Dream Politics in the Poetry of Langston Hughes

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Abstract: This essay explores the use of dreams in Langston Hughes's poetry. The dream, for Hughes, represents a wide array of psychic phenomena ranging from wishes to utopian visions. By analyzing Hughes's poems "Lament for Dark People," "Hope," "Freedom's Plow," and "Dream" the essay seeks to demonstrate Hughes' concern with the capacity of dreaming and the imagination to overturn structures of race and class oppression. Then essay compares Hughes' utopian perspective on the power and potential of dreams to the tragic perspective of Freud. It suggests that Hughes, while skeptical of the more self-serving aspects of traditional African American dream interpretation, sought to combine the best of these African American folk methodologies with elements of the philosophical materialism of Marx and Freud. The result is a kind of oneiric materialism that views dreams as immanent, material objects that embody utopian possibilities.

Key words: Langston Hughes poetry dream politics

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标题:兰斯顿·休斯诗歌中的梦想政治

内容提要:在兰斯顿·休斯诗歌中,作为一种心理现象的梦想有着丰富的内涵:从希望的表达到乌托邦的构想。通过分析休斯的诗歌:"深色人种的悲歌"、"希望"、"自由的耕耘"和"梦想",本文揭示休斯对梦想的多层含义的关注和他颠覆种族和阶级压迫的理想。休斯借助梦想表达他乌托邦式的构想而弗洛伊德悲观地认为梦想应该疗治人类的精神创伤。休斯质疑非裔美国文化传统中梦想的预言性功能,他认为应该将非裔美国文化的精华和马克思唯物主义哲学、弗洛伊德学说结合。其结果就是将梦想视为具有乌托邦精神的客观事务。

关键词:兰斯顿·休斯 诗歌 梦想政治

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Langston Hughes was obsessed with dreams. Of the 879 poems in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, seventy-four make explicit reference to dreams. A number of the titles of Hughes' poems play with a variation on the word "dream," such

as "Dream," "Dreams," "Dream Variations," "Dream Boogie," "Dream Boogie: Variation," "Dream Dust," "The Dream Keeper," "Dream of Freedom," "Dreamer," "I Dream a World," "Montage of a Dream Deferred," and "Slum Dreams." Most often in Hughes's poetry, the word "dream" does not refer to dreams in the literal sense, but rather in the metaphorical sense of hope and aspirations. Sometimes these aspirations are personal, as in the poem "Deferred" where we are allowed to listen in on speakers who dream of earning a high school diploma, owning a white enamel stove, studying French, and buying two suits at once, among other things (Hughes 413). At other times, the aspirations to which Hughes refers are clearly social and utopian, as in his famous, "I Dream a World." Although most of his poems focus on the daytime aspirations of black folk, several of his poems such as "Dream," "Beale Street," and "Nightmare Boogie" take night dreams for their subject matter (Hughes 173, 418). Why, one might ask, do dreams figure so prominently in Hughes's oeuvre? For Hughes, I would argue, "the dream" is a generic signifier, a placeholder if you will, for a wide array of psychic phenomena ranging from the smallest and seemingly most inconsequential wishes to the grandest utopian visions. Primarily focused on the dreams of oppressed people, especially people of color, Hughes' poetry celebrates the capacity of dream-power to overturn established structures of race and class oppression. In the poetic vision of Langston Hughes, dreams can be deferred, but they can't be stopped; they represent the irrepressible human desire to build a world based upon an ideal of social justice.

Hughes interest in dreams dates from the Harlem Renaissance, and coincides with the popularization of Freudian psychoanalysis in the United States. Accordingly, this paper will demonstrate the ways that Hughes borrows from Freud's insights into dreams while simultaneously revising them to suit the hopes and aspirations of the African American community on whose behalf he wrote.

While the writers of the Harlem Renaissance attempted to celebrate what they saw as the vitality of black folk culture and thereby both forge and reflect a collective subjectivity that would come to be called, "The New Negro;" Freudian psychoanalysis concerned itself with attending to the spiritual malaise that accompanied the rationalization and disenchantment of Euro-American lifeworlds as western societies grappled with capitalism, imperialism, and a catastrophic global war. Langston Hughes, like his contemporaries, the Surrealists, was interested in the subversive power of the dream; Freud, by contrast, was far too cynical to embrace such utopian possibilities. Indeed, Freud's social vision might best be described as "tragic," inasmuch that he believed that the best that psychoanalysis could contribute to healing the wounds of modern society was to transform neurotic suffering into common unhappiness. Freud saw the minor rebellions of individual neurotic subjects as losing battles waged against the exigencies of a reality principle organized around order and production. The social repression Freud describes in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) is not something to be resisted, but rather something that one ultimately accepts as necessary to the functioning of any civilized society. Thus, instead of celebrating the dream, Freud sought to extend the rationalizing trends of western societies into the recalcitrant deep structures of human consciousness. He described this aspect of psychoanalysis with

the formulation: "Where id was, there ego shall be."

