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Caroline Carrasco Garcia Silva April 12, 2022

A Reading of Langston Hughes'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 some of Langston Hughes's poems 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 essay bridges a gap between black and white academic writing while also providing a reading of Hughes's poetry in a pragmatic lens.

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Introduction: The New Negro Renaissance, Langston Hughes,

and the prevalence of William James

The years between the 1920s and the mid-1930s are now 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 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 writings on black art and philosophy. Locke had arrived at Harvard when William James was still teaching, but Locke instead learned under Josiah Royce, George Palmer and George Santayana (Stewart 49). As a leading figure in the Renaissance and an influence in the writing style that was produced during the time, that style being identifiably black and distinct from any form of white art, the pragmatism Locke was influenced by and wrote about naturally became part of black identity. DuBois was in contact with pragmatist John Dewey and claimed James to be important to his interpretation of the world, which led to James's philosophy making its way into DuBois' writing, and DuBois' writings were influential for countless authors at the time. While the New Negro Renaissance took shape, American pragmatism became widespread, and the philosophy spread among 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.[1] Though I could analyze some of Hughes's poems from the Renaissance alongside Locke's work, this is anticipated since Locke is often credited with

[1] A reading of New Negro Renaissance poetry through a William James pragmatic lens has not yet been done, but a somewhat similar idea has been explored in *Poetry and Pragmatism* by Richard Poirier. In the book, he 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.

launching the Renaissance and serving as a backbone to the movement.[2] Additionally, DuBois has already been read alongside 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 New Negro Renaissance. I chose Hughes for this project since he is regarded as one of the most prominent poets of the Renaissance.

In this essay, I use specific publications that showcase James's pragmatism and apply the philosophy as theory to four of Hughes's poems 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 intentions in writing, and despite referencing a few of Hughes's essay that reveal his artistic intentions for some poems, I do not endeavor to go into his mind and analyze his thought process 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 Hughes's poetry. The poems featured in

[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).

this essay are “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “The Weary Blues,” “My People” and “Remember” because they were published during the Renaissance and are among some of Hughes’s most distinguished poems from the time period.

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 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 simply 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 African—and other minorities and majority populations.

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 put equal stress on the whole of experience as well as the parts, and how there is a stress on the relations (conjunctions) between experiences as opposed to their separations (disjunctions). James’s mosaic philosophy is a visual demonstration of his 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, which it is—by revealing that it works in an actual 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 as they go on, 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 paper is a reading of Hughes's poetry using a pragmatic lens and I chose to do a pragmatic reading because, not only does using philosophy written by a white man to analyze black poetry peel away the metaphorical color line by striving to overcome the racial boundaries that separate white and black scholarship, but it provides a philosophical foundation and understanding of the poems while using academic essays that are not often read with the poetry. As I stated earlier, it's expected that DuBois and Locke had influences on Hughes's writing, 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 serves as a foundation in reading James's pragmatism alongside New Negro poetry while also using specific parts of his philosophy as theory for reading Hughes's 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 not particularly included in the poem.

Before diving into the analysis, let me provide a bit more background on the two thinkers this paper deals with. James died in 1910, which is 10 years before the New Negro Renaissance is often said to have begun, and 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," James 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,"

James 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 that "the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience;" the fact is that relations are just as directly experienced as the things they relate to; and the conclusion is that "the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience" ("The Meaning of Truth," James 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 like 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 my analysis.

With a brief foundation on James's thinking, I want to further develop the relationship between DuBois and James since DuBois influenced various black thinkers, including Hughes, with his writings on the Talented Tenth, the veil, double consciousness, the color line, and other topics on black culture. DuBois was a major figure during the New Negro Renaissance, and his work influenced black art for years before and after, especially through his 1903 publication *The Souls of Black Folk*. With this publication words could finally be expressed for 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' 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," James 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 and freedom.

To provide a more comprehensive outline of the Renaissance and articulate why I chose Hughes's poetry among the various other poets writing at the time, I want to start off with that

the New Negro Renaissance became a widespread and 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 a bit 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 others who were around their twenties in the start of the 1920s (Mitchell 650). 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 tends to constrict the expanse of the movement, for it has roots across the United States and internationally. As I wrote 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. The Renaissance was a time that black artists, like Hughes, 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 still 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 has different methods of self-expression and revealing his true self in comparison to other poets of the time, but he was recognizably a New Negro poet and contributed to publications at the time with writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, and Gwendolyn Bennet to name a few ("Harlem Literati in the Twenties," Hughes 6). In modern times, Hughes is known as one of the faces of the Renaissance and as a poet who particularly 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. Regardless, he is one of the leading black poets of the time and remains one of the most read poets now. With this in mind, I chose Hughes for obvious reasons for this research: as a major figure representing the 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.

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 don't 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, according to James. 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," James 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 to sustain the attention, and a sustained attention is known among "geniuses" and assumes a mastery of the topic being attended to ("Attention" 400-401).

James writes that by the things one attends to, the universe experienced appears a certain way creating 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 ("Attention," James 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," James 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 is 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, while writing, was not "as blind to the particular ideality of their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality" of his; meaning that much like he would be blind to the experience of other black individuals, they would also be blind to his experience ("On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," James 135). The exclusion of some populations from the poems—whether that be women, individuals who do not identify as African, etc.—does not equate to active 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 was 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). The middle stanzas

highlighting the four rivers reveal a selective attention on the black history of the rivers ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes 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," James 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 the impacts of it ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes 7). I argue that there is 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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 the white masses and other

populations who are unfamiliar with this 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 point in pointing out this blindness is not to argue that the poem must include all that is left out, for certainly a short poem can not 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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 wrote previously, is primarily understood by populations that have a connection to the riverscapes and were exposed to histories of the rivers ("Attention," James 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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," James 382-383). Without a shift in tone or syntax, the attention moves to slavery, but it is 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," James 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 so in later years ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes 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 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," James 382-383) in the poem is the freedom that came floating down the river with Abraham Lincoln ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes 7). In the 7th 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 Negro Speaks of Rivers,"

[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."

Hughes 7). 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," Hughes 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 those 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.

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 forward an afterhours, nightlife tradition of clubs where Jazz and the Blues became widely spread (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," Hughes 31-32). 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," Hughes 9-10). The "moan" of the piano and the "rocking back and forth" seem to call forward the queerness and sexuality explored in these spaces since they indicate rather sexualized sounds and movements, but they

[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.

are implicit as to remain below the surface since these racially mixed, queer spaces were not open to all ("The Weary Blues," Hughes 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,* Rampersad). 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," James 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," Hughes 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 t 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," Hughes 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," James 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 appeal and 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 or appeal during that specific experience at the venue in Lenox Avenue ("Attention," James 382-383).

