

Langston hughes' poem



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appears here] appears here] appears here] appears here] Langston Hughes' Poem It has been the longstanding practice of African American verbal culture to transform literal spaces into topical spaces for rhetorical and figurative purposes. Like the broader culture of black Americans, our literature tempered the historic experience of dislocation, slavery, and discrimination by seeking terms with which to root itself in the African Diaspora. Over time, this discourse of spatial signing has evolved into a literary strategy of allusion to a diversity of symbolic and spiritual spaces in the figurative practice of black writers.

Allusions to the Old Testament iconography of place by which enslaved blacks identified themselves with the enslaved Israelites in Egypt and Babylon in the geography of their song reverberate distinctively in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the debut poem young Langston Hughes scribbled on an envelope as the train taking him to another summer in Mexico with his father crossed the Mississippi. In "Rivers," Hughes claimed this legacy-vocabulary of place encompassing "downriver," the term for all the dreaded places in the lower South to which slaves were sold off, "the riverside," one of the relative safe havens and sites of resistance within the domain of the plantation itself, and "over Jordan," the beckoning frontier of freedom visible from inside the bounds of enslavement and exile as it was elaborated and interpreted in the nineteenth century in the traditional Negro spirituals and in such classic fugitive slave narratives as Frederick Douglass's and Harriet Jacobs's as sites of meditation, rebellion, and recuperation. (R. Baxter Miller, 2005).

By placing that inherited vocabulary of place within a wider geographic perspective, however, Hughes proposed a reconstituted imagery of place for <https://assignbuster.com/langston-hughes-poem/>

the twentieth century, one associated with a progression across continents in a historic and prophetic language of belonging and entitlement, beyond enslavement. This usage of spiritual geography, rooted in the characteristic idiom of the oral traditions of enslaved Americans of African descent and in the narrative texts of former slaves, and present even in Hughes's earliest published work, would remain a lifelong figurative strategy.

This legacy language of place bequeathed by the oral tradition and claimed so authoritatively in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is always at hand for Langston Hughes. It is consistently voiced throughout his career in the terms of the tradition, but it is also turned to unusual and innovative uses. The encompassing places of the spirit that cohere and give order to Langston Hughes's literary vocabulary are three: the unremembered place of origin in Africa, the unrealized yet perfectible social space of America, and the unprecedented enclave of black Harlem.

In his usage of the legacy language of place in his poetry, one perceives the clarity and coherence of Langston Hughes's vision of himself as an African American citizen-poet: "A poet is a human being. Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country. Hang yourself, poet, in your own words. Otherwise you are dead". (Lamonda Horton-Stallings, 1999).

Work Cited

Lamonda Horton-Stallings (1999). Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist in the Protest Tradition, 1921-43; *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 23
R. Baxter Miller (2005). *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Works for Children and Young Adults: Poetry, Fiction, and Other Writing*; *MELUS*, Vol. 30