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Caroline Carrasco Garcia Silva April 07, 2023

Dissolving the Academic Color Line:
A Reading of Langston Hughes's and Gwendolyn Bennett's Poetry from the New Negro Renaissance Through a Pragmatic Lens Using William James's Philosophy

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Abstract

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William James was a prolific figure in New York just a few years prior to the beginning of the New Negro Renaissance, most commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance, that has been typically said to span from the 1920s to the 1930s. Using his pragmatism as literary theory, I analyze two poems each by Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Bennett published during the Renaissance to reveal the attention, blindness, radical empiricism, focus on conjunctive and lived experience, pluralism of thought and meaning, truth of racism, the process of personal consciousness, and habit of style. This project bridges a gap between black and white academic writing while also providing a reading of four poems published by major New Negro icons in a pragmatic lens.

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Introduction: The New Negro Renaissance, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett and William James's Pragmatism

For the individual exploring modern black forms of art and recreating the idea of what it means to be black in the United States, the years spanning the 1920s to the mid-1930s is known as the New Negro Renaissance, during which W. E. B. DuBois announced in 1920, "I think we have enough talent to start a renaissance" (Stewart 333). Alain Locke is credited with coining the name New Negro and giving the title "Negro Renaissance" to the time period after his 1925 anthology *The New Negro*. It's commonly now assumed that he launched the era into the Renaissance with his writing on black art and philosophy. Locke had arrived at Harvard when William James was still teaching, but Locke learned under Josiah Royce, George Palmer and George Santayana (Stewart 49). As a leading figure in the Renaissance and an influencer in the writing style that was produced during the time, that style being identifiably black and distinct from any forms of white art, the pragmatism Locke was influenced by and wrote about naturally became part of black identity. DuBois spoke with pragmatist John Dewey and claimed James was important to his interpretation of the world, which led to James's philosophy making its way into DuBois's writing, and DuBois's writings were influential for countless authors at the time. While the New Negro Renaissance took shape, American pragmatism became widespread, and the philosophy caught on for certain thinkers. Due to James's pragmatism flourishing in the midst of the New Negro Renaissance, I was interested to use his philosophy to analyze New Negro poetry, specifically the poetry of Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Bennett.[1] Though I could analyze the two poet's work alongside Locke's work, this is anticipated since Locke is

[1] A project with similar intentions was explored in *Poetry and Pragmatism* by Richard Poirier. In the book, Poirier hypothesizes the connection between American pragmatism and American poetry and proceeds to trace the philosophic and literary practices of Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James's pragmatism in the works of Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens.

often credited with launching the Renaissance and serving as a backbone to the movement.[2] Additionally, DuBois has already been read in conjunction with countless black authors—both from the New Negro Renaissance and not—and Hughes even admitted to the influence that DuBois had on him, "I had a tremendous admiration for Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, whose *Souls of Black Folk* had stirred my youth" (*The Big Sea* 92).[3] But while James wrote in New York up to his death in 1910, just a decade before the Renaissance began, his pragmatism has yet to be applied to works published during the time.

I chose Hughes for this project since he is regarded as one of the most prominent New Negro poets—an author who published plenty about his life and work, and who has been written about more than any other New Negro poet. Gwendolyn Bennett is a slightly different story. Though a prolific and well-known figure in the 1920s who was friends with Hughes, her work has not received the merit it deserves. She is seldom written about at length in modernity and did not publish much about her own life, aside from some diary entries that focused on her love life. Bennet is important for this project because there is less academia covering her work in depth. It does not appear that she was involved with pragmatism (much like Hughes), but the philosophy is nevertheless applicable to her body of work. Both poets were major writers who influenced what it meant to be a New Negro, contributed to literary publications and were well regarded

[2] Eugene Holmes, in "Alain Locke and the New Negro Movement," writes that "The rise of a genuine New Negro Movement was fostered and encourage by one person, Alain Leroy Locke, who became its creative editor and chronicler" and that "No one, not even the older Du Bois, could have been better equipped to have been the architect of the New Negro Movement and maker of history" (60-61).

[3] Donna Harper writes in "'The Apple of His Eye': DuBois on Hughes" that DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* is "crucial in contemporary analysis of Black American literature" due to how much influence it had on black writers (29). Harper adds that when Hughes published *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, DuBois published a review not long after, which shows how they were in conversation with each other regarding each other's works (30).

among other New Negroes—it just happens that Hughes ended up being more remembered through history. Most of the two authors' publications were popular during the time—pieces that were in wide circulation and were published in major black journals and magazines. I selected Bennett and Hughes among many other black writers of the time because they serve as authors who specifically utilized New Negro mechanics of writing and were, by Locke's standards, the ideal New Negro writers, for they were in their 20s during the renaissance and grew up with it. They were shaped by the time and were equally the people shaping the idea of the New Negro. Their poetry serves as a way to understand the life of a New Negro—which consisted of this want to move past racist society while still reminiscing on the past through the role of the ancestor. The poems selected for this project provide a glimpse into race and gender relations during the time, which is why I thought it important to include a female and male author so that differences due to gender could be analyzed in the poems even when black experience is something that is shared beyond gender boundaries. Bennett and Hughes exemplify what it means to write like a New Negro, and they use particular conventions and themes of poetry to get that story across.

In this essay, I use specific publications that showcase James's pragmatism and apply the philosophy as theory to two poems each by Hughes and Bennett that were published during the New Negro Renaissance. The purpose of reading any text alongside theory is to provide a new perspective and ultimately offer an innovative and deeper understanding of the text. I do not attempt to uncover Hughes's or Bennett's intentions in writing, and despite referencing a few of their essays that reveal their artistic intentions for some poems and general ways of thinking, I do not endeavor to go into their minds and analyze their thought processes in writing. I begin the analysis with James's "Attention" and "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," turn to "A

World of Pure Experience," "A Pluralistic Universe," "The Meaning of Truth" and "A Word More About Truth," and end with "The Stream of Thought" and "Habit." I chose these essays because they are central to James's philosophy, and they can be used as literary theory to critically analyze the poetry. The poems featured in this essay are Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "The Weary Blues" and Bennett's "Heritage" and "Song" because they were published during the Renaissance and are among some of the author's most distinguished poems from the time. Additionally, I will be looking at the differences in writing based on gender and the poems share several similarities pertaining to style and theme, making gender analysis more applicable than choosing widely different poems by the two authors.

The poems selected primarily seem to attend to oppression and racism with a specific focus on how the individual has learned to overcome or cope with racism and hope for an end to racism, and this becomes apparent with an application of James's "Attention" and "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings." I use James's argument that attention is based on interest and aesthetic to try to pick out what the poems focus on, such as the ideas, themes and physical objects—ultimately coming to the conclusion that the ideas, themes and objects reveal how populations overcome or cope with racism. Each poem has things that are left out, kept in the margins or only mentioned implicitly, and James's philosophy on selective attention shows that this can reveal what encompasses human blindness and what is not of interest in the moment of the experience. For example, James's philosophy uncovers that some of the poems reveal a blindness to those who do not identify as black—sometimes as Egyptian or more generally as African—and other minorities and majority populations. Other poems reveal a blindness toward a certain gender, as to perhaps suggest there are different experiences of oppression between men and women.

Radical empiricism is arguably one of James's most important philosophic contributions, thus, using "A World of Pure Experience," "A Pluralistic Universe," "The Meaning of Truth" and "A Word More About Truth," I apply radical empiricism to show how the poems equally stress the whole of experience as well as the parts, and how there is an emphasis on the relations (conjunctions) between experiences as opposed to their separations (disjunctions). James's mosaic philosophy is a visual demonstration of radical empiricism, and it shows how the poems selected highlight the connection between present and past experiences, the present and ancestral self, and the similarities among seemingly different individuals and their experiences. James claims that specific words indicate conjunction, which relates to radical empiricism, and in tracing these words in the poetry, I exhibit how they indicate conjunctions between experiences. According to James, there is only a transition from one experience to the next within the same person, which is not entirely true for black poetry due to shared experiences and the role of the ancestor. It's regularly accepted that poetry can have multiple meanings, and James's pluralism becomes the theory that reveals these different meanings. In relation to truth, I note how the poetry appears to show that racism is true—instead of only being real—by revealing that it works in an actual and potential manner.

Through the application of "The Stream of Thought" and "Habit," I use James's five characteristics of thought to reveal that the poems depict a personal consciousness, but that shared black experience and the role of the ancestor complicate this part of James's philosophy. I also show how the poems—much like thoughts—are continuously changing and evolving, how the poems are written in a stream of consciousness style due to a focus on the transitive parts over the substantive, that the poems deal with objects independent of the mind as to move away from absolute idealism, and that the poems naturally exclude some things and attend to others

due to interest and aesthetic. I finish this essay by analyzing the habits in the poems that get translated into typical forms, themes, words, styles and ideas.

This project serves as a reading of Hughes's and Bennett's poetry using a pragmatic lens, and I chose to use pragmatism as literary theory because not only does using philosophy written by a white man to analyze black poetry deconstruct the metaphorical color line by overcoming racial boundaries that divide white and black literature, but it provides a foundation and understanding of the poems while using academia that is not often read alongside the poetry. As I stated earlier, it's expected that DuBois and Locke influenced Hughes's and Bennett's work, therefore, a critical reading of the poetry with these two thinkers in mind is a predictable task. But a reading utilizing James, a well-known philosopher and scholar living in New York and corresponding with black authors, has yet to be done. This project functions as a foundation in reading James's pragmatism with New Negro poetry while also using specific parts of his philosophy as theory for reading the poetry, which will serve to point out poetic devices, style, attention, habit, truth, belief, pluralism in lived experiences and readings of the poems, conjunction between experiences of the self and others, the role of the ancestor and community in terms of radical empiricism, personal consciousness and the mosaic philosophy, and a blindness for those left out of the poems.

James died in 1910, which is 10 years before the New Negro Renaissance began. He is considered one of the leading thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and a founder of American pragmatism and psychology. James was born in New York City in 1842 and later became Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University in 1880 while continuing to teach psychology. One of his biggest contributions is the pragmatic method, which James defines as trying to interpret each notion by tracing its respective consequence, meaning that if there is

no practical difference between two things, then the two are the same ("What Pragmatism Means" 29). The pragmatic attitude includes looking away from "first things, principles, 'categories' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequence, facts" ("What Pragmatism Means" 33). For James, pragmatism is a theory of truth and meaning, an account of knowledge, and "primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable" ("What Pragmatism Means" 29). A pragmatist is scientifically loyal to fact and believes that meaning comes from "conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve" ("What Pragmatism Means" 30). Therefore, truth is something that must work and have functional possibility, there is nothing subjective about it. James specifically advances radical empiricism, which consists of a postulate, a statement of fact and a conclusion. The postulate is: "the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience;" the fact is: relations are just as directly experienced as the things they relate to; and the conclusion is: "the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience" ("The Meaning of Truth" 7-8). Traditional empiricism puts stress upon the parts, the elements, the individual, and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction. For James, traditional empiricism has the tendency to emphasize the parts at the expense of the larger picture, such as connection and causality, and reduce experience to bare sensations. But for radical empiricism, the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted for as real as anything else. Radical empiricism focuses on the conjunctions as well as the disjunctions between experiences, while traditional empiricism primarily focuses on the disjunctions. I explain many of these terms and philosophies more in-depth throughout my essay as they relate to the analysis.

With a brief foundation on James's thinking, I want to develop the relationship between DuBois and James, since the former influenced various black thinkers, including Hughes and Bennett, with his writings on the Talented Tenth, the veil, double consciousness, the color line, and other topics of black culture. DuBois was an icon during the New Negro Renaissance and for long before. His work influenced black art for years before and after the Renaissance, especially with *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The book, which is a compilation of essays, finally put into words the feelings of double consciousness and the metaphorical color line. Tracing the parallels between DuBois and James's work, James Campbell in "Du Bois and James" writes that they share the conception that we have multiple social selves that we present to others in a desire to be met with approval (573). This notion is seen in DuBois's double consciousness, which is the awareness black individuals have of who they are and who white people think they are, so that the black social self presents itself one way to white populations and another way to black populations in a manner that cannot be intertwined. Another parallel between the two is James's philosophy "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," which he writes that we must recognize that we are blind to each other's experiences. Therefore, we must attempt to overcome this blindness and develop a sense of diversity in acceptance. DuBois had similar sentiments and wrote that, despite our differences, which have no "definite conclusion," there is no reason why "men of different races might not strive together for their race ideals as well, perhaps even better, than in isolation," meaning that there can be a focus on the self while also an awareness of the other ("The Conservation of Races").

James also authored short essays and wrote correspondence on the topics of blackness and race not long before his death. In a June 1909 letter to the Editor of the *Republican,* James wrote "I wish, however, emphatically to check the impression that your paragraph gives, of my

being hostile to the movement of which my friend Prof. DuBois is the best-known representative" when the paper wrote that he declined an invitation to a recent conference about "negro-interests" ("The Problem of the Negro" 193-194). I include this to show James's awareness of black conversations about freedom, racism and equality, as well as how he regarded major black figures who wrote during the Renaissance. In the same letter, James writes that black individuals are "citizens of whom the country may be equally proud; and I should esteem it a national calamity if either of them gave up the cause for which he fights" ("The Problem of the Negro" 194). In "A Strong Note of Warning Regarding the Lynching Epidemic," James writes that he finds it "hard to comprehend the ignorance of history and of human nature which allows people still to think of negro lynching as of a transient contagion destined soon to exhaust its virulence" and then he goes on to write that humans have a "homicidal custom" that make it seem as if killing black individuals is acceptable (171-172). He writes of the "homicidal custom" as a habit of the population—and though he does not explicitly write *white population,* that can be assumed so—that has proven difficult to get rid of due to a "punitive instinct," authorities not doing anything about it and media continuing to cover lynchings ("A Strong Note of Warning Regarding the Lynching Epidemic" 172-173). In "The Moral Equivalent of War," James writes: "so many men, by mere accidents of birth and opportunity, should have a life of *nothing else* but of toil and pair and hardness and inferiority imposed upon them, should have *no* vacation, while others natively no more deserving get no taste of this campaigning life at all—*this* is capable of arousing indignation in reflective minds" (172). By "so many men," James means those seen as inferior to the white masses and, in the essay, he proposes a plan to "get the childishness knocked out of" the individuals who advocate for keeping some populations inferior and struggling in comparison to white populations ("The Moral Equivalent of War" 173).

Though these texts are not central to James's pragmatism, they do reveal his views on blackness and the continuation of oppression in the early 20th century. My analysis will not focus on these texts, but they serve as just another reason as to why I chose to take up this research: James was engaged with black topics and he held friendships with those who fought for black rights.

To provide a more comprehensive outline of the Renaissance and articulate why I chose Hughes's and Bennett's poetry among the various other writers at the time, I want to start off with that the New Negro Renaissance became a representative term of the time period after Locke's book *The New Negro*. Prior to then, the movement was not called as such, and many modern scholars still refer to it as the Harlem Renaissance, claiming that the bulk of the movement happened within that neighborhood. The Negro Renaissance, for Locke, was a "long-term, trans-generational, and interracial cultural shift" and was more expansive than the common 1920-1935 time period we refer to now (Mitchell 650). The original term came from Fenton Johnson in his 1919 editorial for *The Favorite Magazine,* "Credit is Due the West Indian," where he states that the West Indian has upheld "the dignity of the Negro race" and this is identified as the Negro renaissance (Mitchell 642). Locke eventually came to call Harlem the "center of the renaissance of a people" and gave the title of the 1925 *Survey Graphic* magazine: *Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro,* eventually he expanded the renaissance and called it *The New Negro* and explained that Harlem was the start of the movement (Mitchell 644). For Locke, a New Negro was a young generation of black artists, which included Hughes and Bennett, and others who were around their twenties in the start of the 1920s (Mitchell 650). In Locke's *The New Negro,* Bennett's poem "Song" is included, as well as many of Hughes's poems including "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." It was Hughes who used the terms "Negro Renaissance" and "New Negro Renaissance" in his work, as is seen in his book *the Big Sea,* where he also writes that

Locke was “the most racial of the New Negro poets” (*The Big Sea* 203). It was in Hughes’s *The Big Sea* that the term “Harlem Renaissance” also first appeared, and he used the three terms quite interchangeably to refer to the blossoming of black art during the 1920s (Mitchell 652).

Though the time period is more widely known as the Harlem Renaissance in modernity, this title constricts the expanse of the movement, for it has roots across the United States and abroad. As written earlier, pragmatism was in wide circulation at the time that New Negro poets were creating their work and the philosophy had an influence in major figures like DuBois and Locke, who influenced numerous poets during the time, including Hughes and Bennett. The Renaissance was a time that black artists, delved deep into a black culture, and the focus was often on black lived experience with an attempt to appeal to the white masses still in the margins, for stereotypes continue to run deep while the black community was trying to overcome such stereotypes by moving away from the racial uplift ideology of the early 1900s. With self-expression in mind and a desire to create black art for a black audience, Locke wrote that the “Negro to-day wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not” (*The New Negro* 21). Hughes and Bennett had different methods of self-expression and revealing their true selves in comparison to other poets of the time, but they were recognizably New Negro poets and contributed to publications at the time with writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Aaron Douglas (“Harlem Literati in the Twenties” 6). In modern times, Hughes and Bennett are known as essential writers of the Renaissance and as poets who captured the Blues, black art, the tensions of being black in the United States, the role of the ancestor, the veil, double consciousness, among other major themes of the time, but Hughes ended up being more remembered. Regardless, they are both leading black poets of the time and Hughes remains one

of the most read poets in modernity. With this in mind, I chose Hughes for obvious reasons for this research: as a major figure representing black poetry from the Renaissance, he is the perfect poet to read through a pragmatist lens since he can be the base for the postulation that other New Negro poets can also be successfully read using James's pragmatism. Bennett, with a lack of academic work covering her poetry in depth, also serves as the perfect poet to include in the project. As a lesser cited writer in modernity, but a woman who was the "epitome of a New Negro artist," grew up in New York City and published multiple poems in the early 1920s in several literary journals, Bennett's work also serves to show how New Negro female poets can be read through a pragmatic lens (Honey 99).