In addition to the male figure as a central focal point, the ambiance 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 ambiance 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,” Hughes 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 eventually settles on the musician and the ambiance 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 ambiance, 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 down (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 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" (Hughes 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 1-2). Regardless, the poem's focus is not on the energy or the musician's love for the music, but on 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

[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 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.

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 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 say that the poem perpetuates injustice, but simply reveals the experiences believed not worth including in the poem.

Using a lesser-known poem,' "My People" was first published in 1922 in *The Crisis* and is unique when compared to the previous poems I chose due to its form as a catalog, which is a poem that lists things for a rhetorical purpose. The poem appears to be attending to the various roles that people play in society. For the purpose of this analysis, I infer that "My People" refers to black individuals and other minority populations that were ostracized from being seen as equal

to white populations. The poem lists what they do for a living, how they contribute and what they offer,

> Dream-singers,
> Story-tellers,
> Dancers,
> Loud laughers in the hand of Fate—
> My People.
> Dish-washers,
> Elevator-boys,
> Ladies' maids,
> Crap-shooters,
> Cooks,
> Waiters,
> Jazzers,
> Nurses of babies,
> Loaders of ships,
> Porters,
> Hairdressers,
> Comedians in vaudeville
> And band-men in circuses—

in order to show that they are involved in various ways and participate in similar hobbies and professions that all other populations do as well ("My People," Hughes 1-18). The work's focus is quite narrow, showing that when "One principal object comes then into the focus of consciousness, others are temporarily suppressed" ("Attention," James 384). James's philosophy on selective attention—that we attend to one thing based on interest—can help reveal the underlying goal of the poem. The majority of the poem is a simple list of laborious jobs, which Rampersad wrote "sang the ordinary and the low" (*The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. I*), I find Rampersad's point slightly counter-intuitive since it seems to consider those in the poem in a rather penurious way while the poem appears to be attempting to elevate the seemingly common folk. Hughes wrote in the "Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" that he believed in creative, recognizably black art and cultivating a self-love and pride in being black and not attempting to conform to white standards. With this context, the poem itself, with the title "My People,"

inspires a pride regardless of the fact that the jobs are considered "low" to Rampersad's standards and probably most white standards at the time. But it's not that black individuals were not involved in higher positions; DuBois and Locke were remarkable figures during the time and well known among all communities, white and black. But the poem does not focus on the, per say, Talented Tenth or individuals who held the occasional "high-class" professional career, because there is a general reference to the larger population, as signaled by the broad "People." Hughes writes in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" that:

> there are the low-down folks, the so-called common elements, and they are the majority—may the Lord be praised! … Their joys runs, bang! into ecstasy. … They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artists because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardization. And perhaps these common people will give to the world it's truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself. Whereas the better class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone when he does appear. And they are not ashamed of him—if they know he exists at all. And they accept what beauty is their own without question.

This passage reveals a selective attention or "single pulse of consciousness" on the majority or the seemingly regular folk, for they have pride and know their worth beyond simply trying to assimilate or prove that they are worthy to white populations ("Attention," James 382-383). This passage from "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" can give insight into why the middle and higher classes do not seem to be mentioned in the poem but, regardless of this, the attention on the common folk allows for representation and a peeling back of the veil to the reality of such common folk: they continue to work, dance, sing, tell stories, laugh and contribute to society.

In addition, the poem particularly attends to the artists such as the singers, story-tellers and dancers as well as the so called "Loud laughers" ("My People," Hughes 1-4). This more particular focus on the singers, story-tellers, dancers and laughers (who I will reference as the "artists" for the sake of repetition) is probably not surprising, since Hughes wrote in "The Negro

Artist and the Racial Mountain" that it's the common folk that contribute toward black art in society. The final ten lines of the poem repeat the first four in a slightly different way, which also helps reveal the selective attention within the poem. James's philosophy on selective attention becomes even more obvious when we notice that the artists are separated from the other common folk since lines 1-4 and 19-29 only mention the artists and the middle section only mentions the other, more standard jobs. This separation falls in line with James's writing that the mind naturally settles on a pulse of consciousness and when you think you are attending to more than one thing (i.e., the standard jobs and the artists) the mind is naturally guided toward the single object (artists), while suppressing the rest (standard jobs). In the same vein, the poem displays a passive sensorial attention, which James states is based on previous experience and exposure, since Hughes is himself an artist and the poem itself is an art form.

What I noticeably have yet to touch on is the laughers who are bunched within the artist group. The laughers are a trope that has been passed down through generations and is a symbol for pain, or rather laughing through the pain to overcome it.[7] The quote I previously mentioned by Rampersad, "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," highlights this archetype as used in the poem quite well (*The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. I*). Laughing through the pain of

[7] 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 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 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). 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."

racism and oppression become an identifiably black art form that is equated to singing, story-telling and dancing. The question mark on line 27 presumes speculation for the connection of laughing to art—as is written from a potential reader, "Laughers?"—and the poem simply responds with "Yes, laughers….laughers…..laughers—" without giving much of an explanation but allowing the pauses with the ellipses and em dash to make the similarity between artists and laughers apparent ("My People," Hughes 27-28). But the poem's attention to the laughers, without exactly touching on where the laughing stems from also reveals the "marginal object" while keeping the "eyes immovable" on art ("Attention," James 414). That marginal object is oppression, racism and white supremacy that seem to inspire the poem, as it is, at the end of the day, a list of regular jobs that white and higher-class populations tend to steer away from and then proceed to taunt minority populations for having to work such jobs. The source of laughter being in the margins also makes sense when you consider what laughter as a trope is doing: it's a method of coping and overcoming pain. Therefore, when the poem neglects the source of laughter, as to not pay attention to it, it remains within the boundaries of the coping method. We can also say that the racism that is brought up from the laughing and other artforms is something that has lapsed into the unconscious, as James writes, since it has become so habitual as to not be as noticeable in the present beyond the instinctual laughter to get through it ("Attention" 431).

But with the poem primarily attending to the common folk, and especially to the artists, and the inattention to the "Negro Middle class: people who are by no means rich yet never uncomfortable nor hungry—smug, contented, respectable folk, members of the Baptist church" and the "self-style 'high-class' Negro [who] has nothing better to offer," the poem shows a blindness toward middle and higher classes that tried to get out of the "low-class" and attempt to assimilate ("The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes). In the same manner, the poem

does not attend to the jobs and art forms of the middle and high classes. In only attending to the lower-classes, the poem becomes blind to the experiences and artistic constructions of the higher-classes that may still involve coping with racism through the exclusion of such classes.

