The Pragmatist Aesthetic and Langston Hughes

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When Langston Hughes was coming of age as a poet after World War I and spending considerable time in Harlem, the distinctively American philosophy of pragmatism was in the intellectual air of New England and New York, in particular. Prominent pragmatists were William James, who delivered a series of lectures and published a book under the title of Pragmatism; John Dewey, who taught at New York's Columbia University; and Max Eastman, Dewey's protege and the editor of The Liberator from 1918-1921. James, of course, was the mentor of W. E. B. DuBois, to whom Hughes dedicated his poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in his first published volume of poetry, The Weary Blues. Furthermore, Hughes briefly attended Columbia University while Dewey was teaching there, and Hughes credited Eastman's The Liberator with introducing him to the poetry of Claude McKay, who was an inspiration to him (Rampersad, Life 51, 30). Consequently, although this paper will not be arguing for influence by particular pragmatists, direct or otherwise, we should not be surprised to discover that Hughes's writing reflects some of the ideas of pragmatism.

Dewey and Eastman expended considerable effort in applying their pragmatism to their aesthetic theories. George Hutchinson suggests that Dewey's aesthetic theory "is at least partly indebted to African and African American aesthetics as filtered through [Albert C.] Barnes" and, furthermore, that "not only did pragmatism influence African American aesthetics, but African aesthetics itself [. . .] corroborated and influenced pragmatist aesthetics" (46). This paper will examine Langston Hughes's aesthetic. It has been identified by Arnold Rampersad as an "aesthetic of simplicity" (Life 146), and Karen Jackson Ford has published an essay that convincingly explains that term and how such an aesthetic functions in Hughes's work. Ford finds that Hughes's simplicity communicates wisdom and the truth of a complex world. As she puts it, "simpleness [. . .] functions as a brick wall against which complexities collide" (440). Others, such as Onwuchekwa Jemie (1-32) and Dudley Randall (212-14), have discussed Hughes's writing in the context of a black aesthetic that bears witness to and transmits the cultural experience of being black in America. Moreover, Steven C. Tracy has written much about the ways blues music influenced Hughes's art and about Hughes's use of blues structures in his poetry. In this sense, we can also

attribute to Hughes a blues aesthetic. All of these formulations have their merits. That Hughes can be read in multiple ways seems to me to be the mark of an artist who will be read, studied, and enjoyed for many years to come. With this in mind, I have decided to look at Langston Hughes's work through the lens of a pragmatist aesthetic in order to uncover still another dimension of his artistry. Therefore, this paper will demonstrate that Hughes's aesthetic was a pragmatist aesthetic, whether he was conscious of it or not.

1. What is a pragmatist aesthetic?

Pragmatism is considered to be a uniquely American philosophy. The term was first introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce in 1878. William James, though, has long been recognized as the chief proponent of pragmatism. In his book, Pragmatism, James identifies "the scope of pragmatism--first, a method; and second, a genetic theory of what is meant by truth" (37). As a method, James finds that pragmatism is an "attitude of orientation." It is the "attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts" (32). Thus, the pragmatist is an anti-foundationalist, more interested in human experience than absolutes. In the same work, James credits John Dewey and Ferdinand Schiller for their pragmatic definition of truth. Truth means "that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience [. . .]" (34). The relational nature of truth and experience is an important concept for the pragmatist.

James did not write about aesthetics in Pragmatism, but John Dewey has written about the subject extensively. In 1925, Dewey published Experience and Nature, which discusses aesthetics in several places, including a chapter titled "Experience, Nature and Art." Dewey's, and pragmatism's, major treatise on aesthetics, though, is Art as Experience, published in 1934. It is to this work that we must turn in order to define a pragmatist aesthetic. First, though, some comments by another pragmatist, Max Eastman, will be useful. Eastman taught at Columbia University from 1907 to 1911. He was Dewey's assistant and protege there. Eastman writes that "Poetic speech is not so much an art as a natural material in which artists may work. And the material is life itself, in so far as words can assist in making it conscious or communicating it" (194). Here he expresses the notion that the experience of life is both art and the material of art. Furthermore, Eastman notes that art should

communicate life, which we will see is a very important point in Dewey's aesthetic theory. Finally, the pragmatists are convinced that life should be lived fully consciously, as Eastman suggests when he comments that "the value proper to all art is the universal value of an increased consciousness" (205).

