African-american urbanity: from langston hughes to nas

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Specifically from a literary perspective, the Harlem Renaissance—also known as the New Negro Movement—is often held up as one of the most artistically prolific, localized movements in Western literature, producing writers such as Gwendolyn Bennett, Nella Larsen, Esther Popel, and Jean Toomer. No Harlem Renaissance writer has received as much recognition and adulation as Langston Hughes, though, a poet, novelist, playwright, and essayist who is now firmly entrenched in the Western literary canon. While Hughes had a unique poetic style—he favored short lyric poems with simple, concrete images that often featured deceptively optimistic rhyme schemes; his voice was unmistakably his—the subject matters and themes he chose to write about were just as distinctive. Through his poetry, Hughes unflinchingly examined the African-American condition in the first half of the twentieth century: landlords mistreated their tenants, dreams were crushed by the weight of institutional racism, Western history—that usually focused on the “ victories” and “ successes” of white men—was reexamined questioned; most importantly, his poetry was embedded with a love and celebration for African-American culture. This latter characteristic was shared amongst his contemporaries and successors. According to Joanne V. Gabbin, “ African American poetry is the aesthetic chronicle of a race, as Gwendolyn Brooks expresses it, struggling to lift ‘ its face all unashamed’ in an alien land” (Gabbin, “ Furious Flower: African American Poetry, an Overview”). Those successors are far and varied: as Hughes’s legacy continues to live on, his influence has grown and stretched across mediums. In fact, the tenets of his poetry can be found in another predominantly African-American art form—hip-hop. In the 2015 N. W. A. biopic Straight Outta Compton, Ice Cube—the primary lyricist of the rap group—replies with a Hughesian retort when a

reporter disparages the violent content of his music: “ Our art is a reflection of our reality” (Gray, Straight Outta Compton). Like Hughes, many rappers write specifically and exclusively about the African-American experience; hip-hop has often been viewed as a heavily memoiristic art form—the personal becomes political. No rapper better exemplifies this stance than Nasir Jones—widely known simply as “ Nas”—the Queens, New York native who released his seminal 1994 debut album, Illmatic, when he was only twenty years old. Like Hughes, Nas has a keen observational eye, one that understands the cruelties of the world but still, occasionally, sees life through a lens of hope and optimism. The two New Yorkers were born almost seventy-five years apart, yet their work traces similar themes. Ultimately, in the grand scheme of things, Hughes and Nas write about the same topics: the marginalization and mass disenfranchisement of the black voice and body by white-dominated power structures.

Because of its status as a popular art form, hip-hop is often dismissed as vulgar or obscene, without any critical or scholarly merit. This is untrue, especially considering the fact that hip-hop directly follows in the footsteps of Harlem Renaissance writers and members of the Black Arts Movement, such as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Maya Angelou. As such, it is easy to draw comparisons: according to Fran L. Lassiter, “ During the Harlem Renaissance, writers attempted to perfect what Bernard W. Bell describes as ‘ a dual responsibility: to their race and to their craft’ (2004: 98)” (Lassiter, “ From Toasts to Rap”). This dual responsibility is evident in hip-hop, and it is present throughout Nas’s catalogue: he calls himself “ King Poetic” on “ Halftime,” and raps, “ You know [I] got the mad fat fluid when [I] rhyme”;

similarly, on “ It Ain’t Hard to Tell,” he raps, “ Vocabulary spills, I’m ill” (Nas, “ Halftime”; Nas, “ It Ain’t Hard to Tell”). Throughout his oeuvre, Nas displays a consciousness of his ability and a deep respect for his craft. As such, it is with authority and legitimacy when P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods assert that, “ hip hop [is] no more or less compelling as a topic of study or pedagogy than any other moment or cultural product in black history” (Saucier & Woods, “ Hip Hop Studies in Black).

