
The Redeemed Black Identity in Margaret Walker's "For My People" and Langston Hughes's "I, Too": A Critical Race Theory Reading

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Abstract

This paper proposes to highlight the redeemed black identity in the American society. It aims at exposing how Hughes's "I, Too" and Walker's "For My People" portray the new Black identity. As poets of the Harlem Renaissance, Margaret Walker and Langston Hughes have felt concerned with awareness raising among the African-American communities. They sought to make Blacks aware of the identity conflicts and the need to eliminate the ambiguity and internal damnation occasioned by centuries of slavery. In the context of this paper, the poems of Margaret Walker and Langston Hughes are read through the lenses of the critical race theory. The article seeks to bring out how the authors have granted a new image to Blacks by proposing a new black identity in the American society.

Keywords: Black, identity, american, redemption, critical race theory, poetry

Résumé

Cet article se propose de mettre en lumière l'identité noire rachetée dans la société américaine. Il vise à exposer comment "I, Too" de Hughes et "For My People" de Walker présentent la nouvelle identité noire. En tant que poètes de la Renaissance de Harlem, Margaret Walker et Langston Hughes se sont sentis concernés par la sensibilisation des communautés afro-américaines. Ils ont cherché à sensibiliser les Noirs aux conflits identitaires et à la nécessité d'éliminer l'ambiguïté et la damnation interne occasionnées par des siècles d'esclavage. Dans le contexte de cet article, les poèmes de Margaret Walker et de Langston Hughes sont lus à travers la lentille de la théorie critique de la race. L'article cherche à faire ressortir comment les auteurs ont cherché à redonner une nouvelle image aux Noirs par le biais d'une nouvelle identité noire dans la société américaine.

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Mots-clés : Noir, identité, américain, rédemption, théorie critique de la race, poésie

Introduction

The African-American literary tradition deeply believes that African-American culture is the culture of suppressed people. It is also a well-known fact that, the history of African American people is marked with slavery (1619-1865) which is characterized by continuous dehumanization, humiliation, racial segregation, and exploitation. Similarly, African-Americans were viewed as people with no history, no cultural heritage, and no identity in white America (Miniotaité 5). This view is shared by Alain Locke who says that "The Harlem Renaissance, the New York-based artistic and literary manifestation of the New Negro movement of the 1920s, is one of the most influential cultural movements in the history of the United States" (Alain Locke 633).

Defined as a cultural, social, and artistic explosion of African-American way of life, the Harlem Renaissance hastened African-American intellectual reawakening in the 1920s in Harlem and ended with Great Depression in the early 1930s (Bernard 269). This being said, the movement is regarded as a rebirth of African-American arts. Indeed, the Harlem Renaissance consisted in the release of the African-American population from strife and what many descendants of slavery considered as an internal damnation caused by their enslavement. The Harlem Renaissance represents an epoch of intellectual and cultural enlightenment and rebirth. It was characterized by prolific figures such as, Margaret Walker and Langston Hughes, who have propagated messages of cultural awareness, pride, self-enrichment, and identity through the use of literary works, folklore, painting, and music.

Apart from drama and prose, Hughes equally expresses his perception of the African-American community and their identity issues through his poetry along with other African American writers. Evidence of their contribution can be found up to the first half of the twentieth century (Nunes 101). In this perspective, Margaret Walker is described as:
a significant author because she forms part of a matrilineal line of African American women writers from the first African American woman writer, Phillis Wheatley, to younger generations of African American women writers

like Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni, and Alice Walker. Moreover, Margaret Walker is an overtly political writer who engages directly with the politics of her time. She differs from her female literary contemporaries and successors in that she is not only involved in gender politics but in all kinds of political affairs reflecting on every important issue of her time and place. (Hamada 1)

The foregoing connotes that among her contemporaries, Margaret Walker distinguishes herself for being a committed representative poetess regarding social and political issues of her time.

Speaking about “For my People”, Maryemma Graham writes: “Although widely anthologized – over two hundred appearances to date – Walker is too often recognized among academic critics as the author of the extraordinary *For My People*” (Hamada 2).