The application of "Attention" to "My People" revealed that the focus of the poem is how art and in particular laughing is used as a coping mechanism for the experience of racism and oppression. The philosophy also uncovered an attention toward the common populations—those with regular jobs and who are commonly considered as the lower classes—which appears to be a way to unveil how disregarded populations are active and constantly contributing. What is particularly significant is that the philosophy displayed how oppression and racism, which force certain populations to laugh and resort to the jobs cataloged in the poem, are the marginal objects in the poem, but that the particular attention on laughter provides an answer as to why that these are in the margin: laughing involves overcoming oppression. Innovatively so, James's philosophy on attention, thus, allowed for the observation as to why oppression and racism remains in the margins by revealing the object of attention as the laughter and coping mechanism. The application of "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" disclosed a blindness, due to an absence of inclusion, toward those who would be labelled as middle and higher class, especially when the poem is put in the context of "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain."

Nearing the end of the New Negro Renaissance and into the Great Depression, the poem "Remember" was published in the 1930s, a time when black individuals were especially hit due to already having very little. This poem especially attends to African ancestry and the countless lies white Americans told. To call the black population "hungry wretched thing" not only serves to unify a massive group of people into one specific state of mind but also argues that freedom

still awaits (“Remember,” Hughes 19). James argues that what we attend to largely causes the world to appear in a certain way; the poem “Remember” attends to the current ways in which racism and oppression continue in the modern world—at least in the 1930s sense of modernity—which then conveys a mood of irritation that racism is still perpetuated and an impulse to maintain an aggression in order to fight back the racism (“Attention,” James 402). In this way, the poem’s attention to the racism that attempts to destroy black populations and the uprising of those populations reveals a world that is largely chaotic, in constant tension but also one that is largely filled with unceasing subjugation.

The attention is also set on past memories that still influence and shape the present, as well as in a higher physical point as the poem literally tells the intended audience to “Go to the highest hill” (“Remember,” Hughes 5). The movement of those who are regularly put at the bottom due to oppression to the highest point on the hill gives them the ability to look down on a town in Carolina and Maine and produces a reversal of the common image of white populations looking down upon black populations. The language in the poem attending to the reversal of this archetype forces an image of the reversal of power, which the final line of the poem also suggests since there is a hunger for equality and rising out of the bottom of the valley and onto the hilltops. But the attention to past memories—as signaled by the title of the poem and the first few lines, “Remember / The days of bondage— / And Remembering— / Do not stand still” —forces the reader to temporarily remain within memories of bondage (“Remember,” Hughes 1-4). The poem is a call to action and appears to be using those memories to create impetus to alter present oppression, but an attention to the past also means that the world could appear much more like the past than it may be in the present since the world appears as we perceive it (“Attention,” James 382). The poem also equates the past bondage to the current situation, thus

putting the change that did occur from the time of slavery to the 1930s in the margins of the poem.

It's significant that the poem only mentions Africa as the "homeland," as if other homelands do not exist, even though slaves were not only brought from Africa and many came from the Caribbean, West Indies and South America to name a few ("Remember," Hughes 10). Therefore, perhaps not intentional, but the poem excludes a massive and noteworthy population of black individuals, which uncovers a blindness of experience to those who do not share an African ancestry ("On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," James 133). This is especially worth noting because the poem includes two states that represent the north and south along the eastern coast of the United States, but only includes the entirety of Africa instead of going with a more generic line such as "Or your homeland—" to represent a more diverse group that shares similar experiences ("Remember," Hughes 8-10). The apparent blindness in these lines reveal a rather "passive sensorial attention" and a sort of stereotyping, since it seems to assume that Africa would be the only homeland while there are multiple ways in which black individuals may identify themselves ("Attention," James 396). James writes that "Each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties" and the poem weighs more heavily on African identity since it does not include a more representative whole, thus, leaving out a massive community of black individuals who may not identify as African but still experience what "Remember" writes through ("On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," James 133).

Applying James's "Attention" to "Remember" revealed how the poem primarily attends to how past experiences of slavery and bondage are still perpetuated in modern times and continue to empower black population—at least those who identify with an African ancestry—to resist racism and modern forms of slavery. The philosophy also showed how the poem primarily

focuses on memories of oppression, thus, putting the change that has occurred in the margins. The application of "Attention" also uncovers how there is a consideration on the reversal of elevation between white and black populations by the poem telling its intended audience to climb the highest hill and look down to observe how white populations continue treating black communities. The poem's setting becomes the highest hill and this feeds into the tension between experiencing racism and wanting to be equal. Most significant and that which provided a novel interpretation of the poem was the application of "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," which showed how the poem becomes blind to populations who may not identify with an African ancestry since it explicitly identifies "Africa" as "your homeland" instead of inserting something more general or representative of black populations who were brought to the United States for labor.

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 the emphasizes the disjunctions between experiences without stressing the conjunctions and relations. Traditional empiricism is not James's focus, but it is a necessary concept to understand to comprehend radical empiricism, which is what James's philosophy advocates. 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 comparison 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 experiences 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," James 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 is 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 through 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. In this manner, the poetry does appear to point toward a truly co-conscious experience among different individuals due 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 grow and 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 actually 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," Hughes 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*, Hughes 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," Hughes 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 ancestors' 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," James 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's 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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 actually 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," James 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” in comparison to “My soul grows deep” can help answer this question (“The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes 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,” Hughes 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 "The Weary Blues," radical empiricism is employed when the conjunction of black oppressive experience and art are stressed while the disjunction between the two are noted as well. 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 experiences of the musician's overall mood while performing. To point out the stress upon 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, and the poem also showcases this, 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 the creation of Blues music, thus, the experience can be taken separately as the experience of oppression/racism and the experience of creating Blues music, 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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, both in the sense of finding an escape from racism (“The Weary Blues,” Hughes 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 that he had died, which foreshadows the sudden turn to a grim ambiance without stars or the moon (“The Weary Blues,” Hughes 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,” Hughes 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,” Hughes 34).

The ambiguity between the musician either sleeping profoundly or dying also makes 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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 aspect 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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.