The cultural omnivorousness of hip-hop also places it squarely in the realm of postmodernism, that hard-to-define and oftentimes harder to understand artistic movement. The word “ postmodern” might be the most succinct aspect of the movement: thematically, at least, postmodernists built directly on modernism, which was most saliently concerned with alienation from the contemporary world. Infamously difficult to define, postmodernism is “ associated with an awareness of societal and cultural transitions after World War II and the rise of mass-mediated consumerist popular culture in the 1960s-1970s” (Irving, “ Postmodernity vs. the Postmodern vs. Postmodernism). As a result, postmodernists are often repurposing works and placing them into new contexts, thereby creating an entirely new work of art themselves. In hip-hop, the most obvious example of this is sampling—or, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, “ the act of using a small part of a recording (such as a song) as part of another recording.” On “ It Ain’t Hard to Tell,” for example, Nas samples “ Human Nature,” by Michael Jackson, “ N. T.,” by Kool & the Gang, and “ Slow Dance,” by Stanley Clarke. The postmodern elements of hip-hop stretch beyond just the construction of the music, though. Hip-hop is noted for its unflinching depictions of violence:

in “ N. Y. State of Mind,” Nas raps, “ Pick the Mac up, told brothers, ‘ Back up,’ the Mac spit/Lead was hittin’ niggas, one ran—I made him backflip/Heard a few chicks scream, my arm shook, couldn’t look/Gave another squeeze, heard it click, ‘ Yo, my shit is stuck’” (Nas, “ N. Y. State of Mind”). Philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism makes it clear that Nas’s realistic, violent lyrics qualify him as a postmodernist poet. Lyotard writes: The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation self; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable (Lyotard 81)

Violence, in this case, is the “ unpresentable.” Certainly Hughes—who is more easily classified as a modernist—did not articulate this extreme sense of violence, and it does not permeate his work like it does Nas’s. Finally, postmodernists are concerned with reinterpreting history and questioning the accepted historical canon. In this regard, Nas mirrors Hughes: they both invoke African history to remind people of forgotten legacies—the former does this on “ I Can,” while the latter does it in “ The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” When examined through the lens of postmodernism, it is easy to see how Nas’s work draws influence, either directly or indirectly, from—and, more importantly, builds on—the work of Hughes.

Lassiter links hip-hop and the Harlem Renaissance further: “ members of the Harlem Renaissance, similar to today’s hip-hop generation, rejected the poetic traditions and structures of the ‘ old Negro’ who embraced white

bourgeois values and morality" (Lassiter, " From Toasts to Rap"). Like Hughes, Nas never panders to a white audience; instead, he is unapologetically black. In fact, when Nas was first recording Illmatic, he did not even think that he would have a white audience. In an interview with Grantland, his brother, Jabari Jones—also known by his stage name, Jungle—said, " I thought [the album] would be something cool that only Queensbridge people would like. [...] I thought it would be the little Queensbridge crew on TV real fast and then we'd stay in Queensbridge for the rest of our lives" (Golianopoulos, " Q&A: Nas's Brother, Jungle, on Life in Queensbridge and the New Doc ' Time Is Illmatic'"). In short, like Hughes's, Nas's career has remained entirely authentic, and he has never diluted himself in order to appeal to a larger audience; his audience needs to address him on his own terms. This is best evidenced by his use of African-American English Vernacular in his songs (Lister, " Linguistic Variation in Hip Hop: Variable Use of African American Vernacular English by New York Rappers Jay-Z and Nas"). In his 1979 essay " If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?," James Baldwin writes, " language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identify: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity" (Baldwin). This attitude courses through the work of Nas and Hughes: by refusing to give up African-American English Vernacular, they are refusing to surrender and mutate their identities.

