

Sharon Lynette Jones. "Langston Hughes's Transnational Literary Journeys: History, Heritage, and Identity in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro."  
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## **Langston Hughes's Transnational Literary Journeys: History, Heritage, and Identity in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro"**

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### ***Abstract***

In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" Langston Hughes uses geographical spaces as a means of exploring history, heritage, and identity. His work reveals a transnational impulse as it demonstrates connections between the United States and other parts of the world. Examining these two poems through a transnational context reveals how Hughes's use of language illustrates the interrelatedness of people throughout the African diaspora during different time periods.

### ***Keywords***

Transnational, history, heritage, identity, geographical spaces, Harlem Renaissance, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Negro," African diaspora

The Harlem Renaissance, which spans the early 1900s through the 1940s, featured literature, music, dance, and visual art by African Americans (Smith and Jones 163-167). Many of the creative writers, performers, and visual artists traveled throughout the United States, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe as they emphasized black heritage, history, and identity. As a result, one could argue that the Harlem Renaissance existed as a transnational phenomenon due to the national and international migrations of the individuals associated with the movement as well as the multiplicity of national and international influences upon their writing, musical compositions, dance performances, paintings, and sculptures. The transnational

aspect of the Harlem Renaissance contributed to the diversity of writing produced by authors associated with the movement such as Langston Hughes. He evoked a strong transnational stance or position in poems such as "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro."

Hughes's poems "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" illustrate how Hughes employed his poetry as a means of exploring different geographical settings in order to show the significance of history, heritage, and identity to the lives of African Americans in a transnational context. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" testify to his awareness of the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of people and places. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" depict transnational literary journeys because these poems illustrate the connection between migration and the concepts of history, heritage, and identity. Not surprisingly, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" prove to be two of his most significant in terms of his writing during the Harlem Renaissance based on the complexity of the texts and the social, political, and economic commentary embedded within a transnational setting or settings. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" reminds the reader that African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance possessed an awareness and sensitivity to the transnational aspect of the Harlem Renaissance.

Transnational studies offers a useful lens for exploring how the different geographical spaces represented in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" reinforce these themes. These two poems by Langston Hughes embody the guiding principles of transnationalism through the emphasis on connections between people and places. For example, in *The Transnational Studies Reader: Intersections and Innovations* authors Sanjeev Khagram and Peggy Levitt address the significance of transnationalism by stressing that "Social life crosses, transcends and sometimes transforms borders and boundaries in many different ways" (1). They acknowledge that transnationalism affects our perspectives and perceptions on space and boundaries, contending that "What are assumed to be bounded and bordered social units are understood as transnationally constituted, embedded, and influenced social arenas that interact with one another" (5). A transnationalism stance, in effect, challenges us to re-think and

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reconceptualize the notion of borders and barriers between individuals and locations.

Khagram and Levitt offer a useful definition that articulates the meaning of transnationalism. They stress, "By transnational, we propose an optic or gaze that begins with a world without borders, empirically examines the boundaries and borders that emerge at particular historical moments, and explores their relationship to unbounded arenas and processes" (5). The notion of mobility and fluidity embedded within this definition suggests that transnationalism centers on the ideas of interrelatedness and connections. While Khagram and Levitt's scholarship provides insight into the theoretical ideas shaping transnational studies and this information can be applied to better understanding the transnational stance of Langston Hughes's poems, it is important to note that several other critics have analyzed "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" as transnational poems. The ongoing critical discourse on transnationalism within Langston Hughes's poems "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" reveals the relevancy of viewing his work within this way. In *A Transnational Poetics*, Jahan Ramazani analyzes the poetry of Langston Hughes. Ramzani explores "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" through the lens of transnationalism by examining the circumstances surrounding its composition, Hughes's use of geographical places and the historical references (60-62). Anita Patterson also views American literature and the writing of Langston Hughes within a transnational context. In *Race, American Literature and Transnational Modernisms*, she writes, "Sensitive to the constructed nature of national myths, Americanists are ever more alert to the need for analytical perspectives that situate United States cultures in a transnational framework" (1). Patterson addresses the connection between poems such as "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" in relationship to other American and Caribbean authors. She notes how his poetry connects with a tradition of United States poets, including Walt Whitman, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, Amy Lowell, E. A. Robinson, as well as Edna St. Vincent Millay (93). Patterson stresses the connection between Hughes's poetry and that of writers such as T. S. Eliot, pointing out that both men hailed from Missouri, spent time within France, and had their writings influenced by music. She emphasizes

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the connection between the work of Hughes and Caribbean literature, comparing his writing with that of Jacques Roumain, a writer from Haiti (94-95). According to Patterson, Roumain wrote at least two poems that show similarities with Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in relationship to theme and images (126-127). Roumain, according to Patterson, affected Hughes's sense of expanding one's ideas about geographical spaces/boundaries, which are revealed in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" as well as "Negro" (128).