As one of the victims of the imperialistic shadow of European civilization, Langston Hughes presented a very different perspective. In "Lament for Dark Peoples," he provides a concise description of what "civilization" has meant for oppressed people of color.

I was a red man one time,
But the white men came.
I was a black man, too,
But the white men came.

They drove me out of the forest.
They took me away from the jungles.
I lost my trees.
I lost my silver moons.

Now they've caged me
In the circus of civilization.
Now I herd with the many—
Caged in the circus of civilization. (39)

In this poem, civilization is synonymous with the erasure of indigenous identities and the colonization of Africa and the Americas. The red man and the black man are now forced to speak of the cultural self-sameness of their pre-colonial identities in the past tense ("I was a red man... I was a black man") as these identities and the cultures in which they are grounded are now bracketed, interrupted, contradicted, and surrounded by historical forces that Hughes condenses into the initially non-threatening observation: "But the white men came." The neutrality of this account of arrival, however, is itself erased once we situate it in the well-known narrative of European colonization. Then we realize that it is only a metonymic part of a larger series in which white men not only come, but see and conquer as well.

The second stanza is emblematic of the "racial mountain" that Hughes and other artists of the Harlem Renaissance faced as they attempted to articulate a critique of slavery, imperialism, and colonization using language and images acquired from Euro-American primitivism's backhanded celebration of indigenous cultures. Inasmuch as this stanza associates black and red people exclusively with forests, jungles, trees, and moons, it unwittingly mirrors and reproduces the logic of the apologists of European colonization, who held that indigenous people occupied the wrong side of a supposes nature/culture divide, and were therefore in need of the "civilizing mission" of the colonizers. And yet, this stanza is not primarily about indigenous people's relation to culture, it is about loss. Even as it labors under the weight of primitivist distortions, its critique of colonization can be heard in its choice of the verbs "drive," "take," and "lose." While Freud, writing from the metropolis of European civilization, can speak of the loss of pleasure, freedom, and desire as the regrettable but

necessary sacrifices of modern life. The indigenous and African diasporic perspective from which Hughes writes "Lament for Dark Peoples" unmasks the violence and greed lurking behind the passive agentlessness of the euphemism "loss." Loss, from the perspective of "Lament" cannot be thought of apart from the "driving" of people and "taking" of land that accompanied the expansion of European "civilization" to Africa and the Americas. And civilization itself, as we see in the third stanza, cannot be thought of in purely celebratory terms either.

As if revisiting, the perhaps necessary but problematic primitivist images that he uses to critique European colonization in the second stanza; in the third stanza, Hughes describes the way that African and Native American identities get redefined by their encounter with the west. The special relationship they once shared with nature is now turned against them as they are deprived of their personhood and "caged" and "herded" like animals for the entertainment of whites. Hughes's choice of the circus as metaphor for European civilization is as interesting as it is ambivalent. On the one hand, it invokes the manic energy and joyful discovery that underlay what used to be referred to as the "Age of Exploration," while at the same time drawing attention to the exploitation and dehumanization that red and black people suffered as a result of these historical forces. The circus not only perpetuates that exploitation but offers it up to Euro-American spectators in the form of entertainment. Such an analysis has application to a wide array of colonial era cultural phenomena ranging from primitivism in the arts to the zoological exhibition of Sara Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus. Hughes's metaphor of civilization as circus disrupts traditional oppositions between barbarism and civilization, and reminds us of Walter Benjamin's observation that "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256).

The spiritual aspects of dreaming and dream interpretation most familiar to Hughes would have come from what Anthony Shafton calls the African American "way with dreams," a tradition that originated in Africa and is characterized by "the importance placed on ancestor dreams, the predictive use of dreams, the fluidity of boundaries between dreams and other states of consciousness, such as visions, and the spirituality of dreams" (11). While Hughes as an African American whose greatest inspirations came from dreams, the Blues, and black vernacular cultural practices was certainly influenced by this tradition, he was not bound by it. Instead, Hughes approached dreams from a perspective I would like to refer to as oneiric materialism. Unlike the materialism Freud demonstrates in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Hughes's materialism does not so much seek to negate the spirituality of dreams, as to give this spirituality practical, material application. However, for Hughes, there are good and bad uses of dreams. Hughes celebrates dreams that offer us a vision of a better society, but he is critical of those who would use dreams to exploit others and seek personal gain. Indeed, Hughes was particularly skeptical of the popular tradition within African American communities of using predictive dreams to gamble or play numbers. In the short poem "Hope," for instance, we are told of a man who "rose up on his dying bed/and asked for fish." His wife, hearing her husband mention fish, looks the image up in her dream book, and plays it (425).