Applying radical empiricism to "My People" works slightly different than the other poems since it's a catalog, therefore, the relation between the experiences presented in each line are not immediately apparent. Despite this, the poem does not appear to utilize empiricism, as there is not a stress on the individual parts to explain the whole of black experience or the experience of those under the category of *my people*. There is not a reliance on rationalism since the experiences in the poem are defined through real professions instead of conscious, abstract thoughts that do not take place in reality. There is an equal importance on the disjunction and conjunction of experiences in "My People," showcasing a similar usage of radical empiricism

that James's advocates for. I argue this because every line—except for lines 25 and 26—separates each job. But the lines are not fully divided due to a lack of a period that delineates a change in topic or thought. Instead, each profession is separated by a comma, signaling a continuation of a list of things that are related to one another. Each profession—which symbolizes one or more people who are categorized as *my people*—becomes a tile in James's mosaic. And with a consideration of how these different people relate, as in class, race, gender, identity and belief, the tiles denoting the experiences of these separate professions expand and begin to touch as to reveal the similarities ("A World of Pure Experience," James 25). Additionally, the title of the poem being inclusive, as to not outline race, gender, identity, community or class from who is considered *my people,* furthers this conjunction of experiences while still showing how each profession has its inherent differences or disjunction since they are separated by lines and commas.

But while the poem reveals the conjunctions and disjunctions between professions (i.e. different people), it particularly places an emphasis on the conjunctions of experience between the artists in comparison to all the other professions mentioned. James's radical empiricism can provide a sort of reasoning as to why the poem casts more stress on the conjunction between the artists as opposed to all others cataloged. When I first read "My People," I assumed there was a disconnection between the artists and the other professions due to the punctuation on line 5:

> Dream-singers,
> Story-tellers,
> Dancers,
> Loud laughers in the hands of Fate—
> My People.

The period after "My People" dictates a stop or a break in the thought, therefore, separating the artists from the proceeding professions. But on line 18, when the poem moves out of the other professions and back into the artists, there is an em dash. The dash signals a pause or a place for

the reader to think a bit deeper. This em dash is meant to counteract the period on line 5, as in to force the reader to consider how artists and other professionals relate. The poem concludes that all *my people* are artists, therefore, what appears to be a disjunction between the artists and the other workers is only a superficial disjunction caused by the punctuation ("My People," Hughes 19-26). The conjunction between all the professions is emphasized with the addition of "all" and the em dash on lines 19-21, as both signal a plurality of what fits into the categories of artist ("A World of Pure Experience," James 23).

This conjunction, particularly between laughing and the professions, uncovers that it may not be possible for the experience of laughing—as in the specific moments that the laughter does occur—to really come to an end as James's describes. James writes that the function of experience is to lead into the next until it comes to a complete halt, but the final line of the poem implies that there is no end. The ones laughing are doing so "in the hands of Fate," meaning that it's beyond their control and simply something that is meant to be ("My People," Hughes 29). Consequently, in the poem, the experience of laughing stemming from racism does not appear to have a functional end.

According to James, conjunctive relations primarily transition co-consciously, but the poem deals with countless different bodies, meaning that it would be a discontinuous transition, at least in terms of James's philosophy ("A World of Pure Experience" 26). What makes this poem especially different when considering the co-conscious transition is that it does not necessarily write about something that is immediately identifiable as an experience that can travel co-consciously. But rather the poem considers the experience of work as the result of oppression, and how laughing and art become a major form of overcoming or coping with the oppression and everyday life that involves the jobs listed. Each job points toward a different

experience, revealing a pluralism of experiences that are lived through by all those categorized as *my people*. Before I get too deeply into my explanation of pluralism, let me draw out what I mean by co-conscious transition in this poem. A co-conscious transition occurs when one experience passes into another when they belong to the same individual ("A World of Pure Experience," James 26). In the poem, there is an overlap between the laughter, singing, dancing and story-telling that come out of the toil of racism that places *my people* into the professions they hold. This artistic overlap is the coping mechanism and the poem seems to argue that all *my people* use art and laughing as a method of coping with reality. This shared experience of trauma that leads to the same outcome—the outcome being coping through art—is the co-conscious experience among different bodies since it becomes an ingrained tradition that is expressed in the same manner. On the opposite end, each profession is separated by a comma and line, even though the poem seems to advance that *my people* go into these professions at least partially because of racism, which showcases the dis-continuous experience among different beings based on profession ("A World of Pure Experience," James 26). However, the poem does suggest that a truly co-conscious transition occurs among different individuals in terms of coping through racism due to the fact that "all" *my people* turn toward art, which is something James's philosophy does not recognize as possible.

When the poem mentions *my people*, there is no indication that this only includes black individuals or minorities, therefore, revealing another aspect of pluralism in the poem. "My People" crosses racial, class and identity boundaries simply due to the fact that no race, class or identity is ever mentioned. The only indicative that the poem relates to black culture is the laughter, since it's a typical trope in black literature. James writes that with every experience "there may ultimately never be an all-form at all" and that the whole of experience may not be

entirely perceived due to countless different perspectives of the same experience ("A Pluralistic Universe" 21); this perspective makes for a fascinating way to read the poem, for it forces the reader to consider who is left out and who is not typically thought to be Hughes's "People." Hughes's ancestry is complicated; his paternal great-grandmothers were enslaved Africans and his paternal great-grandfathers were white slave owners, therefore, it would not be unreasonable to consider that *my people* also included those who did not entirely identify as black. I think that an unfamiliarity of Hughes's ancestry would provide a reading that "My People" only includes black individuals, but as James's philosophy shows, the whole experience is never garnered, and this applies to reading this poem. Rampersad wrote that the poem focuses on the "ordinary and the low" folk; though the poem does not mention politicians and business owners, there are still "Nurses" and "Cooks" and other individuals who significantly contribute toward society and provide goods and services that majority populations also depend on ("My People," Hughes 13, 10). Rampersad's reading of the poem is an equally real experience, as is any other reading, but by noticing the word choice and considering James's pluralism, we can see that the poem does not delineate race, identity or class.

Similar to how the previous poems showed the truth of racism, so does "My People," and for very similar reasons. I established, through the application of James's radical empiricism, that there is a conjunction between the artists and the other professions because the poem shows how art is used as a coping method for everyday life and the jobs that *my people* have to apply themselves in due to racism, oppression and segregation. The laughter and art being an end product of the workings of racism establish racism as a truth.

James's "A World of Pure Experience" innovatively disclosed how the poem "My People" emphasizes the disjunctions through commas and the separation of jobs by lines, while

also emphasizing the conjunctions by not separating jobs with periods and showing how art and laughing relate to all jobs. Overcoming the boundaries of the philosophy and providing a new reading of the poem, James's philosophy on experience unveiled how the poem showcases a truly co-conscious transition among different black individuals since it claims that all *my people* cope through art and laughing due to shared trauma. The mosaic philosophy was symbolized with the many different jobs that expand and begin to touch as the similarities in their experiences are unearthed. James's philosophy exposed how the function of laughing as a result of racism does not have an end since the final line states that the laughers are in the hands of Fate. Applying "A Pluralistic Universe" unveiled how the poem details a pluralism of experiences according to each profession as well as a pluralism of who is considered *my people* since the poem does not specify. Finally, racism was proved to be true in the poem through an application of "The Meaning of the Word Truth" and "A Word More About Truth" since the workings of racism result in laughing and art as a coping method.