Although Ramazani and Patterson offer a useful analysis of the meaning and significance of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" in relationship to transnationalism in Hughes's aesthetic and in relationship to other writers within and outside the United States, I wish to extend and build upon Ramazani's and Patterson's important work through a comparative analysis of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" in a transnational context by investigating how the geographical spaces symbolize history, heritage, and identity in the two poems to create a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the meanings of these two poems in relationship to their social, cultural, and historical contexts.

In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" Langston Hughes adopts a transnational approach. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is a poem dedicated to one of the key figures of the Harlem Renaissance, W.E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois helped to shape the philosophy behind the Harlem Renaissance as an artistic movement that promoted social justice and equality; Du Bois also promoted the idea of the relationship between blacks in America and in other parts of the world. The poem appeared within *Crisis* during 1921 (Ostrom 271). The magazine was published by the NAACP, and it focused on the social, political, and economic conditions for African Americans. The publication of his poem in *Crisis* provided Hughes with national recognition, which enabled him to be viewed as one of the emerging authors during the 1920s. The poem seems a quite appropriate selection for this magazine, given its raising of public consciousness and awareness about issues related to African American cultural expression and promotion of creative writing. Hughes actually composed "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" while traveling on a train headed for Mexico during 1920 (Tracy 27). Tracy suggests that this

voyage stimulated thoughts of African rivers connected with enslavement as well as Abraham Lincoln and his perspective on enslavement (28). Laurie F. Leach has also noted that when Hughes viewed the Mississippi River during his trip it evoked ideas of enslavement in relationship to African American history (12). Leach also points out that bodies of water within the poem possess associations with enslavement as well as colonialism, yet this poem also presents these other bodies of water with imagery that is not always negative (12). Leach writes, "The speaker has bathed in the Euphrates, been lulled to sleep by the Congo, and seen the glory of a sunset on the Mississippi" (12). Thus, these representations within the poem reflect the complex history of these bodies of waters both nationally and internationally. One could argue that the fact that Hughes composed this poem while journeying to Mexico represents a transnational impulse in his evocation of history, heritage, and identity through various geographical settings. His migration across the Mississippi River and his journey from north to south via the train ride symbolically connect with the migrations of African Americans historically and the history of enslavement of Africans in America as some were sold and transported down the Mississippi River. The Mississippi River then becomes emblematic of the tension between liberation and captivity. While Hughes was born in the post-emancipation period of United States history, he remains connected with that past as a person of African descent whose poems reveals empathy with the enslaved and awareness of that experience within the context of the African diaspora.

In addition, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" articulates the notion of transnationalism through the language. Jeff Westover argues, "The speaker announces his knowledge for the benefit of his listeners, telling the story of a common past in order to cultivate a united consciousness in the present" (1222). Water becomes an important symbol in a transnational context as well; historically, enslaved people traveled up and down rivers on ships after being bought and sold. Additionally, the Middle Passage, the journey that slave ships took from West Africa to America, also involved water as a means of forced and involuntary migration. The speaker in the poem emphasizes more than one river, suggesting a pattern and a repetition of bodies of water associated with the African and

African American experience (line 1). In the first line of the poem, these rivers are not identified and the number is not specified, which evokes a sense of multiple experiences related to water. The speaker points out, "I've known rivers" at the beginning of the poem (line 1). The use of the word "known" (line 1) suggests experience with these bodies of water or rivers. The speaker reinforces the ideas of knowledge and experience when emphasizing "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the/flow of human blood in human veins" which contributes to the credibility of the speaker (lines 2 and 3). Additionally, the use of words such as "flow" (line 3) suggests movement. "Flow" is a word often associated with the motion of liquids or bodies of water, and the image of "blood" (line 3) moving within "veins" (line 3) reinforces the idea of a journey, a migration, or time. The language positions the speaker as being wise, experienced, and cognizant of the past and the present through the symbolism of rivers in the poem.

