Therefore, the genre of blues is ideal for the expression of individual feelings and personal stories.

In "Matchbox Blues" Blind Lemon Jefferson wonders if a matchbox smaller than the palm of a hand can hold his clothes. This means he does not have a suitcase, and not even a destination. But leaving the town and going far seems the only solution for the singer, as he cannot stand the thought of settling down. This song makes private feelings public and touch on themes many can identify with.

I wouldn't mind marryin', but I can't stand settlin' down
I don't mind marryin', but Lord, settlin' down
I'm gonna act like a preacher so I can ride from town to town

Well, I'm leavin' town, but that cryin' won't make me stay
I leavin' town, cryin' won't make me stay
Baby, the more you cry, the further you drive me away

Blind Lemon Jefferson, "Matchbox Blues", 1927

Blues songs were not always "blue". For example, Bessie Smith's "Me And My Gin" is a humorous song, which is essentially drunk-talk about her relationship with the alcoholic beverage gin.

Don't try me nobody, oh, you will never win
Don't try me nobody 'cause you will never win
I'll fight the army, navy, just me and my gin

Any bootlegger sure is a pal of mine
Any bootlegger sure is a pal of mine
'Cause a good ol' bottle o' gin will get it all the time

Bessie Smith, "Me And My Gin", 1928

Overall, we can say that blues lyrics are very honest and tend to touch on adversity and intimately personal situations. Blues musician Jimmy “Duck” Holmes said in an interview that “the lyrics are absolutely true” and that they might be “sometimes good, sometimes bad, but they didn’t lie” (Holmes in Dierking 2017).

1.2. A brief history of African Americans

Blues is a native American music, the product of the black experience in America. Indeed, it developed because of “the Negro’s adaptation to, and adoption of, America” and because of the peculiar position of black people in the country (Baraka 2002, 66). Hence, it is important to briefly present the history of African Americans, which left an indelible scar in the history of the nation still visible today, if we consider the poverty rate of African Americans and recent episodes of police violence (see Horton 2021).

The history of African Americans began in 1619 when a ship carrying around 20 slaves arrived in the English colony of Virginia. The exploitation of free labor allowed the colony to boom and grow, opening a gateway to a new economy. The legislature began to enact laws that protected colonists’ interests. Slavery was first legalized in 1661 with The Barbados Slave Code, a law that defined slaves’ legal status and their white masters’ prerogative, highly marked by racism: “negroes [are] an heathenish brutish and an unsertaine dangerous kinde of people” (see Nicholson 1994, 50). Eventually, the slave code was adopted in other colonies and shaped slave laws throughout the mainland. In the following year, it was declared that children born in Virginia should be slave or free according to the condition of the mother: the son or daughter of a slave was automatically a slave. In 1669, the Virginia legislature defined a slave as property, a part of the owner’s estate. In the meanwhile, the slave population was exponentially increasing, as Takaki states in *A Different Mirror*, relying on the tax lists of Surry County, “from 5 percent of the colony’s population in 1675, blacks increased sharply to 25 percent by 1715 and over 40 percent by 1750” (see Takaki 1993, chap 3).

In the 17th and 18th centuries, African slaves mainly worked on the tobacco plantations in the South, but by the early 19th century this had given way to cotton plantations, as huge demands for cotton grew in America and Europe. And to meet that global demand, there was an increased demand for slave labor. As a consequence, the

property value of slaves increased too, and they kept on being sold as merchandise by European traders on slave ships across the Atlantic Ocean to the West Indies. The cotton export sector developed notably by reason of the appropriation of Indians lands and the expansion of slavery (see Takaki 1993, chap 4). But while slavery was deeply entrenched in the South, the North was growing more mechanized and industrialized, hence not in need for as many field hands as before.

In the 1840-1860 period abolitionists in Britain and in the United States developed large propaganda campaigns against slavery. On the other hand, Democrats wanted to defend their profitable institution at all costs and warned about a “terrible conflict between white labor and black labor” (Takaki 1993, chap 6). Tensions started to grow with the election of Abraham Lincoln as president, as the Union had divided thoughts. In his first Inaugural Address, Lincoln declared: “One section of our country believes slavery is right and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is wrong and ought not to be extended”. The civil war was initiated by the planter class of the South, that constituted only 5 percent of the southern white population, but was extremely dominant in politics (see Takaki 1993, chap 1). Convinced that the government would abolish slavery and destroy the institution that drove their booming economy, eleven Southern states broke away from the North in 1861, forming the Confederate States of America.

During that time, the slave population had reached nearly four million, resulting in a peak of the country’s financial power. It is important to mention that this large group of African Americans were not deemed as citizens or people, but as mere property, as argued in *Scott. v. Sandford* in 1856 (see JUSTIA US Supreme Court, n.d.).

During the conflict, President Lincoln allowed the Union Army to enlist African Americans to “end the rebellion at once”. In 1863 Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. This legislation stated that all slaves within the rebellious states “shall be then, thenceforward and forever free”. Consequently, African Americans answered the call to fight against the South and for their own freedom. Altogether, a hundred eighty-six thousand blacks served in the Union Army. In 1865 the deadly war finally ended and by then, one third of the black soldiers were listed as killed or missing in action. Lincoln praised them as “black warriors” and in his famous Gettysburg Address, the President declared that the nation had been founded, committed to the words that “all men are

created equal” (see Takaki 1993, chap 1). The Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery was ratified and nearly four million slaves were freed and were finally given their citizenship and the right to vote (Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments).

After the Civil War, the United States entered a period called the period of Reconstruction that lasted 10 years, with the aim of securing newfound rights in former slaves. On the other hand, the South was determined to restore white supremacy. As the control of southern states was regained, white supremacists began to enact laws that oppressed African Americans through segregation, known as Jim Crow Laws. Such laws, introduced in 1877 and abolished only in 1964, were the racist “white South’s attempts to limit the new citizen’s presence and rights in the mainstream of the society” (Baraka 2002, 55-56), legally enforcing racial separation in every aspect of social life. The decision in Plessy v. Ferguson, mostly known for the introduction of the “separate but equal” doctrine, with equality substantially nonexistent, was rendered on May 18, 1896, by the seven-to-one majority of the U.S. Supreme Court (see Legal Information Institute, n.d.).

. . . the fact that Blacks had to use separate toilets, attend separate schools, sit at the back of buses and trains, address whites with respect while being addressed disrespectfully, be sworn in on different bibles in the court room, purchase clothes without first trying them on, pass by "white only" lunch counter seats after purchasing food, and travel without sleep because hotels would not accommodate them – all these – resulted in serious psychological damage.

(Morris 1999, 518)

In the post-Reconstruction years, African Americans were forced to live in a separate and subordinate way, with recurrent episodes of violence and terror against them (Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camelia were white supremacist terrorist and hate group whose primary targets were African Americans). They had to struggle with discrimination and unemployment, plus the subsequent economic downturn of the Great Depression of the 1930s, which made many African Americans lose their job.

In the early Twentieth century African Americans launched protests directly attacking racial inequality. In 1909-1910 The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded, and the subsequent Garvey movement organized in 1920 became the largest mass movement Black America had ever produced (see Morris 1999, 520). In the 1940s and 1950s, African Americans took a determined and persistent stand in the Civil Rights Movement. The lynching of Emmet Till in 1955, brutally murdered for whistling at a white woman, pushed more people toward political activism. The following years were marked by campaigns, protests and marches for civil and economic equality. In 1963 nearly 200.000 people marched on Washington, D. C. and Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech. Finally, in 1964 the Civil Right Act was ratified, banning discrimination in voting, public accommodations, and employment.

This did not mean the end of discrimination and racial violence. Black Lives Matter is a recent movement founded in 2013, renewing the focus on the long African American’s struggle for equality in the United States. In 2020, the outrageous murder of George Floyd by a white police officer fueled the movement that became global as marches of protest against racism and injustice were held in many parts of the world.

1.3. The role of blues in the African American community

We call it Black poetry; they called it the blues, "Survival motion set to music".
(Henderson 1982, 30)

America was given the blues music genre in the Nineteenth century by African Americans, a group of people who had been victims of slavery and even when they were free, they were the descendants of slaves with many rich – and often heartbreaking - stories to tell of their ancestors.

As slavery was officially abolished in 1865, the great majority of ex-slaves remained in the South, but some left immediately for the West and the North (Baraka 2002, 51). The period of Reconstruction was a very chaotic period for both the South and the North. Millions of African Americans had turned from “property” into “freedmen”, but they were not “free”, as they were entrapped by the limits of living in

a white man's world. They were no longer slaves, but close enough, as they became wage earners or sharecroppers, working the land of their former master in exchange for a part of the crop (see Takaki 1993, chap 5). And even if the Reconstruction did give African Americans a certain feeling of self-reliance and autonomy, the separateness of black and white in the South made them feel isolated from the mainstream of American society. As cited in Amiri Baraka's book *Blues People*, "the post-slave society had no place for the black American, and if there were to be any area of the society where the Negro might have an integral function, that area would have to be one he created for himself" (55). And *that area* could be exemplified by the black empowering communities that set up in Harlem during the 1920s. I like to think that blues music had been essential for the creation of a space for self-expression and self-determination for the black American. The early blues, says Baraka, was "perhaps the most impressive expression of the Negro's individuality within the superstructure of American society" (66).

If the blues was an extremely personal music, it was also an expression of community and solidarity within the African American community. This communitarian aspect of blues music is explained by Larry Neal, who contends that the "blues singer is not an alienated artist attempting to impose his view of the world on others. His ideas are the reflection of an unstated general point-of-view" (Neal 1972, 46). Blues singers had their own personal life to sing about, but a lot of feelings and experiences were largely shared. The message was often times ritualistic and spiritual.