John Dewey states that the task of one who writes on the philosophy of art "is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience" (3). It will become clear as we progress that the "continuity" Dewey speaks of is crucial to his aesthetic--art cannot be divorced from life. He points to the fact that the art of primitive cultures is found in their domestic utensils and as part of their communal rituals and celebrations. Thus, their art is intimately intertwined with their experience of living. Contrarily, Dewey feels that modern civilizations have isolated art from experience by putting it into museums and by making it a sign of cultural status (6-10). Life for Dewey is experience that is "rhythmic and developing," and experience "signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. [. . .] Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ" (19). We see that Dewey, like Eastman, posits a life that is fully conscious and integrated; art, then, must possess the same qualities. A related point is Dewey's concept of "an experience." He writes, "we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment." The experience will be so complete that it will result in "a consummation and not a cessation." Dewey's examples of "an experience" are illustrative of the point: a game of chess, a political campaign, or writing a book (35).

How, then, does "an experience" relate to aesthetics? Dewey argues that any practical undertaking will possess "esthetic quality" if it is "integrated and moves by its own urge to fulfillment" (39). Dewey firmly believes that the aesthetic is not something that comes into experience from without. It is not some transcendent ideal or inspiration from the gods or a muse. Rather, the aesthetic is "the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience" (46). Thus, any experience, if it is "an experience" will be aesthetic because it is conscious and consummated.

What relation does the aesthetic quality of experience have to art, then? Dewey asserts that

"art, in its form, unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an experience" (48). The pragmatist sense of the unity of the work of art is relational; it has to do with pulling together the elements of experience and organizing them into a whole. Also, just as "an experience" is a fully conscious experience, the work of art must be a fully conscious production. According to Dewey, "The doing or making is artistic when the perceived result is of such a nature that its qualities as perceived have controlled the question of production." The aspect of control in the production of a work of art is especially important to Dewey. The artist assumes the "attitude of the perceiver while he works" (48). He is conscious of what he is doing and this gives the work an aesthetic quality that a spontaneous, uncontrolled work cannot have. Dewey sees an important connection between the artist and the person who beholds the work. In order to "perceive," the viewer must necessarily "create his own experience," and this created experience must "include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent" (54). So, the work embodies relations and communicates those to the viewer. The importance of this for Dewey's philosophy will be discussed later.

Pragmatism is often mistakenly seen as a coldly practical, business-like philosophy. Actually, though, pragmatists identify emotion as a significant and valid experience. Dewey finds that "emotion is essential to that act of expression which produces a work of art [. . .] " (69). In fact, for there to be expression, there must be an "urge from within outwards," but this "welling up must be clarified and ordered" (61). Dewey is making an important distinction between the expression of emotion and the raw, impulsive discharge of emotion. He explains that to "discharge is to get rid of, to dismiss; to express is to stay by, to carry forward in development, to work out to completion" (62). Thus, the aesthetic expression of emotion must be integrated and complete. The artist does not deal in emotional outbursts, rather, he will "build up a concrete situation and permit it to evoke emotional response" (67). Dewey elaborates:

> Yes, emotion must operate. But it works to effect continuity of movement, singleness of effect amid variety. It is selective of material and directive of its order and arrangement. But it is not what is expressed. Without emotion, there may be craftsmanship, but not art; it may be present and be intense, but if it is directly manifested the result is also not art. (69)

What is expressed is not emotion but, rather, "an experience." Emotion is a part of that experience,

but it cannot render the work aesthetic by itself.