Here, a dying man's final request is trivialized by the person he turns to for solace during his last hours when she takes his mention of fish to be a predictive dream that she can use to play and win the numbers. Although Hughes, in "The Dream-Keeper," says "bring me all of your dreams, / You dreamers" (Hughes 45), this poem demonstrates that there are differences between the dreams brought to (or borrowed by) a dream-keeper like Hughes, and the dreams bought to a book-keeper like the one that the wife visits to place her bet. "Hope" implies that it is not enough for a dream to be common to the members of a given community for it to be wrapped in a "blue cloud-cloth" of poetic affirmation; the dream must also help foster community, which is something that the dream in "Hope" obviously does not do.

A similar cynicism toward the use of predictive dreams to play the numbers can be seen in Hughes' "Madam and the Number Writer." In this poem, which is part of a series that features an outspoken character named Alberta K. Johnson, Hughes once again parodies what he regards as the misuse of black dreams. The immediate conflict that the poem sets up is one between Madam's conscious intent to stop wasting her money on the numbers game, and her fervent hope that hitting the number might change her economic circumstances. The comment Madam makes before placing her bet: "I had swore/I wouldn't play no more" speaks of the compulsive nature of her actions. The fact that she had felt the need to forswear the numbers game during some earlier pre-textual moment indicates that she has already been provided with ample evidence of its ineffectiveness in helping her to realize her dreams. Neither her awareness nor her intentions, however, are a match for her desire. And her powerlessness over gambling mirrors and reproduces her social powerlessness as a working-class, African American woman on the margins of U. S. society. Pretty soon, a case of the blind leading the blind ensues as the Numbers Writer's enthusiasm reverberates back and forth between him and the Madam in a kind of call-and-response sequence when he suggests "6 – 0 – 2 / Looks like a likely / Hit for you," to which Madam replies "... Last night, / I dreamed 7 – 0 – 3," and the Numbers Writer thinks "... That might / Be a hit for me" (270) When the number turns out 3 – 2 – 6, we see the transitory alliance between the two figures disintegrate as Madam projects the desire with which she had invested her fantasy into the post-mortem future, once again swearing:

> Ain't gonna play no more [numbers]
> Till I get over
> To the other shore—
>
> Then I can play
> On them golden streets
> Where the number not only
> Comes out—but repeats! (270)

In these stanzas, the desperate nature of Madam's dream of hitting the number becomes clear as Hughes follows her conventional fantasy of a heaven paved with

"golden streets" with the comic exclamation: "Where the number not only/Comes out—but repeats!" (270). Our familiarity with the image of a heaven paved with "golden streets" obscures both its absurdity (and the avarice underlying it) until Hughes links it to Madam's folksy elaboration of heaven as a place where she always wins at numbers because the number is always the same. While Madam's fantasy is logically consistent with the image of a heaven paved with streets of gold, it begs the question of why one would need to play numbers in a heaven traditionally conceived of as a place where all of one's worldly and spiritual needs are satisfied. The irony of this passage is that even in Madame's most desperate attempt to transcend her social and economic circumstances she is unable to imagine a world in which the survival strategies that she has cultivated to endure those circumstances would no longer be necessary. Thus, her heaven is no more persuasive than the pledge she makes to abstain from playing numbers until she arrives there (270).

The numbers writer, for his part, has become jaded, or has, at least, reacquired the level of cynicism one would expect of a person who sees the overwhelming majority of his customers lose a much-needed portion of their weekly income (270). Realizing that he has staked his hard-earned cash on the desperate fantasy of a woman capable of believing her number will hit in heaven, the numbers writer expresses his anger and disappointment in a double-entendre designed to deflate Madam's fantasy and convey a veiled desire of his own: "The runner said, Madam, / That's all very well— / But suppose / You goes to hell?" (270).

If Hughes' oneiric materialism differs from the mechanistic materialism of Freud, while simultaneously being critical of the crass materialism of the African American tradition of using predictive dreams to gamble or play numbers, what are the unique characteristics of Hughes's approach to dreams? These can be seen in "Freedom's Plow," a poem Hughes first published in *Opportunity* magazine in 1943. Working against the grain of a tradition of American pragmatism and commonsense that tends to view dreams as insignificant idle fancy, "Freedom's Plow" represents dreams as the building blocks of society.