Hughes and Nas ground their work in local color: although they are both from New York City, they hail from different neighborhoods; the former was a

Harlem native, while the latter comes from Queens. They both show affection for their neighborhoods while simultaneously recognizing their drawbacks, usually attributed to the effects of institutionalized racism. Hughes has described this mixture of love and frustration with a characteristically keen observation dense with concrete nouns: " Melting pot Harlem? Harlem of honey and chocolate and caramel and rum and vinegar and lemon and lime and gall" (Cruse 314). This evocative list functions twofold: Hughes's food metaphor implies that his contemporaneous Harlem featured a large amount of cultural diversity; it also conjures contrasting tastes and flavors in one's mind—the sweetness of " chocolate and caramel" clashes against the sourness of " vinegar and lemon," a fitting analogue for a neighborhood that both inspires and stifles (Cruse 314). Nas holds this same conflicting view of his birthplace. Although many his songs—especially those on Illmatic—are filled with pleasant, nostalgic memories of his childhood, he also addresses the pervasiveness of the violence in the neighborhood. Jabari Jones noted, " Coming out of Queensbridge, you had all these guys that wanted to be down [to fight], or wanted to extort you or take your chain" (Golianopoulos, " Q&A: Nas's Brother, Jungle, on Life in Queensbridge and the New Doc ' Time Is Illmatic'").

The negatives aspects of their neighborhoods—the poor housing conditions that Hughes derided in " The Ballad of the Landlord" and " Madam and The Rent Man"; the violence that Nas raps about in " A Queens Story"—can be blamed on " black social isolation" (Shihadeh & Flynn 1329). According to Shihadeh and Flynn, " Because of perpetuating institutional arrangements and individual actions, blacks face considerable difficulty in accessing non-

minority neighborhoods [and] the resulting limited contact between blacks and white may isolate many blacks from the rest of society and severely limit their chances for social mobility" (Shihadeh & Flynn 1329). They go further, and detail the consequences of black social isolation: it " combines the weight of poverty, joblessness, welfare dependency, teenage childbearing, and other indicators of social malaise and concentrates them geographically in black neighborhoods" (Shihadeh & Flynn 1329). Black social isolation is one of the root cause of the violence and gang related crime that Nas so frequently centers his music on. In Hughes's " Madam and The Rent Man," black social isolation is also one of the reasons why " The sink is broke,/The water don't run,/And you ain't done a thing/You promised to've done" in the speaker's house (Hughes). Although it manifests in different ways, Hughes and Nas are writing about the exact same topic: the effect of black social isolation on an urban community.

They put their respective urban communities front and center, too, in all of their glory and disappointment. Nas frequently ties together the positive and negative aspects of his neighborhood in one fluid, deft verse. On " A Queens Story," he dots his rhymes with specific, localized references—tracing his way through the disenfranchised areas of his youth to the safer, predominantly white areas—rapping: Rastas selling chocolate weed inside of a weed house Colosseum downstairs, gold teeth mouth Astoria warriors, eight street, twin buildings, Vernon, can't even count the Livingston children. Justice in Ravenswood, nice neighborhood— Caught sleeping out there, be a wrap though. Bridge niggas be up in Petey's ten racks, yo. (Nas, " A Queens Story").

Hughes, meanwhile, takes a more metaphorical approach to his writing about his neighborhood. Philip M. Royster analyzes “ Dimout in Harlem” in his essay “ The Poetic Theory and Practice of Langston Hughes,” writing, “ A young black walking down a Harlem street in the silent shadows of evening becomes a collective individual representing and demonstrating the relationships between many young urban black people and their natural and unnatural environments” (8). Hughes is less concerned with pointing out specific locations—thus grounding the reader in a literal geographic sense—than he is with recreating the atmosphere and collective mood of Harlem. In “ Harlem,” his arguably most famous poem, he never mentions the neighborhood—or any location, for that matter—at all. Instead, he lets the title guide the reader, and implies that the neighborhood is full of—and perhaps the cause of—“ dream[s] deferred” (Hughes, “ Harlem”). Those deferred dreams are a common subject in Hughes’s poetry. As Henry Rhodes writes, “ The American Dream holds that if a man is industrious, self-reliant, and talented he can achieve almost anything his heart desires. The Dream posed a dilemma for the Negro writer. If he chose to believe that the American Dream included the Negro, then he would have to believe that an end to discrimination was in the future” (Rhodes, “ The Social Contributions of the Harlem Renaissance”). Hughes wanted to believe in the American Dream—in “ Let America Be America Again,” the speaker yearns for the idealistic promises of American society to become realities, yet knowing in full conscience that the country has always been discriminatory and racist—but he was well-aware of the pervasiveness of institutional racism. Nas expresses the same disillusionment in “ America,” rapping: “ It’s like waking up from a bad dream/(America)/Just to figure out you wasn’t dreamin’ in the

first place" (Nas, " America"). In the song, Nas goes on to point out the hypocrisy labeling The United States of America as a place where " all men are created equal" (Jefferson, " The Declaration of Independence").