The poem "Remember" utilizes memories of "bondage" and current occurrences of slavery in the United States and Africa to emphasize the conjunction of similar experiences among people who suffer through bondage and to create a mosaic of experiences among people that illustrate the existing reality (Hughes 2, 8-10, 19). The poem places a particular importance on the separate experiences of bondage that ancestors lived through, since the present reader is asked to connect with those ancestors and bring forth those memories ("Remember," Hughes 1-3). James's radical empiricism can be applied to the poem to unveil the conjoining of the past trauma to the present, particularly in line 7 where it's written that black individuals are "yet a slave," which notions that there is a lack of difference in experience between the ancestor and the modern body. In this sense, there is a co-conscious experience between past and present bodies

in terms of trauma and bondage, and the co-conscious transition is not only felt among countless other individuals who call their "homeland" Africa ("Remember," Hughes 10). This co-conscious experience of trauma between past and present bodies also creates the mosaic that James writes about in relation to radical empiricism, since it places indistinguishable experiences of trauma among many different people in a unity as to make their equivalence more noticeable. It appears that the more an individual remembers the past bondage and realizes how similar these seemingly separate experiences are, the bedding between the tiles begin to touch. The mosaic is thus a culmination of tiles from different bodies, ancestral and modern.

Since the poem specifically identifies Africa as the homeland, then perhaps we can imply that a discontinuity experience would occur between someone who identifies as African and someone who does not, despite the similarities in trauma. Because the poem does not generalize to other countries like "My People" does, it does not appear that the poem advances a co-conscious experience for those who do not consider Africa their homeland. Therefore, a dis-continuous experience can be said to occur between individuals who do not identify Africa as their homeland when it comes to bondage and trauma, which falls in line with James's philosophy. James writes that the word "for" signals a conjunctive experience, and lines 10-11, "Or Africa, your homeland— / And you will see what I mean for you to see—," signal the conjunction between the experience of bondage in relation to Africa and the United States ("Remember," Hughes). The lines assume that *you* will perceive and experience the same as the speaker who is guiding *you* toward this realization that slavery is still intact, which depicts a conjunctive experience between two people.

There is also a tie between the experience of whiteness, thievery, lying and corruption. Lines 12-17 divide each sentence into two lines with a colon at the end of every other line:

The white hand:
The thieving hand.
The white face:
The lying face.
The white power:
The unscrupulous power

which illustrates the disjunction and conjunction ("Remember" Hughes). The function of a colon in this poem is to further explain the line preceding the colon, as in to provide a definition. "The white hand" can be taken independently as simply an experience disjointed from "The thieving hand," but the colon attaches the two experiences and defines the "white hand" as a "thieving" one. The same thought process follows for the "white face" and "white power," for they are all defined by the words following the colon. Placing everything preceding the colon on one line and everything proceeding the colon on another is where the disjunction is presented, for it physically isolates "The white hand" from "The thieving hand" while still maintaining their relatedness with the colon. Additionally, line 12-17 are indented and appear physically inside the rest of the poem instead of beginning at the margin like the rest of the lines. This appears to be a physical way of showing how whiteness, thievery, lying and corrupted power are literally internal and interwoven with bondage, which further emphasizes the conjunction between slavery and white power. Therefore, although the poem does not utilize the key conjunctive words that James points out, the use of colons and some lines being within the rest of the poem stress this conjunction.

In terms of pluralism, the poem primarily stresses that black individuals are still oppressed and treated like slaves in modernity, but it also can be read to show how much has changed in terms of slavery and racism. It's written that "you are yet a slave" after pushing the reader to remember the ancestral history of slavery and compare it to their modern experience ("Remember," Hughes 7). The experience of slavery is presented as still intact, and this is used

to insist that the fight for freedom is far from over, especially when the final line describes those who identify as African as "The hungry wretched thing you are today" ("Remember," Hughes 19). In this reading of the poem, it's difficult to consider the impacts of freedom and how much oppression has changed; nevertheless, that is a real experience of racism and bondage in modernity.

The pluralism in the poem is also unveiled with a slightly different reading of the poem. The word "remember" means to retain a memory or bring something back into mind that is not necessarily a current experience, therefore, it should also be considered that the poem showcases how much oppression has changed and gotten—in a certain sense—better than it used to be. "Remember" revives memories of bondage and, with those memories in mind, it insists that the reader compare past and present experiences of oppression. This effort put into comparing the two temporalities is not automatic—or the poem probably would not have been written or remembering would not have to be an action asked of someone to perform—indicating how much has changed from the past. The image of the individual going to the "highest hill" and "looking down" among the population is also a significant trope in black literature, but it's usually portrayed the other way around with black individuals at the bottom and white individuals looking down ("Remember," Hughes 5-6). This reversal of the trope shows the opportunity that was not present in the past. Additionally, the bondage in the present does not play out the same way it did before, for Hughes illustrates thievery, lying and corruption instead of physical abuse like previous narratives of bondage do. Regardless if the times have gotten better, the conclusion in both readings of the poem is that there is still change to work toward.

That there is still change to occur answers the question as to whether the experience of racism in the poem functions like James argues it should: leading into another experience until it

eventually ends. Since the individual remains "hungry" and "wretched" even today, this appears to signal that the experience of racism and having to overcome it won't be ending any time soon, but that the functional end in the experience of racism will eventually arrive. The ending of "My People" where the laughers were in the hands of Fate implies that the individuals do not have agency to create change, but there is agency in "Remember" and the poem seems to urge the use of this agency so that the experience of racism and bondage can finally end. This agency and effort to and racism also proves its truth. The poem shows how racism is true because it also establishes a continuum from the past to the present and notes how the consistency of bondage has created the modern "hungry wretched thing" ("Remember," Hughes 19).

The poem focuses on the conjunctions between past and present trauma and forms of bondage as well as the conjunctions between whiteness, thievery, lying and corruption, which was revealed through an application of James's "A World of Pure Experience." The philosophy also uncovered that the poem showcases disjunctions between experiences of bondage and those who may not identify Africa as their homeland, and that whiteness, thievery, lying and corruption can be understood in disjunction when outside of the context of racism. In the poem, James's mosaic philosophy is formed through different experiences of bondage and racism among various people and, as the similarities in experiences are noted, the tiles move closer to each other. The sharing of experiences of bondage and trauma among people who identify Africa as their homeland, even within different temporalities, displays the co-conscious experience, and the discontinuous experience is posited to exist among those who do not consider Africa their homeland. With "A Pluralistic Universe," it was unveiled that the poem can be read to reveal that not much change in terms of racism and bondage has occurred, but that it can also be read to show how much has changed, especially how the individual living under racism can climb to the

highest hill and look down upon white populations. The application of “The Meaning of the Word Truth” and “A Word More About Truth” indicated how racism is true because bondage and the current state of individuals being hungry and wretched is a result of racism.