God forgive a black man most anything he do
God forgive a black man most anything he do
You know I'm dark-complexioned, I believe he'll forgive me too

James Son Thomas, "The Smoky Mountain Blues", 1986

These verses of James Thomas' "The Smoky Mountain Blues" have a humoristic tone, too. The interpreter sings that he goes "back in jail again" having faith that God will forgive him once again.

Most blues songs expressed personal feelings and problems, such as unrequired love or longing for another place or time, but a few songs addressed social issues and were used to protest injustice within the African American community. Davis asserts that "the blues played absolutely no role in the civil rights struggle in the sixties",

claiming that except for a couple songs, “blues songs are rarely vehicles of overt protest” (Davis 2003, 18), probably because blues songs tend to have another type of promise, often sexual. Thus, gospel music overtook the blues in respect of social protest, giving a tradition of songs, many of which were taken as anthems for the civil rights movement (Davis 2003, 19).

Some blues songs that have a social protest intent can be mentioned. Abel Meeropol, a Jewish poet wrote in 1937 “Strange Fruit”, popularized by singer Billie Holiday, in response to the brutality of lynching, a form of legalized violence against black people. From 1882 to 1968, 4743 lynchings occurred in the United States, according to records maintained by NAACP (NAACP 2022).

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit”, 1939

In the South, after the Civil War, slave labor had been replaced by prison laborers that used to sing songs that lamented their plight. A group of convicts at Raiford Penitentiary in Florida complained about the exploitation of labor in the song “We Don’t Have No Payday Here”.

We don’t have no pay, no payday here
We don’t have no pay, no payday here
And it don’t worry me
That it all, oh Lord, ain’t mine (That I don’t, Lord, have a dime)

Unidentified performers, “We Don’t Have No Payday here”, 1939

Prisoners expressed complaint not only about the work, but also about being hated for no reason. In “I Don’t Do Nobody Nothin’”, led by C.W. "Preacher" Smith with unidentified singers at Cummins State Farm in Arkansas, qualities of both spirituals and blues can be noticed.

I don’t do nobody nothin’, Jesus

But they hates me just the same
I don't do nobody nothin', Jesus
But they hates me just the same

C. W. "Preacher" Smith and unidentified performers, "I Don't Do Nobody Nothin'", 1939

By 1954, an economic slowdown in the United States had resulted in high unemployment rates: black unemployment rates in the South were double or even triple that of the white population (Klein 2018). Brim responded by exposing how bad the situation was getting for the unemployed:

I'm broke and disgusted
In misery
Can't find a part-time job
Nothing in my house to eat

Tough times
Tough times is here once more
Now if you don't have money
You can't live happy no more

John Brim, "Tough Times", 1954

Most blues musicians were farmworkers by day and would play at blues bars called "Juke joints" by night. The earliest form of the blues was often referred to as country blues, or Delta blues. This style usually had a solo singer who would also either play the harmonica or bottleneck slide guitar. The Delta blues also emphasized rhythm finger style guitar and reflective lyrics about the hard lives of African American farmers in the South. The Delta blues, a regional folk music, transformed "into a truly popular music that developed first a large black following, then a European white following, and finally a worldwide following of immense proportions" (Palmer 1982, 16). As blues music grew in popularity, some musicians became famous and toured around the Delta region. Later, blues musicians started performing in Memphis Tennessee to establish their careers.

By 1940, an estimated half-million Southern blacks tried to escape racism and Jim Crow laws by moving to northern cities, hoping for a better life (see Davis 2003, 134).

Many moved to the city of Chicago in particular. Blues musicians made this journey and brought the blues with them. They also developed a new blues sound; the “Bluebird Beat”, as it has been called, was usually carried by bass and drums. The Chicago style was a mixture of older black blues and vaudeville styles and the newer swing rhythms (Palmer 1982, 135) that would later have an influence on rock ‘n’ roll. As blues musicians moved from the South and took their music to different parts of the United States, the blues mixed with jazz and other musical styles from those regions and helped inspire many new genres, such as ragtime, boogie-woogie, and be-bop.

The change from spirituals performed by groups to the concept of the solo, an artist singing or playing by themselves, mirrored the newly acquired freedom of the African American people. It was shaped by their desire to develop an identity of their own, apart from the way white people and other slave owners had viewed them up until that point.

It was no longer strictly the group singing to ease their labors or the casual expression of personal deliberations on the world. It became a music that could be used to entertain others *formally*.

(Baraka 2002, 82)

This professionalism arose from theater shows: “the black minstrel shows, traveling road shows, medicine shows, vaudeville shows, carnivals, and tiny circuses all included blues singers and small or large bands” (Baraka 2002, 82). This means that performing the blues was not just “a passionately felt avocation”, it could be a way of earning money and supporting oneself. The blues was indeed a tool for self-affirmation and gave African Americans recognition and visibility. Notable also is the fact that, as Amiri Baraka observes, the only so-called popular music in the United States of America of any real value is of African derivation (Baraka 2002, 28).

1.4. From African American folktales to blues poetry

Blues poetry arises from the African American oral tradition and the musical tradition of the blues and has become one of the most popular forms of American poetry.

African American oral tradition consists primarily of folktales. The Signifying Monkey tales, written by unknown storytellers, are folktales of enslaved African American that passed down through oral tradition during the 1700-1900s (see Gates 1989, 57). The Signifying Monkey tells the story of a weak but smart monkey that plays tricks over a strong lion. The monkey insults and manipulates the king of the jungle without him realizing it. The term “signifyin’” in black discourse denotes a “technique of indirect argument or persuasion” as well as “the language of trickery” (Abrahams, cited by Gates 1989, 59) and it exemplifies all of the rhetorical play in the black vernacular. The Signifying Monkey is the figure of black rhetoric in the African American speech community. (Gates 1989, 59). Signifyin’ allowed African Americans to express bold opinions or feelings without fear of repercussion. Gates affirms that “the speech of the Monkey exists as a sequence of signifiers, effecting meanings through their differential relation and calling attention to itself by rhyming, repetition, and several of the rhetorical figures used in larger cultural language games”. (Gates, 1989, 58-59). The tone is witty, sharp and satirical.

He said, “King of the Jungles, ain’t you a bitch,
you look like someone with the seven-year itch.”
He said, “When you left the lightnin’ flashed and the bells rung
you look like something been damn hung.”
He said, “Whup! Motherfucker, don’t you roar,
I’ll jump down on the ground and beat your funky ass some more.

(Cit. in Gates 1989, 62)

Folk tales were used in song lyrics, proverbs, riddles and even when not accompanied with music, they were the African’s chief method of education, a way to transmit the wisdom of the elders to the new generations (Baraka 2002, 28).

In black music, many jazz and blues artists have recorded songs about either the Signifying Monkey or, simply, *signifyin'* (Gates 1989, 57), such as Jazz Gillum's "Signifying Woman". Also the blues, the trickster of musical genres, "signifies", in light of the fact that innuendos and doubletalk are often present in lyrics, along with the rhyme and the rhythm of the tales. Lyrics like "some pretty mama better come and get this black snake soon" or "I need a little hot dog in my roll" allowed singers to be outrageously salacious, while retaining a front of perfect innocence (Devi 2016). However, we must remember that some lines from blues songs did cause a stir. Davis reports in *The History of the Blues* that Jefferson's "That Black Snake Moan" was one of the first song to provoke a shocking reaction from listeners. "Though tumescent members have always been plentiful in the blues" says Davis, "there have been few expressions of naked sexual *need* as urgent as this – certainly not before 1926" (123).

In a way it can be said that folk tales inspired blues lyrics, and the musical form of the blues would later inspire poetry. The adaptation of blues to poetry is very interesting because blues as most music genres comes from poetry (by means of lyrics) and then, with blues poetry, music is being transported once again in the lyrical dimension. Paul Garon, cited by Palmer in *Deep Blues*, would probably dismiss the idea that blues comes from poetry, in view of the fact that he states that the blues represents a fusion of music and poetry, in which both elements are of equal importance (19).

The conjunction of these two factors is necessarily present in blues poetry, too. Blues poems are structured with musical elements of the blues genre, such as the use of rhythm, play of sounds and repetitions. Karen J. Ford notes that sung blues and written blues are both verbal creations and thus make use of the same linguistic resources, such as stress, alliteration, euphony, assonance, consonance, and oral formulas. (Ford 1997, 93). By reading a blues poem aloud, the musicality of the blues is perceived, with sound and rhythm played off perfectly. In this extract from the poem "Blues", Kevin Young uses a catchy rhyme and beat:

Gimme some fruit, baby
Gimme some fru-uit
Something red
& juicy I can sink
these teeth into

You had me eating peas Lord
You had me eatin spam
(You had me so turned around)
I never dreamt all you said
came straight out a can

Kevin Young, "Blues", 2003

The foundational blues poem, "The Weary Blues", was written in 1925 by Langston Hughes, who for the first time decided to try to write poetry in the blues form. Kevin Young, in the introduction of the collection *The Weary Blues* states that Hughes "was the first to realize the blues are plural – to see in their complicated irony and earthly tone the potential to present a folk feeling both tragic and comic, one uniquely African American, which is to say, American" (Young in Hughes 2015, 9).

What is fascinating to me is that this was a moment of translation. The rhythm, the scenic environment, the vital energy of the blues and the language of its art form is translated into written poetry.

Needless to say, poems inspired by the blues are not simply transliterations of blues lyrics: they are able to perfectly balance the depiction of the social conditions and the act of performing the blues; and often quotation of blues lyrics are reported as well (Huang 2011, 10). The frequent intertextuality of blues poems was used in blues songs as well: riffs from old songs were inserted into new songs. "The Weary Blues" includes the first blues verse Hughes had ever heard as he was a kid in Lawrence, Kansas. Here is an extract from the poem.

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more—
 "I got the Weary Blues
 And I can't be satisfied.
 Got the Weary Blues
 And can't be satisfied—
 I ain't happy no mo'
 And I wish that I had died."

