



Introduction

Giving New Validity to Old Forms

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

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Langston Hughes's poetry hovers behind Martin Luther King's speeches and sermons the way watermarks show through bonded paper when it's held up to light. King acknowledged how often he used the poems of his contemporary in a letter he wrote to Hughes: "My admiration for your works is not only expressed in my personal conversations, but I can no longer count the number of times and places, all over the nation, in my addresses and sermons in which I have read your poems. I know of no better way to express in beauty the heartbeat and struggle of our people."¹ However, what was common knowledge for these two men during their lifetimes has somehow gone uncharted in formal scholarship. In 1959, Hughes's first biographer, Lawrence Reddick, noted that King "likes to quote the more communicable poets in his speeches and sermons. He reads Negro writers—especially James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes" (4). Twelve years later, Hortense Spillers implied a connection between King and Hughes when she suggested that King spoke "for the South and the black man's 'deferred dream' of civil rights" (22).² Again, without analyzing the depths of their interrelatedness, Richard Barksdale suggested that each of these men "courted and articulated the same dream" (245).

Hughes's biographer Arnold Rampersad notes that many of Hughes's friends pointed out that King's "I Have a Dream" address bore similarities

with some of Hughes's own poems on dreams (2: 367). It has even been said that Hughes himself believed that his own poetry had inspired King's "I Have a Dream" speech (Ghosh 38–39). More than fifty years have passed since King gave this speech. During this time, several Langston Hughes scholars have suspected that King's dream was related to Hughes's poetry.³ This study confirms their suspicions. It charts how Hughes's poetry became a measurable inflection in the voice of Martin Luther King.⁴ More specifically, this book traces the origins of King's dream back to Hughes's poetry. This is not a speculative work: King's engagements with Hughes's poetry are made undeniably visible.

Though they are connected, King's metaphors and Hughes's poems were intentionally distanced from each other. The complex story of this distancing has created the critical need for this study. However, in finally allowing their ideas to be reunited, I do not suggest that King's ideas were not original. I am not arguing that Hughes should be privileged because his poems serve as points of origin. Rather, I have two goals in exploring these connections. First, reuniting Hughes's poems with King's speeches helps us understand the fullest resonance of King's metaphors. Second, King's engagements with Hughes's poems resulted in the twentieth century's most visible integration of poetry and politics.

A better understanding of the forces that led King to redeem metaphors from Hughes's poetry and then reactivate them in the political arena reveals a subversive element within King's rhetoric. King's subversive rhetoric reveals his determination to model resistance as well as engage his own poetic sensibilities. King flourished in a rich nexus of culture, politics, and art. The redemptive work of King shows how he negotiated a political climate that sought to silence a subversive voice like Hughes's. Because King separated Hughes's identity from his poems, the nation unconsciously embraced traces of his poetry.

For example, King's intimate knowledge of Hughes's poem "I Dream a World" represents King's earliest engagement with the metaphor of dreaming, and this fact alters our understanding of how King's dream became more inclusive as it expanded. King eventually stitched together his own garment of dream images. Seeing how the first piece of cloth came from this Hughes poem allows us to chart the growth of King's poetic sensibilities. Most remarkably, and unseen until now, this study reveals that King's first national presentation of "I Have a Dream" was literally in the form of a poem. This poem was masquerading as prose. Charting this metaphor's connection to

Hughes's poem enables us to amplify the previously undetectable inflections of cultural pride and political subversion underlying the speech King delivered at the March on Washington. Instead of quoting Hughes's poetry, King in his Washington, D.C., address was recalling lines from his own poetry. Read chronologically, this book documents King's own development as a poet.

Documenting the intertextual connections between these two artists brings to light four other critical discoveries. First, King redeemed metaphors from Hughes's poetry and transformed them so that they became the emblems of many of his own most significant principles. By linking Hughes's ideas with his own principles, King's rhetoric simultaneously exhibited redundancy and rebirth. King redeemed metaphors from Hughes's poetry to communicate the directive to "keep going," extend the resonance of "midnight" and "daybreak," create culturally relevant associations for "shattered dreams," shape a representation of the "beloved community," and generate a lasting resonance for his own "dream." This study reveals the significance of having Hughes's vehicles muted within King's song.

Second, Hughes's complex reputation accounts in part for why definitive links between the two men have been so difficult to establish. Hughes was simultaneously revered in African American culture for his status as a successful man of letters and reviled by the dominant culture as a subversive Communist. This tension can still be measured today when Hughes's name or poetry is referenced in overtly political contexts. King's willingness to integrate yet conceal Hughes's texts within his own voice demonstrates that King often spoke truth to power through a voice that power thought it had silenced. Metaphors are inherently untraceable. Severing them from Hughes's poetry allowed them to pass through careful surveillance.