In the postbellum America, racial identity has still become "one of the most important themes in multicultural counseling" (Ponterotto and Sabnani 26). Moreover, Cokley in *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, argues that "a disproportionately large number of racial identity studies have been conducted with African-American participants" (Cokley 478). Sorting out the two preceding critical statements concedes that the issue of racial identity is of chief importance during the turbulent struggle of Blacks for civil rights in the United States as depicted by Margaret Walker and Langston Hughes in their poems.

Through my reading of African-American writers, I realize that Black people are still misrepresented over the years in the postbellum America. This article, therefore aims at exposing how Hughes’s “I, Too” and Walker’s “For My People” portray the new Black identity. In other words, the paper proposes to highlight how Hughes and Walker redefine and redeem the Black identity in the American society. The methodological approach of content analysis, being first used as an analytic technique at the beginning of the 20th century in the United States (Barcus), is relied upon in this article. The trend of methodological content analysis approach deployed in this article is a research tool meant to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data, that is, a text pertained to racism and the quest of identity reconstruction. Using content analysis in the context of this article

allows me to analyze the presence, meanings, implications and relationship between certain words or phrases in the two poems under study.

The critical race theory utilized in this paper sustains the “social construction” thesis. It therefore holds that,

Race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient. People with common origins share certain physical traits, of course, such as skin color, physique, and hair texture. But these constitute only an extremely small portion of their genetic endowment, and are dwarfed by that which we have in common, and have little or nothing to do with distinctly human, higher-order traits, such as personality, intelligence, and moral behavior. (Delgado Richard and Jean Stephancic 7-8)

The quote connotes that a society that chooses to ignore these scientifically- measured facts men are endowed with and simply concentrate on the outer and physical traits to judge them, creates races with two-opposing perceptions, and this has become a pivotal concern of critical race theory.

For other theorists, the critical race theory movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado and Stephancic 3). First, the critical race theory champions the idea that white supremacy and racial power are systematically maintained over time, and the law plays a key role in this process. Second, its work has investigated the possibility of transforming the relationship between law and racial power, and more broadly, pursues a project of achieving racial emancipation and anti-subordination (Feredj and Chaddadi 7-8, 12).

The critical race theory deployed in this paper will help figure out the struggles of racism and the injustices undergone by African Americans. It will also allow to show the processes through which the two poets suggest ways to mend the social Black identity as an integral part of the American Dream in the midst of the problems of racism and inequality.

1. Portrayal of Racism and Social Injustices of Black Slavery

Under this section, I intend to highlight how racism and the social injustices are portrayed by Hughes and Walker. The historical context that informs the works of Hughes and Walker reveals that Black Americans have been pushed out of societal dealings and they have faced instability in their households. Such a situation has forced communities of Black Americans to pull together into families and a community for their well-being (Stanford et al. 2). In this vein, for centuries, Europeans and Americans have developed racial theories of inferiority, which maintained African Americans in the status of lower species and ignored their ownership of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic values (Miniotaité 5). Race, in this regard, appears as "a socially constructed phenomenon, based on the erroneous assumption that physical differences such as: skin color, hair color, texture and facial or other physical features. These features are related to intellectual, moral, or cultural superiority the concept of race has, with regard to biological and social realities" (Irhamni 6).

Considering racism, Grosfoguel redefines it as a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. In his view, it grows along the line of humans who have been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by institutions of the capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/colonial world system (Grosfoguel 9). Boyle quoted by Grosfoguel equally construes racism as "an ideological construct that assigns a certain race and/ or ethnic group to a position of power over others on the basis of physical and cultural attributes, as well as economic wealth, involving hierarchical relations where "the superior" race exercises domination and control over others" (Grosfoguel 11).

In Langston Hughes's "I, Too" (1926), such racial evidences are brought to daylight. The speaker's lamentations about the exclusion of Blacks from the American society embody the spite of the poet against the plight of blacks. As it can be read, in the following lines: "Tomorrow, I'll be at the table when company comes, / Nobody'll dare say to me, "Eat in the kitchen"/ Then, besides / they'll see how beautiful we are and be ashamed" (L1.5-8). Hughes posits that Black identity must be maintained regardless of social injustices and racism that victimized Blacks. Consequently, they must contend to develop their own cultural tradition and add their contribution in the American history.