Langston Hughes, "The Weary Blues", 1925

Blues poetry transports the reader into the dimension of the blues, a Harlem night club where performers sang the blues; as if we could, in the words of Langston Hughes, “hear their laughter. . . hear the soft slow music, and feel the floor shaking as the dancers danced” (Hughes 1993, 233).

Blues music absorbs the whole American experience, therefore a blues poem cannot be read simply “as a discourse of individualization and internalization”, but also “as a product of a more generalized African American culture” (Huang 2011, 15). Author and music expert Hao Huang comments upon the blues and jazz poems stating that:

jazz poetry mines jazz music for inspiration, influence, and interlocution. In doing so, jazz poetry alludes to the lived black experience in America, as does jazz music, a cultural practice derived from socio-historical realities of African American communities. This practice not only includes African survivals in African American language, music, and culture, but also Euro-American influences affecting black life in the United States of America.

(Huang 2011, 9)

The same is valid for blues poetry, as Huang states in commenting on the jazz poetry written by Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown. Both poets were influenced by the rhythms of jazz and blues, genres that evolved independently, though more or less simultaneously, in different parts of the South (Davis 2003, 7).

The blues is able to narrate the black experience in America. Likewise, blues-inspired poetry gives African Americans a deep sense of belonging. The jazz poet Amiri Baraka claims that the first poetry that had any meaning to him was the poetry of the blues.

. . . poetry is a form of music . . . That's where poetry began; close to music, close to dance, and for those of us who are in the Afro-American community it's normal that music should be the music of our own people because that's what we come up with. That's what we're born with, so that's music . . . the first poetry that I knew was the poetry of the blues.

(Baraka in Reilly 1994, 222-23)

On the whole, blues-inspired poetry is able to display vernacular music into the written language through “bluesy” structural techniques and linguistic resources and to show, through its lines, black culture and blues portraiture.

CHAPTER 2 – Langston Hughes

2.1. Biography

Every so often, the blues just naturally overtook me, like a blind beggar with an old guitar.

(Hughes 1993, 238)

Langston Hughes was one of the leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance as well as an accomplished novelist, essayist, and dramatist. His writings center on poor and working-class African Americans and on “the dreams and heartaches that all Negroes know” (Hughes 1993, 285).

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902 and grew up mostly in Lawrence, Kansas. He was raised by his grandmother until the age of twelve, then he went to live with family friends for two years, and with his mother afterwards. Hughes developed a quite early fascination for books and started writing poetry in seventh grade, when his classmates elected him class poet. He was inspired by the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Carl Sandburg. In his autobiography *The Big Sea* Hughes reports that it was de Maupassant who made him want “to be a writer and write stories about Negroes” (34).

In 1919 he received a letter from his father, who he had not seen for eleven years. Hughes spent the summer and the next year in Mexico with his father, whom he hated. James Nathaniel Hughes is described by his son as a greedy and haughty man that “hated Negroes”. Hughes had the impression that “he hated himself, too, for being a Negro” (40). On the other hand, Langston did not understand “his strange dislike of his own people”; he explains, “because I was a Negro, and I liked Negroes very much” (54). On a train journey South, at age of seventeen, Hughes composed what would become one of his most famous poems, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” which transmits a community spirit and a special sympathy between Hughes and his people. Some of Hughes’ poems began to appear in the *Crisis* soon after. In 1921, Hughes enrolled at Columbia University in New York. But after a year, he quit, and his father never wrote to him again.

Hughes began life on his own in Harlem, but soon he experienced that “the color line barred your way to make a living in America” (86). He switched different jobs and found the time to write as well, while starting to receive attention from publishers. Then, Hughes decided to work aboard a ship, which allowed him to travel and visit what he would call “the great Africa of my dreams”, which he was eager to see. He was seen by Africans as a white man, and when Hughes replied that he was not white, the response was “you are not black either” (103). At the beginning of his autobiography *The Big Sea*, Hughes explains that “unfortunately” he is not black, as he was of a “copper-brown complexion”, and that “in the United States the word “Negro” is used to mean anyone who has any Negro blood at all in his veins”, while in Africa “the word is more pure” (11). In point of fact, the “one drop rule” had been a practice within the public discussion of race in the United States. Such “rule”, prominent in the Twentieth century, was a “method by which we decide which individuals are ‘black’” and has meant that anyone with a trace of African ancestry, visually discernable or not, is “black”. By these means, the concept of race is not only about phenotype, but also about “blood”, neglecting the possibility of a “mixed race” and implementing racism and discrimination (see Hollinger 2005, 18).

After a variety of jobs and errands, Hughes decided to go to Paris, where he worked first as a doorman in a little club. Later he was employed as a cook, then as a waiter at the Grand Duc, a well-known night club. There, he experienced the night life of the sprightly French capital, and saw entertainers, musicians, storytellers, singers and dancers. After France, he went to Italy and Spain, with little or no money.

Hughes returned to the United States and settled in Washington, where he went through a hard time and wrote a lot of poems. He later revealed in his first autobiography that his best poems were all written when he felt the worst (54). Hughes began to write poems “in the manner of the Negro blues and spirituals” (205). He was inspired by Washington’s Seventh Street, where all colored people lived and gathered. Hughes listened to the blues that was played there and tried to write poems like the songs he heard.

In 1925, Hughes took a job busing tables at a hotel restaurant. One day Vachel Lindsay, a well-known poet, came to the hotel. Hughes mustered the courage to slip three of his poems, “Jazzonia”, “Negro Dancers” and “The Weary Blues”, beside

Lindsay's plate. Lindsay appreciated the poems, and the next morning's newspapers reported Lindsay's discovery of a "Negro bus boy poet". A year later, Hughes published his first poetry collection, and decided to name it *The Weary Blues*, as his "lucky poem", which made him win his first poetry prize. Hughes began to form his first literary and artistic friendships. He was then offered a scholarship to Lincoln since he desired to go to college.

During the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes' work was exceedingly influential and his output remarkable, even when attending college. In 1926, Hughes published "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in *The Nation*. This essay can be considered the manifesto of the Black Renaissance, in which Hughes asserts and encourages the self-expression of African American artists "without fear or shame" (Hughes in Walser 1999, 57). In the same year, Hughes worked together with his contemporaries Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent and Aaron Douglas and created the magazine *Fire!!*, which ended after just one issue.

In the following year Hughes published his second book of poems *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, which was well received by literary magazines and white press but "the Negro critics did not like it at all" (Hughes 1993, 265). Hughes' depiction of "workers, roustabouts, and singers and job hunters" (264) outraged some African American critics who felt that members of the "race" should always be portrayed in the best possible light. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes responded to these criticisms saying:

I personally knew very few people anywhere who were wholly beautiful and wholly good. . . I knew only the people I had grown up with, and they weren't people whose shoes were always shined, who had been to Harvard, or who had heard of Bach. But they seemed to me good people, too.

(267-68)

In 1930, a few months after graduation, Hughes published his first novel *Not Without Laughter* and four years later, his first collection of short stories *The Ways of White Folks*. In the 1930s Hughes' poetry became more centered on racial justice and political radicalism and became deeply involved in theatre. His short story *Mulatto* was adapted to a play that premiered on Broadway in 1935. He founded theatre companies

in Harlem and Los Angeles. At the age of 38, Hughes published his autobiography *The Big Sea*. Years later, in 1956, a second volume of autobiography *I Wonder As I Wander* was published. Langston Hughes continued to contribute to American literature until his death, in 1967 in New York. His many collections of verse also include *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), *Fields of Wonder* (1947), *One-Way Ticket* (1949), *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) and *Ask Your Mama* (1961). His last poetry collection, *The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times*, published posthumously in 1967, included poems such as "The Backlash Blues," emphasizing Hughes' commitment to incorporate the mood of the blues and jazz also in his last work (Jones 2002, 1153). Throughout his life, Hughes was also awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Rosenwald Fellowship, and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Grant.

As a poet, Langston Hughes kept his language direct and had no interest in being obscure or pretentious. His verse is personal and subjective as he stated in his autobiography: "since high school I had been writing poems about workers and the problems of workers – in reality poems about myself and my problems" (Hughes 1993, 272). With his poetry, Hughes celebrated the vibrant nightlife and the everyday experiences of working-class African Americans, often recreating the mood, the music and the themes of blues and jazz.

Langston Hughes contributed greatly to American literature, leaving to us poetry, short stories, autobiographies, essays, song lyrics and plays. Today, his many works continue to be cherished and commemorated around the world.

2.2. Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance

Langston Hughes is universally known as the Poet Laureate of Harlem and as one of the most influential voices of the Harlem Renaissance, which was an artistic, literary and intellectual movement in New York in the 1920s.

Hughes was featured in the most relevant work of this era, Alain Locke's 1925 collection of articles, stories, pictures and poems, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. This anthology displayed both a name (New Negro Movement or New Negro Renaissance) and a goal for this era. The aim was for African Americans to come together and foster a new black cultural identity. Harlem, a black neighborhood in Upper Manhattan, was "the Mecca of the New Negro", described by Locke as a "laboratory of

a great race-welding”, where “Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination” (Locke 1980, 630). Black artists were prompted to cooperate toward a common cause in order to “rise from social disillusionment into racial pride” (Locke 1980, 632) and create a new “race” that was disentangled from racial stereotypes and limitations.

Many important voices were brought together in Locke’s book, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Zora Neal Hurston, James Weldon Johnson and as mentioned previously, also Langston Hughes. But among the leaders of the movement there were different visions of the Harlem scene. Locke strived for a “spiritual Coming of Age” (Locke 1980, 634) driven by an intellectual elite that must offer only good depictions of the “race”, with the purpose of breaking the stereotypes and obtaining rights and liberty. Contrastingly, Langston Hughes sought to give voice to the lower class of African Americans, with their virtues and their defects. Naturally Hughes understood black artists’ concerns for black representation in literature, and their aspiration to put members of the “race” in the best light possible, as he explained in *The Big Sea*:

They had seen their race laughed at and caricatured so often in stories. . . that when Negroes wrote books they wanted them to be books in which only good Negroes, clean and cultured and not funny Negroes, beautiful and nice and upper class were presented.