I. Attention and Blindness

In this first section, I use James's "Attention" to analyze what the poems have the tendency of attending to—whether that is the environment described in the poem, certain physical objects, people, themes, conventions of black art, etc.—and in what ways this shapes how the poems can be read and experienced. I also analyze how the poems reveal a blindness to other individuals and populations through what the poems do and do not focus on by using James's "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings."

James writes that "Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter my experience" since these items ultimately have no interest in one's personal experience of the world ("Attention" 381). This means that, while there are countless objects and items someone can notice, pay attention to and perceive, most go unnoticed since they are not of interest to that person. A lack of interest can be due to aesthetic, opposition in belief and experience, distraction or simply finding interest in other things. Selective attention may limit one's ability to fully perceive differences of experience, but without it "experience is an utter chaos" since the mind would be attending to too many things, and ultimately nothing at all ("Attention" 382).

James writes that subjective interest draws one to a particular object, item or idea in experience so that it's the "focus of consciousness" and other objects, items and ideas "are temporarily suppressed" ("Attention" 382-383). He writes that we can only attend to one thing at a time and when multiple things are being attended to, they are a "single pulse of consciousness" as to appear as a single unit within the mind ("Attention" 384). For James, it's impossible to attend to more than one thing at once, for if one thinks they are attending to more than one thing, the individual is actually only attending to one thing since the mind will recognize that the unity

has been fragmented and it will let go of other objects while it focuses on the one ("Attention" 384, 386).

James differentiates between different modes of attention, and I argue that the poems have a rather passive sensorial attention, which he defines as "derived when the impression, without being either strong or of an instinctively exciting nature, is connected to previous experience and education with things that are so" ("Attention" 395). However, with this form of attention, James writes that "*No one can possibly attend continuously to an object that does not change,"* thus, how do the poems maintain a continuous and steady attention throughout, or do they not ("Attention" 399)? James counters that by writing that one can bring back the topic to mind in order to sustain the attention, and a sustained attention is known among "geniuses" and assumes a mastery of the topic ("Attention" 400-401).

James writes that by the things one attends to, the universe as experienced appears a certain way, which creates a pluralistic universe of different experiences and, eventually through practicing attention, individuals can "attend to a marginal object whilst keeping the eyes immovable," which can be useful to understand what is left in the margins of the poems ("Attention" 402, 414). Though marginal objects are never wholly clear, recognizing what is partially absent can help better understand what is not central to the poems and why that may be ("Attention" 414). It's also worth considering that certain common and habitual sensations and experiences may "lapse into the unconsciousness" when they are not considered important enough and can then become marginal ("Attention" 431). James writes that important sensations are noticed even after time and that inattentiveness itself must be grounded in a habit and not only sensorial fatigue ("Attention" 432). It's important to note that one individual may forever be limited in their perception of experience due to what has been already labelled for them, and this

can be due to upbringing, one's surroundings, where they live, etc. James writes that "*the only things which we commonly see are those which we preperceive,* and the only things which we preperceive are those which have been labelled for us, and the labels stamped into our mind" ("Attention" 421). By "labelled" and "preperceive," James means the thing which those around us also pay attention to.

One's attention to certain aspects of experience also dictates how one can become blind to others' experiences. James writes that "Each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties and the significance of the situations that call these forth," meaning that one fails to perceive what others find important when it's not important to the self ("On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" 133). An application of this blindness to the poems reveals moments in the text that become blind to black individuals who do not share the same experiences as those that are detailed in the poems, both in terms of the ancestor and in modern life. Much like anyone becomes blind to others' interest to an extent, it would be surprising if Hughes and Bennett were not "as blind to the particular ideality of their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality" of their own; meaning that much like the two poets would be blind to the experiences of other black individuals, others would also be blind to their experiences ("On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" 135). The exclusion of some populations from the poems—whether that be based on gender, individuals who do not identify as African, etc.—does not equate to suppression or injustice. But realizing which populations the poems do become blind to in the moment reveals aspects of attention, narratives left in the margins and audience intention. Tendencies of blindness are translated into the poetry, and I focus on the text itself and how it reveals blind tendencies rather than trying to argue that Hughes or Bennett were blind.

Hughes wrote in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" that his poems were often written with the whole race in mind, and he was an artist who did not worry much about what white populations had to say about his and other black art. But as Arnold Rampersad wrote in the first volume of "The Life of Langston Hughes," Hughes "laughs so often and so loudly that the tragedy of his earlier years, which is the way he remembered them, was finally almost always hidden" but his "chronic chuckle" did not completely get rid of the noticeable pain that he and other black individuals endured due to racism and oppression coming from white populations ("A Kansas Boyhood 1902 to 1915"). It's important to read the poetry, even while focusing just on the text itself, with the race in mind since Hughes advocated for black artists to detach from white standards and be proud of their blackness and unique artistic styles. Therefore, though I will not be trying to get into Hughes's mind in the application of James's philosophy, I will keep in mind some of Hughes's intentions and apply the pragmatism to the text itself to reveal how using it can help better understand what the poems attend to and how they reveal a certain human blindness.

I will begin with Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of River" since it was written at the beginning of the New Negro Renaissance in 1921. Hughes was an active writer of essays during the time, and he wrote about this specific poem in his book *The Big Sea,* which details that he was crossing the Mississippi River on his way to visit his father in Mexico. An 18-year-old Hughes wrote the poem on the back of an envelope as he thought of his father and recounted the importance of the Mississippi River in relation to slavery and freedom (*The Big Sea* 54). Its simplicity makes it so that the poem is easily overlooked for its use of the ancestor, riverscape history and celebration of African American history and future. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes states that before writing the poem he remembered what the Mississippi meant to "Negroes in the

past—how to be sold down the river was the worst fate" and then began reminiscing all rivers important to African and African American history (*The Big Sea* 54)

> 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 middle stanzas highlighting the four rivers reveal a selective attention on the black history of the rivers ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 4-7). It's a bloody and violent poem below the surface, but this is left out for the reader to fill in, thus providing various readings of the poem. There is also an attention to how the ancestors' role—at least in relation to the four rivers—shapes modern black life since it's written that Hughes's has known those rivers despite not interacting with them in the ways described in the poem. And with the ancestors' role in relation to those rivers, there is a violent history that appears to remain in the margins of the poem even while the central images of the rivers at peace remain "immovable" ("Attention" 414). For James, it's through practice that one can eventually notice the margins while keeping a slightly different focal point, and for the bloody history of the rivers to be maintained in the margins by signaling to this history through the "muddy bosom" indicates a deep awareness of that history and its impacts ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 7). There appears to be a profound awareness of black heritage in the poem because the "muddy bosom" and duskiness of the rivers are not central to

the image of the rivers as the poem seems to convey, but they are still present and thus not dull to the senses ("The Negro Speaks of River" 7-9). The central idea is peace and that black individuals have been around at the major waterways and across many countries since the beginning of time. But the line "muddy bosom" and "Ancient, dusky rivers" signal a darker history of the waterscapes, more specifically of the Congo, Nile and Mississippi, while remaining peripheral images in the poem ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 7-9).

By keeping the brutal history of these rivers in the margins and only hinting at it, the poem then seems to omit a non-black audience from understanding it fully, which uncovers human blindness toward those who may not be familiar with the history of slavery associated with those rivers. It's not the poem's obligation to educate white masses and other populations who are unfamiliar with the history, though. It's interesting to consider the exhaustion of black art constantly having to overcome this Jamesian human blindness, as to make sure populations perceive and understand the melancholic experience of these rivers. Hughes writes that having to overcome the blindness for others—specifically for white populations—and adhering to white standards of art is "the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America" ("The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"). But even while the poem does not have the obligation to educate, the poem still perpetuates blindness since those who do not know the rivers through personal experience, ancestral history, or do not have roots in Africa, do not share the experience and, according to James, have no reason to find interest in or understand the darker histories of the rivers. Due to this blindness, the evident interpretation of the poem is of the peacefulness of the rivers with no association to slavery and also the significance in such rivers to black upbringing and establishment. Additionally, since the poem does not to explicitly represent the torment of the riverscapes—since it weighs more heavily on the peace—the poem is blind to

those who experienced the rivers differently, as to not feel at peace with their histories, even if they identify as individuals of the black community, were exposed to the histories of the rivers and also claim that the histories of the rivers flow through their bodies. The aim in pointing out this blindness is not to argue that the poem must include all that is left out, for certainly a short poem cannot do all that, but James's philosophy on blindness provides a theory to point out what is excluded, why it may be excluded and what happens due to the exclusion.

The poem also focuses on the role of the ancestor, as indicated through the use of the pronoun "I," which reveals a personal connection in modernity to these rivers and to the ancestors who experienced the rivers in the sense that the poem implies. The poem indicates a continuum of the ancestors' lived experience into modern black life, which relates to James's argument that one preperceives what has been labelled ("Attention" 421) since there is a focus on the rivers near "the dawns" of the earth and how their significance is ingrained in the natural "flow of human blood" ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 4, 2). The preperception—which is the tendency to perceive things based on exposure, education and past experience—comes across in the poem as the tendency to perceive how black communities relate to the natural world and the four rivers. Thus, the poem suppresses the symbolization of the rivers as can be understood outside of black history when it's written that the "soul has grown deep like the rivers" (in this case I think it's appropriate to say that Hughes means his own soul since the poem was written while he crossed the Mississippi), which exhibits the soul's constant connection to slavery, abuse of black bodies and the subsequent freedom on those same waterways, especially of the Congo, Nile and Mississippi ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 3, 10). This preperception and selective attention molds the experience of the four rivers as one that highlights the tension between freedom and brutal violence that, as I previously wrote, is primarily understood by populations

that have a connection to the riverscapes and were exposed to histories of the rivers ("Attention" 421).

The poem alludes to the "dawn" of civilization at Mesopotamia with the Euphrates and the abuse of black bodies with the Congo and Nile rivers that were part of the passage to slavery ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 4). The Euphrates is connected to the action of "bathed," the Congo to "built" and "lulled," and the Nile to "looked" and "raised" ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 4-6). Bathing in connection to the dawn of civilization suggests that the poem is attending to the peaceful beginning of African populations and human civilization, and the "focus of consciousness" is the freedom once naturally part of everyday life ("Attention" 382-383). Without a shift in tone or syntax, the attention moves to slavery, but it's significant to note that the violence experienced during slavery is a marginal element in the sense that the poem attends "to a marginal object whilst keeping the eyes immovable" from the peaceful tone that exudes freedom and celebration of black communities ("Attention" 395). The reference to the building of the hut near the Congo and the raising of the pyramids near the Nile is married with the image of labor, even though research has shown that it was not slaves who put up the pyramids and slavery was not yet a concept in the same way that it became in later years ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 5-6). [4] But the mention of the rivers alongside the verbs "built" and "raised" signal the use of the Congo and Nile for slave passages with the Trans-Saharan slave trade and colonialist efforts, and brings in the tension between peace and labor in relation to the

[4] Jonathan Shaw wrote "Who Built the Pyramids" for *Harvard Magazine* in 2003 and explained that "Rooted firmly in the popular imagination is the idea that the pyramids were built by slaves serving a merciless pharaoh." He shares the work of Lehner and how he came to uncover the archeological sites of the workers who built the pyramids. He writes that "There *were* slaves in Egypt, says Lehner, but the discovery that pyramid workers were fed like royalty buttresses other evidence that they were not slaves at all, at least in the modern sense of the word."

rivers. Violence is also marginal with the writing of the Mississippi river; during the Red Summer of 1919, about 200 black individuals were killed and thrown into the Mississippi (Miller 31), and the "trip down the Mississippi to the Deep South" is also referred to as "the second middle passage" since about "875,000 American slaves were forcibly removed from the Upper South to the Lower South" (Zeisler-Vralsted 91-92). Therefore, the river has numerous meanings that shape the experience of reading the poem, yet the "focus of consciousness" ("Attention" 382-383) in the poem is the freedom that came floating down the river with Abraham Lincoln ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 7). In the seventh line, freedom is the center of attention since the poem mentions the "singing" of the river instead of the groans of slaves and the drowning of thousands below. The death associated with the river is not entirely lost due to the river's "muddy bosom," which is juxtaposed with it turning "golden" with the coming of freedom revealing the tension between light and dark and death and life "(The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 7).

The tactic of selectively attending to freedom and the celebration of African roots seems at times like a coping method when read against the history of the rivers that the poem only partially points toward. In this way, some black audiences may be aware of the darkness in the poem, but white audiences may not understand entirely due to a lack of previous experience and the ancestor, which feeds into this blindness. Nevertheless, an application of James's "Attention" revealed how "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is a poem that primarily focuses on the peace surrounding these riverscapes and how influential they are for black communities, as well as getting the point across that black populations have been around since the dawn of time. Using "Attention" also allowed me to extrapolate how slavery in relation to the rivers was left in the margins of the poem and how the darker histories of the riverscapes are not central to the work.

A significant revelation using James's "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" was how the poem focuses predominantly on African communities—since the poem only features waterscapes in Africa, plus one in the United States—and does not explicitly articulate the gloomy histories of the rivers so that those who did not experience or know about such histories are not able to understand the poem in that sense. Additionally, the application of "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" uncovered how the poem becomes blind to different experiences of the rivers through its absence of representing the peace and torment surrounding the rivers equally and explicitly. James's philosophy on blindness allowed for a novel interpretation of the poem by providing a theory to extrapolate where the poem becomes blind to certain populations and experiences, and in this case the poem was revealed to be blind toward non-African populations in particular.

Gwendolyn Bennett, though she was a highly influential writer during the New Negro Renaissance, never experienced the same fame in modernity that Hughes still does. She was born in July 1902 in Texas. Her early childhood was spent in Washington D.C and she eventually moved to New York and attended the Brooklyn Girl's High School, graduated at the start of the Renaissance in 1921 and then attended Columbia University. In 1925, Bennett went to Paris to study art on a scholarship and it's during this time when she wrote her first diary. Returning the following year, Bennett found herself as assistant editor of *Opportunity* and as a member of the editorial board of *Fire!!*, the latter which was created by Hughes. By 1928, Bennett had published 22 poems in several publications, including *Opportunity*, *The Crisis* and *Palms*. That same year, Bennett temporarily moved to Florida after her marriage to Dr. Albert Jackson and that negatively impacted and interrupted her work; "Despite the accolades, the poetic vitality, and Bennett's joyful image in the black press, however, after 1928, she evidently published no

more poetry except for reprints" (Honey 105). Three years later, when she moved to Long Island, the end of the Renaissance was nearing, and the Great Depression was pushing forward. By 1936, Bennett moved back to Harlem, where she joined the Harlem Artists Guild and helped direct the Harlem Community Art Center. Her years before moving to Florida were her most influential and she worked closely with Hughes and other monumental writers of the New Negro era. Despite her influence during the time, Bennett is not a writer that is much written about in academia—certainly not like Hughes. Much less work is left behind for scholars to try to understand her thought process, but sections of her first diary and her 1926 short story "Wedding Day" that was published in *Fire!!,* a literary magazine that sought to challenge the norms of black art and culture prior to the New Negro movement, do provide some insights.

Bennett's short story "Wedding Day" is a piece of non-fiction and not a critique of black art, as we saw in Hughes writing, but it nevertheless gives insight to an issue Bennett didn't think would ever go away: the color line. The story follows Paul Watson, an American black man who moves to Paris, and his hatred for American white people—especially if he is called a racial slur. Watson eventually meets Mary, an American white woman in Paris. Though initially hesitant to let her in, she attempts to convince him by saying she is not racist, "'Aw, Buddy, don't say that. I ain't prejudiced like some fool women' … 'Oh, Lordy, please don't hate me 'cause I was born white and an American. I ain't got a sou to my name and all the men pass me by cause I ain't spruced up. Now you come along and won't look at me cause I'm white.'" ("Wedding Day" 4). But Mary doesn't go through with the wedding, "How'd she say it now, 'just couldn't go through with it,' white women just don't marry colored men, and she was a street woman, too. Why couldn't she have told him flat that she was just getting back on her feet at his expense" ("Wedding Day" 6). The story, though short and light-hearted, offers a critique on American

society and how it impacts places abroad. Bennett studied in Paris from 1925 to 1926 and wrote in her diary on June 26, 1925, of her sadness in moving to Paris and being away from her friends. She specifically points out the "cold rain that eats into the very marrow of the bone" and made her feel homesick (Hoffmann 67). But aside from some homesickness, Bennett's diary entries seem to show that she enjoyed Paris and even felt that "things seem so simple here, so remote" (Hoffmann 68). "Wedding Day" is a stark contrast from her diary entries, but the short story shows this cloud of racism and color that differentiates Bennett from the majority in Paris and the United States. This color line and an awareness of the different ways that blacks and whites are treated in the United States is clear in her poetry as she recalls black heritage and culture in "Heritage" and oral tradition and music in "Song."

Bennett's 1923 poem "Heritage" is alike Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in the sense that both feel an attachment to Africa despite not being born there. Hughes did travel to Africa, but that was not the case for many other writers in Harlem, including Bennett. Despite the poets not being from Africa, the role of the ancestor is clearly the object of attention in both poems. The poems also utilize the first person and sensory verbs to get across this tie to African heritage and culture.

> I want to the see the slim palm-trees,
> Pulling at the clouds
> With little pointed fingers. . . .
>
> I want to see lithe Negro girls,
> Etched dark against the sky
> While sunset lingers.
>
> I want to hear the silent sands,
> Singing to the moon
> Before the Sphinx-still face. . . .
>
> I want to hear the chanting
> Around a heathen fire

Of a strange black race.

I want to breathe the Lotus flow'r,
Sighing to the stars
With tendrils drinking at the Nile. . . .

I want to feel the surging
Of my sad people's soul
Hidden by a minstrel-smile.