III. Stream of Thought and Habit

For this final section of the essay, 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's 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 thought or 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," James 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," James 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," James 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," James 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's 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," James 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).[8] 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). 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

[8] 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.

expresses (“The Stream of Thought,” James 236). The resting places (substantive) are, to James, usually filled with sensorial images, while the places of flight (transitive) are 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 and wanting to recognize 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,” James 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,” James 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,” Hughes 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,” James 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," James 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 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 thought ("Habit" 128). But also "We must be careful not to give the will so stiff a task as to insure 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," James 129).

Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" does not exert personal consciousness exactly how James's 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 had 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," Hughes 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," James 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 effectual 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

actually quite active, as noted by the verbs used throughout: “bathed,” “built,” “looked” and “heard” (Hughes 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,” Hughes 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,” Hughes 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," James 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," James 128). The punctuation in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is important, especially since it's visibly different from the punctuation utilized in the other three poems 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. Also novel, the difference in writing style in comparison 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.

"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," James 222). Much like "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the poem also features the role of the ancestor and presents a shared experience among black individuals through the Blues themes, the Blues coming from the "black man's soul" as in the soul that is shaped by centuries of black history, as well as the notion of dying or falling asleep to escape racism. 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.

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—signaled 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 that Hughes and many others attended to experience a sort of social acceptance. The multiple meanings, both apparent and hidden, of the poem show that the thought is constantly evolving and changing, 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 in 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,” Hughes 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,” Hughes 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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," Hughes 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. Since the poem seems to intentionally rhyme on occasion and includes the musician's dialogue, the poem is not a stream of thought, but it's still free flowing and without break due to it being 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.

The most telling marker as to why the poem "My People" is a personal consciousness is through the title, for there is an explicit identification that the poem details *my people,* as in the personal and possessive sense. The poem is a catalog of different professions that symbolize different people, but the commonality among them all is that they cope through singing, story-telling, dancing or laughing. This generalization of coping methods reveals the personal

consciousness, since it's a thought or assumption that is uniquely individual. It may even be a bias finding of commonality since Hughes is an artist himself.

As to the second characteristic of thought, the poem begins by separating the artists in the first four lines from the other professions through the period on line 5, as well as separating each profession from the others with each line. By the 19th line of the poem, though, "all" *my people* are artists. That "all" individuals featured in the poem are finally found to have similarities by the end when it comes to how art is used to cope reveals that thought is continuously changing, since art and the professions were all separated until the 19th line. In a similar note, this poem showcases James's philosophy that no two thoughts are ever the same since every line of the poem is slightly different even when the same words are repeated. The only time when a thought appears to be identical is when the poem writes "Dream Singers" and "Dream-Singers all," "Story-tellers" and "Story-tellers all," "Dancers" and "Dancers—," and "Loud laughers in the hands of Fate—" and "Loud-mouthed laughers in the hands of Fate" ("My People," Hughes 1-4, 19-21, 29). But an attention to the words and punctuation quickly reveals how no two lines are the same in the poem, showing the evolution of thought in the poem that seems to emphasize the similarities in those perhaps thought to not have anything in common.

The catalog style poem is also unique in the way that it takes up James's third characteristic of thought: that thought is continuous and the transitive and substantive parts of experience are equally important. At face value, the poem primarily features the substantive since it's a list of professions, therefore, there are no apparent transitive parts or alternations. But that is when punctuation is especially important to notice; the commas and em dashes themselves serve as the transition from one experience to the next. An expected counter argument to this claim, I suspect, is that commas and em dashes create pauses in the poem, which is how James's

defines the substantive in the way that it makes our thought process pause ("The Stream of Thought" 237). However, I argue that in this poem the commas and em dashes serve to connect previous lines to the next and, by doing so, connecting each profession to the following as to create a community that is identifiable as *my people*. This connecting of professions with the use of commas and em dashes also means that the experience of one profession is in relation to the experience of the following and, as James writes, the transitive parts are thoughts of relation as well. The poem is not a stream of consciousness since there is no detailing of the professions themselves or a more intimate description of the jobs, but the free-flowing, free-verse poem still flows without a break in quality or content, which are attributes James considers for stream of thought writing.

Though "My People" does not necessarily deal with objects that appear by themselves and outside of human thought since these are human-made jobs, the poem does not utilize absolute idealism. James writes that through experience, something that previously appeared absolute actually has past and present realities; this notion is demonstrated in the poem when those who previously seemed disconnected in career and artform actually end up finding similarities in the expression of art by the end of the poem. This reveals how the poem does not limit *my people* to the current moment of obvious separation and is able to move past the differences to find common ground. The object of this poem is slightly different in comparison to the other poems since there are not many complete sentences, but the object of the poem ends up being every profession. This is effective, though, since it means that the "*single pulse of subjectivity*" are the jobs that *my people* hold and they are a single pulse due to the lack of punctuation, which furthers the community aspect that the poem seems to express *(*"The Stream of Thought," James 269).

As I stated in the first section of this paper, the attention in “My People” lies on the artists and art appears to be the main interest because it’s an expression and coping method for oppression. An attention to laughing is especially prevalent given that “laughers” is repeated seven times in the poem and it becomes equated to an artform despite not being a traditional artform (“My People,” Hughes). According to James’s philosophy, the main focus can often be said to represent “most truly” the object being described, which in this case is oppression and racism (“The Stream of Thought” 276). The poem does not mention individuals who chose to overcome racism by neglecting their culture, but rather features individuals who deal with it through the job they are offered, and through art and laughing. The stress on laughing and the “laughers” is specific to black communities and it appears to be the symbol that best represents racism because it includes laughing through the pain.

Compared to the other poems, which incorporate more descriptive surroundings, “My People” appears to come a bit short of habit when it comes to scenery and atmosphere. However, the punctuation and use of em dashes remain constant, except for in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” which I have already noted as being unhabitual. The frequent commas and em dashes allow for the experience of one job to move and connect with the following, as to reveal their conjunction. This habitual style displaces boundaries, which is especially ironic since the poem pulls the veil back on the experience of oppression and what living within its boundaries is like by depicting “the ordinary and the low” and how they all use art to cope (*The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. I*, Rampersad). The poem comes across as a technique to overcoming racism—specifically through identifying the commonalities between community members and through coping methods—which is something also seen in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” through reclamation and “The Weary Blues” through the attention of the excitement of the performer.