(267)

Nevertheless, Hughes' jazz and blues poetry brought into question the ideals of the "talented tenth" or "cultured few" New Negro elite leading the creative flowering of African American culture, sustained by Harlem Renaissance leaders Du Bois and Locke (see Huang 2011, 21). Indeed, Hughes was never preoccupied to impress readers with representations of wealthy and cultured black people. Firstly, Hughes confessed that he “didn’t know the upper class Negroes well enough to write much about them” (Hughes 1993, 268). Secondly, Hughes wanted to provide real depictions of black experience without any filter, and in doing so, he tried to overturn what he felt was a disempowering position: running after white standards.

Hughes asserted in his 1926 manifesto “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” that it was not required to put a best foot forward. “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame,” he wrote. “We know we are beautiful. And ugly too” (Hughes in Walser 1999, 57). He was committed to show the realness of his own “race”, which he was proud of. Hughes “often sought to scandalize as a form of sympathizing” with African American ordinary folk (Young in Hughes 2015, 13). As a matter of fact, Hughes’ poems are filled with poor working-class people, cabaret singers, dancers, beggars, prostitutes, gamblers; and they were for Hughes “good people, too”. David Chinitz commented that Hughes romanticized the African American lower class, a social group “with which he always identified but to which he himself never really belonged” (Chinitz 1996, 178). Indeed, Hughes belonged more to middle-class than the proletariat.

Hughes wrote poems of social protest, on nature, death, love and other themes. Of great importance is the fact that a significant amount of his work is centered on the musical tradition of blues and jazz. Hughes narrates in his autobiography that he was inspired by the songs he heard on Washington’s Seventh Street. They were “gay songs, because you had to be gay or die; sad songs, because you couldn’t help being sad sometimes”. Either way, those tunes “had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going” (Hughes 1993, 209). Hughes saw in blues songs – which are almost always steeped in self-pity and misery – something humorous, even if it was the kind of humor that made people laugh to keep from crying. He declared that jazz (and the blues as well, I might add) to him was

one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul – the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world. . . the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed with a smile.
(Hughes in Walser 1999, 56)

As such, black music represented for him an expression of the resilience and the tragedy of African Americans. And in the black proletariat, Hughes saw an incredible energy in the face of suffering and oppression. Hughes’ poetry aims and succeeds to

illustrate this facet. Young commented: “Hughes took tragedy and made it heroic, finding it comic too” (Young in Hughes 2015, 15).

Hughes never strived to be a respectable man of letters and to write in ways that did not resonate with his persona. Hughes wrote poetry that honored the heritage of African Americans, but his focal point was not great heroes or historical events. For him, it was the lively culture of everyday people – their music, their language, and their everyday experiences in the city – that shaped his sense of identity. Particularly, the jazz and the blues were for Hughes “essential ingredients in the democratic potential of black cultural nationalism” (Huang 2011, 21), and crucial to “any understanding of black American culture” (Rampersad in Jones 2002, 1151). The cultural and historical significance carried by the music of blues is also found in Hughes’ verse. This adaptation made Hughes an experimental writer, and some of his contemporaries were not ready to accept popular music being connected with elite African American literature. Hughes in his manifesto declared:

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand.

(Hughes in Walser 1999, 57)

Hughes’ blues inflected poetry was able to open “the closed ears” of many of his contemporaries and critics, who had considered themselves impressed and satisfied by the musical and verbal interplay in the poems, and by the well-accomplished representation of African American experience in America as well. To provide an example, Jessie Fauset, who contributed to the cultural flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance, authored one of the earliest reviews of *The Weary Blues*. In the *Crisis* magazine, Fauset praised Hughes’ blues poems for addressing “universal subject[s] served Negro-style,” adding that “while I am no great lover of any dialect I hope heartily that Mr. Hughes will give us many more” of comparable poems (Fauset in Huang 2011, 21).

On the other hand, in a review of the same poetry collection, Cullen criticized Hughes for “too much emphasis . . . on strictly Negro themes” and questioned whether

blues poems belonged to “that select and austere circle of high literary expression which we call poetry” (Cullen in Bloom 2010, 87). All things considered, many critics of that time expected Hughes to be more sophisticated and to touch on a broader human experience that could fulfill the “desire for a modernist literature attuned to the complexities of modern life” (Rampersad in Jones 2002, 1147).

On the whole, the Harlem Renaissance wanted to present an attempt for authentic black expression, however, many writers were disposed to adapt to white standards. Hughes left behind many expectations and determined his own voice.

Even when Hughes received strident critiques, he did not pay attention to them or tried to defend his work. He always left his work speak for itself. The harshest remarks were made for *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, called by historian J. A. Rogers "piffling trash" (Rogers in Rampersad 1986, 151) because of both the title and its poems, many of which were used in schools and colleges a short ten years later.

2.3. Recurring themes

As a writer Hughes decided to focus mainly on the struggles of African Americans. His poems, however, are often humorous and satirical, as he believed that “Negro artists” should not encourage self-pity and moaning in their own people. In his poems, Hughes combined his pride for black culture with an original form of expression.

The Harlem theme in Hughes’ poetry is one of the main ones. According to Arthur P. Davis, “he has written about Harlem oftener and more fully than any other poet” (Davis 1952, 276). In his poems, Harlem is a symbol other than a place. As a matter of fact, when he depicts the hopes, the dreams, the struggles, and the discontent of the black neighborhood in Upper Manhattan, Hughes is also “expressing the feelings of Negroes in black ghettos throughout America” (Davis 1952, 283). Harlem is described in most poems as lively and joyous, but there are overtones of weariness and desperation, which can be sensed in “The Weary Blues”. The poem is “about a working man who sang the blues all night and went to bed and slept like a rock” (Hughes 1993, 215). The term “weary” used by Hughes see to define white civilization and its tiring ideal of pursuing money and business, a world to which African Americans did not have access to. The

singer in the poem is an anonymous man that sings and plays a “drowsy” and “sad” tune. Just like the “dancing girl” in “Jazzonia” and the “jazz-boys” in “Harlem Night Club”, the pianist of “ebony hands”, despite the blue mood, performs energetically all night long. In performing the blues, he tries to find some new delight, and some sort of escapism. But when the dawn approaches, reality hits. The singer frets into exhaustion and sleeps like a dead man. Yet the singer is able to persevere in part thanks to the act of performing the blues. By playing and singing the blues, “he sings some sense into his life, expressing the soul of the black experience” (Huang 2011, 20).

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
 I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
 He did a lazy sway. . . .
 He did a lazy sway. . . .
To the tune o’ those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
 O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
 Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man’s soul.
 O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
 “Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
 Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
 I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
 And put ma troubles on the shelf.”

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more—
 “I got the Weary Blues
 And I can’t be satisfied.
 Got the Weary Blues
 And can’t be satisfied—

I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."
And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

"The Weary Blues", 1926

The speaker of the poem, who could be Hughes himself, identifies with the singer, as the ambiguous syntax makes unclear who exactly is "droning a drowsy syncopated tune". In Harlem, the realm of blues and jazz, music represents a safe place to escape from all sorrows; because "tomorrow is darkness", but while dancing, it is "joy today" (Hughes 2015, 14). However, the weariness is not only lifted by forms of escapism, such as music, sleep and – the most desperate and permanent relief – death. Hughes' poems often highlight the resilience and the hopeful spirit of African Americans in the face of suffering.

[...]
Weary,
Weary,
Trouble, pain.
Sun's gonna shine
Somewhere
Again.
[...]

"Blues Fantasy", 1926

Speakers in Hughes' poems see to present significant aspects of African American culture. Sometimes, the voice speaking is culture itself. The poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" stretches from the earliest moments of human history all the way to American slavery, emphasizing that "the Negro" has both witnessed and participated in the creation of human history. The speaker has "known rivers", beginning with the "rivers

of our past” – the Congo, the Niger, and the Nile in Africa, and then the Mississippi where African slaves were sold in times of bondage. The speaker claims that black identity and experience is so deep and powerful that can bridge the gaps left by slavery, allowing the reconnection with lost ancestors. The voice of the poem proclaims that black history is deep, and people who share this history are tenacious and forceful. Hughes celebrates black perseverance and the population of African Americans – to him, “the gayest and bravest people possible” (Hughes 1993, 54-55).

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.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, 1926

Some of Hughes poems are committed to denounce injustice against African Americans, for instance addressing the problem of the cultural role of biracial children in segregated America in “Mulatto”. In Hughes’ work, several poems are vehicles for claiming rights and social justice, spreading a message of racial pride and hope for a future without a color line. In “I, Too”, Hughes spreads a message of possibility of equality in America, firmly claiming that “I, too, am America”. The speaker evokes the past, when the meal was denied to him and had to eat separately from white people. The word “then” gives reassurance that such thing won’t happen in the future.

I, too, sing America.

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, am America.

"I, Too", 1926

The topics covered in Langston Hughes range from light-hearted themes to deep-rooted ones, often touching on matters which contributed to the fight for equality in America. In the main, it can be perceived a strong sense of pride for his people and a message of refusal to give in. Kevin Young stated that Hughes' work stands out above other poets of his generation, "creating something new, vernacular, blues-based, as American as lynching & apple pie" (Young 1997, 160).

2.4. Analysis and critics

Hughes' accommodation of blues to poetry represents a particular interconnection between orality and literacy. The blues, a music that is heard, is being transported into a text that is bound to be read. We could say that the nature of blues

poetry is indeed synesthetic as the two terms belong to two different sensory domains. The aspect of orality is extremely relevant in blues poems, the ones that Langston Hughes was used to make up in his head and “sing on the way to work” (Hughes 1993, 217).

