

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”ⁱⁱ An African Centered Historical Study of the Selfethnic Liberatory Adult Education Nature and Goals of the Poetry of Langston Hughes: the Impact on Adult Education

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Abstract: *The purposes of this historical study were to document the Selfethnic liberatory adult education nature and goals of selected poetry of Langston Hughes published from 1921 to 1933; and to document the impact this poetry had on the field of adult education.*

The purposes of this study were to document the Selfethnic liberatory adult education nature and goals of Hughes’ poetry (published between 1921 and 1933), and to document the impact this poetry had on the history of the field. In addition, the goal was to expand the historical knowledge base of the field.

This study addressed the problem that the historical, philosophical and intellectual literature of the field does not, to any significant degree, include the contributions of African American adult educators. This exclusion has been addressed to some degree in recent years, but given that this group has both created and participated in adult education activities since 1619, the depth and breadth of these contributions are still under documented in the historical texts of the field (Colin, 1989; McGee & Neufeldt, 1985; Johnson-Bailey, 2002). This gap in the literature renders the history incomplete and is not reflective of the rich diversity that this group has contributed to the field. This data, then, by not being available does not allow educators to create diverse curricular programs that meet the needs of all graduate students, nor does it help graduates to be completely prepared for the diverse challenges in the field, especially as they relate to African Americans. In addition, African American graduate students do not see their race as contributors to the field. When African Americans are documented as contributors to history, it provides examples of “Selfethnic Reflectors” (Colin, 1989). These ‘reflectors’ make it possible for African Americans to see themselves as contributors, and provides meaning construct that helps them to believe that they, too, can contribute to the field.

To address this gap, Langston Hughes, an African American, is introduced as an adult educator. More specifically, Hughes is introduced here as a Selfethnic liberatory adult educator. A Selfethnic liberatory adult educator is one who uses an African Centered orientation grounded in the philosophy of Selfethnic reliance, which asserts that Selfethnic pride and unity lead to Selfethnic liberation and economic success (Colin, 1989). In addition, Selfethnic liberatory adult educators believe that this knowledge is disseminated by culturally grounded programs that provide both formal and informal educational activities (the introduction of new knowledge/information and/or deprogramming regarding knowledge and/or understandings as a result of a miseducative process) that are reflective of the sociocultural realities and lived experiences that are indigenous to African Peoples as a result of the impacts of sociocultural and intellectual racism (Colin, 1992, 3).

This research was framed within an African Centered Historical Paradigm, (Asante, 1990; 1996; and 1997). This viewpoint grounds the study in African Centered values, ideas and ideals and allows scholars to conduct research by putting these at the center of the study. The units of analysis for the study were Colin’s (1989, 1998) Theories of Selfethnic Reflectors and Selfethnic Liberatory Adult Education. Selected poems were analyzed using the concepts

embedded within these theories. Results of analysis revealed the poems contained these conceptual elements.

As an example, Hughes' (1933) poem, *October 16th: the Raid* documented the murder of John Brown's men at Harper's Ferry, one of whom was Hughes' uncle. This poem documents the negative impact factors of racism, which is a conceptual element embedded in the Theory of Selfethnic Reflectors. The cornerstone of this theory is the acknowledgement and documentation of a true history, which includes the negative impact factors of racism. Colin's theory advocates that documenting positive contributions by the race is one means by which this "mis-education" (Woodson, 1933) can be corrected.

The raid on Harper's Ferry led by John Brown was accomplished by a small group of both Black (some slaves and some freemen) and White men who were opposed to slavery. Their goal was to take over the armory at Harper's Ferry and seize the weapons. During the raid, they were attacked by the local militia, and several of the men were killed, including Hughes' uncle who was a free Black man (Hughes, 1940). In this example, Hughes demonstrates that the negative impact factor of the racist system of slavery is death for those who actively participated in it, for those who handsomely benefited from it, and for those who were opposed to it.

Selfethnic Reflectors, which is a conceptual element embedded in the Theory of Selfethnic Reflectors is also illustrated in this poem. This term refers to developing a positive Selfethnic pride and esteem by acknowledging the racial group's accomplishments and contributions to society. It is framed within a construct that "self acknowledgement of self value construct that reflects a proper conception of self" (Colin, 1989, p. 23). Hughes' grandmother provided a Selfethnic Reflector for him by passing down this story about his uncle's courage to stand up for and die for what he believed in. Knowing that his grandfather fought for the rights of his people, and died in that process provided a very strong activist identity for Hughes. As a result of this example and many other examples of family members who were educators/activists/writers, Hughes "reflected" these same values and became an educator/activist/writer, who dedicated his life to improve the racial identity of his people, much like the example that was set for him by his uncle and other relatives.