But at the same time, the poem highlights how oppression restricts the individual to certain jobs that lead to using coping methods and this can be identified as "the enormous fly-wheel of society" that "keeps us all within the bounds" of oppression because there is simply just coping mentioned in the poem, not a fighting back ("Habit," James 126). In this way, the poem highlights the habit of commas and em dashes that are frequent in Hughes's poetry, while also showcasing this attempt to overcome racism but being ultimately unable to.

James's "The Stream of Thought" revealed how "My People" is a personal consciousness through the use of "My," as well as the generalization that all *my people* cope with art. Particularly significant due to an application of the philosophy, the consciousness is depicted as always evolving by how art and each profession seem to be initially separated by the period on line 5 and each line break, but end up being all connected when the poem highlights how all these individuals cope through art. The poem is not a stream of consciousness, but the commas and em dashes serve as the transitive parts, therefore, there is balance between substantive and transitive. Though the poem does not deal with objects outside of the mind since these are human-made jobs, there is still an awareness that the meaning of them can shift through different real experiences. Due to the frequent repetition and stress on the laughers, that is how racism is best represented in terms of the poem. James's "Habit" highlighted how the poem is not as atmospheric, but the punctuation is quite habitual to Hughes's style and this habit establishes the connections between experiences. There was also a habit of attempting to overcome racism through art, but an inability to do so since there is no mention of fighting back current situations.

The use of the second person "you" in "Remember" is slightly different than the first person used in "The Weary Blues" and "The Negros Speaks of Rivers," but the poem is still a personal consciousness because it addresses the "you" in a way that is meant to influence the

other's own personal consciousness. What I mean by influence is that the poem gets the audience thinking specifically about how slavery is still prevalent today, something that perhaps would not happen without urging. And this need to urge others reveals how the poem is confined to a single personal consciousness that attempts to impact other personal consciousnesses. The poem's vagueness and failure to define the "days of bondage" and how one is still a slave in modern times also uncovers how it's a personal consciousness while acknowledging that every individual's idea of bondage and modern slavery is a unique, personal consciousness ("Remember," Hughes 10-11). The audience is invited to remember the days when they were slaves, as to remember prior lived experiences or stories of experiences that come from the ancestors, which communicates that such memories are unique, insulated and personal. For example, if the poem was to explicitly define the "days of bondage," then perhaps the poem would be understood as endeavoring to attest that bondage was and is the same for all black individuals. A criticism to this argument is that when the poem states:

> And you will see what I mean for you to see—
> The white hand:
> The thieving hand.
> The white face:
> The lying face.
> The white power:
> The unscrupulous power

it appears to be defining modern slavery and stating that it's similar to the bondage once experienced ("Remember," Hughes 11-17). But I argue that the lines are vague, allowing for an interpretation of what thieving, lying and corruption entail based on a contrasting personal consciousness and experience. Also, the explicit identification that modern slavery and past bondage come from the white hand, face and power does not undermine differences in experience or disregard differing personal consciousnesses because this experience of whiteness and white supremacy is a shared experience.

The poem's vagueness when it comes to bondage and slavery also contributes to the constantly evolving consciousness in the poem and that of others. The action of remembering is done in the moment and the experience that is remembered is not explicitly labeled other than it being limited to bondage, therefore, a different version of the same memory or a completely different memory is bound to be recalled with each reading of the poem. It's a reader-response poem that specifically relies on the response of the reader to create meaning out of memories and current experiences of slavery. In this way, the main action in the poem—that of remembering—indicates the continuously evolving personal consciousness, for something in the past will never be remembered the same way in the present nor will the same memory be recalled every time. Also, that each reader is asked to remember their own "days of bondage" reveals this Jamesian sense of the personal consciousness and that every single mind will have a different experience of what bondage looks like. The one consistency in the poem is that "the days of bondage" and modern slavery are due to white superiority, and that itself is not an evolving thought ("Remember," Hughes 2). The final line of the poem, which states that the experience of being black—even after abolition—fosters "The hungry wretched thing you are today," shows how there is a need to change the current consciousness of whiteness and modern living through a continuous battle against the institutions and populations that uphold white superiority and slavery ("Remember," Hughes 19).

Though "Remember" is not a stream of thought poem since it addresses a "you" instead of going in depth into what the speaker sees slavery and bondage as, it's still a poem without division in theme or quality. The poem also does not have many substantive parts, perhaps because it's an action-oriented poem and requires the reader to conjure up substantives and sensorial images from the text itself. Where the poem is exceptionally substantive is where the

em dashes appear on lines 2, 3, 10 and 11; these are moments of pause which seem to ask the reader to summon a sensorial image of bondage and modern slavery from their personal consciousness. Most of the other lines in the poem are in constant movement and serve as transitions between the images generated from the act of remembering bondage and connecting that memory to modern forms of slavery. For example, the audience is asked to remember and then promptly told to "not stand still" until being ordered to climb "the highest hill" and consider the sight they see in relation to the initial remembering ("Remember," Hughes 4, 5, 11). James also writes that transitive parts are thoughts of relation and "The white hand" is a thought in relation to "The thieving hand" since the former is meaningless without the latter ("Remember," Hughes 12-13). In the exact same way, "The white face: / The lying face" and "The white power: / The unscrupulous power" are all thoughts in relation and the colon helps identify this since the colon signals a definition ("Remember," Hughes 14-17). And finally, the last word of the poem—"today" —shows how thought is continuous since everything that has happened in the past creates the "today" version of "you," meaning that tomorrow's version will be different ("Remember," Hughes 19). As noted, there are few substantive moments in the poem due to the action of remembering and the indented lines of the poem being in relation to each other since they would be meaningless otherwise, which all of this comes to light applying James's third characteristic of thought.