David Chinitz asserts that “while the adaptation of oral culture to literary ends is never uncomplicated, the accommodation of blues to poetry presents some difficulties” (Chinitz 1996, 177) Indeed, the realization of a written collection of folktales that belonged to the oral tradition has been done without disputes on the feasibility of the matter or its ending result. On the other hand, some critics have questioned blues poetry’s quality and authenticity.

Blues is essentially an oral form meant to be heard rather than read; and the techniques and structures used to such powerful purpose in the songs cannot always be transferred directly to the literary traditions within which, by definition, Afro-American poets write.

(Williams 1977, 542)

Similarly, David Chinitz, referring to Hughes’ poetry, noted that “the stylistic devices that add excitement and emotion to blues performance cannot be captured in poetry by mere transcription” (Chinitz 1996, 182).

As a matter of fact, the expressiveness of the singer’s voice, its distinctive timbre, the vibrations of the instruments cannot be reproduced to all intents and purposes in a poem. Nonetheless, written words printed in page, thanks to Hughes’ effective strategies, are capable of making the reader dive into the act of performing the blues. Clearly Hughes must depend on his audience’s ability “to reconstitute the original imagined performance, which will require the reader to have at least some experience as a blues listener” (Chinitz 1996, 182).

Hughes was the first to write poetry in the blues form, as Kevin Young notes in his introduction to *The Weary Blues* (14), thus the first writer to contend with the implicit difficulties of blues poetry. Chinitz gives voice to his opinion saying that “he succeeded – not always, but often – in producing poems that manage to capture the quality of genuine blues in performance while remaining effective as poems” (Chinitz 1996, 177).

In fact, if Hughes' blues poems were simply transliteration of blues lyrics, his poems would lose all sense of authenticity. He knew how to exploit the blues form poetically in order to have a result that was effective as a poem.

As regards the structure of his poems, Hughes used a variety of blues stanzas. He wrote his poems borrowing the standard AAB classic blues structure and wrote verses within elaborate structures of different free verse stanzas as well.

In the first case, Hughes transports the blues stanza into the poem. In blues songs, the typical structure of an individual verse is AAB (two analogous lines followed by a contrasting line). Hughes cuts each line in half, so six lines are created out of three. As a result, lines 1-2 function as the twelve-bar blues stanza's first line, lines 3-4 as the repeat line, and lines 5-6 fulfill the role of the response line. This pattern is frequently maintained throughout the poem. Chinitz remarks that writing out the blues in half-lines thanks to the use of enjambment, allow the line breaks to reflect nuances of oral performance, such as breaths and vocal pauses. This strategy also "heightens expectations of the syntactical conclusion, paralleling a harmonic resolution in the music" (Chinitz 1996, 186). In "Lament Over Love", the dividing of the blues lines serves to accentuate the tormented lament of a woman who has been abandoned by her lover and is thinking about ways to commit suicide.

I hope my child'll
Never love a man.
I say I hope my child'll
Never love a man.
Love can hurt you
Mo'n anything else can.

I'm goin' down to the river
An' I ain't goin' there to swim;
Down to the river,
Ain't goin' there to swim.
My true love's left me
And I'm goin' there to think about him.

Love is like whiskey,
Love is like red, red wine.
Love is like whiskey,

Like sweet red wine.
If you want to be happy
You got to love all the time.

I'm goin' up in a tower
Tall as a tree is tall,
Up in a tower
Tall as a tree is tall.
Gonna think about my man—
And let my fool-self fall.

“Lament over Love”, 1927

Hughes also quotes actual blues lyrics in inverted commas in his foundational blues poem “The Weary Blues” and many others. The metrical structure of blues does not mutate, as meter, tempo and rhythmic aspects remain unaltered. What changes, as mentioned before, is the way Hughes decides to organize the lyrics on the page. In this poem, the poet wanders down Harlem’s Lenox Avenue at night and hears a pianist singing the blues.

He played a few chords then he sang some more—
 “I got the Weary Blues
 And I can’t be satisfied.
 Got the Weary Blues
 And can’t be satisfied—
 I ain’t happy no mo’
 And I wish that I had died.”

“The Weary Blues”, 1926

On the other hand, “Lenox Avenue: Midnight” exemplifies Hughes’ experimentation with rhythmic free verses. The poem is a fourteen-line poem that is contained within 3 stanzas of text, where the refrain is repeated twice and occupies the first and last stanza. The lines do not make use of a specific rhyme scheme (the only rhyme is pain-rain) or metrical pattern. They also range in length, with the shortest being only one word and the longest seven words. The longer verses present unaccented

syllables followed by accented syllables, creating a iambic rhythm, broken up by trochees – one stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable.

The rhythm of life
Is a jazz rhythm,
Honey.
The gods are laughing at us.

The broken heart of love,
The weary, weary heart of pain, –
 Overtones,
 Undertones,
To the rumble of streets cars,
To the swish of rain.

Lenox Avenue,
Honey.
Midnight,
And the gods are laughing at us.

“Lenox Avenue: Midnight”, 1926

As a rule, rhythm is an essential component of all poems, but notable is the fact that in blues poems the rhythm wants to recall a particular form of music; its beat, its drums, the feet stomping on the ground, the sound of the voice of the singer and their accompaniment. By reading a Langston Hughes’ blues poem aloud, it can be noticed that in general the poem’s verbal rhythms are similar to those of a classic blues: “four steady metrical beats in each line, spiced with syncopated rhythmic patterns created by the syllables in between the feet/pulses”, it is to say, “irregular syllabic patterns over a regular beat” (Huang 2011, 12-15). In addition to quick changes in rhythm and strong accents, musical elements may include rhythmic repetition of word and phrases that when repeated in different stanzas, they can function as a refrain.

Hughes’ “Song for a banjo dance”, included in the first collection of poems *The Weary Blues*, presents a notable degree of musicality, to the point that we could say that it has a 4/4-time signature beat. For its rhythm and rhymes, it is easy to imagine this poem being sung. Indeed, the method applied by Hughes for writing blues poems

constituted in humming verses he came up with before writing them down. Here is an extract from the poem.

Sun's going down this evening –
Might never rise no mo'.
The sun's going down this very night –
Might never rise no mo' –
So dance with swift feet, honey,
(The banjo's sobbing low)
Dance with swift feet, honey –
Might never dance no mo'.

"Song for a Banjo Dance", 1926

Meta DuEwa Jones praised the stylistic features applied by Hughes as "genre-breaking and technically innovative" (Jones 2002, 1146). Indeed, Hughes goes beyond basic linguistic resources as stress, alliteration, anaphora, consonance, etc. However, we must recognize that Hughes' poems are not full of "delicately calculated formal devices", as Hughes "would rather have his blues poems under- than overdressed" (Chinitz 1996, 180-84).

Some of the effective strategies that have not already been mentioned have to do with typography. Hughes took advantage of the options available of the style and appearance of printed matter, such as italics, indentation, the use of capital letters and punctuation. These recurses are used "to simulate the characteristics of oral performance and to achieve certain visual and aural effects" (Chinitz 1996, 185).

Verses in italic in between stanzas in roman, suggest that they are lyrics of a song, creating a musical interlude. In this extract from the poem "To Midnight Nan at Leroy's", it can be noted that even though it is silent poetry, music starts to play in the reader's head.

Sing your Blues song,
Pretty baby.
You want lovin'
And you don't mean maybe.

Jungle lover. . . .
Night black boy. . . .
Two against the moon
And the moon was joy.

“To Midnight Nan at Leroy’s”, 1926

Hughes’ verses are often arranged freely on the page, as to make stanzas more energetic and livelier. Verses are not chaotic and disorganized, simply the space between the margin and the start of the lines can vary according to an arranged order.

Shake your brown feet, honey
Shake your brown feet, chile,
Shake your brown feet, honey,
Shake ‘em swift and wil’ –
 Get way back, honey,
 Do that low-down step.
 Walk on over, darling,
 Now! Come out
 With your left.
Shake your brown feet, honey,
Shake ‘em, honey chile.
[...]

“Song for a Banjo Dance”, 1926

The use of capital letters can indicate a change in pitch, creating a crescendo of the voice.

Sleek black boys in a cabaret.
Jazz-band, jazz band, –
Play, pLAY, PLAY!
Tomorrow. . . . who knows?
Dance today!
[...]

“Harlem Night Club”, 1926

The three period-ellipsis seem to be one of the most recurring stylistic devices. The suspension points serve to emphasize the words and introduce a more human voice to the piece. Hyphens are very frequent, too, and indicate a pause, an unfinished thought, or a line break.

[...]
Low . . . slow
Slow . . . low –
Stirs your blood.
Dance!
[...]

“Dance Africaine”, 1926

Innovative is also the fact that some of Hughes’ later writings were written specifically to be performed with blues and jazz accompaniment. Meta DuEwa Jones reports Paul Engle’s remark on Hughes poetry: “Hughes has written these poems essentially for reading to music. They must be wholly alive and diverting that way. On the page, they are less so” (Engle in Jones 2002, 1151). The perceived effect of listening to a recording performance of Hughes’ poems, compared to reading the poems in silence, naturally differs. Nonetheless, reading the poems with no musical accompaniment does not make the poem less than what it is. Hughes’ reading performances reflect the participative nature of blues, with the call and response. Hao Huang notes that:

Hughes thinks of his voice as making an equivalent contribution to a jazz performance as the musicians, by enunciating his words in dialogue with instrumental improvisations. Thus poetry and music share the act of listening and responding, bridging the divide between the reciting poet and the performing musician.

(Huang 2011, 23)

Blues poems transports the reader into another dimension: the dimension of the blues. Langston Hughes spent a lot of time in night clubs and cabarets in the French capital or in Harlem. In his first autobiography he describes the scenery of the night club Grand Duc in Paris:

Blues in the rue Pigalle. Black and laughing, heartbreaking blues in the Paris dawn, pounding like a pulsebeat, moving like Mississippi!