Hughes in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” focuses his attention on the ancient rivers that had and continue to have an impact on black culture, but Bennett instead focuses on several aspects of black life that brings the poem into Africa. In the first two stanzas, it’s not yet clear that the setting is Africa, but the personification of nature and the eventual introduction of the “Negro girls” is a serene scene and invites the reader into a setting that is natural and away from the bustling New York City where Bennett was when she wrote “Heritage” (4). It becomes clear that Bennett’s attention is on Africa when she mentions the “Sphinx-still face” and onward with the “Lotus flow'r,” which is the national flower of Egypt, and the is “Nile” in Egypt and Sudan (“Heritage” 9,13,15).

It appears that Bennett’s attention, which brings out the specific images she references in the poem, are influenced by other poets. The “slim palm-trees” are morphed into the “little pointed fingers,” which then become the hands of the “lithe Negro girls;” this transition from the palm trees to the girls show this unity with the natural that is part of African culture (“Heritage” 1, 3, 4). Aside from depicting this connection between the natural and blackness, Bennett also calls attention to Angelina Grimké’s poem “The Black Finger,” which depicts “A black finger / Pointing upwards” (7-8). Grimké’s poem questions why black people still look to the heavens, reaching upwards for something that is not really there, especially when the black finger is surrounded by a “gold sky,” which symbolizes whiteness in America. Bennett has a similar idea,

however, the pointed fingers are actively pulling away the clouds and are against a "dark" background, as in surrounded by other black girls ("Heritage" 3-5). In Bennett's poem, the black finger is rewritten in a setting that it can thrive within, that it can point upward and reach something that it can attain. In this way, Bennett's attention is not on the losses of black folks or the suffering they feel as long as the color line is still in place, but instead on the opportunity to grow that the connection to Africa and heritage offers. Much like Hughes focuses on the peace between the rivers and blackness in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Bennett also focuses on the peace between the natural African landscape and blackness.

The third and fourth stanzas also play on the transition of the natural to the human, which is fostered through the personification of the natural. Bennett writes that she wants to hear "the silent sands" singing near the Sphinx and this turns into "chanting / Around a heathen fire" ("Heritage" 7-11). The silent sands seem to transform into people chanting, once again furthering this connection between the people of Africa and nature. It's also these lines that clarify that Bennett is narrowing her attention to Africa. Aaron Douglas, another major figure during the New Negro Renaissance, was heavily influenced by Egyptian images and symbols and Amy Kirschke in her book *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and The Harlem Renaissance* writes that "DuBois wanted Douglas to remind the *Crisis* audience of their African ancestry and to inspire in them an interest in the common heritage. Egypt was the common vocabulary to achieve this goal" (77). Bennett seems to also utilize Egypt as a backdrop that is identifiable as Africa to emphasize this *common heritage*. As James wrote, there are countless things that one can attend to in a single environment, and certainly too many in Africa to put into a single poem. Bennett seems to focus on the *people* of Africa and a peace with nature and suppresses other objects that could be brought into the poem. And this also shows her use of the "passive sensorial attention,"

which James writes is derived from what one already knows, since Bennett relies on the role of the ancestor also seen in Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" ("Attention" 395).

Much like Bennett was influenced by Grimké's poem, she also picks up on Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America." Wheatley's first line states "'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land," which ties to Bennett's description of the fire as being "heathen" ("Heritage" 11). Heathen in Old English means not Christian or Jewish and it was later tied to paganism, in the sense of describing someone who is not Christian, Jewish or Muslin (Merriam-Webster). Bennett also described the black race as "strange" ("Heritage" 12), and this connects to Wheatley's description of the black race as "'a diabolic die'" as thought from white Americans (6). In both lines, Bennett is not depicting her people as strange or without religion, but instead picking up on common black stereotypes that ultimately have a lesser impact on people when in Africa as opposed to in the United States. Bennett's choice to include "heathen" and "strange" show her awareness of black stereotypes and her desire to alter the meaning the words have garnered.

Hughes's final river in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is the Mississippi. Bennett's final line in "Heritage" depicts the American tradition of minstrelsy. Both poems show this inability to overcome oppression and that Africa always somehow links back to the United States due to millions of enslaved people being brought over. The "minstrel-smile" harks images of black face, a form of theatrics where white people would portray black people by painting their faces the darkest shade of black and acting out racist depiction of blackness ("Heritage" 18). These depictions often portrayed black people in a cheerful spirit while working on a plantation up until the end of the 1930s. That's the image that Bennett brings to the end of the poem, and it serves to show that the white person playing black face will never understand what it feels to be black, but

their smiling faces underneath the black makeup creates a veil that only suppresses the true sadness that the black race feels. The minstrel-smile being this American birthing of black stereotype and the final line of the poem shows how destructive it is to African heritage, for the smile hides all the culture that is weighed heavily in Bennett's "sad people's soul" ("Heritage" 17). James's passive sensorial attention is also shown in this last stanza; it was clear in "Wedding Day" that Bennett identifies the color line as one of the biggest hurdles dividing whites and blacks and it's shown in the final lines of "Heritage" that this color line, which allows for the popularity of black face, disperses attention from actual African heritage.

It's interesting that the fingers mentioned in the third line of the poem belong to "Negro girls" specifically, instead of perhaps Negro people ("Heritage" 5). Bennett does eventually write of the whole black race, but why single out Negro girls in the second stanza? Positive depictions of black women were not common up until the New Negro Renaissance and they were often linked to prostitution, poverty and primitivism, and overly sexualized, but Bennett instead links these girls to the naturalness of Africa and in a setting that illustrates belonging. James writes that what is partially absent can show what is not central ("Attention" 414), and though I do not think Bennett was attempting to state that black men were not as important as black women, there seems to be a need to depict black women outside of poverty. Bennett is thus partially blind to the experience of the black man in Africa, and we see the reverse in some of Hughes's poems, though both authors do write from the perspective of the other gender at times. Determining that Bennett was blind to black men in "Heritage" is not as useful as trying to understand why she isolates the "girls." James writes that one often becomes blind to others' experiences simply because it does not directly impact one's own experiences ("On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" 133), and it appears that this is what we see in Bennett's "Heritage," she is simply more

in tune with a woman's experience of the role of the ancestor, but it's also important to understand the ways in which black women were depicted prior to the New Negro Renaissance and during. Elise McDougald in "The Task of Negro Womanhood," which was printed in Locke's *The New Negro,* states "There is, however, an advantage in focusing upon the women of Harlem—modern city in the world's metropolis" and that up until the New Negro Renaissance, black women are "most often used to provoke the mirthless laugh of ridicule; or to portray feminine viciousness or vulgarity not peculiar to Negroes" (369-370). McDougald writes that the modern black woman is delving into art and countering previous stereotypes or illustrations of black women in art, "There is every prospect that the Negro woman will enrich American literature and art with stylistic portrayal of her experience and her problems" (377), which is what Bennett appears to be doing by focusing her attention on "Negro girls" in the poem before becoming more general with the "black race" ("Heritage" 4, 12).

A shown through the use of James's "Attention," Bennett focuses on the peacefulness of Africa, as detached from American racist influences, and sense of belonging among black girls and the black race. Yet, there is still a marginal attention to the violence that racist white America contributes to blackness and Africa, as shown through the minstrel-smile that functions as a veil, hiding African heritage from the white experience. Bennett also attends to iconic poems by Grimké' and Wheatly and alters the conception of specific symbols they introduced in their own poems, which shows her awareness and attention to specific black stereotypes. Utilizing James's "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," it become clear that Bennett is blind to the experience of black men, but not a way that is meant to further oppress. Rather, Bennett appears to work toward illustrating black women in poetry in a manner that goes beyond poverty, sexualization, and other common ways of depicting black women in literature prior to the New

Negro Renaissance. Bennett also appears to be partially blind to the whole of Africa at times since she utilizes Egyptian images. Though she does appear to use Egypt in a way that is meant to cultivate an image of Africa in its entirety as Douglas and DuBois attempted, this nonetheless excludes the other countries of Africa, with their different terrains, civilizations, cultures, languages, customs and narrows the whole continent to a single country. Her inclusion of the Lotus, Sphinx and Nile in the poem make it clear that the setting is Egypt, and though she mentions the whole race, the images in the poem may not be the experience of the whole race.

It was in the mid and late 1920s that Hughes began to embody an identifiably New Negro style with the publication of "The Weary Blues" in 1926. The poem is full of vernacular and the Blues style, which comes in part by the culture of Harlem nightlife. "The Weary Blues" calls forth an afterhours, nightlife tradition of clubs where Jazz and the Blues became widespread (Vogel 407), which is suggested when it's written that "And far into the night he crooned that tune. / The stars went out and so did the moon" ("The Weary Blues" 31-32).

> 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.

These afterhours clubs were not only known for music, but they were "racially mixed and sexually deviant social spaces" filled with sexual ambiguity and were often frequented by queer populations, including Hughes (Vogel 402). Hughes kept his sexuality quite private at the time, but his queerness is suspected, and this appears to translate into "The Weary Blues" at certain moments. The poem highlights the art of Blues music, and the attention falls on the melancholic themes of the music that are meant to communicate the everyday struggle of black life. But in the margins of the poem, attention falls onto racial mixing and intercourse, with sex and homosexuality being common themes in Blues that are often beneath the surface.[5] The contrast between the "ebony hands" and "ivory keys" symbolizes both the playing of the instrument and the racial mixing in afterhours clubs ("The Weary Blues" 9-10). The "moan" of the piano and the "rocking back and forth" seem to call forth the queerness and sexuality explored in these spaces since they indicate rather sexualized sounds and movements, but they are implicit as to remain

[5] Eric Garber writes in "*A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem"* that, though the blues translated themes of loneliness, poverty, love and difficulty, "The social and sexual attitudes of Harlem's new immigrants were best reflected in the blues." He gives several examples of black artists, including, Bessie Smith, May Rainey and Lucille Bogan, who wrote about homosexuality, cross-gender behavior and sex in their Blues songs.

below the surface since these racially mixed, queer spaces were not open to all ("The Weary Blues" 2, 10). The sexual undertones in the poem would not be completely unexpected because even in the 1920s his close friend, "Countee Cullen, deduced that Hughes must be a homosexual" since Hughes "had so far given not the slightest indication of sexual interest in women" (*The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. I*). I suspect part of the reason racial mixing and sexuality/homosexuality are not what the poem selectively attends to at the forefront is because these themes were ill-received among many populations, therefore, it becomes suppressed in the poetry and what does come across quite clearly are the common themes in Blues: issues of oppression and the creation of music to cope with that oppression ("Attention" 382-383).

The attention to gender is significant in the poem since it proclaims that the Blues comes from "a black man's soul" and, though the work specifically details a male "Negro," Blues music was not exclusive to men, and a lack of female representation reveals a blindness for women who in many ways equally dealt with the themes uncovered in the Weary Blues through music and in other ways ("The Weary Blues" 15). Additionally, *a black man* is not the same as *the black man,* in which the former generalizes to *all* black men since *a* is used to modify non-specific nouns unlike *the.* Thus, leaving out all black women or anyone who does not identify as *a black man* means that their experience is omitted, but not necessarily ignored or overlooked. This difference in attention to gender and who takes the role of musician further accentuates the blindness of black women and other minority populations who may participate in the Blues due to simply making it specific enough to be *a black man* but not generalizable enough to *any* "Negro."

The male musician is also written about in relation to the poverty-stricken environment of the afterhours club. It's written that the space has an "old gas light," the musician plays from a

"rickety stool," and he plays a "sad raggy tune" and "melancholy tone" ("The Weary Blues" 5, 12, 13 17), all of which also come across as a unified image of multiple items being attended to that create the "single pulse of consciousness" that point toward poverty ("Attention" 384). These items are only connected to the male in the poem, thus again leaving out how women and other minority populations may be experiencing the same circumstances.

But why are these images only connected to the male in the poem? And why does the poem read as exclusive to men? As James writes, numerous items are present to an individual, and choice of focus and attention on one thing over others is due to interest ("Attention" 382). I don't particularly think the poem fails to attend to women to further divide gender, for Hughes has other poems that focus or at least mention women, but the very specific pronoun usage does seem to imply a difference in experience depending on gender. In light of James's philosophy on attention, we can also read the poem and make the conclusion that it fails to focus on women because they are simply not of interest during that specific experience at the venue in Lenox Avenue ("Attention" 382-383).

In addition to the male figure as a central focal point, the ambience and specific items inside the room take center stage in "The Weary Blues" too. During the first half of the poem, there appears to be equal attention on the musician and the atmosphere, but that does not last long as the attention finally settles on the musician. It's also important to note that the poem attends to objects that further the image of poverty and sorrow. There is a tendency to view the ambience in a rather negative perspective when the opposite could be an equally real experience that others were living through. For example, the lighting appears as a "pale dull," the piano is "poor," the stool is "rickety," and the music is "sad" and "raggy;" all such adjectives push forward a narrative of poverty and misery ("The Weary Blues" 5, 10, 12, 13). There is a shift in

attention on line 23 that falls in line with James's philosophy that the mind cannot attend to multiple things at once and that it will eventually focus on one thing. The poem ultimately settles on the musician and the ambience becomes suppressed. This shift in attention toward the musician reveals the central interest and appeal of the poem, which I think also harks the question of sexuality since there is a reference to the musician going to bed.

Noting that there is an eventual decrease in attention to the ambience, there is a complete lack of attention to the audience in the room or the larger feelings within the space, therefore, the poem evokes a rather narrow experience that only focuses on the struggles of black individuals and the black musician. In this way, the poem also presents Blues music as rather cheerless, especially how the lyrics inserted in the poem primarily touch on a feeling of isolation. But as James writes, it would be utter chaos if one could attend to everything all at once; therefore, it makes sense as to why the poem maintains an attention on objects, lyrics and movements that symbolize poverty and oppression despite it revealing a blindness to a perhaps different experience of the Blues genre and afterhours sub-culture ("Attention," James 382). Additionally, afterhours spaces were regarded as 'safe spaces' where a doorman would serve as "guardian of underworld knowledge" to prevent such spaces from being closed (Vogel 404). The poem not explicitly touching on the fact that these spaces allowed many to finally act and feel like themselves seems to dismiss the peace radiated in such spaces.

Even if "The Weary Blues" is simply read to be a Blues musician performing at a venue without the afterhours concept—which is the more common way of reading the poem[6]—the

[6] Arnold Rampersad, in a paper titled "Langston Hughes's Fine Clothes to The Jew," writes that the poem establishes a "distance between the persona or narrator of the poem and the black bluesman" and that the poem springs from Hughes's isolation and his will to admire the artist (147). Rampersad adds that the poem is situated in a cabaret but avoids the sexual tension in it

poem makes the assumption that the musician has a desire to die, as is signaled with the final lines, "He slept like a rock or a man that's dead" (35). This assumption reveals the poem's blindness in understanding the musician and a tendency to assume fate through the lyrics of a song that is culturally known to primarily express feelings of sorrow. Additionally, the way that the poem describes the musician as doing a "lazy sway" and having a "melancholy tone" paints a picture that the musician is rather exhausted and woeful without considering an opposite experience ("The Weary Blues" 6, 17). Perhaps the perception of the musician influences the ambiance, since it's written that the musician is playing a "drowsy" and "mellow" song before the venue itself is illustrated ("The Weary Blues" 1-2). Regardless, the poem's focus is not on the energy or the musician's love for the music, but on his performance and the fatigue and disadvantaged ambiance, which reveals a blindness to the opposite experience or a sense of freedom while playing.

Applying James's "Attention" to "The Weary Blues" revealed how the poem primarily attends to the musician, but at first attends to the items that illustrate poverty within the environment and the musician playing within that environment. This is significant because the philosophy allows for the revelation of this movement from the environment to the musician while connecting this movement to attention, which reveals interest, instead of simply noting the

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and rather highlights how Hughes honors European tradition through the English writing and black tradition through the vernacular "*in spite* of the English language" (147). Arthur Davis, in "The Harlem of Langston Hughes's Poetry," writes that the black piano player, and all his actions throughout the poem, is "highly symbolic" as a means of escape from the harsh reality of oppression in the 20th century (277). For Davis, the poem expresses the ways in which black individuals attempt to forget racism and oppression but are yet unable to. He, much like Rampersad, fails to point out the afterhours club and the sexual tension ingrained in the poem. Both also fail to note on Hughes's attention to the objects in the poem and how they essentially reveal the constant reminder of oppression. And probably unsurprisingly, they both fail to note on how Hughes is blind to the personal experience of the Blues singer, despite writing a poem that observes him.

movement as separate from attention and interest. There is an omission of attention to women, the audience watching the musician play, different perspectives of poverty as presented through the external environment, how the musician may be experiencing oppression since there is an assumption made from the lyrics that the musician would rather be dead and, finally, the afterhours and sexual natures of the poem are kept in the margins, even though it's hinted at. James's philosophy on attention is particularly useful in reading the poem in a novel way since it allowed for a deeper reading into what the poem does and does not attend to, as well as providing a theory as to why there was a shift in attention on line 23. The application of "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" to the poem showed how the poem is blind to the personal experiences of the musician even while making assumptions of his attitudes based on the way he appeared to perform in a lazy and swaying manner. James's essay also revealed that, by the poem making rather definitive remarks about who partakes in the Blues, there is a blindness toward women and other minorities who use it to cope with oppression or simply partake in the creation of the art form. Though, again, this blindness is not to say that the poem perpetuates injustice, but simply reveals the experiences believed not worth including in the poem.

A year before Hughes published "The Weary Blues," Bennett's "Song" was published in 1925. Much like Hughes's poem, "Song" is full of vernacular and uses the Blues style. The two poems are alike to one another and although Hughes did not explicitly say he was inspired by Bennett's poem, they are nevertheless expressing similar themes: the use of music to get through tough times. Hughes's poem is set inside of a music venue with sexually deviant images and an overall focus on the Negro man playing the Blues. Bennett's poem is set in a few different

places, including Africa in the first stanza, a "camp-meeting-place"[7] in the second stanza and some sort of urban landscape in more modern times. The progression that we see in the poem with the turn of each stanza shows how the "song of waters" wasn't always a song full of pain, but with the come of slavery and the eventual freedom of slaves, these songs became a representation of the soul of the black race and they were particularly poignant ("Song" 1).