In line 4, the speaker states, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" to convey the speaker's connection to nature (line 4). Thus, the speaker's emotional and spiritual state parallels these rivers and reveals a type of empathy, identification, and understanding of the natural world. The line suggests the idea of change, transformation, and a development of the soul. In the middle of the poem, the speaker becomes specific about bodies of water whereas before the poem was general. This proves important in terms of the transnational stance of the text. By being specific about locations and names of rivers in the poem in this section, Hughes provides it with a more global and international context by connecting bodies of water from various geographical spaces. The locations of the rivers show the merging of both the past and the present for the speaker, further emphasizing the role of history, heritage, and identity for individuals of African descent.

Line 5 reveals the idea of the evolving of life in relation to the Euphrates River when the speaker comments, "I bathed in the Euphrates" while "dawns were young" to show a historical context. The Euphrates River has historically been viewed as an important part of the history of civilization. The line refers to the beginning of a day or even the beginnings of time and the development of

civilization. In line 6, the speaker emphasizes the Congo River in Africa, by stressing the construction of "my hut near the Congo" while claiming "it [Congo River] lulled me to sleep" due to its soothing effect. The image of that type of building or dwelling near that river in line 6 suggests domesticity; the line also suggests a peaceful, hypnotic, and tranquil quality and a state of rest. In line 7, the speaker makes reference to the Nile River and claims to have "raised the pyramids above it" which shows connection to a great architectural achievement. Pyramids connect with the institution of slavery as enslaved people built these in Egypt. The references to pyramids also connect with the poem "Negro," in which the speaker claims to have built the pyramids too. In this section, the speaker views the Nile River, an essential body of water in the African continent. The speaker's connection with the pyramids suggests that people of African descent remain vital to the support and creation of great world civilizations. The reference to enslaved people within Egypt also bears important historical significance in relationship to the history of enslavement and Christianity in the United States of America. Enslaved African Americans saw a parallel between their plight and that of the enslaved Israelites within Egypt. Specifically, they identified with the Exodus story from the Bible. This portion of the Bible chronicles enslaved Israelites becoming free. Langston Hughes connects with that traditional identification of the plight of African American slaves and their connection with the enslaved through his incorporation of references to Egypt and to the United States in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

Lines 8, 9, and 10 also develop that important connection as the speaker moves from commenting on slavery in Egypt to exploring its existence in United States history. The speaker states, "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" to connect with American history. These lines juxtapose the history of enslavement in America as symbolized by the Mississippi River that transported enslaved people and the city of New Orleans, where enslaved people were bought and sold as chattel. Additionally, lines 8 and 9 refer to the sound of the water flowing or even the music of enslaved people

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along the Mississippi river as they toiled in forced servitude uttering songs such as spirituals or religious songs which sometimes contained hidden codes and messages about freedom and liberation from slavery and the masters. The reference to Abe Lincoln also connects with the ideas of this period in American history due to his association with the debate over slavery in the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reference to the Mississippi River represents a type of personification; the description suggests the effects of water and dirt created by the flow of the river. The description indicates the end of a day but also could suggest a possibility of optimism for the future. Arnold Rampersad writes, "The angle of the sun on the muddy water is like the angle of a poet's vision, which turns mud into gold" (40). Clearly, Hughes's poem proves to be important and transformative in its meditations on issues related to African and African American history.

The rivers specifically mentioned in the poem are located in different settings in the world and reflect a transnationalist aspect in connection with history, identity, and heritage. R. Baxter Miller has commented on the location of the rivers within this poem. He writes,

When the Euphrates flows from Eastern Turkey southeast and southwest into the Tigris, it recalls the rise as well as the fall of the Roman Empire. For over two thousand years the water helped delimit that domain. Less so did the Congo, which south of the Sahara demarcates the natural boundaries between white and Black Africa. The latter empties into the Atlantic ocean; the Nile flows northward from Uganda into the Mediterranean; in the United States the Mississippi River flows southeast from north central Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico.

(57)

Thus, Hughes's choice of bodies of water within this poem reflects a sense of movement, time, and places of important social, political, economic, and historical significance in a transnational gesture.



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In Hughes's poem the speaker moves from informing us of experience and knowledge of rivers and bodies of water, to later being more specific with the references to the Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi rivers, and then the speaker returns to a general indication of knowing rivers (without mentioning specific names) in lines 11-13. This reinforces the speaker's awareness and the expansiveness of the travel and places associated with the development of humanity and the institution of slavery. The language in lines 11-13 suggests age, the passage of time, and race, reinforcing the idea of the speaker being black and identifying with these rivers on a spiritual, emotional, and physical level through the use of language as the speaker points out, "I've known rivers" which repeats language in the poem's first line (line 11). The speaker also uses the phrase "dusky rivers" which reinforces the ideas of darkness and blackness (line 12). The final line of the poem, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers," mirrors line 4 in the poem, again reinforcing the notion of history, heritage, and identity.