(Hughes 1993, 162)

The lived experience of black night life is perfectly captured in Hughes' poems; leaving the impression that we can hear the music in the background, and perceive the vibrant energy of black performers, singing and dancing. Many of Hughes poems are rich in details that appeal to the five senses that permit an illusory sensation of hearing the blues. In Hughes' poems written in the manner of the blues, sensory details of hearing are reported: "the jazz band playing", "poor piano moan", "sad raggy tune", "the music's soft and wil'", "the banjo's sobbing low", "singing minor melodies", "a drowsy syncopated tune" and onomatopoeic sounds such as "thump thump thump". Also, the depictions of "Harlem roof-tops", Harlem's cabarets, cellars, night clubs "down on Lenox Avenue"; and pianists, blues singers, jazz-bands, dancers and "brown skin steppers" assist to create a vivid scenery of the scenes and the sounds of the night life of African Americans. "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 A. M.)" perfectly portrays the ambience of the cabaret and the jamming sessions that continued until dawn. The lyrics of a song are written in capital letters and are interspersed with a dialogue of two lovers, reported in lowercase. The reader is absorbed in the environment, being able to hear the music playing and the chatting in the background.

[...]
EVERYBODY
Yes?
WANTS MY BABY
I'm your
BUT MY BABY
sweetie, ain't I?
DON'T WANT NOBODY

Sure.
BUT
Then let's
ME,
do it!
[...]

“The Cat and the Saxophone”, 1926

David Chinitz said that “Hughes is determined to write lyrics more like the blues than the blues themselves” (Chinitz 1996, 179). Indeed, Hughes’ blues poems contain plenty of key words belonging to the world of jazz and blues, and idiomatic images frequently recurring in blues songs, such as the knife that vindicate infidelity, the railroad that suggests desertion, the river as the place to end all sorrows, etc. However, Hughes “frequently gives these traditional elements a new twist, turning them to his own purposes” (Chinitz 1996, 190).

Not only does Hughes’ poetic language reflect the musical tradition of blues and jazz, but it also displays African American vernacular culture. Hughes employs rural African American Vernacular English (AAVE), distancing himself from the conventional poetic language. Varieties of AAVE have been continuously maintained for up to three centuries, transitioning from earlier slave and sharecropping communities into predominantly African American, independent communities (see Wolfram 2020). In view of this, the use of rural black dialect within the blues stanza allowed Hughes to portray African Americans folk “in a language and form that approached, perhaps to a maximal degree, their own cultural idiom” (Chinitz 1996, 191).

[...]
De po' house is lonely
An' de grave is cold.
O, de po' house is lonely,
De graveyard grave is cold.
But I'd rather be dead than
To be ugly an' old.

When love is gone what
Can a young gal do?

When love is gone, O,
What can a young gal do?
Keep on a-lovin' me, daddy,
Cause I don't want to be blue.

“Young Gal’s Blues”, 1927

For many critics the use of black dialect and simple language in Hughes’ verse made of him an “unsophisticated and provincial poet” of “plain, easy to understand language” (Forbes in Jones 2002, 1147). But after all, for Hughes it was ultimately necessary to depict African American speech patterns in order to express the soul of the black experience. Hughes, referred to by Jones as a “poet speaking through the dialect form from the heart of his race” (Jones 2002, 1150), was also trying “to incorporate the idioms and nuances of traditional Black culture into a modern artistic vernacular” (Farrell, Johnson in Huang 2011, 1151).

By speaking in Harlem’s recognizable accents, Hughes was able of capturing moments of the life of African Americans and racially represent this group as a writer. Hughes accomplished the adaptation of blues to poetry “not only by imitating, but also by Signifyin(g) the blues” (Huang 2011, 22), creating poems that capture Hughes’ pride in African American culture, reflect the everyday life of African American workers and convey the sound of African American speech patterns.

CHAPTER 3 – Kevin Young

3.1. Biography

Kevin Young is an award-winning poet as well as an essayist, editor, professor, and curator. His poetry, drawing from and deepening the African American poetic tradition, makes Young widely regarded as one of the leading poets of his generation.

Kevin Young was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1970. As a kid, he moved six times, due to the careers of both his parents. He then lived in Topeka, Kansas, until he went to college. Young confessed that he feels a connection “to the black folks who live [t]here”, mentioning that Langston Hughes grew up partly in Kansas too, and Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka (Young in Arnold 2006, 186). Young now lives in New York.

Kevin Young did not begin writing seriously until his freshman year in high school, when he took a creative writing class. His father was a doctor and his mother a chemist, so Young drew closer to poetry on his own, even though at first, he did not see poetry as a career path (see Gilsdorf 2007). After High school, he furthered his studies at the University of Harvard, majoring in English and American Literature. At the age of nineteen, Young won the first prize in the 1989 Academy of American Poets College Poetry Awards. As a student, he studied under Seamus Heaney and Lucie Brok-Broido, who recognized Young’s talent. Brok-Broido’s remark on Young’s poetry was reported in the *Harvard Gazette*: “he already has a vision and the freedom to express it. There’s something urgent about his poems and each is fixed in its idea” (Brok-Broido in Wulf 1989, 7). In the same article, it is reported that Young’s inspiring role model was the poet and lecturer Marie Howe. While a student at Harvard, Young also joined the Dark Room Collective, a community of young African American writers, artists and filmmakers, that gave him the chance to live in a vibrant arts community. After his bachelor’s degree, he was awarded a Stagner Fellowship from Stanford University. At the Stagner there was not any specific course of study, so Young had the opportunity to “explore new voices” and to “dream up things and write manifestoes and really make a tradition for myself”. Thus, Young spent a period of time learning about 1960s Black Arts and diving into the physical tradition of books. During this time, he found a first edition of *Ask Yo Mama* by Langston Hughes, which constituted a big source of inspiration and still is one of Young’s

favorite books (see Rowell, Young 1998, 50-53). Later, Young earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Brown University.

In 1995, Young published his first poetry collection, *Most Way Home*, winner of the National Poetry Series and the Zacharis First Book Award. Lucille Clifton, who selected Young's collection for the National Poetry Series, said of Young:

This poet's gift of storytelling and understanding of the music inherent in the oral tradition of language recreates for us an inner history which is compelling and authentic and American.

(Clifton in Lee 1996).

Young worked at the University of Georgia and from 2001 to 2005, as the Ruth Lilly Professor of Poetry at Indiana University. Subsequently, Young moved to Emory University, where he has been named University Distinguished Professor. For a decade (from 2005 to 2016) he had been curator of the Raymond Danowski Poetry Library at Emory University, which contains a large collection of first and rare editions of poetry. From 2016 to 2021, Young had the role of director at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (Kevin Young 2022).

After his first collection of poems, Young's production continues with *To Repel Ghosts* (2001), which delves into Jean-Michel Basquiat's paintings; *Jelly Roll* (2003), a collection of blues poems; and *Black Maria* (2005), which draws inspiration from film noir. These three collections of poetry form what Young calls in a 2006 interview with *Ploughshares* "an American trilogy" called *Devil's Music* (see Arnold 2005, 188).

His collection of poems *Jelly Roll* was a finalist for the National Book Award and *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, and winner of the Paterson Poetry Prize. His prolific creation makes Young a winning author of five collection of poetry. His twelve authored collections of poetry include *For The Confederate Dead* (2007), *Dear Darkness* (2008), *Ardency: A Chronicle of the Amistad Rebels* (2011), winner of an American Book Award; *Book of Hours* (2014), a finalist for the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award and winner of the Lenore Marshall Prize for Poetry from the Academy of American Poets; *Blue Laws: Selected & Uncollected Poems 1995-2015* (2016), longlisted for the National Book Award; *Brown* (2018) and *Stones* (2021), which was enlisted for the 2021 TS Eliot Prize

(see Kevin Young 2022). Kevin Young is also editor of many volumes, as well as writer for magazines such as *New York Times Book Review*, *Callaloo* and *Ploughshares*. In 2017 he was named poetry editor of *The New Yorker*. Furthermore, he writes for museums in Los Angeles and Minneapolis. Young does not limit himself to poetry. Of great impact are his two nonfiction books: *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (2012) and *Bunk* (2017), which won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in Nonfiction.

Kevin Young is committed to keep on supporting the poetic tradition, making sure it is still alive. With his words and versatile style, Kevin Young moves through history, sifting through the past and the present, intertwining poetry with visual art, literature, and music.

3.2. Reminiscing history and Langston Hughes

Most people don't think of black folks when they think Kansas; fewer would dream of poetry. However, as a fellow Topekan, I feel a special connection to Hughes & this early & by all accounts alienating portion of his life.

(Young 1997, 157)

Kevin Young once stated that he feels connected to Langston Hughes, as both have grown up partly in Topeka, Kansas. For Young, his own cultural background represents an important source of inspiration. By reading his work, it can be noticed that *home* is a theme often featured in his poems. To give an instance, the collection *Most Way Home* and *Dear Darkness* are rich in memories of his Louisiana family, and one part of *Brown* (On the Aitchison, Topeka & The Santa Fe) is dedicated to poems about his boyhood in Topeka.

On the other hand, rarely have Hughes dealt explicitly with his environmental background in his poems. Young noted that he strived to be impersonal and to focus more on others than himself. For this reason, Young defined the nature of Hughes' work as "unautobiographical" (Young 1997, 160). Nonetheless, Young also observed that "something in his poems' easygoing yet reserved tone feels forged from that Kansas background" (Young 1997, 157). Young, "as a fellow Topekan", can grasp certain aspects of Hughes poetry that many would not pay heed to, thus possesses a key to

understanding accessible especially to people who have lived there. The ones who have grown up in Kansas know that the upbringing there is “alienating”: it has been like this for both Young and Hughes, in spite of being born in different generations.