Nas is not necessarily a pessimist, though, and he expresses hope more often than Hughes does. According to Raphael Travis, Jr., " Hip-Hop's use includes goals of empowerment for individuals and communities, moving from an emphasis on ' me' to a simultaneous emphasis on the collective ' we'" (Travis, Jr., "" Rap Music and the Empowerment of Today's Youth: Evidence in Everyday Music Listening, Music Therapy, and Commercial Rap Music"). This sense of encouragement has been especially prevalent in the latter half of his career. The entire concept behind " I Can" was designed to motivate children, with a chorus that reads, " I know I can/Be what I wanna be/If I work hard at it/I'll be where I wanna be" sung by a group of kids (Nas, " I Can"). Nas opens his first verse with an inspirational set of bars: Be, B-Boys and girls, listen up: You can be anything in the world, in God we trust. An architect, doctor, maybe an actress, But nothing comes easy it takes much practice (Nas, " I Can").

These same sentiments can be found in Hughes's work, but in a more opaque, abstract way—after all, if there was no hope whatsoever, write write " Let America Be America Again"? Ultimately, both artists ask their readers to strive toward excellence, to change the system as a self-motivated individual. Gabbin asserts that, " From the earliest attempts of African American poets in the eighteenth century to express lyrically their adjustment to existence in a society that debated their humanity to their intense exploration of their voice in the waning years of a racially charged

twentieth century, they have built an aesthetic tradition that affirms them" (Gabbin, " Furious Flower: African-American Poetry, An Overview"). One aspect of African-American culture that glues this aesthetic tradition together is religion—Christianity, in particular. The church served many purposes: it is " a place to create a self-identity, a place of self-discovery, and a sanctuary from racial oppression" (Lambert 303). Many of Nas's songs and Hughes's poems reflect this; some, however, express doubt, letting the desolation of racist America seep into normally hopeful confines of the church. The latter half of Nas's career has featured a more positive view on Christianity—he famously got " God's Son" tattooed across his stomach near the turn of the twenty-first century—but on " Live at the Barbecue," one of the first tracks he ever recorded, he raps, " When I was twelve, I went to Hell for snuffing Jesus" (Nas, " Live at the Barbecue). On " Represent," he does not employ hyperbole, but is more forthright: " Won't even run about Gods/I don't believe in none of that shit, your facts are backwards" (Nas, " Represent"). While these songs demonstrate a flat-out rejection of Christian hope, Hughes's " Song for a Dark Girl" expresses more of a despair and disappointment. In the second stanza, the speaker wonders about the efficacy of prayer in a religion that is just as whitewashed as her discriminatory country, saying, " I asked the white Lord Jesus/What was the use of prayer" (Hughes, " Song for a Dark Girl"). In different ways, both artists show how the Christian church can simultaneously be a beacon of hope for the African-American community—a lynchpin uniting people—and another reminder of harsh American realities.

As a whole, Nas's work can be viewed as a postmodernist expansion on Hughes's modernist poetry: the former builds on the pervasive theme of alienation in the latter's writing by presenting the unpresentable violence of African-American urban life. Hughes wrote in broader strokes, using concrete images to metaphorize the plight of African-Americans in the first half of the twentieth century; Nas, on the surface, has a more narrow focus, honing in on the locations of his youth to represent the general struggles of city life—he makes the specific universal. They share more similarities than differences, though, and ultimately write with the same goal in mind: chronicling the effects of institutional racism on their communities.

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