Remarkably, race and gender shape Margaret Walker's literary practice and vision. Her works mainly focus on African Americans' past and present in America and specifically in relation to African-American women. (Hamada1). Under the critical race theory approach, the first two stanzas of Walker's "For My People" include words and phrases that specifically characterize the atrocity of Black slavery in the postbellum American society.

The first two stanzas of "For My People" introduce the African-American history and paint the manifestations of Black slavery through some key words. Clearly put, Walker has first itemized daily self-reinforcement of cultural and social activities of Black slaves via the following wordings: "singing their slave songs repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties," "their blues," and "jubilees," "praying their prayers nightly," "to an unknown god," "bending their knees humbly to an unseen power" (Stanza1, ll.1-4). It is clear that Walker attempts to retrace some of the values which marked blacks even under slavery. This suggests that blacks continued to worship and maintain their belief systems. Through this evocation of the pleasures dispossessed Black slaves were and are still entitled to in the postbellum America, Walker questions the scornful identity of Blacks jeopardized by the white religion. Achilles Mbembe, a Cameroon-born philosopher, agrees with the foregoing when he says: "blackness as an identity divides the history of blackness into three stages: 'enslavement,' 'decolonisation,' and 'globalisation.'" Mbembe further reinforces this statement that "blackness becomes an identity with pejorative meaning [...]" (Mbembe 2).

Stanza two in "For My People" portrays the tasks of the ongoing practice of slavery among Black people in these terms: "For my people lending their strength to the years, to the gone years and the now years and the maybe years, washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching dragging along never gaining never reaping never knowing and never understanding." (ll.5-8)

When the speaker utters words like: "to the gone years," "the now years," and "the maybe years," he evokes the sad reality of slaves' hardships under slave masters from the beginning of slavery to its abolition. The words are implicit indications of the vital energy that the practice of slavery has taken from the slaves.

In addition, the reader gets exposed to the chores slaves have to go through on daily basis and for centuries this has continued to be their lot. These chores consisted in "**washing, ironing, cooking, scrubbing, sewing, mending, hoeing, plowing, digging, planting, pruning, patching, and dragging,**" certainly, these actions represent the unceasing activities Black people were entitled to under slavery and are still subjected to in the American society.

Moreover, slavery is represented as an appalling practice that nothing good but cause huge losses to its victims. Under slavery, the victims surrendered to a life, "**never gaining, never reaping**" never **knowing** and never **understanding.**"

The same plight of Blacks is confirmed by Fanon who proclaims that: "the disaster of the man of color lies in the fact that he was enslaved" (Fanon 231). He implies that Blacks got debased as a result of the manhandling during slavery days. Due to slave brutalities, Blacks have grown with identity complexes and crises. The same is what Fanon emphasizes when he says that "the black soul is a white man's artefact" (Fanon 16). In this quote, Fanon pinpoints the reality that whether they are ugly, inferior or violent, Blacks are a new reality made by the practice of slavery.

Walker and Whitman, share the same views when they put forward an inclusive voice as they have the speakers of their poems talk as if they speak from a vivid experience of slavery in their poems. Walker represents the poor of the cities, "Chicago and Lenox Avenue in New York and Rampart street in New Orleans" (Stanza 6, ll.21-22), who fights against poverty and the pain endured by black slaves. This role as a representative poetess of the masses within the experiences of racism furthermore links Walker's work to Richard Wright's, who was also a close friend in Chicago and an advocate for the racially and socially oppressed (Concannon 100-101).

2. The Socio-cultural Forces that played against Black Americans

The identity of Black Americans has been greatly shaped by the social and cultural forces that worked against them in the American society. The focus of this section is to scrutinize the historical and social influences that affected the slaves and the Black American descendents. A look at the Jim Crow Law and how it conflicts with the Harlem Renaissance allow to elucidate the influences.

2.1. Impact of Jim Crow Laws on Black Americans

About 1877 many of the advances Blacks had made, such as their accession to political offices and better housing, were slowly being taken away by the legislative processes. Laws known as the Black Codes and Lynching Laws gave Whites the right to punish and murder Blacks as they please. In spite of the abolition, these laws enabled slavery to be reestablished under a different name and for different purposes-- control and economic maintenance.