Any discussion of aesthetics is, sooner or later, going to come around to the subject of form. Dewey defines form in terms of "completeness of relations within a chosen medium." Art, like life and nature, consists of relations which are "modes of interaction." According to Dewey, "A social relation is an affair of affections and obligations, of intercourse, of generation, influence and mutual modification. It is in this sense that 'relation' is to be understood when used to define form in art" (134). Form is not the exclusive property of art. Dewey finds it in any experience that is "an experience," and he feels that these kinds of experiences inevitably call for people to organize their perceptions of the experience into a unified whole. Nonetheless, he believes that art, specifically, "enacts more deliberately and fully the conditions" that bring about such wholeness. "Form may then be defined as the operation of forces that carry the experience of an event, object, scene, and situation to its own integral fulfillment" (137). Another aspect of form is rhythm. Dewey defines it as "ordered variation of changes" (154). Rhythm can be seen everywhere in nature, for example, in the beating of hearts, in the change of seasons, and in the movement of tides. Dewey finds rhythm in all truly aesthetic works of art. He calls such aesthetic works "naturalistic," as opposed to "realistic" art which imitates particulars but fails to capture their "moving and organizing rhythms" (153). This view would then make pragmatist aesthetic theory a non-mimetic theory of art in that the work is "an experience" in itself, not simply the representation of an experience.

Pragmatism is rightly thought to concern itself with what is useful, with practical consequences. Dewey's aesthetic does meet this criterion of the philosophy. It is important to remember that Dewey sees the world in relational terms and that human relations are of primary interest. It is no surprise that this fact comes into play in his aesthetic theory. He claims that, ultimately, "works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience" (104-05). The effect of this communication is that "Art breaks through barriers that divide human beings, which are impermeable in ordinary association" (244). This is certainly a very practical consequence of artistic endeavor. This aspect of Dewey's theory will also play an important role in our further discussion of Langston Hughes. Speaking about our perceptions of art created by cultures other than our own, Dewey asserts that

> We understand it in the degree in which we make it a part of our own attitudes [. . .].

> To some degree we become artists ourselves as we undertake this integration, and, by bringing it to pass, our own experience is reoriented. Barriers are dissolved, limiting prejudices melt away, when we enter into the spirit of Negro or Polynesian art. This insensible melting is far more efficacious than the change effected by reasoning, because it enters directly into attitude. (334)

In this sense, of effecting a change of attitude, art can be seen as propaganda, and Dewey certainly does not subscribe to any theory of "art for art's sake." He is most concerned with art's real effects in and on actual experience. Dewey identifies two alternative views of what "art does to us and for us." "Either it operates because some transcendent essence (usually called 'beauty') descends upon experience from without, or esthetic effect is due to art's unique transcript of the energy of the things of the world" (185). Dewey clearly comes down on the side of the latter.

2. Is Langston Hughes's aesthetic a pragmatist aesthetic?

The substance of Langston Hughes's aesthetic can be gleaned from three sources: his essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"; his autobiography, The Big Sea; and his collection of short stories, The Ways of White Folks. In his "Racial Mountain" essay, Hughes aligns himself with the "common people" of his race. He depicts these people as full of life, as not given to intellectualizing art, as holders of "their own individuality in the face of American standardization," and as able to "accept what beauty is their own without question." Hughes feels that the Negro artist must draw his material from this group because, since the individual's experience is part of the community's experience, it is the only way one can truly express oneself (693). Of his own work, Hughes comments, "Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know." He goes on to proclaim his manifesto: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame" (694). Thus, we see that Hughes's intention is to express his own experience, particularly in the aspect of its relatedness to his community. This relational dimension of Hughes's intent is our first connection to Dewey and a pragmatist aesthetic.

Like Dewey, Hughes feels that primitive cultures were more conscious of life than modern Western cultures are. In The Big Sea, Hughes presents his Foreword to a sociological survey he conducted while at Lincoln University. In part, it reads, "In the primitive world, where people live

closer to the earth and much nearer to the stars, every inner and outer act combines to form the single harmony, life. [. . .] They do not, as many civilized people do, neglect the truth of the physical for the sake of the mind" (311). He goes on to state, "This meant, I suppose, that where life is simple, truth and reality are one" (311). Hughes is equating truth with the experience of life lived in the flesh, consciously, and harmoniously integrated. Dewey, we have seen, presents his aesthetic theory in much the same terms.