I am weaving a song of waters,
Shaken from firm, brown limbs,
Or heads thrown back in irreverent mirth.
My song has the ush sweetness
Of moist, dark lips
Where hymns keep company
With old forgotten banjo songs.
Abandon tells you
That I sing the heart of race
While sadness whispers
That I am the cry of a soul. . . .

A-shoutin' in de ole camp-meeting-place,
A-strummin' o' de ole banjo.
Singin' in de moonlight,
Sobbin' in de dark.
Singin', sobbin', strummin' slow . . .
Singin' slow, sobbin' low.
Strummin', strummin', strummin' slow . . .
Words are bright bugles
That make the shining for my song,
And mothers hold down babies
To dark, warm breasts
To make my singing sad.

A dancing girl with swaying hips
Sets mad the queen in the harlot's eye.
Praying slave

[7] Camp-meeting places, or camp-meeting grounds, were both a concept during slavery and during the Reconstruction Era. Before blacks were freed from slavery, slaves and their white masters would delegate places of worship that were labeled camp-meetings. These were spaces where Christianity would be fostered. During Reconstruction after slaves were freed, this practice continued to a certain extend. Former slaves would meet at camps and utilize them a community space for worship, spirituality, singing, story-telling and prayer during the emerging oppression of Jim Crow (Minuette 29-51).

Jazz-band after
Breaking heart
To the time of laughter . . .
Clinking chains and minstrelsy
Are wedged fast with melody.
A praying slave
With a jazz-band after . . .
Singin' slow, sobbin' low.
Sun-baked lips will kiss the earth.
Throats of bronze will burst with mirth.
Sing a little faster,
Sing a little faster,
Sing!

It appears that Bennett's attention is stuck on her people's song, those that express "the heart of race" and expel whispers of sadness ("Song" 9-10). Bennett begins the poem in Africa, directly connecting to her African ancestry. This is clear in the line "With old forgotten banjo songs," which brings forth an image of oral tradition and songs shared in Africa before millions of black people were shipped across the world for the purposes of slavery, leading to a fragmentation of that tradition ("Song" 7). Unlike Hughes, who wrote "a black man's soul" to illustrate a particular experience, Bennett generalizes her poem to all black people when she writes "I sing the heart of a race" and "I am the cry of a soul" ("Song" 9-11). Bennett's inclusivity is rather apparent when compared to Hughes's poem. James writes that blindness is due to one failing to see what others are seeing, perhaps because it's not important or it does not impact one directly ("On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" 133). As previously written, Hughes does not appear to be blind to women in "The Weary Blues" in an oppressive manner, but rather the homosexual undertones of the poem give insight as to why Hughes only focused on men in the poem. But that's not the case for Bennett, she immediately identified that African songs of tradition are something that encompasses the experience of all black individuals.

In the second stanza of the poem, it's not clear if Bennett is referencing a "camp-meeting-place" during times or slavery or the Reconstruction Era, but for the sake of linearity in the poem itself, I will assume she is writing of meeting places during slavery ("Song" 12). The difference between the song of her people in the first to the second stanza is evident. The song in the first stanza was "ush sweetness," it created a sense of careless "mirth," but by the end of the first stanza, the song has turned to "sadness whispers" and that continues into the second stanza ("Song" 3-4, 10). It's also in the second stanza where the vernacular comes out, something that was identifiably a style of the New Negro Renaissance. The tune of the "ole banjo," an instrument used for the creation of African music in the first stanza, is still present in the camp-meeting place, therefore showing how that oral tradition has not been completely forgotten ("Song" 13). But the "mirth" while singing is replaced by "Sobbin' in de dark," which illuminates the shift in the ways that black music is used and performed ("Song" 3, 15).

It's this second stanza that clarifies the "focus of consciousness" that James writes about ("Attention" 382-383). The song itself is the object that Bennett focuses on directly and the melancholic images appearing in the margins of the poem help define the song as being one of sorrow. For example, the image of the "mothers" holding their babies down for nourishment doesn't initially appear as a solemn illustration, but if we read it in the context of slavery, these children will be forced to live through hours of brutal labor, whippings, oppression and forced reproductions, which is why this image of caring mothers makes Bennett's "singing sad" ("Song" 21, 23). Additionally, if we consider how many enslaved black women became pregnant, it seems to reveal why Bennett highlights the darkness of the "breasts" against the babies, perhaps showing that a white slaveowner is responsible for the sexual abuse ("Song" 22). The sequence of "Singin', sobbin', sturmmin' slow" also depicts the focus of consciousness as

specifically songs of sorrow, for even the sobbin' does not stick out any more than the act of strummin' or singin'; it's as if the sobbin' has become such a common practice that it holds no significance over the norm ("Song" 16).

The final stanza of the poem appears to deal with post slavery United States in an urban setting, but the music remains the same. It's clear that it's an urban setting due to the mention of the prostitute or "harlot's eye" after the image of the girl dancing ("Song" 24-25). McDougald wrote in "The Task of Negro Womanhood" that "the Negro woman has been forced to submit to overpowering conditions. Pressure has been exerted upon her, both from without and within her group. Her emotional and sex life is a reflex of her economic station" (379). It's interesting that Bennett uses this image of the prostitute when it's no necessarily shredding the image of blackness as sexual. The prostitute's eye belongs to a "queen," as Bennett seems to write, therefore I wonder if instead the image is meant to denounce the practice of prostitution among black women. The image is also similar to the Negro in "The Weary Blue" when "He did a lazy sway" (6), for the dancing girl is also "swaying" her hips ("Song" 24), which appears to show a repose in music even though the lyrics and themes of the song may be solemn.

Bennett writes that the "Clinking chain and minstrelsy / Are wedged fast in melody," meaning that they are the objects being sung about in black music ("Song" 30-31). It's interesting that the banjo is no longer present in the last stanza, which symbolizes the forgotten songs and oral music tradition that have instead turned into Jazz ("Song" 27). Though the song sung is still melancholic, Bennett writes that it's music that allows her be hopeful, as written in lines 26 to 29. This hope is especially portrayed in the "laughter"[8] that Bennett recalls ("Song"

[8] Mike Chasar, in "The Sounds of Black Laughter and the Harlem Renaissance: Clause McKay, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes," writes in the start of his paper that "W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison have all been widely

27), which she also mentioned in line 36, “Throats of bronze will burst with mirth.” The throats being bronze is a particularly beautiful image; it portrays a sparkling, sun-kissed, brown-colored skin, while also describing how black bodies as like bronze: tough and resistant to erosion, yet easily shaped and able to undergo immense heat. In this final stanza, the “single pulse of consciousness,” as James calls it (“Attention” 384), is the use of music as a hope for a better future. That attention is due to a passive sensorial attention, derived from Bennett’s previous experience of her ancestors through the bitterness of having Africa stripped from them and then thrown into slavery (“Attention” 395). Even though Bennett did not directly live through that, that is the story that impresses her memory and shapes her art during the New Negro Renaissance, as is clear by the way that she harks images of African oral tradition and songs from the time of slavery. It’s interesting that Bennett never actually writes that she is utilizing specifically African images. Bennett’s ancestry goes back to Egypt in the poems as this catch-all for Africa (Kirschke), and we can also assume she is referencing Africa through the images of Egypt by considering James’s points on blindness, but she is again particularly inclusive in the

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recognized as ‘noisy’ authors who ‘sound’ black culture, producing ‘speakerly’ prose or incorporating black music into their work. But black poets such as Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, and Langston Hughes can be just as noisy” (57). Chasar writes that black authors included the “black laugh” as an elemental part of black community that unleashed a “force of nature” (71). He argues that the included the “black laugh” as an elemental part of black community that unleashed a “force of nature” (71). He argues that the laughter is added to show white audiences why black individuals have to laugh to overcome the pain that is brought by white communities (Chasar 71). Chasar does not name Gwendolyn Bennett, but she nevertheless become a noising poet in “Song.” Paul Laurance Dunbar, in his poem, “We Wear the Mask,” writes in the first line that “We wear the mask that grins and lies, / It hide our cheeks and shades our eyes,—" and then goes on to write “We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries / To thee from tortured souls arise” (1-2, 10-11). Dunbar’s 1895 poem reveals the long history of the black laugh as a masking of pain, and it’s consistently seen in Hughes’s work and other poets who wrote during the New Negro Renaissance. For example, Claude McKay, in “North and South,” writes in line 7-8 “And swarthy children in the fields at play, / Look upward laughing at the smiling skies.”

first stanza, meaning that the "sweetness" of the songs before slavery could come from anywhere in the world ("Song" 4), so long as it's still representative of the race, which is a general and fabricated concept anyways. Perhaps this inclusivity was to show the shared experience of blackness, one that does not discriminate on geographic location. When compared to Hughes' poem, at least the one's selected for this project, Bennett appears to be much less blind to the experiences of others instead of narrowing into her own experience as a black woman in the 1920s.

Bennett specifically narrows her attention on the song of her people and the ways in which it has changed through time, as shown by James's "Attention." Unlike Hughes, Bennet is incredibly broader with the music and the sentiments that black music expands upon; she writes that the song of waters she creates, which is the poem itself, is "of a race" and "of a soul" ("Song" 9-11). It's interesting that Bennett focuses on the ways in which black music has evolved through time and how it becomes a symbol of hope. This is drastically different from the way Hughes's poems plays out, which instead focuses on the sorrow of the musician that gets translated into the music itself and at the venue he performs. Through the use of James's "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," Bennett does not appear to be blind toward certain black folk, despite the reference to the "dancing girl," because the experience of the song is not exclusive to just women or just men, but "the heart of race" ("Song" 9), which is unlike Hughes's poem since he writes of "a Negro" ("The Weary Blues" 3).

II. Radical Empiricism, Experience, Pluralism and Truth

One of the principles that James is more known for is his construction of radical empiricism in comparison to traditional empiricism. In "A World of Pure Experience," he writes that traditional empiricism "lays the explanatory stress upon the part, the element, the individual, and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction" (23). Empiricism is knowledge derived from experience and the senses, and it claims that it's through lived experience that we can acquire knowledge, beliefs, truths and different views. Accordingly, concepts are only known through experience and not independent from it. James also writes that "*empiricism means the habit of explaining wholes by parts*" and it tends towards pluralistic views ("A Pluralistic Universe" 10). Therefore, traditional empiricism means that knowledge is gained from the individual parts of experience, and it insists on emphasizing the disjunctions between experiences without stressing the conjunctions and relations. Traditional empiricism is not James's focus, but it's a necessary concept to understand radical empiricism, which is what James's philosophy supports. He states that radical empiricism "does full justice to conjunctive relations without, however, treating them as rationalism always tends to treat them as being true in some supernal way, as if the unity of things and their variety belonged to different orders of truth and vitality together" ("A World of Pure Experience" 24). Rationalism here means that knowledge comes from reflective experience and reasoning, which includes mental awareness and consciousness, in contrast to experiences through the senses. Rationalism also emphasizes the universal, the whole instead of the parts, and holds that knowledge and truth can be gained independent from sense experience. Radical empiricism asserts that knowledge is gained through sense experience of both disjunction and conjunction, and James particularly stresses the conjunctions that then form a "mosaic philosophy," which is "a philosophy of plural facts" ("A

World of Pure Experience" 23). In an actual mosaic, the tiles are held together by bedding or cement, but in James's mosaic philosophy "there is no bedding; it is as if the pieces clung together by their edges, the transitions experienced between them forming their cement," which further emphasizes how experiences are connected and in relation to one another, and as time passes, experiences within the mosaic can grow and two that once seemed separate now appear connected or in some relation to one another ("A World of Pure Experience" 43).

James shows that words like "with, near, next, like, from, towards, against, because, for, through, my," all indicate a conjunctive relation between experiences ("A World of Pure Experience" 25). Considering James's radical empiricism, I show how the poems selected showcase the conjunctions while still maintaining the importance of the disjunctions. Black art often includes the role of the ancestor, and lived experience is a sort of continuation of what ancestors previously lived through. Therefore, the poems illustrate an awareness of conjunction between current and past black experience and a sort of mosaic philosophy where all black experience is shown through tiles and the edges of past ancestral and present experience grow to touch and live in relation. Additionally, black lived experience, even among widely different individuals, are often thought to be intertwined since there is a common understanding of oppression and racism, which also can symbolize this mosaic philosophy among different personal experiences.

But though James stresses the conjunction between experiences more than empiricism does, it's important to keep in mind that he writes that the conjunctive relation is primarily a "co-conscious transition," meaning that "one experience passes into another when both belong to the same self" ("A World of Pure Experience" 26). James argues that one person does not share a personal experience with another person because one's experience does not pass into another's

seamlessly. It's only continuous transition from one experience to the next when it's within the same person, but a "discontinuity-experience" when it's from one person to another ("A World of Pure Experience," James 26). With a disjunction between one's experience and another's, James also emphasizes that experiences within the same person have their own conditions, which is why he stresses that conjunctions and disjunctions "must be accounted equally real" and that we must be ready to think about two experiences as conjunctions if we are willing to look at them as disjunctions ("A World of Pure Experience" 27). With this in mind, I show that the poems display that certain experiences do not transition between different bodies, but that this boundary is also not as prevalent within the black community. The poetry does appear to point toward a truly co-conscious experience among different individuals due to a shared trauma and role of the ancestor, which is something that James does not recognize as possible in his philosophy.

Understanding that lived experience is a whole of conjunctive and disjunctive experiences and that a transition from one experience to the next in the same way is only possible within the same individual and not across multiple individuals, James writes of the pluralistic view more in depth. He explains that:

> there may ultimately never be an all-form at all, that the substance of reality may never get totally collected, that some of it may remain outside of the largest combination of it ever made, and that a distributive form of reality, the *each-form*, is logically as acceptable and empirically as probable as the all-form commonly acquiesced in as so obviously the self-evident thing ("A Pluralistic Universe" 21).

Pluralism functions side-by-side with radical empiricism, and James adds that it "allows that the absolute sum-total of things may never be actually experienced or realized in the shape at all" ("A Pluralistic Universe" 26). To put his idea of pluralism into simpler words, James means that there is no complete view of the entire universe—with all experiences and truths—in one focus, one experience or one perception. This means that each body will view the universe differently

in each experience they live through, revealing that there is more than one *real* account of how things are perceived and experienced. This means that there are countless real points of views depending on how the individual experiences reality due to, at least partly, attention and habit. In his essay "The Will to Believe," James writes of this pluralism by stating that we must continue experiencing our life and thinking through what we have experienced so that our opinions may expand (23). He adds that to have an opinion and hold on to it as if it's the absolute truth and there is no way to reinterpret it or rethink it based on future experience is a "mistaken attitude" because, as empiricists, we must acknowledge that there is a truth and that "although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when" we attain it ("The Will to Believe" 23, 21), therefore, we must always be open to expanding our opinions, particularly those we think are true.

When it comes to truth, James argues that anything to be deemed true must work in an actual or potential manner ("The Meaning of the Word Truth" 118). This means that only through the pragmatic method can truth be acquired. James differentiates belief from truth in stating that "beliefs are thus inertly and statistically true only by courtesy: they practically pass for true," but for something to be true, there must be a reference to their "functional possibility" and they must work ("The Meaning of the Word Truth" 119). Beliefs are the only things that can be true or false; a true belief is one that works and is found to work through the pragmatic method by experimenting and experience. A belief is false if it does not work, neither nor potentially. Experiences are never true nor false, they are simply *real*. Just the beliefs that arise from experiences can move through the pragmatic method to acquire a truth value, since empiricism relies on real world experiences instead of experiences of the mind. Considering James thoughts on truth, I show how the poems reveal that racism is a truth in a manner that proves functionality instead of relying on opinion.

It's also important to consider the function of experience, and James writes that the "only function that one experience can perform is to lead into another experience, and the only fulfillment we can speak of is the reaching of a certain experienced end" ("A World of Pure Experience" 33). James states that experiences can lead from one to another and that this function is fulfilled when these experiences that go toward the same ending finally stop coming to the same ending. As a result, the experience is done and the individual can finally move past it. But does black experience really work like this? Is reaching an end possible?

Beginning once again with "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the poem asserts a creation of the current self from the past that was directly experienced by the ancestor and the self in modernity. Applying James's radical empiricism to the poem reveals that the individual can be explained in terms of the parts that make them up: ancient and modern histories of the Euphrates, Congo, Nile and Mississippi rivers. But James stresses that if experiences can be understood as disjunctive, then they must too be understood as conjunctive. The poem reveals that the speaker identifies themselves with the ancient history of the rivers, as in connecting with the ancestor and the history of black life outside the United States, which shows the conjunction between past and present lived experiences. A unity of the ancient rivers in the modern blood shows this conjunction in experience as opposed to considering the rivers in a more modern temporality.

The poem states that the "soul has grown deep like the rivers," signifying a similarity between the substance of the soul and what the rivers represent to black communities in ancient times ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 3). It's particularly significant that the poem uses the first-person pronoun "I"—which for the purposes of this paper, I assume to mean black individuals with ancestry to Africa and Hughes himself, since he mentioned in *The Big Sea* that he wrote this poem when thinking about how his father has a "strange dislike of his own people" and that he

"liked Negroes very much" (*The Big Sea* 54)—even though the present body is not directly experiencing the bathing, building, looking upon and singing at the four rivers ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 5-8). The "I" pronoun further conjoins the experiences of the rivers between the ancestors and modern black bodies, which noticeably does not align with James's argument that a "discontinuity-experience" occurs between different people ("A World of Pure Experience" 26). With this overlapping of experiences, the poem indicates how there is a lack of discontinuous experiences between black individuals—even when in different temporalities—since the ancestor's role is deeply ingrained into modern life as individuals take the lessons of the past, thus advancing that a "co-conscious transition" is occurring ("A World of Pure Experience" 26). Additionally, the exactitude of the experience when it comes to racism and oppression, even in different temporalities, makes it so that the black community does not encounter a discontinuous experience between one another, something James would object to. That the poem illustrates the soul grown deep, as in a continuation from the souls of the past, serves to link the different souls together and create a unity, which highlights this co-conscious experience among different individuals, thus overcoming the boundary that James's philosophy establishes. The use of the word "My" in lines 3 and 10 are one of James's key words that signal a conjunctive relation between experiences ("A World of Pure Experience" 25), and in these two lines it shows the conjunction between the modern, personal soul and the histories of the rivers. This entanglement between past and present experiences—the co-conscious transition—of the rivers creates the mosaic philosophy that James writes about, except that in the poem it's between different people.