Considering how reliant "Remember" is on each personal consciousness to make meaning out of bondage and modern slavery, it may seem as if perhaps the poem utilizes absolute idealism. Idealism is a way of stating that objects in reality do not possess qualities or significance themselves but depend on the mind. This is not the case for bondage or slavery in the poem since both are real and exist in reality outside of the human mind to give it meaning

since they disadvantage black individuals (and other minority populations). Bondage and slavery existing and having qualities outside the human mind allows the poem to be vague in its description while still dealing with things independent of thought itself. Additionally, the poem relies on the reader to attach a more personal meaning to bondage and slavery based on past experiences in order to create momentum to end modern slavery. James writes that with time new experiences materialize and the individual becomes aware that the first experience of something—in this case, bondage and slavery—is not the absolute and has meaning outside of one's internal thoughts of the object. The poem does similarly because it acknowledges that there is not a single idea or experience of bondage and slavery, as is marked by the speaker asking the reader to remember and "see what" the speaker means ("Remember," Hughes 11). In terms of the object of thought in the poem, bondage and slavery are not it; they are the central themes, but they are not objects in the sense that James writes about objects because bondage and slavery as objects would not make sense in the context of the poem. "Go to the highest hill / And look down upon the town / Where you are yet a slave." ("Remember," Hughes 5-7) is the object of the first four lines and each previous and following line feature another object that all interrelate because these sentences are a "*single pulse of subjectivity*" ("The Stream of Thought," James 269). The full sentence is identifiably the object as opposed to just slavery because the reality of being a slave seems to require the experience of looking down upon a town and observing what that looks like in practice—meaning that slavery itself is not a state of consciousness if it does not have a context, and the context in the poem is of observing slavery's specifics in action ("Remember," Hughes 5-7).

The habit in "Remember" is to identify the issues of whiteness, explain how slavery is still intact and convey how this impacts the black individual today. The habit in the poem differs

from the others since the previous poems focus on reclaiming or highlighting black culture and showing how populations overcome racism without directly addressing it. But the style of writing, with the em dashes and irregular punctuation, is still a maintained habit in "Remember," as it's in "The Weary Blues" and "My People." This similarity in writing style and form reveals a habit—which is also seen in several other of Hughes's poems—and James writes that a habit is a reflex, something that comes naturally and does not require effort ("Habit" 113-114). Therefore, though the theme in "Remember" may be slightly different from the rest of the poems I selected for this essay, the overarching habit in the poem is the use of alternating punctuation.[9] As mentioned earlier, "The Weary Blues," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "My People" all show an attempt to overcome racism by focusing on the joy of the musician and music as a coping method, reclaiming significant black riverscapes, and noting the similar ways in which *my people* cope with oppression, respectively. This reveals a habit of attending to the ways in which whiteness and racism impact black communities without focusing on racism itself. "Remember" does not seem to showcase this habit since the poem paints the image of the hungry and wretched black individual as a direct product of white oppression in the final line instead of focusing on how those impacted by modern slavery cope. In other words, the poem is remarkably direct with its intention to state that white superiority has not ended and black anger is a product of that continuation. This break, which seemed to be a habit in the other poems,

[9] Not all of Hughes's poem focus on reclaiming black culture and many touch explicitly on slavery, oppression and racism. For example, his famous poem "Harlem" does not specifically detail how black communities overcome racism or cope, but rather it directly addresses how racism defers dreams until they finally "*explode"* (11). Most importantly, though the theme is similar to "Remember," the alternating punctuation and em dashes are still incredibly present in "Harlem." The poem "You and the whole race" addresses how black communities look down upon themselves and white populations and choose to not act against racism. The poem does not reclaim black history or show how individual cope with racism, it shows how some populations choose to do nothing but avoid the issue, and with this argument, the poem calls on the race to step up so they can become free. The poem is similar to "Remember" in terms of tone and theme and, again, the alternating punctuation is present. Therefore, it's not only the poems I have chosen for this essay that reveal this habit of punctuation, it's a habit seen in many of Hughes's poem from the New Negro Renaissance and after.

reveals that perhaps only dealing with black populations while leaving white populations in the margins of the text is a habit still in formation.

"Remember" presents a personal consciousness due to its vagueness in defining slavery and bondage and insisting the audience define it through the action of remembering since it acknowledges that every individual will define slavery and bondage slightly different without their personal consciousness, something that James's "The Stream of Thought" innovatively brought to light. The consciousness is constantly changing since the poem relies on the reader to create meaning from a past memory, which will never be the same as experience in the moment and will not be remembered in the same way every time. Identifying that the individual is wretched today due to past and present slavery gives the possibility that tomorrow may be different, also showcasing how thought is always changing. The poem is not a stream of consciousness, but it does primarily focus on the transitive parts since the poem is full of movement and requires the reader to create the substantive parts in their own personal consciousnesses. The poem deals with an object outside of the mind—that being slavery—due to the fact that the poem can fail to define bondage and slavery and still make sense in the context. James's "Habit" uncovered how the overarching habit in the poems selected is the use of the alternating punctuation, such as colons, em dashes, commas, question marks and exclamation points.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have pulled back the metaphorical color line that divides black and white scholarship and provided an innovative way to read some of Langston Hughes's poetry from the New Negro Renaissance. 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 philosophy 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 influence may not have reached Hughes in particular, it did reach writers like Alain Locke and DuBois who influenced Hughes and countless other writers at the time.

Using James's pragmatism as a theory to critically analyze Hughes poetry gave insight into where the attention lies in the poems. Hughes wrote in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" that black artists should be addressing 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." James's philosophy on attention revealed that the poems do just that with the specific focus on the racial significance of riverscapes, the rhythm of the Blues, the laughter and art that covers the pain, and the identity of a fighter due to racism. James's philosophy on blindness showed how the poems can be blind to women, other minority groups, those observed without intel into their minds, those who do not identify with Africa but may still identify as black, and those who are middle and high-class and still are impacted by racism.

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 sort of 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 common 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 the poems.

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 poem while also showing how the poems themselves apply pluralism in the sense of an acknowledgment of distinct perceptions of the same experiences, like in the case of slavery, bondage and racism. An application of James's "The Stream of Thought" also revealed this pluralism as multiple personal consciousness were recognized in the poems, especially in "Remember" and "The Weary Blues" with the engagement of the reader and musician. His philosophy on thought also showed how the consciousness and beliefs are evolving, as is motioned by the changing focuses or shifts in the poems. Finally, James's philosophy on habit revealed how the overarching habit in the poetry is the consistency on black poetic in general and on the alternating punctuation as opposed to just periods or the occasional colon.

Hughes was a celebrated poet of the time among his community, and his work continues to stand out among the New Negro poets, with "The Weary Blues" and "The Negro Speaks of

Rivers" as especially famous works. Analyzing such a well-known figure of the movement 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. And with the possibility of applying pragmatism to other New Negro poets, it's also safe to assume that James's pragmatism can be further applied to the four poems I selected for the purposes of this essay because, due to pluralism, there will always be different ways of reading the poems. He 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," James 15-16), and this can be applied to the interpretation of poetry as well: there are many visions and modes of feeling when it comes to reading Hughes's New Negro poetry and the interpretations in this essay are just a brief introduction to the span of possibilities.

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