> First in the heart is the dream.
> Then the mind starts seeking a way.
> His eyes look out to the world
> [....]
>
> The eyes see there materials for building,
> See the difficulties, too, and the obstacles.
> The hand seeks tools to cut the wood,
> To till the soil, and harness the powers of the waters.
> Then the hand seeks other hands to help,
> A community of hands to help—
> Thus the dream becomes not one man's dream alone,
> But a community dream.
> Not my dream alone, but our dream.

Not my world alone,
But your world and my world,
Belonging to all the hands who build. (263 – 64)

These lines are filled with partial objects—hearts, dreams, minds, eyes, hands, wood, soil, water, forming what Gilles Delueze and Felix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* refer to as "connective syntheses"①. Hughes situates the dream alongside objects as mundane as "wood" and "soil," and among actions as physical as "building," "cutting," "tilling," and "harnessing," thereby making an implicit argument for the materiality of dreams. Here the dream is no transcendent orchestrator of material transformation; instead, change occurs through the collective agency of each of the autonomous objects that participate in the building of this new world. Hearts hold dreams. Minds seek ways. Eyes see materials. And hands execute various forms of labor while also seeking the assistance of other hands. In other words, the dream exists in a horizontal relation to the other objects that make up the social body; it is immanent not transcendent, one of a multitude of objects necessary for the formation of a new social order.

In this passage, Hughes also presents a very different understanding of condensation than Freud provides in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*. For Freud, condensation was that part of the dreamwork that combined multiple thoughts into a single image, thus resulting in a disproportion between the narrative a dream related and the ideas that narrative represents. Freud observed this process at work so often in the dreams of his patients as well as his own dreams that it ultimately led him to conclude that the psyche seems to be under sort of some compulsion to combine all of the sources by which a dream is inspired into "a single unity in the dream itself" (179). But what if this compulsion to combine thoughts and images was not limited to the interior of dreams? What if there were a similar compulsion to combine dreams themselves into larger utopian visions? This is what "Freedom's Plow" proposes as hands seek out other hands and individual dreams become communal dreams of a new and better world.

If "Freedom's Plow" gives us insight into Hughes' thoughts about the materiality of dreams, the poem "Dream" provides us with a key to Hughes' preferred method of dream interpretation. The poem features a speaker who has just awakened from a dream of having become estranged from his lover. This estrangement is paralleled by the tone of what the speaker refers to as "This most strange dream..." (173). What accounts for the feeling that accompanies this most strange dream, a feeling that in psychoanalytic terms might be described as uncanny? We don't have to search far for an answer. In the dream from which he has just awakened, however, the speaker claims to have seen that which defies reality, namely, the absence of his lover. The problem with the speaker's understanding of reality is that it fails to see the signs and symptoms of the future in the present. His dream tries to make him aware of this wider reality, but when he awakes to find his lover lying next to him in bed, he reaffirms his more limited sense of reality by simply reaching out to touch him. It's as if he hopes that touch will restore the reality of which sight has deprived him. His mis-

take is in making too literal an interpretation of his own dream, and then thinking that he has refuted its claim of his lover's absence by making physical contact with his sleeping body. This refutation turns out to be more of a disavowal as the speaker realizes: "Asleep/Face to the wall," his lover is really not "there at all" (173). The lover's physical presence cannot disguise his emotional absence, symbolized by his turned back.

If we only focus on the theme of lost love in our reading of this poem, we run the risk of making the same mistake as the speaker when he interprets his dream too literally. This poem, I would, argue is not simply about the end of a romantic relationship; as the title suggests, it is also about dreams. By reinterpreting the signs and symptoms of the future as it makes itself felt in the present, dreams, the poem tells us, enable us to see "What did not seem could ever be" (173).

A close reading of the single sentence upon which this poem centers, "everywhere I saw / what did not seem could ever be," reveals a complexity of structure that was uncharacteristic for Hughes who was known for what one scholar has termed an "aesthetic of simplicity." To "not... be" is a negation. To "seem" is to appear. And "could" describes a future possibility. To then say that, "... everywhere I saw/ What did not seem could ever be" (173) describes the denegation of an apparent future possibility. In this poem's literal meaning, that future possibility is the end of the speaker's relationship. It is apparent from the signs and symptoms displayed by his lover, metonymically symbolized in the poem with the line: "Face to the wall." The negation is the speaker's denial of the emotional distance that has come between him and his beloved. The denegation is the work that the dream undertakes by condensing what are presumably numerous minor instances of this emotional distance into a single stark image—the physical absence of the beloved. But again, if we only focus on the content of the poem, we wind up missing the ways that its form can be applied in other contexts. From this vantage point, the dream offers the possibility of seeing past one's cynicism and the perennial error of eternalizing present social circumstances, in order to consider new and different possibilities.

【Note】

① See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983).

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