What I have pointed out so far only reveals the impact of ancient black culture and upbringing on modern bodies, though. By uncovering the pluralism in the poem, it becomes

evident that there is a darker history to the rivers despite the work being tranquil, as conveyed with the verbs "bathed," "built" and looked" that are not intertwined with anything burdensome or extraneous ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 4-6). The imagery accompanying the Euphrates, Congo and Nile are also peaceful with the dawn, the lulling to sleep and the pyramids rising. Overall, the poem translates a certain freedom that ancestors experienced prior to slavery and bondage. The gaps in time between the dawn of time, to the building of small communities, to the eventual building of the pyramids and larger civilizations accentuate where the modern human began and how African communities have been around for much longer than any white American community. The peace remains with the mention of the Mississippi, as described with Lincoln coming down to abolish slavery.

However, there is a completely different side to these rivers that is uncovered only with a knowledge or different experience of the rivers, and this oppositional reading of the poem reveals the pluralism that James writes about. Below the surface it's a bloody and violent poem, but that is left out for the reader to fill in. As written in *The Big Sea,* Hughes authored the poem after he "remembered reading how Abraham Lincoln had made the trip down the Mississippi" and decided to abolish slavery soon after (54). In *The Big Sea*, Hughes states that before writing the poem, he remembered what the Mississippi meant to "Negroes in the past—how to be sold down the river was the worst fate" and then began reminiscing all "other rivers in our past" (54). As I wrote in the first section of this essay, about 200 black individuals were killed and thrown into the Mississippi in 1919 (Miller 31), and the "trip down the Mississippi to the Deep South" is also referred to as "the second middle passage" after over half a million slaves were removed from the Upper to the Lower South (Zeisler-Vralsted 91-92), which the "muddy bosom" signals these drowned bodies ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 8). But the muddy bosom also symbolizes

freedom, both in death and when it turns "golden in the sunset" after the river was redefined by liberty once Lincoln rode it down to end slavery ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 8).

In terms of the dark histories of the other rivers, the Congo and Nile introduce the importance of riverscapes for civilization and both were part of the slave trade. With the intrusion of European colonizers, the Congo River was one of the ways to bring black individuals to the coast from the inland areas once the population of slaves diminished. The building of the hut and the pyramids is associated with labor, even though neither involved slave labor. However, the mention of labor in these peaceful spaces brings into mind a transition from the carefree bathing to a more active and laborious involvement with the rivers until the movement into the United States with the Mississippi, which spark more images of modern slavery. The sharp contrast between overtones and undertones in the poem—(1) overtones: the celebration of African ancestry and how it shapes the modern self and (2) undertones: the painful histories of these rivers that impacted and continue to impact generations—reveal the pluralism that James writes about. The differing views and understandings show that there is no complete view of the entire universe and that every individual experience is slightly different due to perception ("A Pluralistic Universe" 26).

With an application of radical empiricism and pluralism to the poem, I argue it functions to show how there is a co-conscious experience between past and present. When does this experience really stop, though? I ask this in light of James's point that the function of experience is to lead into another until that eventually stops and the experience is fulfilled or comes to an end ("A World of Pure Experience" 33). The difference between writing "My soul has grown deep" and "My soul grows deep" can help answer this question ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 3, 10). The past tense of the word "have" shows that it no longer grows deep like the rivers.

Also, the past tense of "I've known rivers" instead of "I know rivers" implies a stopping point ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 1, 2, 8). James states that when experiences come to an end, the individual can finally move past them; I argue that this is true in the poem, mostly because there is a sense of overcoming racism and oppression since these are objects that remain in the margins of the poem. It appears as if the soul growing deep led to this ability to process racism and think beyond it. And this real experience of racism that is left in the margins reveals the truth—as James explains truth—of racism since it works: it caused the shift in significance of the rivers from peace to dread prior to the rivers being reclaimed in peace.

The application of James's "A World of Pure Experience" showed how "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" focuses on the conjunctions between experiences over the disjunctions and emphasizes a mosaic philosophy among different people. Particularly significant and providing a new understanding of the poem and an objection to the philosophy, the application of James's philosophy reveals how the poem advances that a "co-conscious transition" occurs among multiple individuals who share the same experience of oppression due to the influence of the ancestor and the ancestor's soul being intertwined with the modern soul. James's essay also helped illustrate that the experience of the soul growing from these ancestral roots has reached a stopping point and appears to imply a moving beyond racism since racism is an object in the margins of the poem. Using James's "A Pluralistic Universe" exhibited how multiple readings of the poem are possible based on different experiences of the poem, the context it's written in and experiences of the rivers, such as the poem can be read to celebrate African ancestry and detail the peace surrounding those riverscapes while it can also be read alongside the destructive histories that involved bondage and slavery. The philosophy also helped explain how there is no complete understanding of the poem in one reading, much like there is no complete view of an

experience at one point in time. Finally, the application of "The Meaning of the Word Truth" and "A Word More About Truth" revealed how the poem proves the truth of racism since it caused the shift in significance of the rivers from peace to dread in a way that this dread now helps newer generations grow.

In many ways as explained above, Bennett's poem "Heritage" remains similar to Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," particularly through the use of radical empiricism and an equal importance on the conjunctive and disjunctive that creates James's mosaic philosophy. James writes that radical empiricism asserts that knowledge is gained through the senses and actual lived experiences, as opposed to experiences of reflection and reasoning ("A World of Pure Experience" 23-24). And what better example of the use of radical empiricism then Bennett's "Heritage"? Each stanza focuses on how a sense brings about the experience: sight belongs to the first two stanzas, hearing to the third and fourth, smell to the fifth and touch to the final. Bennett is very clear that her experience of African heritage is one that she was able to acquire through the senses alone. In this way, we can begin an analysis to show how Bennett puts equal importance on the conjunctions and disjunctions that create the whole of experience.

In nearly each stanza there appears one of James's identified words that indicate a conjunctive experience (with, near, next, like, from, towards, against, because, for, through, and my), with a few others that do not align with James's exact words but are nevertheless similar to another, therefore, giving off the same effect. In the first stanza, Bennett writes that she wants to experience the palm trees pulling at the clouds *with* their fingers. In the fifth stanza, she writes that she wants to breathe the Lotus while it sighs at the stars *with* tendrils at the Nile. The use of the word "with" in both lines conjoin the separate objects. For example, the palm trees pulling with their pointed finger; it's only with the conjunction of the palm trees and the fingers that the

image of an individual pointing up with a black finger comes though (as explained previously with Bennett's influence from Angelina Grimké's poem "The Black Finger"). The Lotus flower would be a separate object from the tendrils without the word "with," but instead it becomes the image of the Egyptian national flower looking up at the stars while extending a tendril, similar to the black finger in the first stanza, which serves to further connect African people to the natural. In the second stanza, Bennett writes that she wants to see black girls *against* the colorful sunset; the word "against" conjoins the experience of the black girls in contrast with the sunset, which appears to represent a sense of belonging since the girls are "etched" or engraved into this scene of tranquility. Bennett writes in the final stanza that she wants to feel the rising of *her* (or *my* - since the poem is in the first person) sad people's soul that lies hidden with a smile. The word "my" conjoins her experience to every other black person. Without the word "my," the stanza would simply mean that Bennett wanted to feel the rising of an unidentified group of people, but with the identification that those people are *her people,* it becomes clear that this is a unified experience that also represents herself. Stanzas 3 and 4 do not feature one of the words that James identified, but the words "Before" and "Around" function similarly to the word "near," which is one of the James's words ("Heritage" 9, 11). In the third stanza, "Before" conjoins the experience of the sands singing with the iconic image of the Egyptian Sphinx, which makes clear this experience is in Africa, more specifically in Egypt. And in the following stanza, "Around" conjoins the chanting of the "black race" with the fire, which pushes forward an image of spirituality that is separate from Christianity.

These connections are made between separate objects with the use of the words that James identified help create this "mosaic philosophy" of plural facts ("A World of Pure Experience" 23). These experiences can stand alone, and this is most obviously shown through

Bennett's choice to link them through the conjunctive words. But while her attention to the conjunctions is clear, she still stresses the disjunctions. The separation of the stanzas is the clearest illustrations of this disjunctions; the disjunctions are formed by the different senses that Bennett utilizes to create the whole experience of African heritage. The disjunction seems to show that an understanding of African heritage cannot simply be created through a single sense experience but must be a collection of separate parts. Because Bennett equally emphasizes the disjunctions and conjunctions of experiences, instead of the whole only being explainable by the parts, she seems to argue that African heritage must be explained by the whole, which is the mosaic philosophy, instead of through the distinct tiles that create the mosaic.

The disjunction of African heritage experience is also shown through the use of the first person and the desire to see, hear, breathe and feel. These experiences are not actually happening in present time—they are images that have occurred prior to slavery and Bennett longs for a return to more peaceful times, as is clear with the final two lines of the poem. Present and past are attached through the use of the first person because, though Bennett was born in the United States, she is still deeply connected to her African ancestry that is symbolized through Egyptian images and describes these specific scenes as if she has had experienced them. The role of the ancestor, this oral tradition of African heritage taught by older generations to newer generations who never stepped foot in Africa, also contributes toward the mosaic philosophy. What once seemed separate—that being the experiences of the ancestor and the modern being—maintain a connection to African heritage, which then links the edges of different temporal experiences. Additionally, it's this connection between past and present that supports the "co-conscious transition" that James defines as one experience passing into another experience within the same self ("A World of Pure Experience" 26). James argues that experiences between different

individuals do not transition co-consciously but, as I explained through Hughes "The Negro Speak of Rivers," the role of the ancestor allows for this co-conscious transition between different individuals. Bennett's use of the role of the ancestor also fosters this co-conscious transition due to Bennett not experiencing the scenes detailed in the poem but yet having vivid images to display of African heritage. Bennett also writing "my sad people's soul" furthers this deep connection between black individuals, as a sort of internal born nurtured by a common struggle due to slavery and modern oppression ("Heritage" 17).

James writes that due to pluralism, experiencing the complete substance of reality is not possible, for there are infinite ways to view and experience the universe based on attention and habit. Most clearly, Bennett shows this through her particular focus on Egypt in "Heritage," as shown through the images of the Sphinx, Lotus flower and the Nile. And though she is quite inclusive of Africa as a whole, since she states that all are her people, there is nevertheless an attention on Egypt. As previously explained, Egypt serves as a placeholder for Africa—it serves as an identifiable image of Africa; but does this adversely "simplify the human form" (Kirschke 76)? It appears that Egypt as Africa is due to a habit, as Farah Griffin in "On Time, In Time, Through Time: Aaron Douglas, Fire!! and the Writers of the Harlem Renaissance" explains that "many artists of (Douglas') day were inspired by Egypt" because it served as a place of cultural achievement and established civilization (50). But would the experience of the poem be different if Bennett instead utilized images of Nigeria, Ethiopia or perhaps Morocco? The short answer is yes. Bennett does not seem to argue that she engages with a complete view of black reality in the "Heritage," or else she would have perhaps used different images to symbolize the different countries in Africa, even while Egypt was used as a symbol for Africa as a whole. The single image that appears to be a complete view of African heritage is that of black folk hiding their

sadness with “a minstrel-smile” (“Heritage” 17-18), as if each black body experiences sadness in this way. This notion is similar to how the black laugh functions and is a widespread theme in black art in the New Negro Renaissance to symbolize a whole race’s attempt to rise out of oppression in a way that makes it appears as if it does not impact them as white folks think it does. It’s this smiling mask that serves as the “functional possibility” that fosters the truth of racism. James writes that for something to be deemed true it must actually or potentially work instead of being an experience that is individual and based on belief. For Bennett, the “minstrel-smile” is a direct action coming from the sadness that racism creates, therefore, the smile has a functional possibility and actively works to shield that sadness (“Heritage” 18).

James also writes that, because of pluralism, individuals must be willing to seek out other perspective in a way to expand their own opinions of reality. Bennett does this by shifting from Egypt to her people in the final stanza. There is an identification that slavery and racism have not allowed for the images in “Heritage” to occur in present time, or that racism has not allowed Bennett to experience her heritage in the present. But in the final stanza, Bennett writes that she wants to see her people surge beyond that minstrel-smile that keeps them from connecting with their heritage. This shows Bennett’s desire to understand reality beyond the truth of racism. That the smile is a minstrel one is especially interesting since minstrelsy involved white individuals in black makeup, therefore this line connects whiteness to blackness in an attempt to overcome differences. This yearning is also seen in her short story “Wedding Day,” but that crave is falsely given when Paul Watson lets his guard down to allow a white American into his life only to be betrayed once again. “Wedding Day” shows Bennett’s attempt to let go of the ways racism has impacted her inability to trust white Americans but also her fear of being deceived. “Heritage” is

similar to “Wedding Day” in that Bennett writes that she wants black folks to come out of the hole of racism, but she is still acknowledging that long held false smile.

Though Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” seems to have a ending point in which racism is overcome, this is not the case for Bennett’s “Heritage” for the same reason that she has a desire to move beyond the minstrel-smile that hides her people’s sadness. The function of experience is to lead into the next experience until there is a stopping point, according to James in “A World of Pure Experience,” and Bennett shows that her poem has not reached that point due to her not being able to experience her heritage in the present and her attempt to overcome the boundaries keeping her from experiencing so. “Heritage” stands in a spot that is in between experiences with a hope of reaching a stopping point, one in which the minstrel-smile is no longer necessary.

James’s “A World of Pure Experience” showed how “Heritage” is ideal for the application of radical empiricism since Bennett relies on the senses to create an experience of African heritage. There are also several uses of James’s identified words that signal conjunctions, as well the different and separate stanzas suggesting disjunction. The equal importance put on the two creates the mosaic philosophy between the separate but conjoined objects in the poem, as well as between the ancestor and the modern being. Similar to Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” the co-conscious experience occurs due to the role of the ancestor, which is fostered through shared trauma. Bennett’s idea of heritage is quite narrow, for it includes definite Egyptian objects and is not representative of the entirety of Africa, though we must be receptive that Egypt served as a symbol of Africa during the time. Though Bennett writes that she wants to see her people surge, there is no statement that her poem “Heritage” is representative of most people from Africa, regardless, there is a desire for *all* people with

African heritage to flourish. The one image that does not seem to have a pluralistic understanding is the minstrel smile, which also reveals the truth of racism since it appears to be the product of racism in the poem. The truth of racism seems to contribute toward this hesitancy toward not letting white Americans in, which then fosters the habit of regarding white Americans as hostile and unaccepting, even though Bennett shows a desire to overcome this habit.

In "The Weary Blues," radical empiricism is employed with the conjunction and disjunction between black oppressive experience and art. Without digging too deeply, the poem can be understood to be detailing a black Blues artist singing about the pain of living within a racist society at a venue on Lenox Avenue late at night. If I was to apply only *empiricism* to the poem, then this partial experience of the musician would not give insight into the whole of black lived experience, instead it would only be taken individually since James writes that empiricism "lays the explanatory stress on the parts" and disjunctions "and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction" ("A World of Pure Empiricism" 23). But the poem does not seem to take up an empiricist style, as is noted by the way in which the experience of the ambiance matches the experience of the musician's overall mood while performing. To point out Hughes's stress on the conjunction between the experiences of blackness, Blues music and racism, I will consider the poem's use of the words "with, near, next, like, towards, against, because, for, through, my," since James writes that these indicate a conjunctive relation between experiences ("A World of Pure Experience" 24). The experiences in conjunction in the poem are that of being black which results in living among racist tendencies and the creation of Blues music. With my previous reading of this poem in relation to the afterhours subculture and homosexuality/sexuality, the conjunction between the former three experiences and that of afterhours and Blues are also prevalent. These experiences can all be taken separately within the

poem, but James writes that "if we insist on treating things as really separate when they are given as continuously joined … then we ought to stand ready to perform the converse act" ("A World of Pure Experience" 27).

A conjunction that the poem showcases is that the experience of oppression and racism in everyday life feeds into the experience of creating Blues music. The experiences can be taken separately, but the conjunction gives insight into why the musical experience is the way that it is. For example, the artist "made the poor piano moan with melody" and sang "In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone" ("The Weary Blues" 10); both instances of the word "with" show how the song is impacted and conjoined with sorrowful experiences of being black in the United States. The piano is personified to be "poor" and its reaction to such status is a moaning of a tragic melody. And the voice of the singer is portrayed as gloomy. Thus, we see that the Blues are joined with the dismal reality of oppression, poverty and racism.

The word "like" also pops up in the poem stressing the conjunction between experiences of music, racism and blackness. The musician playing "that sad raggy tune like a musical fool," makes it so that music and sadness are a conjoined experience—since *sad* and *raggy* describe the *tune*—as well as the act of performing in a foolish manner ("The Weary Blues" 13). Let me define "fool" before going any further; in the poem it does not mean to act unwisely, but rather to deceive or show a deep love for the music. The line shows that the experience of the woeful music and the foolishness are immediately separate since they are not one in the same and the contrast between foolishness and "sad raggy" displays this inherent separation between the two; the contrast being that "fool" implies amusement and love for music while "sad raggy" suggest poverty. The word "like" in the middle of the sentence conjoins the two experiences so that

being a musical fool can be better understood when taken side-by-side with the melancholic music as to reveal a sort of coping method that occurs through the music itself.

In the final line of the poem, “He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead,” the word “like” conjoins the experience of sleeping in peace and death, in the sense of finding an escape from racism (“The Weary Blues” 35). The line shifts the tone of the poem since the previous use of the word “like” suggested that the musician enjoyed performing, since it offered an escape. In the final stanza, the musician sings that he wishes he had died, which foreshadows the sudden turn to a grim ambiance without stars or the moon (“The Weary Blues” 30-32). The musician is described as sleeping “like a rock” or “a man that’s dead;” but neither have much of a difference in the poem since both suggest restfulness, peace and escapism, just one is more permanent than the other (“The Weary Blues” 35). With this artificial juxtaposition, the poem conjoins death and sleep with escape from the harsh reality of racism while also noting the disjunction since “the Weary Blues” continued echoing in his head, therefore, revealing that there may not be an escape after all (“The Weary Blues” 34).