Hughes's poem masterfully explores these notions. The reader, along with the speaker, takes a type of journey which connects the past and the present. The range and scope of the poem show the broad vision of Hughes's work, as he attempts to capture a sense of interrelatedness and connections in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." The poem proves to be an important commentary on social, political, and economic concerns within the context of important historical events. Ramazani suggests that "Although racial identity is often conceived in terms of roots, this poem takes multiple routes leading in different directions" (62). Hughes's poem proves to be transnational in terms of content and subject matter. The context of the poem connects heavily with the meanings. The poem then serves as a reminder of both present freedom and past enslavement for people of African descent. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" functions as a powerful and moving commentary on how a culture's social identity transcends time. By placing his speaker in different centuries and locations, Hughes manages to make a transnational gesture which illustrates how writing of the Harlem Renaissance emphasized the experiences of people of African heritage within a broad social, political, and economic context.

In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes challenges the reader, and perhaps himself, to contemplate not only the past but also the present lives of African Americans or people of African descent and the complex and complicated nature of identity. The interest in Africa displayed in the poem reflects the interest in this continent for Hughes and other authors of the Harlem Renaissance, who explored the connection of African Americans with Africa. His reliance on Africa as a site in this poem truly emphasizes the symbolic importance of Africa as a place of heritage for individuals of African descent. Hughes used the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" to highlight the importance of Africa, which becomes an important symbol of transnationalism in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." The transnational impulse in the poem increases its depth and complexity due to the social, political, and economic context revealed in the language.

Similarly, in his poem "Negro," Langston Hughes engages in a transnationalist approach as he explores geographical locations. This poem first appeared in print as "The Negro" within *Crisis* during 1922, and as "Proem" within *The Weary Blues* (Ostrom 268). This meditation on black identity which crosses time and geographical space appears in the same magazine as "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," testifying to how the poem connected with the subject matter of the publication. Its appearance in the magazine also illustrates the national attention the poem received due to it being in this important magazine which helped shape the direction of the Harlem Renaissance through the promotion of authors such as Hughes. As is the case with "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the speaker within this poem possesses experiences located within different time periods and geographical locations, providing it with a transnational stance. Here, the speaker comes to speak for a whole group of individuals rather than just one person. Hans Ostrom writes, "Spoken by a collective persona, the poem glimpses 'Negro' history panoramically, and the persona has been, by turns, a slave, worker, singer, and victim" (268). By employing a speaker or persona with multiple identities, Hughes shows the diversity of the black experience nationally and internationally. The poem then proves to be a commentary on individuals within the African diaspora.

As is the case with "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in "Negro"

Hughes employs language as a means of exploring African identity within a transnational context in "Negro." The first line of the poem reinforces the idea of the speaker's racial and ethnic heritage, and establishes the primacy of that as being a part of the speaker's identity when the speaker comments, "I am a Negro" in a direct way. The Harlem Renaissance as a movement focused on the notion of black identity. By emphasizing racial heritage at the beginning of the poem and in the title, Hughes establishes very early on that the poem emphasizes blackness and the African diaspora. Line 2 also emphasizes the idea of blackness, and the repetition of that color in the line reinforces this concept of skin tone with the descriptive language of "Black as the night is black" in the poem. Additionally, the association with "the night" in line two proves to be significant as well by uniting the speaker with a cycle or span of time, which recurs, in the context of human experience. The third line which states "Black like the depths of my Africa" proves to be significant too as the speaker equates or compares blackness with Africa. The reference to Africa also hearkens to the African heritage of the speaker, and the choice of the phrase "the depths" (line 3) suggests the connection is significant rather than superficial. These lines also evoke a sense of the past with the reference to "my Africa" (line 3) as the speaker claims heritage there. The use of "my" on the part of the speaker also suggests a reclamation or possession of that continent as a source of heritage—a heritage or connection which would have been partly sundered by the capture and enslavement of peoples of African descent and their forced bondage within the context of the transatlantic slave trade. In the fourth line, the speaker connects with the idea of forced servitude and bondage, associated with many people of African descent globally, in the earlier portion of the poem by articulating "I've been a slave" to emphasize status. In lines 5 and 6, the speaker crosses geographical and historical lines, merging ancient Rome and colonial America in terms of the history of forced servitude and bondage by people of African descent through the language "Caesar told me to keep his door steps clean" (line 5) and "I brushed the boots of Washington" as well (line 6). Also, the references to Caesar and Washington connect with the notion of power, leadership, and status. The speaker functions in a subservient position to Caesar, and to

Washington; at the same time, the speaker's efforts enabled Caesar and Washington to function, again reinforcing the idea of people of African descent playing a significant role historically, socially, economically, and politically.