It is important to note that Topeka’s population in 1960 was 91.8% White and 7.7% Black according to the Census Bureau (United States Census Bureau 2012), and that minority struggled for a long time with the burden of racial discrimination. Young affirmed:

It’s so visible here where those white people in town who have your same last name are basically the other half of your family who would never acknowledge that. But we all know what happened.

(Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 46)

Hughes navigates through history in a great number of poems but proceeded in impersonal ways. Young perceived in Hughes an inclination to distance himself from his own background and called Hughes’ poetry “poetic of refusal”. Young asserted:

This painful Kansas past helps explain the "distance" sometimes found in his poems, as well as their underlying melancholy. In many ways, this ironic distance simply recasts a blues aesthetic.

(Young 1997, 157)

As evidenced by his body of work, Hughes is undoubtedly committed to show the realness of his “race” and its culture, but “appears to give virtually nothing away of a personal nature” (Rampersad cited in Young 1997, 159).

At the beginning of his writing life, Young thought that this approach to poetry was to be preferred, as he felt like he “had to do something grander in a more shallow sense”. But eventually, these means blocked what Young really wanted to say. On that note, Young decided to write about his family and its “unique past, one I rarely saw in even black letters” (Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 44).

So, whereas Hughes wrote about his preference for his second collection of poems over his first “because it was more impersonal, more about other people than myself”

(Hughes cited in Young 1997, 160), Young asserted that with his own poetry, besides telling a story about the country that he grew up in, he is trying to tell a story about himself. (Young 2018b).

His first collection “comes out of the Southern tradition, both literary and folk based” (Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 43). Young explores his own family’s narratives, “showing an uncanny awareness of voice and persona” as he enacts the lives of people from the rural South, the way they talked, and the stories they told. (Arnold 2006, 188). But also revealing “the ways in which family history held silence, things that are unsaid” (Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 43). Young added:

the poem is not just about history, and the truth of untold history, but also, if you don't have a history, making it or remaking it for yourself. How to forge an ancestry, both literal & literary.

(Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 44)

Poems like “Saying Grace”, can evoke in readers their own kinship. Charles H. Rowell, an African American writer and founder of *Callaloo*, stated that at some point after reading various poems from *Most Way Home* “I almost start saying these are my people and our past. These are kinfolk” (Rowell, Young 1998, 48). Many poems from Young’s first collection can evoke in readers their own kinship. For instance, “Saying Grace”, dedicated to Young’s mother, is in the voice of a woman who narrates in first person the poor conditions of life in the rural South during the times of the civil war as she was a little girl. Many readers who heard similar stories from their parents or grandparents – or experienced it in first person – can resonate with the poem and discover themselves in it. The verses appear to have the character of prose, as they present the ordinary form of spoken language rather than poetry. However, such prosaic verses are adorned with poetic devices, such as similes and imagery. Young’s intention was to replicate the way people of the South talked and the stories they told, without, by all means, romanticizing sharecropping and segregation. The speaker recounts:

[...] The money was bad

like all money then, not near

as green or wide. Three dollars
for a hundred pounds, better part

of the day. I barely kept up, hands swole up
like unpicked fruit. No matter when
she started, Frankie plucked fifteen pounds

more, food for two, a new
Easter dress. Summer I turned
so black & bent, all because I'd rather

pick with friends than sling weeds
alone, than stuff my mattress green.
[...]

“Saying Grace”, 1995

Another instance of Young moving through history in a very personal way is exemplified with *Brown*. This collection of poems is divided in two sections: home recordings and field recordings. The first section alludes to his home in Kansas and the second one recalls the South and the Great Migration from the South (Young 2018a). *Brown* is about “different type of brownness” (Young 2018b) where “brown” is also intended as surname, as the poems feature cultural icons surnamed Brown, such as the singer James Brown, the abolitionist leader John Brown and the educator and civil rights activist Linda Carol Brown. The poem “Brown” is dedicated to Linda Brown, who had been a crucial figure in the civil rights movement, as she became the center on the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education*. Linda Brown was in third grade in 1951, when her admission to the Sumner School in Topeka was turned down due to her race. In 1954, the Supreme Court ordered the end of state-mandated racial segregation of public schools. In the poem, Linda’s father asks the school principal why her daughter’s admission had been rejected. This Kansas case then extends throughout the United States and “Little Linda” becomes “more”, she becomes “an idea”, triggering “a revolution in civil rights law and in the political leverage available to blacks in and out court” (see Bell 1980, 518). Here follows an extract from the poem.

We’re watched over

in the antechamber

by Rev

Oliver Brown,
his small, colored picture

nailed slanted
to the wall – former
pastor of St. Mark’s

who marched
into that principal’s office
in Topeka to ask

why can’t my daughter
school here, just
steps from our house –

but well knew the answer –
& Little Linda
became an idea, became more

what we needed & not
a girl no more – *Free-dom*
Free-dom –

“Brown”, 2018

Kevin Young told in an interview for GBH that Linda Brown used to play the piano at a church in Topeka when he was little. Young called to mind that “when she sang, she really came alive”. Young feels touched and awestruck by having met a woman who made history. With “Brown” Young meant “to capture the way history could be written in front of you, singing” (Young 2018b). Young’s poetry effectively makes us realize how culture shape personal experience and how history is invariably created from people’s personal experiences that can be very close to us. Young, indeed said that his intent was to show that “history wasn’t something far off, it was something personal, intimate” (Young 2018b).

Young is also interested in “the sense of history in jazz” (Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 52). Music carries historical meanings, in the way it reflects the socio-historical surroundings and in the way it can advance change. Young said that musicians such as Count Basie, B.B. King and James Brown, along with many other cultural icons, “are the people who changed the world around us and changed the culture” (Young 2018a). Young’s fascination for jazz grew while being a student at Stanford University, where he hung out at the jazz clubs in San Francisco, which helped him with certain aspects of his aesthetic. Kevin Young asserted that “jazz is crucial for black poetry” (Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 51), so it inevitably manifests in his poetry.

Kevin Young have been strongly influenced by Langston Hughes, whose autobiography *The Big Sea* is referred to by him as a “book which changed my life” (Young 1997, 161-62). Young’s kinetic, vibrant poems, often shaped by other art forms, echo Hughes’ lively and bluesy tones, spiced with Young’s language and distinctive style. In *Jelly Roll*, the first section of poems honor Hughes, being introduced by a verse of “When Sue Wears Red”. His collection *To Repel Ghosts* includes a poem dedicated to Langston Hughes, addressing him as a saint, asking him to bring news from heaven and to sing “them weary blues”. In the poem, qualities of both gospel and blues can be noticed. “Intentional stutters and hesitations, repetitions of words and phrases, and the interjection of exclamatory phrases and sounds” (Williams 1977, 544) are reproduced in the poetic text to echo vocal techniques used in the spirituals and blues, and as to facilitate emotional involvement. Hughes is addressed with a series of apostrophes throughout the poem, often in capital letters. Young plays with typography, using capital letters to evoke a loud voice, and frequent break lines to create short, bouncy, yet drowsy lines. The sounds of trumpets and bells which made Hughes’ poems so lively and musical are playing no more, since Hughes “quit town”. The poem represents an ode to Langston Hughes, reminiscing his blues poems, and unfailingly conferring the weary atmosphere of the blues genre.

LANGSTON HUGHES
LANGSTON HUGHES
O come now
& sang
them weary blues –

Been tired here
feelin low down
 Real
 tired here
since you quit town

Our ears no longer trumpets
Our mouths no more bells
 FAMOUS POET©
 Busboy – Do tell
us of hell –

Mr Shakespeare in Harlem
Mr Theme for English B
 Preach on
 kind sir
of death, if it please –

We got no more promise
We only got ain't
 Let us in
 on how
you 'came a saint

LANGSTON
LANGSTON
 LANGSTON HUGHES
 Won't you send
all heaven's news

“Langston Hughes”, 2005

Kevin Young's poems take inspiration from different art forms, not only music. In *Black Maria* he is influenced by film noir and *To Repel Ghosts* explores Jean-Michel Basquiat's paintings. Basquiat's art bestowed to Young a sense of history and music that he could not have gotten “through any other artist” (Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 53). Moreover, in *Brown* there are a lot of sport references: black athletes like Hank Aaron

and Arthur Ashe make an appearance in the poems. In essence, Young's poetry intertwines poetry with other arts, which overlap in his imagination. Young claimed that:

I wouldn't say I was necessarily just interested in these other art forms, whether it's the blues or film noir . . . I was really more interested in the icons of that, and the structure, and how you can play with the structure to get at, I wouldn't say deeper meanings, but some of the similar kind of meanings.

(Young in Arnold 2006, 188)

To summarize, with his poetry, Kevin Young explores – and exposes – his memories from his family and childhood and the history of the United States. Furthermore, he celebrates black culture, giving honor to important figures inspiring to him, from Langston Hughes to Jean-Michel Basquiat. Drawing inspirations from various art forms, Young “plays with the structure” of his poems.

3.3. The language of blues

Jazz, after all, is another way of talking.

(Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 51)

Kevin Young, with his poems, reveals his fondness of music. He grew up listening to James Brown, B.B King and other great artists in the scene of blues and rock and roll. Referring to the blues pioneers, Young said that “to love music is to love those singers”, who are “America inventors” (Kevin Young 2018a). As a matter of fact, blues is representative of African American culture, by all means *American* culture. On the grounds of this, Young stated that blues and jazz are “crucial for black poetry” (Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 51). Adapting the genre of blues to poetry was not an endeavor for Young, as the blues naturally – almost instinctively – manifested in his poems. The process was natural, maybe since Young was not the first poet to work with this matter. Most importantly, this is due to the fact that music to him is “another way of talking” and Young knows how to speak its language.