The ambiguity between the musician either sleeping profoundly or dying also makes it unclear if the experience of the Weary Blues and racism ever have an end. James writes that the function of experience is to lead into another until it reaches an ultimate end (“A World of Pure Experience” 33). If the musician were to die in his sleep, then the experience would come to an end—but the poem implies that this would be the only way for the experience to reach an end. If the musician just sleeps like a rock, then the experience of racism and the Weary Blues would continue as a loop. Therefore, the poem indicates that the function of experience is to reach an end—as signaled by death—but it also reveals how the regular function of experience as James details may not be an option while alive.

Finally, the use of the word “through” and “from” in the poem are also significant because they conjoin the separate experiences of the everyday life and that of music. The observation of the musician performing is a single experience within his entire day; the same can be said for the musician who is only performing in this specific location, within this specific ambiance and with this specific song at this certain time in the day. Nevertheless, the “Sweet Blues” is “Coming from a black man’s soul,” meaning that the lyrics and instrumentals of the song are composed from deeply held, personal experiences of being black (“The Weary Blues” 14). It’s worth noting that it comes from *a* black man’s soul, not just the musician’s, which shows how the fatigued meaning conveyed through the Weary Blues is something universally experienced by at least black men. The same cannot be generalized to women, as far as the poem goes. But with the understanding from “A Negro Speaks of Rivers,” the soul is shaped and influenced by past and present life and, in “The Weary Blues” the music also appears to be a culmination of experiences from the self and the ancestor. The word “from” in the line conjoins the experience of the song with the overall lived experience as it’s shaped by racism, oppression, and present and past experiences. Similarly, to how the poem expresses that the experience of music and everyday life can be conjoined due to life creating the music, the poem also states that the Weary Blues continues to play within the musician’s head even after the performance is over (“The Weary Blues” 34). The echoing of the music shows how music and life can become one experience as they both form and are impacted by one another.

This smooth passage between the Blues and life displays the “co-conscious transition” that James states is when one experience passes into another when they belong to the same self (“A World of Pure Experience” 25). In the poem, this transition also seems to occur between the musician and other black men, since it’s written that the song came from *a* black man’s soul,

making it universal and generalizable to *all* black men. James states that it's a discontinuous experience when this transition occurs between different people, but the poem does not seem to apply aspects of the philosophy, as the Weary Blues itself and the feeling that it represents are not only particular to the musician, but the musician serves as a voice for those emotions that can be hard to articulate. In this way, the poem advances that a truly co-conscious experience occurs among black men due to the shared trauma that is expressed through the Weary Blues. The mosaic that James writes about is based off the Weary Blues being a shared experience between countless individuals and the conjunction between racism, blackness and music because these experiences that seem to be separated within and between people are in relation to one another.

In terms of pluralism in "The Weary Blues," it's rather hidden since the common reading of the poem is of the musician and the themes of the Blues music. For James, pluralism means that there is no absolute way to view an experience and, that based on perspective, a different experience of the same scenario is still a real experience since everyone will experience things differently depending on the perspective or what comes into attention in the moment. Poetry is an art form that keeps certain meanings and experiences hidden below the surface so that several different readings are possible and equally real. The beginning of the poem is heavy with references to poverty and feeling worn out, while the latter part of the poem focuses on the lyrics. Words like "drowsy," "rocking," "mellow," "lazy," swaying," "sad raggy," "thump" and "melancholy" stress the exhaustion of the musician while also painting a picture of euphoria ("The Weary Blues" 1-17). As I pointed out earlier, the exhilaration of the musician performing can be understood when read alongside the function of the Blues. The style came as "a response to African Americans' deeply traumatizing experience of slavery and the dehumanization that persisted after its end" and served as a way to put "the bodily, visceral dimension of emotion into

language" (Steinfeld 31-32). The lyrical choice in creating Blues is often about transcending "a situation of oppression and a longing for improvement in the future," thus, serving in many ways as a "spiritual escape" (Steinfeld 20). Therefore, the experience of the musician in a certain jubilant stance displays an overcoming of oppression through music since he is not overcome with sadness or rage, similar to how I compared foolishness to "sad raggy" earlier in the section. But words like "lazy" and "drowsy" show a different side to this euphoric performance by displaying the musician as also rather defeated. The poem is specific with word choice and it reveals the experience of the musician as someone who is tired of facing the oppression and inequality that he sings about while also not wanting to be trounced by it. This tension between euphoria and exhaustion is shown through the musician's fluidity, as in the constant swaying and rocking (displaying elation) while performing and his lazy sway (displaying despair).

Reading the poem while considering the afterhours subculture creates a different experience and reveals a pluralism of interpretation. The repetitive rocking and swaying movements can be read in a sexual manner, and it reveals Hughes and the social environment's queerness. That the musician performed "far into the night" supports that the show is taking place in an afterhours club setting that were "important institutions in the cultivation of sexual subcultures in Harlem, Time Square, and Greenwich Village in the 1920s" (Vogel 406). The poem appears to take the Blues theme of sorrow and disguise a sexual ambiguity underneath it while allowing certain words to reveal the reality of this ambiguity. The choice to only detail the musician's "ebony hands" playing the "ivory key[s]" and making the body of the instrument "moan" gives insight into potentially multiracial sexual relations that were hidden during the times since racial mixing was not yet accepted. The black and white of the piano can also represent Hughes and his complex racial background as both his parents were of mixed descent.

With this completely different experience of the poem, the lyrics can also transform. Homosexuality and queerness were far from being accepted, therefore, the lyrics that the musician sings can also represent the inability to be "satisfied" due to not being able to be sexually honest with oneself or intimate with preferred partners ("The Weary Blues" 26). Additionally, the poem is produced a few days after the actual experience, as it's stated that the musician was playing "the other night," ("The Weary Blues" 4). The memory remains a vivid scene and primarily focuses on the male musician and how he interacted within the environment, which can reveal an aspect of sexual interest. The detail of the musician taking the song to bed is also intimate; perhaps it's an imaginative scenario to stress how much Blues is intertwined with everyday life, but perhaps it reveals a more personal connection between Hughes and the musician, or the musician and someone else who watched the performance.

Both readings of the poem are real possibilities, despite being widely different and showcasing completely different scenarios because James states that different experiences of the same occasion are real and that an experience can never have an "all-form" ("A Pluralistic Universe" 21). The poem does reveal a truth of racism, much like it did with "The Negro Speaks of Rivers;" the physical objects in the environment, like the "old gas light" and the "rickety stool," point out the poverty that is a direct result or working of racism in society ("The Weary Blues" 5, 12).

The application of James's "A World of Pure Experience" highlighted how "The Weary Blues" stresses the conjunction between blackness, racism and the Blues style of music in the sense that racism in the poem is a product of being black and the Blues becomes an artistic portrayal of that experience. There was also an exhibition of the conjunction between death and sleep in relation to escape from the reality of racism. But on the same vein, I displayed the

disjunction between death/sleep and escape with the Weary Blues echoing through the musician's head since it shows that sleep or death are perhaps not always connected to the experience of escaping racism ("The Weary Blues" 34). Specifically, an attention to the words "with, near, next, like, from, towards, against, because, for, through, my" that James says signal a conjunction helped identify moments of conjunction in order to reveal what experiences are in relation with each other ("A World of Pure Experience" 25). Applying "A Pluralistic Universe" emphasized how there can be multiple readings of the poem: at least two being that of the musician and his sorrowful Blues and that of the afterhours subculture. Additionally, James's philosophy showed how the musician himself conveyed plural perceptions since he can be viewed as both euphoric and defeated, as well as a mixture of the two. The application of "The Meaning of the Word Truth" and "A Word More About Truth" illustrated how racism is shown to be true through the objects in the environment that are a product of racist tendencies.

In Bennett's poem "Song," it is not immediately clear that James's radical empiricism will be applicable since the role of the ancestor is rather forefront and Bennett did not directly experience Africa as in the first stanza, nor slavery as in the second stanza. But, it's this role of the ancestor and the use of the first person and possessive pronouns that allow for the application of radical empiricism. As previously explained, the role of the ancestor allows for a co-conscious transition when it comes to black experience, and it's the same case with Bennett's "Song." The poem itself is not some mystical rendering of old African life and modern black life in the United States but includes traditional images of the banjo and the singing of African "hymns" to the eventual religious camps and the modern jazz band that functions similar to the older hymns by continuing to tell the story of black folk ("Song" 6, 12, 27). Bennett's knowledge of traditional African music and how it was impacted by slavery is through the role of the ancestor, as in the

past lived experience of black people. The final stanza of the poem is the turn to jazz, something Bennett was surrounded by during her years in New York in the early to mid-1920s.

Much like in "Heritage" and Hughes's poems, Bennett also prioritizes the disjunctions and conjunctions, which help create the mosaic philosophy between past and present black life. The most obvious disjunction in "Song" is time. There is a clear progression from the time of freedom in Africa, to slavery in the United States or reconstruction, and then modern life. These time periods being split into different stanzas accentuates the disjunction even more. These time periods have widely different ways of living and treatment for black people, and Bennett acknowledges this through the contrasting images. The first stanza is serene and peaceful with words such as "weaving," "sweetness" and the singing ("Song" 1, 4, 9). The second stanza is chaotic with the vernacular and lyrical lines in the first half of the stanza. The words "A-shoutin'" and "Sobbin'" also instill this sense of chaos, danger and sorrow—a direct opposition to the first stanza ("Song" 12, 15). The final stanza imparts a sense of hope with the "praying slave" and the "mirth" shown alongside the singing of music, as opposed to the crying ("Song" 26, 36). But even with the separate stanzas, which illustrate different time periods and foster disjunction, one common theme still flows through it all: music. Music is what allows a conjunction between past and present in the poem, for it is the one thing that black people never stopped taking part in. The verb *to sing* is seen in each stanza, and though the song shifts and picks up different themes, sounds and instruments, it's never left behind. It's this equal importance placed on the disjunction and conjunction that creates James's mosaic philosophy: the different time periods are the tiles in the mosaic and music is the cement forming in between ("A World of Pure Experience" 43).

"Song" also utilizes words such as with, near, next, like, from, towards, against, because, for, through and my to exhibit conjunction between more specific images. In the first two lines of the poem, the word "from" conjoins the music to specific brown bodies, meaning that the music is specifically coming from black tradition and expresses the song of Bennett's people. The use of "My" in the fourth line connects Bennett to traditional black music, for she was not alive when that oral tradition began but she is still directly impacted by it and claims it as her own. The use of "my" in line 23 has the same effect, for Bennett explains that her singing in modernity is directly impacted and connected to the experience of slavery. The word "With" in line 33 conjoins the "Praying slave" and the "Jazz-band" as to show how they function in the same way. The praying slave hopes for a better future out of slavery and jazz music expresses these sentiments in the form of a singing prayer. These conjunctions, which become transparent through the application of James's philosophy, further shows the connection between the ancestor and the modern black being, or between past and present time periods and ways of living. It's the conjunction exercised through the use of such words that James identified that also foster the mosaic philosophy between past and present lived experience in which the music becomes the linkage between the disjunctions.

Due to this connection between the ancestor and the modern being, a co-conscious transition is fostered between different individuals. The boundary that differentiates one body from another is taken apart within the black community due to a shared struggle, as I explained with Bennett's "Heritage." It's when Bennett identifies that she sings "the heart of race" that this co-conscious transition is clear, for Bennett becomes the voice for the entire race as opposed to only for herself ("Song" 9). And while she has not experienced freedom like that in Africa or

slavery in the United States, she is still able to garner images as if she lived through it and it continues to impact her own songs that represent the whole race.

Pluralism in the poem is not as prevalent through the idea that "the substance of reality may never get totally collected," but more through James's idea of having an open mind and being susceptible to finding mistakes on a certain held belief ("A Pluralistic Universe" 21). The function of prayer and music reveals that Bennett does not believe oppression should and will guide her race forever ("Song" 26-27), but it's prayer and music that expose the truth of racism in the poem. James writes that truth must have a functional possibility, and racism actively turning black communities toward prayer, and more specifically music, shows that these actions are direct consequences of racism, therefore, song and prayer become the functional possibility that works to overcome racism ("The Meaning of the Word Truth" 118-119). Music and prayer are the hope that Bennett, and her people, still hold onto and it creates the belief that racism and oppression is not the "all-form" of reality ("A Pluralistic Universe" 21). The poem ending with "Sing a little faster, / Sing a little faster, / Sing!" uncovers an urgency to move past racism and oppression ("Song" 37-39). It reveals a want for a different lived experience and shows how Bennett recognizes that there are plural experiences of reality that don't include racism. Since the poem ends in a sort of urgency to see what lies beyond, "Song" does not reach a stopping point in which the experience comes to an end. Much like in "Heritage," Bennett has yet to see her people and herself joyful and out of racism, therefore, the function of experience (that being prayer and song due to racism) in the poem has not reached an end. However, Bennett's hope that is showcased by the faster singing in the final lines illustrates a belief that there can eventually be a "certain experienced end" to racism and the use of prayer and song to overcome racism ("A World of Pure Experience" 33).

James's "A World of Pure Experience" showed how Bennett's "Song" highlights the disjunction between the different time periods through the different stanzas. Yet, there is a stress on the conjunction since each stanza includes the song and singing. The fosters the conjunction between the ancestor and the modern being, while still noting on the separation between the two due to temporality. Several of James's words that signify a conjunction also showcase the connection between prayer and music, as well as modern black songs and traditional black hymns that used the banjo. Due to the equal stress on the conjunctions and disjunctions, as well as the creation of the mosaic, the co-conscious transition is nurtured between different bodies due to shared trauma that is expressed through music. The biggest difference between "Song" and the other three poems is that, instead of "Song" showing multiple different possible readings, it primarily focuses on the idealization of a different reality—one in which racism is no longer intact. James writes that pluralism is realized by having an open mind and being open to different views of reality, and Bennett shows this perception through her desire to sing faster so that racism leaves her reality quicker.

III. Stream of Thought and Habit

For this final section, I use James's "The Stream of Thought" and "Habit" to analyze the form of the poems as well as habitual punctuation, style, syntax and themes. Although the poems are not in a prose, internal monologue style like most traditional stream of consciousness writings are, the poems still highlight a flow of thought that is similar to how James explicates the stream of thought style, especially when it comes to punctuation and how experience is written out. James's essay on habit provides a theory into what becomes habitual in the poems and what appears as a habit being overcome.

James's five characteristics of thought become critical to an understanding of how thoughts play out and what goes into a stream of consciousness. For the first characteristic, thoughts tend to be "a personal consciousness," meaning that thoughts are unique to the individual and that one's thoughts belong to one's other thoughts ("The Stream of Thought" 221-222). *Personal consciousness* simply means that thoughts remain within the confines of one's mind and do not cross into the minds of others; it means "absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism" ("The Stream of Thought" 222). Thoughts are shared during a conversation, but when it pops into the mind, it's entirely personal, and even when thoughts are shared between two people, the thought is never the same between the two.

Second, within each personal consciousness, thought is continuously changing and evolving. James writes that a state once experienced and gone can never recur identically as it did before, and no bodily sensation is ever reproduced the same way twice ("The Stream of Thought" 225-226). A deception of the senses or déjà vu may seem as if two events are identical, but James stresses that this cannot be, for every experience is always different even if it's the smallest, most unnoticeable difference ("The Stream of Thought" 227). One's state of mind is

also never the same as it was a previous time and, therefore, "Every thought we have of a given fact is … unique, and only bears a resemblance of kind with our other thoughts of the same fact" ("The Stream of Thought" 228). One's belief or perception is thus always changing, evolving with time as more experiences occur and the experiences are constantly remolding the individual ("The Stream of Thought" 229). Much like one thought is never the same as the last, every experience, despite how similar they may seem, is different.

Third, within each personal consciousness, thought is sensibly continuous, in which James defines "continuous" as "without breach, crack, or division" ("The Stream of Thought" 232). James accounts for interruptions and time-gaps when the mind loses consciousness all together, such as during sleep, blackouts and "breaks in quality" where the content change happens so abrupt that there is no connection between two thoughts ("The Stream of Thought" 232). Consciousness appears to flow continuously as opposed to being chopped up ("The Stream of Thought" 234). James introduced the term "*stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life,*" and it's now widely recognized as a form of writing that many black poets used to break away from white and strict forms of poetry ("The Stream of Thought" 234).[9] James's thought process in arguing that the consciousness is continuous is based off his observation that "it would be difficult to find in the actual concrete consciousness of man a feeling so limited to the present as not to have inkling of anything that went before" ("The Stream of Thought" 235).

[9] For example, Gwendolyn Bennet's 1926 poem "Hatred" features 21 lines bunched together with no apparent rhyme scheme or structure to convey an emotional, yet strategic, hatred for the mentioned "you" that elevates her in comparison to the intended audience. The formlessness of the poem reveals this stream of thought style, as there are anywhere from two to six words per line with plenty of enjambments throughout. Anne Spencer's 1920s poem "Translation" also utilizes a stream of thought style as the dialogue within the 17-line poem features two people and a narrator without much of an indication of when speakers change. The poem illustrates a spiritual journey that the two take and it's written in both the first and third person with no rhyme scheme or discernible form.

The stream of consciousness is made up of oscillations between transitive parts (flight/alternation) and substantive parts (perching/rest), as that is what the rhythm of language expresses ("The Stream of Thought" 236). The substantive is, to James, usually filled with sensorial images, while the transitive is usually filled with thoughts of relation—static or dynamic. James writes that the end of a thought comes when another substantive part becomes the central thought, and those transitive parts serve to guide from one substantive thought to the next ("The Stream of Thought" 237). Everyday language has a habit of attending to the substantive over the transitive, according to James, i.e., we have the habit of recognizing the substantive. James argues that there is value in the transitive parts since our brain, ourselves and our thoughts are always changing with time. Therefore, the substantive and transitive are part of the same process and James writes that "they are but one protractive consciousness, one unbroken stream" ("The Stream of Thought" 241).