But Hughes did not consider himself to be a primitivist. His patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, wanted him to be primitive and this led to his break with her. He tells us, "unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro--who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa--but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem" (325). This passage reveals two things about Hughes's aesthetic. First, his writing had to express his own self; it had to come from, be a part of his personal experience of living. Secondly, expressing one's experience has something to do with rhythm. This rhythmical aspect of experience for Hughes becomes clear when we juxtapose the above passage with his words from earlier in The Big Sea which discuss his days in Washington, where he sought out the many varieties of music coming from his people. His intent was to write poems like the songs he was hearing. It was their rhythm of life that attracted him. He explains, "Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day--night, day--night, day--forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power" (209). Hughes, like Dewey, wants to find the natural rhythms of life expressed in art.

Important details of Hughes's aesthetic are presented in his collection of short stories, The Ways of White Folks. Hutchinson suggests that these stories "are like examples and arguments for pragmatist aesthetics" (38). For instance, "Slave on the Block" is a satirical portrayal of a white couple, Michael and Anne Carraway, who see themselves as artists. Their approach to art is antithetical to a pragmatist aesthetic. The Carraways admire Negro art, which Hughes depicts as full of life--"the dancing that had such jungle life about it, the songs that were so simple and fervent, the poetry that was so direct, so real." The Carraways, by contrast, do not try to express their own experience in their art; rather, they "copied" the Negro art (19). Furthermore, the Carraways are

shown throughout to be people who live life vicariously, whereas the black characters in the story, Mattie and Luther, are lively and unpretentious, living life fully and consciously. These characterizations are suggestive of the aesthetics they represent, but the difference between Hughes's aesthetic and an "art for art's sake" aesthetic is most clearly seen in the story "The Blues I'm Playing."

Hughes sets up a stark contrast between the pianist, Oceola Jones, and her patron, Mrs. Dora Ellsworth. Mrs. Ellsworth, as Steven C. Tracy points out, represents an "art for art's sake" aesthetic in the tradition of "Walter Pater and the Aesthetic Movement" ("Blues" 14), while Oceola, I am arguing, corresponds to Hughes's aesthetic. Being a childless widow, Mrs. Ellsworth has "no interest in life now save art" (96). She favors "art of the old school, portraits that really and truly looked like people, poems about nature, music that had soul in it, not syncopation. And she felt the dignity of art" (107). She feels that "Art is bigger than love" (118). When Mrs. Ellsworth takes up Oceola as her protege, she plans to instill her own aesthetic in Oceola and wants to provide Oceola with "a more artistic atmosphere." She feels Oceola will not need her boyfriend, Pete, because "She will have her art" (105). Mrs. Ellsworth wants to get Oceola away from her house parties and church choirs--"for art's sake." Therefore, she takes Oceola to her up-state mountain lodge so that Oceola can "look from the high places at the stars, and fill her soul with the vastness of the eternal, and forget about jazz" (108). Mrs. Ellsworth wants Oceola to "learn to sublimate her soul" (109).

Mrs. Ellsworth's ideas are foreign to Oceola, though, "for she had never met anybody interested in pure art before" (100). Mrs. Ellsworth tells Oceola that "Art is long [. . .] and time is fleeting [. . .]." Oceola responds, "but I gets nervous if I start worrying about time" (107). Tracy remarks that Oceola's response shows that she prefers to concentrate "on living more immediately, and on flowing with her life [. . .]. Art, then, takes its place in a continuum rather than existing outside of or over it ("Blues" 14). Oceola does not understand why people argue "so much about life or art." She "merely lived--and loved it" (109). Music is an important part of life for Oceola, but it is not everything. "Music, to Oceola, demanded movement and expression, dancing and living to go with it." As for sublimating her soul, Oceola could not "imagine that Beethoven had nothing to do with life, or that Schubert's love songs were only sublimations" (111). When Mrs. Ellsworth opposes Oceola's marriage because it will burden her with children, Oceola replies that she does not "see why children and music couldn't go together" (114). When she returns from Europe. Oceola decides to