Jim Crow, or segregation laws of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, effectively divided the American South into Blacks and Whites in almost every aspect of public life. (Feredj and Chaddadi 8). This echoes in Walker and Hughes's poems.

The rise in racism of this Jim Crow period from approximately 1877 to 1914 spread from the South to the North and the West where previously Blacks lived in around democracy, housing, and jobs. In the Jim Crow period, Blacks were stripped of their employment, segregated against in their housing and social interactions, and forced to live in poverty. Most of all, the interracial socialization and marriages were ended by watchdog groups like the Ku Klux Klan (Mays 589).

Hughes and Walker have simultaneously placed the emphasis on race relations in America and the obstacles African Americans faced to achieve the American Dream. Their poetry portrays the Jim Crow Laws of the late 19th and early 20th centuries when it reached its peak of racism and discrimination. During this era, African Americans living in the South were segregated, treated unfairly, and suffered greatly. Although slavery was ended by the Civil War (1861-1865), racism did not disappear yet, it spread gradually and took strong holds in the American society (Feredj and Chaddadi 8, 16). Here are some examples of segregation policies in the South as expressed in these two poems.

In "For My People," Walker retrospects the black experience as a people who of attending a segregated school. Due to the Jim Crow segregation laws, to learn the bitter truth of blackness in America was associated with poverty and political separation and inferiority. The speaker evidences this type of experience when we read that:

For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to
learn to know the reasons why and the answers to and the
people who and the places where and the days when, in
memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we were

black and poor and small and different and nobody cared
and nobody wondered and nobody understood (Stanza 4,
ll.9-12).

The stanza underscores the way Blacks got formatted to accept misconceptions about themselves. The educational system stood as an instrument in the process of transmitting a frustrated identity to Blacks. The system of white supremacy has worsened the oppression faced by African Americans (Thenu 659). As a matter of fact, they intimate such a reality when the speaker is again brought to say that,

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time
being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when
burdened, drinking when hopeless, tied and shackled and
tangled among ourselves by the unseen creatures who
tower over us omnisciently and laugh. (Stanza 7, ll.25-28)

The speaker in Walker's "For My People," mentions the depressive state of African Americans as a result of the social forces and manipulation deriving the Jim Crow Laws that are pioneered by the white race. Frederickson confirms the black trauma during Jim Crow days as he states: "Individual blacks had been hanged or burned to death by the lynch mobs to serve as examples to ensure that the mass of southern African Americans would scrupulously respect the color line" (Frederickson 2). In addition, the white supremacy violently represses African Americans who attempt to resist Jim Crow Laws: "With white supremacy challenged throughout the South, many whites sought to protect their former status by threatening African Americans who exercised their new rights" (Murphy 37). Despite the threats of the white race against Blacks, Walker chronicles the genuine and unceasing attempts by African Americans to join the American society in churches, schools, clubs, societies, associations, councils, committees, and conventions—only to be cheated and deceived, as we derive from the poem,

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in
the dark of churches and schools and clubs and societies,
associations and councils and committees and
conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and
devoured by money -hungry glory -craving leeches, preyed
on by facile force of state and fad and novelty, by false
prophet and holy believer. (Stanza 8, ll.29-32)

The influence of the Jim Crow Laws on African Americans herald their quest for a new identity; because "racism raises an attitude of people

and the way of thinking that they consider their race better than others" (Hutami 11).

In "I, Too", Hughes emotionally represents the miserable conditions of Blacks in the postbellum America by indicating that America is not only for white men (Akakpo-Domé 345).

In the poem, Hughes writes, "I, too, sing America. / I am the darker brother. / They send me to eat in the kitchen/ When company comes" (Ll. 1-4). Here, Jim Crow in the South outlaws African Americans though they are engrossed in patriotism. Moreover, the neglected Black identity, instead of diminishing the speaker's enthusiasm, rather revigorates it. In subsequent lines, the poem's tone becomes optimistic when it reads: "But I laugh, / And eat well, / And grow strong" (Ll. 5-7). This shows that Black people did not remain inactive under the Jim Crow Laws. They fought them as displayed by the speaker in the lines above.