Fourth, thought always appears to deal with objects independent of itself, showing that our minds are cognitive. Comparing this fourth characteristic to absolute idealism helps with comprehension; James writes that absolute idealism means that "the infinite Thought and its objects are one," or in non-Jamesian words, absolute idealism means that knowledge and truth are a reflection of the mind and dependent on thought ("The Stream of Thought" 263). James explains that the first time something is experienced it appears as the "absolute way" in the sense of absolute idealism, but with time and new experiences, the individual becomes aware of past and present realities that are not united with the mind. At this state of realization, the mind knows that the object appears in reality and knows that it knows so ("The Stream of Thought," James 264). The *object* that thought deals with is the whole "content or deliverance," as in the whole sentence that expresses the idea ("The Stream of Thought" 266). For example, the

sentence “black people are oppressed in the United States” is the object, not only “oppression.” James also expresses that, despite how complex the object is, the thought of the object is always an “undivided state of consciousness” because the object is thought in a unity or “*single pulse of subjectivity”* (“The Stream of Thought” 267, 269).

Fifth, thought is interested in some parts of these objects to the exclusion of others, meaning that thought is selective. I explained this characteristic in the first section of this essay when I considered James’s "Attention,” therefore, I will not go into another deep explanation of this concept. But I will add that we tend to ignore most of the things being presented to us because thought only focuses on a few that “practically or aesthetically” interest us (“The Stream of Thought” 275). From these few, we then choose the specific(s) that best represent the object of thought. For example, in the case of oppression, if our focus tends to be on black inequality and white supremacy then those two things will represent oppression “most truly” for us despite the various other ways of representing it. This fifth characteristic of thought also intertwines with habit, since our mind will have a habit of attention as it “persistently fails to notice” certain things but always notices others (“The Stream of Thought” 276).

For James, every living creature is a bundle of habit, meaning that most of the things a living creature does is habitual, eventually becoming instinctual (“Habit” 110). He gives the examples of snuffling, putting hands into pockets and biting nails as habits that become reflexes that are “*concatenated* discharges in the nerve-centre, due to the presence there of systems of reflex paths” (“Habit” 113). Habits are not always something that just appear but are nurtured from childhood; James explains that during growth, the brain will be influenced by its environment. What is learned becomes “branded” and is never lost, even if lost from conscious memory, and then becomes part of the “normal fabric” and a habit (“Habit” 118). James states

that "*habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes fatigue,*" which means that habitual movements decrease the time and energy spent to achieve a successful action ("Habit" 118). We can think of this in terms of poetry by analyzing the habitual words, phrases, rhyme schemes, themes, syntax, symbols, styles, poetic forms, among others, that the poems showcase while getting the intended message across.

When there is a habit, there is also a diminishing of the conscious attention when performing the action ("Habit" 120). This also means that events come in succession based on the habit without conscious thought of the next event. For example, if we commonly say the same phrase when we experience oppression, then it eventually becomes instinctual to say the phrase after experiencing some sort of oppression; however, at one point, it might have been a manual and conscious effort. James writes that "Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance," which is certainly something to take into consideration with the poems in regard to continued racism ("Habit" 126). James writes that habits do not just disappear, and getting rid of them takes a conscious effort, but before that, the habit must be identified. James says that "*we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can, and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us*" ("Habit" 127).

As James writes, when we acquire a new habit or leave an old one, "we must take care to *launch ourselves with as strong and decided an initiative as possible"* so that the habit does not become inhibiting ("Habit" 128). James builds on this by stating that we must encourage the new habit and actively engage to build the new and break the old. He adds that, when trying to get into a habit, we must not allow exception until the new habit has become secure into our lives, for the slip undoes more than expected ("Habit" 128). But also "We must be careful not to give

the will so stiff a task as to ensure its defeat at the very outset; but; *provided one can stand it,* a sharp period of suffering, and then a free time, is the best thing to aim at;" meaning that setting realistic expectations are necessary for forming new habits or they will fail ("Habit" 129).

Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" does not exert personal consciousness exactly how James explains it due to the role of the ancestor and how ideas, knowledge, thoughts and beliefs are passed down among countless individuals. Nevertheless, the poem is still in the first person, which means it can be read as a personal consciousness, but it must be understood that not all experiences mentioned in the poem were actually experienced in the first person. It's especially interesting to take the repetitive "I" and "I've" throughout the poem against "The Negro" in the title. The title is exclusive to an entire racial identity, which deviates from James's idea of a personal consciousness since the poem assumes that the ideas and thoughts in the poem are not confined to only one mind, but all "Negro" minds. The first-person pronoun thus comes as a stark contrast to the title, and it appears to advance the view that every black individual can relate to the personal consciousness presented in the poem as if it were their own.

Apart from the personal pronoun declaring that the poem is a personal consciousness, the anaphora of "I" and "I've" reveals that the thoughts included in the poem are continuously changing and evolving—at least the thoughts regarding the rivers. The "I" and "I've" are in the past tense, as with the rest of the poem, but the poem still illustrates a chronology of temporality from the dawn of time to the granting of freedom. And with this changing temporality, the "soul has grown" along the way, which indicates this continuous evolution of thought and understanding of black culture, the self, slavery and oppression. As I mentioned earlier, the rivers have a bloody and dark history associated with slavery and death. However, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" reclaims the rivers once used to sell the ancestors for labor as foundational to the race

and current success. The poem only includes the painful history of the rivers in the margins—motioning toward them with the mention of the "muddy bosom"—and highlights the poems in a modern, peaceful manner ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers" 8). With the implicit acknowledgement of the rivers' agonizing history, a central attention to when the rivers carried peace, and a recognition that the rivers and the ancestors shape modern black populations, the poem reveals a constantly changing consciousness.

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is not a stream of consciousness poem in the sense that we now tend to consider stream of consciousness writing, but it's a free verse poem that has no breaks in thought process or "breaks in quality" ("The Stream of Thought" 232). Hughes wrote in *The Big Sea* that he crafted the poem in ten to fifteen minutes; he added that "No doubt I changed a few words the next day, or maybe crossed out a line or two. … Generally, the first two or three lines come to me from something I'm thinking about, or looking at, or doing, and the rest of the poem (if there is to be a poem) flows from those first few lines, usually right away" (56). Just understanding the writing process itself shows how this is a stream of thought poem, but a look at the transitive and substantive parts is a more effective way to consider if the poem can be read as a stream of thought. When I first began to reflect upon the substantive and transitive parts of the poem, I was struck by how motionless it felt. My own recognition of the substantive and lack of identification of the transitive is part of James's philosophy when he states that we have a habit of focusing on the substantive. This feeling of stillness was due to the anaphora and the perpetual reflection on the four rivers. However, it's important to focus on the word choice when analyzing the movement in a poem, especially for short poems that stick to a single theme or image that are unlike most stream of thought works that follow the flow of consciousness and may reveal multiple images. I found that "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is

rather quite active, as noted by the verbs used throughout: “bathed,” “built,” “looked” and “heard” (4-7). Besides the verbs adding action, they are also thoughts of relation—as in actions done in relation to the rivers. In this way, the verbs serve as the transitions from one river to the next, representing the bridge between each object of thought. The verbs also show a chronology of human civilization and details nature in relation to humanity instead of both objects being separate. Additionally, the punctuation also reflects the transitive over the substantive; the colon on lines 1 and 9 help move past the single, still image of the “river” into a detailed and cultured explanation as to why the image of the river is significant and should be thought of in relation to humanity.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is a perfect example of how the mind deals with objects independent of itself and how it does not use absolute idealism. James writes that “by having other thoughts than this present one, and making repeated judgments of sameness among their objects, he corroborates in himself the notion of realities, past and distant as well as present, which realities no one single thought either possesses or engenders, but which all may contemplate and know,” meaning that with time, there is a past and present knowledge of an object and an understanding that the object exists entirely in reality itself (“The Stream of Thought” 264). The implicit mention of the troubled history of the rivers in the poem and the explicit focus on how the rivers help black individuals prosper and eventually become free, reveals a recognition that the rivers are objects existing in reality and with meanings that go beyond the mind. This is especially indicated by the line, “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins,” because it states that the significance of the rivers existed prior to humans given it a more personal significance in relation to their lives (“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” 2). It’s also important to note that “rivers” or each river is not the

object of the poem, but it may seem like it if the intention in writing about the rivers is not identified. As James explains, the object of thought is the complete thought, not only the theme or central image. “I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young” is the object, not only “Euphrates,” because it’s the full, undivided thought (“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” 4). Each full sentence is an object of thought in the poem because the sentences show the purpose of the rivers in relation to black culture and history. The full sentence serving as the object instead of only the central image or theme also requires the reader to maintain a focus on the personal consciousness presented in the poem instead of attempting to make assumptions that do not align with the personal experiences of the rivers as mentioned in the poem.

As to the fifth characteristic of thought, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” makes an especially interesting attempt to overcome habits through an attention to the present. The angle used to represent the rivers is to show how they have shaped black populations, but there is no explicit mention of slavery despite these rivers being connected to slavery. This point overlaps with James’s philosophy on habit because the poem seems to attempt to overcome the former tormenting significances of the rivers to move beyond the societal habit of oppression. The poem appears to serve as an endeavor to move beyond the poverty, slavery, oppression and anti-blackness that these rivers have at one point been associated with. The poem focuses on peace and freedom, as if reclaiming the rivers and pulling them away from how they were habitually used to benefit slave holders. But the frequent punctuation and lack of free-flowing sentences—which stands in contrast to the flowing of the rivers—gives off the feeling of fatigue and division, which makes sense since there is a divide between the poem’s significance of the rivers and how they were used for so long. James writes that “*habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes fatigue,*” thus, the fatigue

that comes across with the frequent punctuation—as it adds more pauses, moments of break and splits the experiences—shows how the reclamation of these rivers is not habitual, which is why I use the work "reclamation" ("Habit" 118). But the poem does use language that launches "*with as strong and decided an initiative as possible*" to overcome the habit of only noting the unpleasant histories of the rivers ("Habit" 128). The punctuation in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is important, especially since it's visibly different from the punctuation utilized in Hughes's "The Weary Blues" and Bennett's "Heritage" and "Song," where there are ellipsis and em dashes to denote pauses without completely finishing the thought like a period does. The more formal usage of punctuation reveals a certain uneasiness with the words, or a sort of recognition that habit is "the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent," as in the poem does seem to attempt to rewrite the significance of these rivers within the black community by dismissing—and rightly so—how whiteness and slavery have changed the meaning of these rivers for an entire racial identity.

James's "The Stream of Thought" stressed how "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" expresses the personal consciousness for the larger racial identity that has experienced the rivers in relation to peace, freedom and slavery. The personal consciousness present in the poem is continuously changing because the poem expresses a temporal chronology, and the poem attempts to reclaim the rivers instead of allowing slavery to define them. Though not a traditional stream of consciousness work, the poem is a stream of thought due to the free verse, the relation between humanity and riverscapes that then moves one experience of the river to the next, and the verbs that add literal movement. The philosophy also pointed out that the poem acknowledges that the significance of the rivers exists outside of human thought by the poem beginning with the river prior to humanity, thus showing how the personal consciousness in the poem deals with objects

independent of the self and mind. James's "Habit" provided a new understanding of the poem by showing how the poem attempts to overcome the habit of the rivers being tied to slavery within the black community and those who personally experienced the rivers being used in this way. Additionally, the difference in writing style in contrast to the three other poems reveals the fatigue and uneasiness in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," which all point toward this action of reclamation that the poem indicates.

James's first characteristic of thought was not entirely applicable to Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," but Bennett's "Heritage" reads more like a personal consciousness—at least to an extent. The use of the first-person makes it clear that this is Bennett's personal consciousness, for it details her desires to experience Egypt or Africa in a state of freedom before the impact of slavery and racism. And though her desires can be similar to another person's, they will never be reproduced identically to her own as described in the poem. However, her desires are based on the experiences of others—things she has heard about rather than experienced herself. Her own desires and personal consciousness come from the confines of another person's mind through a sharing of heritage. It's important to acknowledge that even though the desires depicted in the poem were gathered from the stories of others, that does not mean that Bennett's personal consciousness, as exhibited in the poem, is a reproduction of another person's personal consciousness in exactitude. In this way, James's statement that there is "irreducible pluralism" within the confines of one's mind is true to an extent in Bennett's "Heritage" ("The Stream of Thought" 222). "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is a more generalized poem, specifically due to use of "The Negro," as to overcome this insulated personal consciousness and shows how every black person is impacted by the rivers. That's not the case with Bennett's poem, for it is far more personalized and focused on her own experienced yearnings. But the final lines of the poem

seem to break down James's ideas of the personal consciousness, at least partly. Bennett writes that she wants to feel "my sad people's soul" surge upward and out of the false smile that oppression forces ("Heritage" 17). The "minstrel-smile" is not an object that is confined to her personal-consciousness, and it's certainly reproduced into the consciousness of other black people due to this shared oppressive treatment, at least as demonstrated in the poem itself ("Heritage" 18). The minstrel-smile is a black archetype and was widely used in literature, as I previously explained, similar to the veil that DuBois coined. Bennett makes it clear that it's not an object only living within her mind by stating that it hides the soul of *my people,* which generalizes the image, something she only does one other time in line 12 with "black race."

Bennett, like Hughes in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," also appears to reclaim Africa and this shows that thought is continuously evolving. It's Bennett's desire to experience Africa as detailed in the poem that showcases her changing thoughts, or at least a want for her thoughts to evolve. The anaphora of the phrase "I want" in the start of each stanza depicts Bennett's hope that she can let her guard down, that she and her people can stop using the minstrel smile, and that she can connect with heritage in a way that is not tied to slavery and racism. The poem does not focus on highlighting how Bennett's thoughts are actively changing in the present, but that there is a want for those thoughts to change and that it's a possible outcome. This also gets at Bennett's habit in the poem; her short story "Wedding Day" showed her reluctance to let her guard down and let white Americans into her life due to a fear that they would once again betray her. That's the habit of mind that Bennett seems to be writing into "Heritage," there is a want for heritage in a pure state and a want to shed the false smile, but there appears to be a hesitation since the poem only encompasses desires instead of actions that allow the desires to occur. Like James writes, habit is the "enormous fly-wheel of society" and it has shaped how Bennett

understands her heritage, takes pride in it and recognizes how white America has influenced it. But she exhibits a want to engage in a new habit by composing about her desires to rid of the minstrel smile.

Bennett's poem is in free verse, with the third line of each stanza rhyming with the following third line, but this does not exhibit how "Heritage" is a continuous thought. An analysis of the transitive and substantive images in the poem help show the continuity in thought. The ellipses on lines 3, 9 and 15 indicate a pause and takes the place of something that is intentionally left out. Though these spaces are of rest, the reason to add them is to let the reader consider the images that just appeared and those yet to come. It's ultimately used as a transition from one image to the next rather than an actual pause. In a structural sense, the ellipses serve to connect the first stanza to the second and so forth. At the end of the second stanza, there is a period, which signals the end of an image. That period serves as the substantive, or pause, before continuing onto the following stanza. For the first four stanzas, the periods separate the actions (and senses) "to see" and "to hear." It's interesting that "to breathe" (smell) and "to feel" are connected with the ellipsis ("Heritage" 13, 16), while taste is completely missing from the poem. Perhaps the eventual connection between breathing and feeling are meant to showcase that the senses intertwine to create the experience of African heritage or perhaps Bennett values the ability to see and hear her heritage more. Regardless of the reason, the ellipses serve as the transitive parts connecting the images of heritage that encompasses each stanza. Additionally, the verbs "Pulling," "lingers," "Singing," "chanting," "Sighing" and "surging" add movement to the otherwise still images depicted in each stanza ("Heritage" 2, 6, 8, 10, 14, 16). Even though the second stanza utilizes the word "lingers," the placement of the verb is different than seen in the other stanzas. The word "Etched" is in the place of where the verb is anticipated, and the missing

verb makes the stanza rather still since the "Negro girls" are depicted as standing outside during sunset ("Heritage" 5, 4). The word "lingers" adds a sense of an everlasting sunset, a surreal image of amalgamating vivid colors, that stands in opposition to the dark skin. The word "lingers" serves as the transitive that connects the etched black girls to the sunset, much like the "Pulling" serves as the transition between the palm trees as actual human bodies pointing upward ("Heritage" 2).

Heritage in the poem means tradition and culture, which does not necessarily imply existence beyond the mind, as James's fourth quality of thought requires. However, Bennett relies on the senses, which is the foundation of James's radial empiricism, and shows how she is concerned with objects existing independent of themselves that then make up the heritage she knows. The utilization of the senses as a way to experience heritage shows how these are real objects that Bennett is able to interact with. There is also an understanding of past and present realities, which James writes becomes clear as new experiences continue. Since the poem depicts a desire to see, hear, breathe and feel, Bennett makes clear that she cannot do that currently due to her people still hiding underneath the minstrel smile. However, Bennett recognizes a potential for the images of heritage that she depicts to once again be experienced in a pure state that is free from the minstrel smile. Therefore, she acknowledges that the depicted images of heritage exist in reality, devoid of meaning and by themselves prior to the influence of racism, which is essentially what James mean when he writes in "The Stream of Thought" that objects exist independently of themselves.

When it comes to selectivity and habit, it's interesting to consider the illustrations of race in the poem. Apart from Bennett's habit of being hesitant toward white Americans and her attempt to overcome that habit by showing a desire to overcome the minstrel miles, Bennett

seems to play on common white habits of illustrating black people. In the fourth stanza, Bennett writes of the chanting coming from a "strange back race" around a "heathen fire;" these images paint black people as devilish and unsettling, which we also see in Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America." Since the poem is named "Heritage," it appears that these negative connotations of black people have been so ingrained that Bennett almost seems unsure of what this chanting actually meant for her heritage. It's essentially the habit of hearing such stereotypes that leads them to become branded and difficult to discern from reality for younger black individuals in the time period ("Habit" 118). It's such stereotypes that "keeps us all within the bound of ordinance," whether that be acting a certain way or viewing people a certain way, that seems to guide the last line of the poem ("Habit" 126). The minstrel smile hides the uncomfortable feeling of being depicted as *a strange black race* or chanting in a *heathen* manner, as depicted in the poem, and allows the habit of such stereotypes to continue even while Bennett has a desire to overcome them.