Third, unlike what we see in other studies that often document inspiration and influence, the creative exchange between King and Hughes was reciprocal. Although this study primarily concerns Hughes's influence on King, portions of it identify King's influence on Hughes. As figure 1 reveals, this reciprocal influence is shown in the archival retrieval of Hughes's creation of one aria, four poems, and a play as a result of King's influence.

Fourth, and finally, in contrast to his handling of so many other sources, King personally sought out, revised, and incorporated Hughes's works into his addresses. In other words, King did not merely recycle and reinvent Hughes as he had heard him invoked in sermons by other preachers; instead, King purposefully selected Hughes's poetry with measurable intentionality.

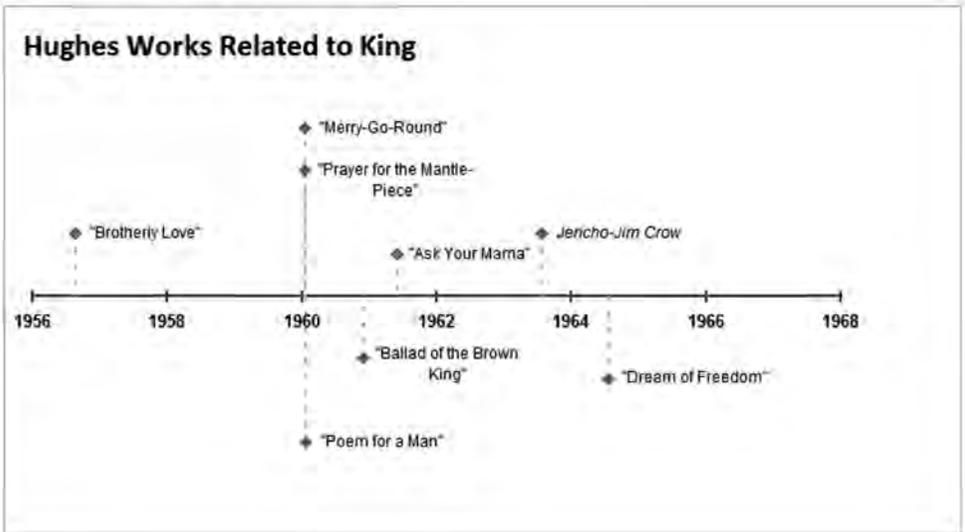


Figure 1. A timeline of Hughes's works related to King.

His choice to embed Hughes's poetry speaks directly to his personal investment in the primary works of Hughes's oeuvre.

King's incorporation of Hughes's poetry is highly significant. It demonstrates the highly educated preacher's desire to simultaneously connect with the heart of his African American audience and his own cultural roots. Furthermore, it affirms that when Hughes's poetry was transformed, performances of African American literature could move dominant culture. King gave Hughes's poems hundreds of public hearings that earned acceptance precisely because they had been separated from their derogatory labels as emblems of black culture. King's attraction to Hughes's poetry reveals an essential element of King's cultural heritage. As Lewis Baldwin suggests in *There Is a Balm in Gilead*, "King's cultural heritage must be carefully studied before we get a full portrait of the man, the movement, the message, and the legacy" (6).⁵ Keith Miller's exhaustive scholarship, presented in *Voice of Deliverance*, has enabled us to see how King reinvented what he inherited from other preachers as he created his public identity. Richard Lischer has meticulously reconstructed the rich experience of hearing King preach with his critical study *The Preacher King*. I extend each of these studies in important ways to show that Hughes was the most appropriate poet for King to engage. Personally selected from King's cultural roots and then incorporated with uncommon care and intentionality, Hughes's poetry is

precisely the source material that audiences unconsciously wanted to hear King preach.

In addition to his roles as preacher and prophet, King was also a revisionary poet. His philosophical approach to rewriting source material can best be understood from his own testimony. Speaking to an audience at Spelman College, King said: “Originality is a basic part of education. That does not mean that you think something altogether new; if that were the case Shakespeare wasn’t original, for Shakespeare depended on Plutarch and others for many of his plots. Originality does not mean thinking up something totally new in the universe, but it does mean giving new validity to old forms” (Carson 5: 412). Extending this thought to King’s own case, the speaker’s dynamic personality is invoked in his or her ability to present and revise ideas, not to create original materials. By redeeming metaphors from Hughes’s poetry, King infused his own rhetoric with an accessible, inspirational, visionary, and subversive vitality. His rhetoric establishes a historical continuity with the past in order to make it present and alive.