live in Harlem so that she can be in the "middle" of her people and their experiences (115). In the final passage of the story, Oceola plays the blues and says, "This is mine" (119). The blues and Oceola's musical art are about life and the relations between people, which is why she takes a proprietary interest in them. Tracy finds that, in this final passage, Oceola "fuses her sadness and hope into a work of art that affirms humanity and self-pride." Furthermore, "historically, geographically, intellectually, emotionally, sexually, and artistically, the blues is represented as both being unifying and useful" ("Blues" 18).

The difference between Mrs. Ellsworth's aesthetic and Oceola's is clear. And Oceola's aesthetic is a pragmatist aesthetic. For her, art is not ethereal and otherworldly; art and life are interrelated. Oceola's aesthetic is socially relational; it involves her with other people. Her art expresses her own experience of life, which is immediate and flowing; it does not sublimate it. Her art is "unifying and useful," and that is pragmatic.

3. How is a pragmatist aesthetic reflected in Hughes's poetic practice?

It has long been recognized that Langston Hughes's poetic signature is the blues. So much so that Arnold Rampersad can claim that Hughes's "initiative in the blues remains the only genuinely original achievement in form by any black American poet [. . .]" ("Hughes's" 67). Furthermore, in Hughes's blues poetry we can most clearly see him practicing a pragmatist aesthetic, whether consciously or not. This is not surprising because the blues itself is an art form that meets the criteria demanded by this aesthetic. Before discussing specific poems, it will be helpful, first, to demonstrate how a pragmatist aesthetic informs blues music, and secondly, to show that Hughes's poetry is derived from the same elements that characterize blues music.

As pointed out by Tracy, Hughes often mentions blues singers in his prose writings, and those most mentioned are invariably the women of the 1920s who sang an urban, vaudeville style of blues, and who had been recorded (Hughes 118-19). Daphne Duval Harrison has studied these women and can offer us some insight into their art. She finds that "the blues is life which is art" (8). This is an art that is in no way above or beyond the experience of the artist; it is art that is experience. Furthermore, the blues "has the power to reaffirm the values and worth of the people" (7); it is art that reinforces communal relations. Harrison demonstrates this by pointing to two qualities which are highly valued by the black community: "articulateness and toughness." These

communal values are central to the blues, which "are a means of articulating experience and demonstrating a toughness of spirit by creating and re-creating that experience" (65). The experiential and relational nature of the blues is clearly akin to a pragmatist aesthetic, but also, the blues contains an important personal element. Harrison contends that these blues women of the 1920s used their music to "project a new image of themselves as total beings with independent spirits" (100), who are "realistic, complex, alive" (111). Such totalization of self suggests a person who is conscious of her life and her art and who strives to integrate and harmonize her experience. Though intimately related to the community, she is "independent" in her recognition of her experience as her truth. Though her songs were often written by others, especially men, the blues woman made them express herself by her "choice of performing style, inflection, emphasis, and improvisation on certain aspects of the lyrics [. . .]" (111). Thus, as Houston A. Baker, Jr. asserts of the blues and its performers, the blues woman offers "interpretations of the experiencing of experience" (7). Notably, it is the nature of the blues song to encapsulate "an experience" that is fully conscious and complete, which fits Dewey's pragmatic formulation. Finally, Harrison tells us that the attraction of the blues "is that they express simultaneously the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it [. . .]" (65). In this interplay of pain and joy, tears and laughter, we have one of the natural rhythms of life that the pragmatist aesthetic looks for in a work of art.