Much like "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Bennett's "Heritage" expresses a personal consciousness that extends beyond herself due to her wanting to experience her people surge from the current state of oppression and move beyond the minstrel smile, as well as her ideas of heritage coming from other people since she has not experienced Africa as is detailed in the poem. But the poem is more of a personal consciousness as James defines in "The Stream of Thought" because it depicts Bennett's own desires as to how she wants to experience heritage. Through James's philosophy, I also showed how "Heritage" is continuous due to the use of the ellipses and verbs (or senses) serving as the transitive between substantive images of heritage. It was uncovered through James's "Habit" that Bennett shows a want to overcome her habit of allowing whiteness to impact her heritage due to her depicting a ridding of the minstrel smile.

Bennett also shows how the objects of heritage in the poem exist beyond themselves as defined in the poem since Bennett shows a desire to move past how racism influences her heritage.

"The Weary Blues" comes across as a personal consciousness due to the use of the first-person pronoun and the internal observation of the venue and musician. The specific lines that describe the musician expose the personal consciousness and an awareness that every individual has a different thought about the performance. To exemplify this point, the poem includes the musician's lyrics on line 19 to 30 instead of describing the lyrics or paraphrasing them, and this shows the "absolute insulation" of the musician's mind since the lyrics cannot be paraphrased or described by someone else and still have the same meaning as the musician himself assigned them ("The Stream of Thought" 222). The poem utilizes the role of the ancestor and presents a shared experience among black individuals through the Blues, which complicates the personal consciousness, especially since the Blues comes from a "black man's soul," as in the soul that is shaped by centuries of black history and is generalized to be coming from all black men. But the poem remaining within the first person, while still attempting to generalize the feeling that the Blues conveys and directly adding the lyrics instead of paraphrasing, shows how the poem is a personal consciousness to the extent that the musician's thoughts cannot be exactly replicated, nor Hughes's own experience of the performance.

In terms of the second characteristic of thought, "The Weary Blues" displays a continuous evolution of thought through the multiple ways in which the poem can be read as well as the tension between the musician being in a state of freedom—signaled by him being a fool who is completely in love with the music—and a state of fear—gestured by the feeling of hopelessness and wanting to die. The overarching themes appear to be oppression and how to cope with it, since there is an attention to the impoverished environment, the musician who puts

his all into his craft to cope and the troubling lyrics, which all get across the feeling of hopelessness in a racist society. The poem also attends to the excitement and freedom the musician exudes when performing. And the poem gives subtle hints to the afterhours, queer environment where Hughes and many others attended to experience a sort of social acceptance. The poem's multiple meanings, both apparent and hidden, show that thought is constantly evolving and changing—that the environment written about is constantly in flux—and that one experience is never the same as the previous or the one still to come, as James explains.

James writes that each personal consciousness is without break and, though "The Weary Blues" doesn't break, it's not a stream of consciousness poem. The poem does not follow a certain form or rhyme scheme, but it does have a few lines that rhyme, such as line 1-2, 4-5, 9-10, 12-13, 17-19, 23-24, and 33-35, among others. The objective descriptions of the surrounding and addition of the lyrics also brings a halt to considering the poem as a stream of consciousness. Regardless of this, the Blues style of writing does create a flow between each thought without forming breaks. The poem is not a traditional Blues poem consisting of two lines that repeat, a third longer line that explains the previous, and an AAB rhyme scheme, but the overall beat, rhythm and rhyme scheme that is present still conveys the Blues style. Blues is largely an improvisational art form, therefore, the stream of consciousness aspect of it is built into the poem by simply writing within the tradition. The stream of consciousness also comes in since there is no set meter or conventional form to the poem.

James also explains that the stream is made up of alternations between transitive and substantive parts, and the poem is full of movement with just a few pauses that particularly call attention to the substantive. The poem consistently notes on the relations between the environment, physical objects the musician interacts with and the musician himself, and when

these are thought of in relation to the other, it becomes transitive. For example, the experience of the movement of the musician is in relation to the room and music with the lines, "rocking back and forth to a mellow croon," "Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool" and "In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone" ("The Weary Blues" 2, 12, 17). In all these lines, the substantive is the musician, but since he is described in movement and in relation to objects and his voice, these lines serve as transitions into the following experience of the musician instead of providing a pause like substantive parts do. The substantive pops up in the poem in lines 11, 14 and 16, where it's written "O Blues" and "Sweet Blues;" aside from these short moments of rest, the poem is fluid as it attempts to keep up with the musician's steady movements.

In terms of the fourth characteristic of thought, I previously pointed out the use of rhyme in the poem that does not follow a formal rhyming pattern, but the scheme present reveals how the lines are meant to be read together as a whole object of thought. The poem also exemplifies James's argument that the mind knows that the objects appearing in reality are real; this point comes across when comparing the poem to an idealistic, romanticized poem that emphasizes the imagination and beauty of life from a rather glamorized perspective that nearly seems fantastical. This is not the case with "The Weary Blues" since there is an attention to the "rickety stool" and the "old piano," which all portray poverty ("The Weary Blues" 12, 18). The physical objects described in the poem, without much care to over explain or clarify why the environment is the way it is, reveal this acknowledgment that the environment has meaning outside of the mind itself. As to the final characteristic of thought, the point of focus is what we tend to say represents the object best, according to James, and the poem's tendency to attend to the impoverished venue, excitement yet sorrow of the musician, and the solemn lyrics reveal that racism can best be represented in this way.

James writes that habits are sometimes taught and then become branded into the self, and an application of this to the repetitive lines, "O Blues" and "Sweet Blues," can give insight into why these short lines are the only habitual ones ("The Weary Blues" 11-16). As mentioned earlier, the Blues is a type of poetic style that focuses on sorrow, and these repetitive lines show the habit of maintaining within a rather desolate state of mind despite the noted joy of the musician playing—even with the depressing lyrics. It's not only these explicit mentions of the Blues and its themes that reveal this habit of remaining within the mindset of racist tendencies, but also the habit to write about the poverty in the environment. Of course, there is the reading of the poem that pays attention to how it serves as a queer and sexually ambiguous work but, even then, we cannot avoid the overarching impoverished items and details in the poem. Not to mention the sexual and queer language reveals a habit of hiding oneself due to the fear of being alienated. Noting that there is a habit to focus on poverty and sorrow, does this prevent a focus on the better qualities of black life? I ask this because there are times in the poem when there is an attempt to overcome this habit, especially when it's stated that the musician played "like a musical fool" and that the musician "slept like a rock," implying pleasure in the music and that it enables one to somewhat overcome the impacts of racism ("The Weary Blues" 13, 35). The occasional attention to the ease at which the musician plays and the flow of the performance reveal an effort in trying to also gain that peace, but the poem suddenly returns to the impoverished and mournful details, such as calling the music "sad" and "raggy" ("The Weary Blues" 10-11). Additionally, the final line comes as the musician is going to bed and finally able to forget all his worries, but then the speaker of the poem imagines that this rock-like, restful sleep is death, which unexpectedly brings back the image of struggle ("The Weary Blues" 35). Therefore, there are glimpses at what James claims are attempts to overcome an old habit and

build a new one, but the speaker of the poem does not fully launch themselves into this new habit and instead slips into old tendencies of focusing on adversities.

Though not a traditional flow of consciousness style, “The Weary Blues” is a personal consciousness through the use of the first person while also acknowledging that thoughts are insulated within the individual by the choice to not paraphrase the musician’s lyrics, as revealed by James’s “The Stream of Thought.” The philosophy showed that the personal consciousness of the poem is always changing and evolving through the different ways that the poem can be read. The stream of thought is especially shown through the free form of writing that does not break due to it being written in a Blues style, which is an improvisational art form. An innovative application of James’s substantive and transitive showed how the experience of the musician is in relation to the environment and the music. Finally, James’s “The Stream of Thought” also showed that the impoverish environment and Blues music seem to best represent racism in the context of the poem. James’s “Habit” demonstrated how the poem shows a habit of describing sorrow and poverty since it references back to symbols such as the old piano, rickety stool, the Blues and the musician perhaps being dead.

Bennett’s “Song” is revealed to be a personal consciousness through the use of the first-person, something we’ve seen with the other poems. She describes the song as her own, something that she has composed herself inspired by the “firm, brown limbs,” “dark lips,” “forgotten banjo songs” and “heart of race” (“Song” 2-7). Bennett does not seem to claim that the words in the song are perfectly replicated in every black person’s mind or consciousness due to her use of the first-person and possessive pronouns. However, it’s interesting how she identifies the song as “the cry of a soul,” as if showing that it demonstrates the struggle of her people in a manner that is generalizable and universally experienced. This universal experience

is due to the role of the ancestor—the internal link between past, present and future black bodies due to shared trauma. But this link does not imply that Bennett's every lyric or creation of the song is wholly replicable, only that the experience it relays is universal and relatable among black people.

The final three lines of the poem showcase how Bennett's thought is constantly shifting, creating an experience that is unlike the last—or at least hoping that it's unlike the last. But before considering the final lines, the structure of the poem itself reveals the fluctuating experience of music. Black music goes from being "ush sweetness" in times of freedom to being associated with "sobbin' in the dark" during times of slavery ("Song" 4, 15). Modern black music in the final stanza is associated with jazz, instead of the banjo, and it harks images of prayer and a reminiscence on laughter. Music evolves in the poem, and it appears to hardly be experienced the same way twice, for black music serves different purposes with the changing of time. Bennett's own evolving thoughts are shown in the final lines when she pleads for the singing to move faster, as to go past a point where music is associated with prayer for better times and a nostalgia for laughter. The song coming in faster symbolizes the return of laughter and the slave's prayers coming true. The thought going into Black music will thus change once again and this pleading shows Bennett's desire for modern black music to no longer be used for the purposes of illustrating struggle or coping with it.

The stream of thought is much clearer in Bennett's "Song" than in "Heritage" due to the enjambment, alliteration and vernacular. Though Bennett does utilize periods and commas, and they are correctly placed, they are also randomly placed when considering that other lines do not have commas and periods. These (perhaps intentional) additions get to the heart of the stream of consciousness writing, which James defines as uninterrupted and "without breach" ("The Stream

of Thought" 232). The poem itself is the "weaving" of a song, and with the line "I am," it appears to be happening in the present as Bennett is writing, for it is not in the past or future tense ("Song" 1). This present tense writing also serves as an example of the stream of consciousness style, which perhaps allows for the alternations in punctuation. The enjambment on lines 4 through 7 and 8 through 10 (as with the other lines that utilize enjambment) create a sense of rushing—as if there is no time to waste between the reading of each line. The enjambment also functions as the transitive parts of the poem, for the different lines stand by themselves and are separated from each other, but the lack of punctuation connects each substantive image in each separate line. Though the enjambment serves to quicken the pace of the poem and connect substantive images, the use of ellipsis is quite different than from Bennett's "Heritage," which was also used to connect substantive images. Here, the ellipses create pause and serve as substantive spaces. In line 16 and 18, the ellipses follow the word "slow" and slow down the pace of the poem, as if following the command itself. The ellipses on lines 11, 29 and 33 come after specific images—the soul, laughter and jazz—and serve to create a space to consider the value of each when it comes to black culture and perseverance. The ellipses are the substantive—places of pause following images of blackness in the poem—while the transitive is the act of writing the song itself. The transitive is the becoming of the song as Bennett explains that she is inspired by the images appearing in each stanza. The alliteration of the "s" sound in the first half of the second stanza create the sound and feeling of a song, especially lines 16 through 18. The alliteration also makes it confusing to follow the sequence of strumming, singing and sobbing—as if that pattern has also become confusing for those who live through it. The vernacular is also seen in the second stanza with the alliteration, which helps portray the rhythm of the song, something we see in Hughes's "The Weary Blues."

Bennett shows the change that music can undergo, as well as the potential for it to change even further. It's through this acknowledgement that Bennett also reveals how the object of the poem—that being music or song—exists independent of the mind instead of demonstrating an "absolute way" of experiencing music. Of course, the music as appearing within a certain space in a single moment is not completely detached and independent. But a more generalized understanding of music, as Bennett shows, reveals that music is independent of itself—existing without meaning before a specific meaning is put upon it—which is why it can have various connotations and change with time. The music in flux also gets at the fifth characteristic of thought by showing Bennett's habit of being hesitant of opening up to white Americans, for it's clear that her idea of black music is one impacted by the toils of slavery and oppression. Additionally, it's only in the final lines that Bennett shows a desire to overcome that meaning and use of modern black music by moving beyond racism. This desire to "Sing a little faster," as to allow an evolution of black music due to a change in racism, also shows an attempt to get rid of a habit ("Song" 37). The line has the same effect as the alliteration, a quickening of the rhythm so that time moves by faster, more swiftly, and racism absolves, no longer having an impact on black music. It shows a hopefulness that oppression can come to an end, that black music will not forever serve the function of prayer for a group of people.

As exemplified through James's "The Stream of Thought," Bennett's "Song" is a stream of thought poem due to the first-person pronoun and her identifying the song as one she is creating, but that is slightly complicated due to the role of the ancestor and how she writes the song with the whole race in mind, as if the song is representative of the race's experience. I showed how Bennett's thoughts on music are evolving due to her detailing how music has changed through time and it will continue to change with the end of racism. The use of the

ellipses and alliteration showcase the movement in the poem and James's philosophy on the substantive and transitive parts. James's "Habit" was depicted in the poem through Bennett's desire for music to change beyond being used by the praying slave and in jazz to illustrate shared trauma, for she identifies that this has become the norm for black music, even in modern times.

Conclusion

By working with one of the New Negro Renaissance most famous writers and another who deserves just as much credit but has been oftentimes forgotten, I have pulled back the metaphorical color line that divides black and white scholarship and provided a novel way to read some of Langston Hughes's and Gwendolyn Bennett's poetry. William James was a prolific figure in New York just a few years prior to the beginning of the Renaissance that has been typically said to span from the 1920s to the 1930s, and his philosophic work was widely read for years through the Renaissance and after. He was in contact with influential black writers like W.E.B DuBois and commented on black issues through correspondence and short essays. Though James's influence may not have reached Hughes and Bennett in particular, it did reach writers like Alain Locke and DuBois who influenced Hughes, Bennett and countless other writers of the time.

Using James's pragmatism as theory to critically analyze Hughes's and Bennett's poetry revealed where attention lies in the poems. Hughes wrote in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" that black artists should address black topics and tap into "his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears." Though Bennett did not write essays that explained her process of creation, her short story "Wedding Day" gave insight into her hesitation to trust white Americans and her feelings of being stuck in a culture of racism and whiteness. James's philosophy on attention revealed that the poems do just that with the specific focus on the racial significance of riverscapes and African landscapes, the rhythm of the Blues and black songs that mask the pain, and a sense of heritage that brings one to a state of peace. James's philosophy on blindness showed how the poems can be blind to different genders that are not explicit in the

poems, other minority groups, and those who do not identify with Africa but may still identify as black.

James's radical empiricism revealed how the poems focus on the conjunction between personal experiences and those among different people instead of focusing on how experiences do not relate to one another. The mosaic philosophy also provided a visualization as to how personal experiences in the poem begin to overlap, as well as how past and present and those between different people come to relate to one another. An application of radical empiricism allowed for a precise recognition of words that specifically signify conjunction instead of disjunction, which gave insight into how the words themselves relate to one another and create bridges between seemingly separate experiences, especially those in different temporalities and bodies. Finally, radical empiricism established a theory to analyze a sharing of experiences between black individuals and the ancestors since James argues that a transition from one experience to the next only occurs within the same self, but an application of this philosophy showed how this is not true for Hughes's and Bennett's poetry.

It's generally understood that poetry can have multiple meanings, as with any text, but James's pluralism showed how each reading is an equally real experience of the poems while also showing how the poems themselves apply pluralism by acknowledging distinct perceptions of the same experiences, such as with slavery, bondage and racism. His philosophy on thought also showed how consciousness and beliefs are evolving, as is motioned in the poems by the changing focuses, shifts, and a desire for time to move faster or beyond a certain point.

Hughes and Bennett were celebrated poets in their time and among their community, and their work continues to stand out among the New Negro poets, with "The Weary Blues" and "Heritage" as especially famous works. Analyzing such a well-known figure of the movement

like Hughes using James's philosophy offers the possibility of a more generalized application of the philosophical theory to the New Negro Renaissance due to the focus on black lived experience, the conjunction between experiences of the self and others, the mosaic built out of personal, ancestral and community experience, and the habits of style that black poets naturally take up while also detaching from white standards of art. The application of the philosophy as theory to Gwendolyn Bennett, a lesser-known author to many of those who do not study the New Negro Renaissance in depth and one whose work shows up less often in anthologies, reveals how James's pragmatism can be applied to black women poets successfully and provide a novel reading of such poems. Bennett is important to this project for reasons Hughes is not, my attempt is to bring her work back into focus at a level that Hughes is recognized. The poetry included in this project help understand the life of a New Negro, which consisted of a want to move past racist society while remaining connected on the past through the ancestor. The poems selected provide a glimpse into race and gender relations at the time and is the reason why I include a male and female poet so that differences due to gender could be analyzed even when black experience is shared beyond such binary boundaries.

Though only four poems make up this project, that is not to say more poems are not applicable. I also cannot say that the conclusions drawn in this project across the four poems are all that there are. Due to pluralism, there will always be different ways of reading the poems. James writes regarding the history of philosophy that there "are just so many visions, modes of feeling the whole push, seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one's total character and experience" ("A Pluralistic Universe" 15-16). This can be applied to the interpretation of poetry: there are many modes of feeling when it comes to reading Hughes's and Bennett's poetry and the interpretations in this essay are just a terse evaluation of much greater possibilities.

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