A great part of the poems in *Jelly Roll*, *Dear Darkness* and in other collections are dedicated to the theme of the blues, the ragtime, the boogie-woogie, and other music genres and styles. Most of the poems' titles are words belonging to the world of music, such as "Jitterbug", "Swing", "Prelude", "Nocturne", "Blues", "Player Piano", "Funk", etc. In all his production, Young does not limit himself to one or a couple of music genres, stretching from jazz and ragtime to hip-hop and rock. But the blues, particularly, is a recurring subject. Many poems are titled as blues tunes, for example "Late Blues", "Black Cat Blues", "Dead Daddy Blues", "Yellow Dog Blues", etc.

Some poems hint the rhythms of Langston Hughes, for their form and mood. Young's blues poems, however, tend to convey preeminently the humor and the bittersweet irony of blues lyrics more than blues sound and environment.

The verses of "Disaster Movie Theme Song" convey the impression of a blues song, which is the soundtrack of a series of unfortunate events. The nine stanzas of the poem present the character of traditional blues verses, in twelve bar and with the typical repeated first line, and the third line developing the idea presented in the previous lines. The first line is repeated with a slight variation in the following one, in which the phrase "I say" recalls blues verses, such as Jefferson's: "I walked from Dallas, I walked to Wichita Falls/ I say, I walked from Dallas, I walked to Wichita Falls". Young, in the same manner as Hughes, breaks the blues lines in half.

Winding back roads
I believe in you

Winding muddy back roads
I say I believe in you

Wheels got stuck baby
What good's belief do
[...]

"Disaster Movie Theme Song", 2003

In general, Young's blues poems are more focused on reproducing the attitude of the blues. In actual fact, the attitude of the blues is plural, as many songs are essentially

desperation set to music, while other blues tunes are feel-good songs – despite often constituting a mask to despair. Thus, some of Young’s blues poems are dark and tragic, and others tell funny stories, presenting exaggeration and hyperboles. In both cases, the speaker in the poems is unlucky and dramatic about their situation.

“Last Ditch Blues” is one of the finest examples of the agony of blues set to poetry. The poem contains recurring images of blues songs, such as the spider, as a metaphor of depression that crawls up the walls in songs like “Black Spider Blues” by Sylvester Weaver. Poison is another recurring element in blues lyrics. In the poem the speaker tries to drink strychnine, to kill themselves, in the style of The Sonics’ song “Strychnine”: “Some folks like water/ Some folks like wine/ But I like the taste/ Of straight strychnine”. Moreover, the railroad has a special place in the blues: it represents travel, escape, returning, and the end of life on its ties. Weariness, and a strong and desperate desire to die transpires throughout the poem, displaying the most miserable opening, a hyperbole which has also something comical in its excess: “Even death/ don’t want me”. In fact, the speaker of the poem attempted suicide several times, yet their name still is not on the obit page in the news. The typical desperation of blues songs is taken to the extreme, on paper. The break lines and the short verses – sometimes isolated, as the world “tired” – emphasize the painful torment.

Even Death
don't want me.

Spiders in my shoes.

Even God.

I tried
drinking strychnine

Or going to sleep
neath the railroad ties –

Always the light
found me first.

The Law.

Put me under arrest
for assaulting a freight –

Disturbing what peace.

(Turns out it
was only strych-eight.)

Tired of digging
my own grave.

Tired.

Spiders in my shoes.

The paperboy only
sold me bad news.

And wet at that.

The obit page said:
Not Today.

The weather blue too

Stones all in my shoes.

“Last Ditch Blues”, 2008

In sharp contrast, in many blues poems Kevin Young uses a catchy tone and beat to suggest a funny story being told. His poem “Black Cat Blues” takes its title from a song by Sam Lightnin’ Hopkins. Lightnin’ Hopkins was a terrific storyteller, and in the song in question, recorded in 1953, there is a mix of the driving rhythms of blues with cheery tones of boogie-woogie. Kevin Young takes his mood, his playful humor, and the storytelling. In the poem, the speaker narrates that he was put on trial to find out the judge was his ex-wife, who sentenced him to remarry; but he would rather die or end in jail than go back with her. The rhythm and tempo of the poem recall blues structure, in particular Hopkins’ style.

I showed up for jury duty –
turns out the one on trial was me.

Paid me for my time & still
I couldn't make bail.

Judge that showed up
was my ex-wife.

Now that was some
hard time.

She sentenced me
to remarry.

I chose firing squad instead.
Wouldn't you know it –

Plenty of volunteers
to take the first shot

But no one wanted to spring
for the bullets.

Governor commuted my term to life
in a cell more comfortable

Than this here skin
I been living in.

“Black Cat Blues”, 2008

The storytelling aspect of the blues can be concentrated in a two-line poem, such as “Early Blues”. The tragedy of the blues, dealing with personal catastrophe, in Young’s poem is downsized.

Once I ordered a pair of shoes
But they never came.

“Early Blues”, 2003

Kevin Young proved to be able to accommodate blues to poetry not only by reproducing blues spirit and structure, but also by signifyin' the blues. In "Boasts" the speaker appears as the figure of the trickster, starts to boast, making subtle sexual innuendos, even though it is most likely that nobody asked about it in the first place. The voice in the poem talks with pride about his African origins, bragging about having invented the blues and having big feet. It recalls – not necessarily purposely – Hughes' poem "Negro", in which the speaker claims: "I've been a singer . . . I made ragtime". The first verses of "Boasts" introduce the image of a "black" Adam and the symbol of the southern and tropical palm, as suggestive of Africa. The speaker preens himself about one time in which he danced all night and invented the blues, almost in a casual and effortless way. After showing off his big feet – which could mean he is a good step dancer or that he is well-endowed – the speaker says that he is done with the bragging. It is a poem that honors the African American heritage, while maintaining a witty and jazzy tone:

Wouldn't be no fig leaf
if I was Adam

but a palm tree.

Once I danced all
night, till dawn

& I – who never
did get along –

decided to call a truce –
my body

buckets lighter
we shook hands

& called it blues.

Mama, I'm the man
with the most

biggest feet –
when I step out

my door to walk the dog
round the block

I'm done.

"Boasts", 2003

In his blues poems, Kevin Young adopts the "vernacular of the blues". According to him there are many vernaculars, and the challenge for him consists in reproducing the language, "whether it's the vernacular of the blues, or the vernacular of visual art, the sort of language of the everyday". Young stated that it is not always easy, and that sometimes the language can be "quite jarring and strange" (Young in Arnold 2006, 188). Nonetheless Young affirms that:

That's what I like in life and poetry, that kind of playfulness that exists, I think, in language and life as well.

(Young in Arnold 2006, 188)

Often, in Young blues poems, there are forms of African American Vernacular English, such as "tonite", "gal", "ain't" as an auxiliary or the "-s" in non-third person-singular such as "I needs". Young perceived that "the way people speak, especially black people", was often "misrepresented or over-simplified" in certain literary pieces. Thus, Young tries to represent dialect how it really is for him, by "hearing it, and being around it and speaking it" (Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 46). Young, referring to his first collection of poems, expressed his sense of vernacular and its implications.

... "the" becomes "de" and that's exactly what I didn't want in the book. I want to get a sense of how people spoke from the order of the words, the words they

would choose, the way things were aligned – I don't want no apostrophes or letters cut out of words. Because my sense of black vernacular was not that ... I think too often that dialect is represented as English with something missing. (Young in Rowell, Young 1998, 46)

For Kevin Young, a poem is made “of poetic and unpoetic language, or unexpected language” (Young in Arnold 2006, 188). Young’s language is indeed often “unexpected” as much as impressive. For his blues poems being in form, they never feel artificial or uptight. Young proceeds to make emerge through the lines the vernacular of blues, with its witty humor and tragic overtones. Not only do Young’s poems aspire to music, but they also transcend it. Young said that “the music of the poem is in the words. It’s not behind the words or in front of the words” (Young in Hinzen, 2014).

To sum up, for Young poetry is music by all means. He speaks the language of blues, by storytelling, telling tales, improvising, and “jazzing”.

Conclusion

This study argues that the blues absorbs the whole American experience. Whether it is a blues song, or a blues poem, the blues is, other than an aesthetic, a piece of history. The blues is a native American music, which has its roots in African musical tradition, and became in the African American community a vehicle for self-expression and self-affirmation. Blues musicians sang their experience in America in a song, which implies that the musical tradition of the genre also constitutes an historical testimony. Similarly, blues poets, such as Langston Hughes and Kevin Young, elaborate the blues heritage, honoring black culture, which is not about skin at all, but just *culture*.

Hughes's blues-inflected poetry balances the social conditions, the act of performing the blues and its musicality with the aid of linguistic resources and visual effects created by typography. His poetry is able of capturing candid moments of life, both joyful and drowsy. Young's operation to set blues to poetry appears different in some respects. Firstly, his approach interweaves through different decades and experiences. Secondly, Young's inspired poetry is more interested in the storytelling aspect of blues rather than its sounds. Both poets did an excellent job in adapting the blues genre to the form of poetry; without presenting transliterations of blues lyrics or simply a highly musical poem, but playing with the art craft, with the language and with the structure. All of this is done while talking about personal stories and public histories and maintaining their own identity as individuals.

This investigation bestowed me many keys to the understanding of African American culture and musical tradition. I also opened my ears to new musical nuances. By listening to today's R&B and hip-hop, I can perceive influences of the blues, also in lyrics, such as in Deante' Hitchcock's "Flashbacks" (2020). The mentioning of Langston Hughes' name in this song caught my attention when I first heard it: "I was young and confused, with nothin' to lose/ Better to be human than God, word to Langston Hughes". The lyrics refer to Hughes' poem "God": "Better to be human/ Than God – and lonely". This is just another proof of how Hughes' poetry has been meaningful for the African American poetic tradition and is still recognized and celebrated by younger generations. Most importantly, with his prolific creation Kevin Young will continue to deepen the

tradition pioneered by Langston Hughes, writing poems which read aloud like the best of blues and jazz.

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