Steven Tracy convincingly demonstrates the relation between Hughes's poetic technique and the blues form. Hughes uses many of the themes that can be found in blues lyrics and often his stanzaic patterns are similar to the blues. Tracy also shows how Hughes's poems often fit the pattern of the eight-bar and twelve-bar blues structures (Hughes 144-45). Martha Cobb points out that "the beginnings of African-America literatures [. . .] were created within the framework of black oral traditions" (1). Hughes is certainly following in this tradition in his blues poems which are based on the obviously oral form that is the blues. Each poem is presented in the voice of a persona speaking in the black vernacular. Tracy feels that Hughes emphasizes "oral communication and unaffected language" (Hughes 143). This use of the vernacular helps to connect Hughes's art to his experience and the experience of the black community. In fact, the use of the vernacular in itself fits Dewey's idea of aesthetic expression in its emphasis on communication and breaking down barriers. Furthermore, Hughes's poems are related to the blues tradition through their use of rhymes and repeated lines, which help to recreate the rhythmic feel of the music they are based on. In fact, a

person who is familiar with the blues can hardly help putting the poems to a mental music as he or she reads. Additionally, the rhythm of the blues and Hughes's poems is very much the "ordered variation of changes" that Dewey finds in all true art (154). One might even go so far as to say that the blues is the apotheosis of Dewey's idea of art.

For the purposes of this paper, I have elected to examine poems found in Hughes's second published volume of poetry, Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927), because he specifically states that a significant number of the poems in the book are based on the blues. Also, this volume represents the full blooming of an aesthetic that informs most of his subsequent poetic output. That this is so is attested to by contemporary reviews of the 1959 book, Selected Poems of Langston Hughes, which is a representative collection drawn from over thirty years worth of Hughes's poetry. C. L. Anderson finds that the "mood" of the volume as a whole "is principally the blues," and those poems that are most successful "find the proper balance between the sounds of speech and the blues rhythms" (618). Furthermore, Charles Guenther asserts that Hughes "draws his inspiration [. . .] from life around him and from his experience" (608). Thus, these reviewers remark upon elements of Hughes's aesthetic, as revealed consistently over the course of a long poetic career, that are marks of a pragmatist aesthetic and that we will see were clearly evident at the beginning of his career in Fine Clothes to the Jew.

The one element of Langston Hughes's poetry that stands out, according to Cobb, is "the element of voice which constantly projects a black observer, black speaker within the framework of the black experience of life" (3). Considering Hughes's interest in the women blues singers of the 1920s, it might be well to start our examination of his poetry with a look at blues poems he wrote using a female voice. The poem "Suicide" begins by evoking the emotion of sadness turning to despair. The narrator's "sweet good man" (1) has left her, and she feels sad, then sorry for herself, then suicidal. But in the second stanza, her emotion has turned to anger, and she debates with herself whether murdering him might not be a better idea than killing herself. The third stanza finds the speaker in the throes of depression. Apparently realizing that murder is not an option--he is gone, after all--she succumbs to depression, to the weariness of living, and opts for a permanent sleep in the quiet of the river. Hughes, in The Big Sea, tells us that as a youth in Mexico he was often depressed and once contemplated suicide (47), so he appears to be crafting his art out of his own experience. But what is more important is that his poem, in eighteen lines, presents "an experience"

that is integrated and complete. Notice that in printed form this blues lyric is even more consummatory than it would be if sung because one can easily imagine that the speaker has put down her pen and gone out to do the deed. Furthermore, Hughes does not tell us how to feel but presents a concrete situation which, of itself, evokes our emotional response. The organic rhythm of the poem can be found in the speaker's perfectly natural mood changes. Humans are emotional beings, and our emotions are continually changing. In these ways, the poem achieves the unity the pragmatist desires.

"Black Gal" is a variation on the "my man left me" theme. This female speaker is "a workin' girl" (1) who always treats her man right and is not suicidal. Her problem is her blackness. "I hates them rinney yaller gals" (15), she says, because the men all chase them, and the speaker is left to be alone. Her loneliness and her sense of being unappreciated is the strong emotion this poem evokes by its depiction of "an experience." Moreover, the experience of the privileging of light skin and the intrinsic unfairness of that is one the entire black community can relate to. Communicating the human cost, the pain of this experience can have the pragmatic effect of breaking down the barriers between people.