Biographically speaking, in 1909, Langston Hughes himself attended a white elementary school in Kansas despite the Jim Crow Laws restrictions on the Blacks. He suffered a lot in that school because of his color. His female white teacher has usually mocked him with negative comments and humiliation in front of Hughes' colleagues. She often pushed him to seat at the end of the last row (Jones 10). It is worth noting here that, "under Jim Crow, African Americans became a second status citizens" (Worth 8). Clearly, the Jim Crow era stands out as a time when racism was at its peak and many African Americans were beaten, abused and also lived in extreme poverty.

It has been demonstrated through the above section that Jim Crow Laws have severely influenced African Americans even in the postbellum America. Despite all this, the oppression and injustices undergone by Blacks have rather generated the passion for an egalitarian society and the new identity they strived for through the Black Renaissance.

2.2. The Influence of the Harlem Renaissance on Blacks

Through the Harlem Renaissance, Black writers started to explore their identity and cultural manifestations in the 1920s and 1930s (Bader vii, viii, ix). This self-discovery revealed itself in multiple ways including literary and artistic works (Perry 13).

The Harlem Renaissance is indeed:

A period of remarkable creativity in literature, music, dance, painting and sculpture by the African- Americans, from the end of the First World War in 1917 through the 1920s. In the course of the mass migrations to the urban North in order to escape the legal segregation of American South- and also in order to take advantage of the jobs open to African-Americans at the beginning of the War- the population of the region of Manhattan known as Harlem became almost exclusively black, and developed into the vital centre of African-American culture. (Abrams 126)

Abrams seems to say that during World War I and its aftermaths, Harlem inhabitants started developing their cultural heritage in order to redefine their New Negro identity. As a result, African-American literary tradition emerged in particular from a need to affect social change.

The Black Renaissance has influenced people worldwide, but it especially meant a lot for the Black community for which the movement took grounds due to their suffering and their desire to improve to break the shackles of their plight. In this sense, Weldon Johnson encouraged and supported black writers, by urging them to share their emotions of being black in a white society (Perry 17).

During the Harlem Renaissance, writing, particularly poetry, has become the main tool of self-expression and resistance. The early twentieth century Black man has found poetry as his mouthpiece to voice the unparalleled oppression experienced under white supremacy. Undoubtedly, the use of poetry has contributed to the rebirth of Blacks. The rebirth of the 'New Negro' has resulted in a plethora of works, especially poetry that celebrated the antiquity and legacy of the African-American past (Thenu 656).

Flourishing in Harlem between the mid-1910s and the mid-1930s, the Harlem Renaissance stands as the first cultural movement to attain widespread recognition both within and beyond black communities and occupied a central position in African-American cultural history. This movement attracted poets, dramatists, novelists, short-story writers, musicians, painters, and intellectuals with its promise of a setting in which black artists could interrelate with one another and with their white contemporaries. The Harlem Renaissance was led by black poets like Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes (El-Defdar 124).

Hurston, Hughes, and McKay affirmed the Harlem Renaissance's long-term impact in their writings of the 1940s, which would influence future generations of authors (Imane 31).

This revival of African-American consciousness is echoed in Margaret Walker's "For My People" when in her poem we read that: "For my people standing trying to fashion a better way from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding, trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people, all the faces, all the Adams and Eves and their countless generations"(Stanza 9, ll. 33-35). In this quote, the poetess proclaims her admiration for her people in the black community, as a result of the waves of protests during the Black Renaissance, to transform America into a world of universal brotherhood devoid of any kind of marginalization.

In line with the above, it is argued that the lack of economic opportunities and more importantly, the prevalence of prejudice, lynching, and segregation in public spaces all contributed to the intolerable conditions of African Americans (Feredj and Chaddadi 8). African Americans of all social classes joined together in Harlem, which became the focal point of a growing interest in African-American values comprised in the culture of: jazz, blues, dance, theater, art, fiction, and poetry.