King deeply engaged with Hughes’s poetry by memorizing and rewriting it on numerous occasions. In every instance, King intentionally altered Hughes’s poetry—sometimes changing a key phrase, at other times using Hughes’s organizational structures to create his own lines. King also rewrote an entire poem by Hughes and incorporated it seamlessly into his speeches on several occasions. Figure 2 charts how King gave new validity to old

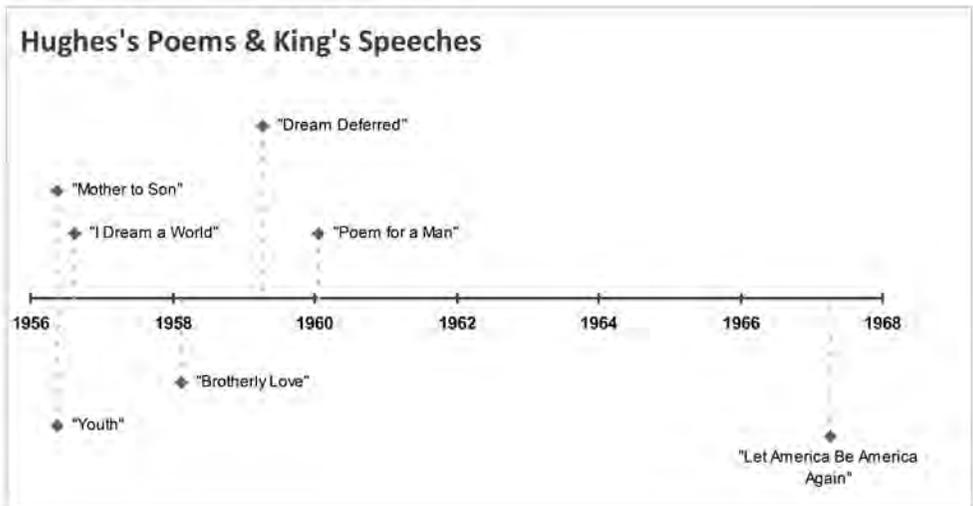


Figure 2. A timeline for some of King’s most significant uses of Hughes’s poetry in his speeches.

forms of poetry by consistently invoking Hughes's poems "Mother to Son," "Youth," "Let America Be America Again," "Dream Deferred," "Brotherly Love," and "I Dream a World" throughout his career. The vast majority of these poems were invoked for the first time in a three-month period from May 13 to August 11, 1956. In fact, on August 11 alone, King alluded to four different Hughes poems. As J. T. Porter, a member of King's congregation, would attest, "Everything else was a spin-off of what I heard the first year" (qtd. in Lischer, *Preacher King* 81). Invoking Hughes repeatedly during this formative period in his preaching career ensured that Hughes would forever remain a measurable inflection in King's voice. The pattern that emerges after this era is one in which King reworded, rewrote, and disguised Hughes's poetry.

Why did King rewrite Hughes's poetry in his addresses? The decision to rewrite rather than simply paraphrase or recite Hughes's poetry results in the creation of King's poetic persona. A poetic persona was important for several reasons. First, it allowed King to validate his prophetic persona. Poetry is a co-requisite to prophecy. We realize that we have forgotten this when we recognize that the Old Testament prophets presented their visions in poetic form. In these inherited models, prophecy trespasses into poetry. Without the gift of lyrical expression, King's declarations of the future would lack the rhetorical authority of scripture. Second, in sermons and addresses, reinventing another writer's ideas eliminates the need for disruptive referencing that can wake the dreamer. Driving for an effect sometimes bordering on incantation, allusive connections to other texts maintain the listener's hypnosis as they "get gone" right along with the preacher. This need is often intensified at the end of a speech as the rhetoric climbs in intensity. Hughes's metaphors consistently appeared in the final moments of King's oratory. Third, the rhetorical demands of the speech often dictate the elimination of some references. In the case of rewriting Hughes's verses, King often had to be careful to avoid triggering animosity as a result of Hughes's subversive reputation. Furthermore, as a teacher, King often sought to model the subject matter of his speeches through his rhetorical strategies. This sometimes resulted in brilliant displays where the rhetorical demands of the speech called for either reinvention or integration of his inherited sources. Fourth, and finally, the deep personal engagement that results from rewriting source material results in a genuine ownership of the new material. There is no need to reference something so intimately lived and deeply transformed that it has truly become one's own.

King's deep engagement with Hughes's poetry highlights his own poetic