Loneliness is a blues theme used frequently in Fine Clothes to the Jew. It can be found coupled with the black community's experience of uprootedness, which was common in the early decades of the twentieth century. "Bound No'th Blues" gives us the rhythm of the continual repetition of the word "road," which evokes the rhythmic one-foot-in-front-of-the-other nature of being on-the-road. The voice of this poem is ambiguous, which is fitting because the experience was shared by black men and black women, young and old, who found themselves on the road. This speaker is heading for the North to escape the oppressive South, which puts him or her in the company of thousands of black people. The experience of going north is a lonely experience because one is leaving all that is known and familiar behind, and it is fraught with the danger of exploitation, which further isolates the individual. Thus, we see that the poem communicates the natural rhythm of the migration of peoples, the emotions of loneliness and sadness, and the aspects of "an experience" that is deeply individual but, at the same time, unifies the people who share it in common.

"Homesick Blues," another poem with an ambiguous voice, takes the same themes of loneliness, sadness, and uprootedness and reverses the experience. This speaker wants to return to the South, to what is familiar and, consequently, comforting. The poem communicates the emotion of being homesick, which is "an experience" in itself. Also, we find evidence of the fully conscious

nature of Hughes's art. His poem ends: "To keep from cryin' / I opens ma mouth an' laughs" (17-18). This is the dichotomy of the blues that Hughes articulates in his introductory "A Note on Blues," where he writes, "The mood of the Blues is almost always despondency, but when they are sung people laugh" (xiii). It is a comment on the blues that Hughes makes many times in his career (Tracy, Hughes 115) and shows that, as he created, Hughes was fully aware of how the result would be perceived. Thus, Hughes exhibits the control that Dewey looks for in an artist.

"Workin' Man" is a poem with a male voice. Here Hughes presents the lament of a laborer, an honest "hard workin' man" (13) with an unfaithful wife. The home is a "hovel" (4), the wife is "out in de street" (7), and being good nets one "nothin' but trouble" (16). This articulates the experience of many twentieth-century African Americans; they worked hard and had little to show for it. Furthermore, the poem reflects the natural, but monotonous, rhythm of the life of the laborer and communicates the numbing experience of hard work that is unappreciated and unrewarded, which is the still too often "truth" of the working man.

Hughes's pragmatist aesthetic is not only shown in his strictly blues poems. Other poems in Fine Clothes to the Jew also reveal it. "Laughers," for example, communicates "an experience"--the experience of being black in America. Hughes says it is the experience of "Loud laughers in the hands of Fate-- / My people" (4-5). Again, this is the blues dichotomy, and Hughes goes on to catalogue who his people are: "Dish-washers, / Elevator-boys, / Ladies' maids, / Crap-shooters, / Cooks," (6-10) and so forth--not a banker, lawyer, or scholar in the lot. But, he says, they are artists: "Dream singers, / Story tellers, / Dancers" (1-3). This suggests that Hughes feels that his people are the people who live aesthetic lives, lives that are themselves works of art, fully conscious and integrated. Furthermore, "Laughers" encapsulates Fine Clothes to the Jew as a whole. The book consists of poems which constitute slices of life, slices of the lives of Hughes's people. Hughes takes us from the "Crap Game" to the "Prayer Meeting." We meet the "Prize Fighter," the "Elevator Boy," and the "Mulatto." We go from "Saturday Night" to "Judgment Day." And we experience the experience of a "Beale Street Love":

> Love
> Is a brown man's fist
> With hard knuckles
> Crushing the lips,

Blackening the eyes,--

Hit me again,

Says Clorinda.

Hughes pulls no punches in his poetic expression. He communicates the truth of experience--for the individual and the community--and that is art, for the pragmatist.

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