The speaker emphasizes the idea of labor and servitude and the centrality of people of African descent to the economies of places by identification as "a worker" in the poem (line 7). The notion of working suggests both forced and voluntary labor. In line 8 and line 9, the speaker claims to have played a part in the construction of mighty architectural feats in ancient Egypt and in more contemporary America, illustrating the heavy reliance on labor through emphasizing responsibility for constructing "the pyramids" (line 8) and creating "mortar for the Woolworth Building" too (line 9). The poem shifts from one place to another by linking the experiences of black people in Africa and in the United States in a diasporan connection with social, political, and economic implications. The poem reinforces the idea of people of African descent contributing to and being a part of major achievements in building and construction admired worldwide historically.

The poem continues the speaker's insistence upon the interrelatedness of people of African descent in the United States and in Africa. The poem also mirrors "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in this regard, particularly within the context of the history of enslavement and the transatlantic slave trade. For example, lines 10-13 of the poem connect with the forced migration of Africans who ended up in the United States and the evolution of African American cultural expression through singing and musical expression as revealed in the music of enslaved and free blacks. In line 10 the speaker identifies as one who sings. The notion of song connects with the African and African American oral tradition in the context of the poem, and the speaker develops a transnational connection between Africa, the southern United States, and music in lines 11-13 when emphasizing the carrying of the oral tradition "from Africa to Georgia" (line 11) which led to the creation of "ragtime" as a musical form (line 13). The reference to a voyage from Africa to the state of Georgia in this section of the poem suggests the transatlantic slave trade historically as enslaved Africans were sent to the United States and sold as slaves. Many enslaved individuals worked on plantations

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in the South, particularly in states such as Georgia. The reference to songs that were sung by slaves on plantations while laboring in the fields reinforces the ideas of heritage, history, and identity. These lines emphasize history, geography, race, identity, enslavement, and the oral tradition that emerged from the presence of slaves in America. Additionally, the lines reflect both enslavement and post-emancipation life for the slaves.

Hughes continues the themes of geographical boundary crossing and history in a transnationalist manner. In lines 14-15, the speaker addresses the realities of oppression in Africa and the American South when indicating "The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo" as proof of mistreatment (line 15) and continued racially motivated violence "in Mississippi" to highlight social injustice (line 16). The comments on the history of violence against Africans by Europeans in Africa and the lynching of blacks in Mississippi illustrate global oppression and discrimination. By juxtaposing brutality in Africa within the context of the reality of violence against black people in early 20th century America, Hughes's poem suggests continuity in violence and injustice against peoples of African descent which transcends time and place in a transnational stance. Again, the speaker's language provides social, political, and economic commentary in a national and international context.

The final three lines of the poem repeat the language of the first three lines of the poem, again giving it a kind of circular pattern. This reinforces the racial and ethnic identity of the speaker, connects with the cycle of time, and reinforces the geographical space of Africa as a place of descent and cultural heritage. Hughes's poem functions then as a symbolic example of this dynamic, spanning ancient Rome, ancient Egypt, colonial America, Africa and antebellum America to reinforce the ideas of enslavement, bondage, oppression, and injustice. At the same time, there is a sense of not being defeated despite all of the injustice.

Looking at the poetry of Langston Hughes through a transnational lens proves to be a useful means of examining his works. His reliance on different geographical places in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Negro" represents the poet's attempt to explore issues of history, heritage, and identity within the context of social, political, and economic commentary during the Harlem

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Renaissance. Through his innovative use of language, Hughes provides the reader with a thoughtful, complex, and complicated reflection upon the intersections between time, place, and space. His poetry depicts the transnational impulse and literary journeys of an American writer who continues to influence writers in more contemporary times. By exploring the connections between the past and the present through his transnational approach, Langston Hughes provided a means for his readers to better understand the interrelatedness of people in the African diaspora and beyond.

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