In documenting Hughes as a Selfethnic liberatory adult educator, the Harlem Renaissance Movement, the period in which Hughes came into prominence as a writer/activist, was also documented as an adult education activity that included culturally grounded programs.

The goal of the Harlem Renaissance was to re-educate the race that had learned to devalue itself due to an education that promoted racial inferiority (Johnson, 1925; Locke, 1925; Hughes 1940; Lewis, 1994). This Movement used art as a means to teach about a positive racial identity. Some of the art used in the Movement included poetry, essays, novels, magazine and newspaper articles, sculpture, painting, plays, and music, and other forms of visual art; however, the most used teaching strategy was literature (Lewis, 1997).

The Harlem Renaissance Movement was a strategy that was conceived of by two civil rights organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League (Lewis, 1997). These activists tried so many other tactics to fight against racism, and decided on art as a strategy because it was a new frontier. "They hoped to capitalize on the unique moment for a racial breakthrough...display of artistic talent and discipline that would win at least some of the civil rights denied African Americans" (Lewis, 1997).

The Metatheory of Selfethnic Liberatory Literary Adult Education (Howard, 2009) emerged as a result of this study. It provides meaning construct for African Centered literary art as a means of sociocultural protest, to be used in culturally grounded adult education programs

for the purpose of promoting Selfethnic reliance and economic success. A metatheory is one that allows the researcher to combine conceptual theoretical elements or entire interrelated theories to provide meaning construct that emerges into an accumulated theoretical mass (Asante, 1998). The Metatheory of Selfethnic Liberatory Literary Adult Education combines elements from Colin's two theories, and three other African Centered concepts: "Art as Propaganda" (DuBois, 1926), "African Art is Always Functional" (Asante, 1998), and the "Rhetoric of Resistance" (Asante, 1998). These concepts are defined below:

"*Art as Propaganda*" (DuBois, 1926) - has a purpose to help the improvement of the race. Dubois postulated that art always has a purpose to promote a positive impression of the race, as he was getting opposing arguments from members of his race that art can simply signify art, for art's sake. He adamantly disagreed with their thesis.

"*African Art is Always Functional*" (Asante, 1998) – is a similar concept to "Art as Propaganda" (Dubois, 1926). Asante wrote: "There can be no art without a functional objective within the mind of the artist. ... And the artist, or speaker, satisfies the demands of the society by calling into being that which is functional" (Asante, 1998, p. 75).

"*Rhetoric of Resistance*" (Asante, 1998) – refers to the "fundamental ideas, written or spoken that have the goals of promoting liberty, fraternity and equality that have been systematically made unavailable to certain groups by those in charge, by assigning labels of inferiority to those groups, that resulted in oppressed treatment of those peoples" (p. 123).

Both of Colin's theories state that re-education must take place through occur within the confines of culturally grounded programs, but she does not prescribe any specific subject matter for use in these programs. This study expands on these theories by prescribing literary art as a subject that can be used in culturally grounded programs. The philosophical framework for this literature is that it must be politically functional, in that it cannot be art just for the sake of art. It must have the goal of promoting liberty and equality, and must provide a resistance ideology that rejects Eurocentrism. To this end, the following criteria characterize Selfethnic liberatory literature:

1. Documents an accurate African history, current and past, including ancient Africa, which improves the racial Selfethnic image; thus improving Selfethnic racial pride and esteem (Colin, 1989).
2. Contain instructive rhetoric that decodes the mind of the destructive effect of selfethnic negation, and helps to break the "chains of psychological slavery" (Akbar, 1996, p. 2; Colin, 1992)
3. Express resistance to a dominant Eurocentric educational pedagogy that is lauded as the cultural norm, and therefore superior (Colin, 1989, 1998; Asante, 1998).
4. Document the contributions of African Americans to the field of adult education, by providing Selfethnic Reflectors for African American graduate students, creating an inclusive history, and expanding the historical knowledge base of field so that all graduate students are given a truer account of history (Colin, 1989, 1999).

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