The African-American authors have endeavored to shape Black cultural identity and solidarity. Hughes stood as a Harlem literary giant in that respect. The critic Lindsay Patterson portrays him as a honest and a faithful writer who best represents his people. He once stated that: "Hughes more than any other black poet or writer recorded faithfully the nuances of black life and its frustration" (Wagner 94). During the exuberant 1920s, the Harlem black community situated in uptown New York City, sparkled with passion and creativity. The sounds of its black American jazz swept the United States by storm, and jazz musicians and composers like Duke Ellington became stars beloved across the United States and overseas (VanSpanckeren 77). Hughes's "I, Too" hereby exhibits black humanity against the white mischief. On the basis of the skin color, the Whites despised the Blacks, and thereby denied their rights of American citizenship. Despite their rejection, Blacks have continued to regard Whites as their brothers and admonish them. Hughes's poetry paints such a reality in the following lines: "I, Too": I, too, sing America, / I am the darker brother (Ll. 1-2). Hughes actually highlights some of the ways in which, Blacks superseded their anger and

frustration to continue stretching a hand to their white counterparts inspite of the racial segregation against Blacks in the American society. Though the Whites refused to have their meal together with the Blacks together in the dining room, this rather invigorated Blacks to pursue their fight for racial equity. Hughes confirms the foregoing when she writes: "They send me to eat in the kitchen, / When company comes, / But I laugh, / And eat well, /And grow strong" (Ll. 3-7). Here is a vindication of how the whites maltreat Blacks in the 1920s in the postbellum America.

3. The American Dream and the Redemption of Black Identity

The identity of the oppressed Black man in connection to the American Dream is the point of discussion in this part of the paper. The American Dream for many Americans is an integral part of their own identity. America is said to be a "... dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone" (Adams 404). According to Adams, everyone living in the American nation and working hard to achieve self-realization has equal opportunities and rights. No matter what is his race or skin color, all people are equal as stated by the Founding Fathers in *The Declaration of Independence* of 1776. The spirit of the American Dream and the sense of equality spread in the American society, have contributed to the nation building and also helped in the emancipation of Blacks.

In this respect, Hall suggests that "identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, [and] we need to understand them as produced within specific historical and institutional sites, within specific discursive formations and practices" (Hall 4). In the last stanza of "For my People" (1942), Margaret Walker equally corroborates the optimism of Hughes for change for the benefit of the Blacks in America by entreating that:

Let a **new earth** rise. Let **another world** be born. Let a **bloody peace** be written in the sky. Let a **second generation full of courage** issue forth; let a **people loving freedom** come to growth. Let a **beauty full of healing and strength** of final clenching by the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let **the martial songs** be written, let **the dirges disappear**. Let a **race of men now rise and take control**. (Stanza 10)

Walker closes the litany of pain, endurance, grief, and relentless hope of Blacks with her poem's boldest declarations. She calls for a new

world, born of a "bloody peace," peopled by lionhearted and freedom-loving African Americans that will riot, claim and redeem their stolen identity and destiny. The speaker's exasperation of Black people's revolting conditions and his idealistic view of America with African-American identity redemption largely lies in the hands of Blacks themselves. The call for action to break the bondage is claimed by Biko who argues that, "authentic black identity would consist of black people being their own guardians without white people pretending to guide and assist them in the struggle for identity" (Biko 20).

Moreover, Walker's concern about African- American experience and the values inherent to the American society as a whole used to be a challenge to the predominantly white establishment. In acknowledging the African-American experience as a motif of Walker's poem, Graham says, "it is this broader perspective, which always challenges the literary imagination that has given her critics such difficulty, perhaps, in finding for Walker a place in the literary canon" (Graham xxi).

Walker was equally undervalued by her male contemporary writers because of her early marriage and engagement with children. This sexist comment shows how gender was one of the reasons she was overlooked by critics (Hamada 5). Walker goes on to say in 1970 that, "In a constant search for freedom, peace, and human dignity the Black writer has continued to speak loudly against social injustice, human slavery, open oppression of mind and body, violent intimidation, and humiliating indignities" (Walker 125).

This connotes that in the process of freeing the Blacks through her writings in the postbellum America, Walker criticizes social injustice, human slavery, open oppression of mind and body, and all other kinds of intimidating and humiliating actions against Blacks. This behavior has birthed their passion to quest for an egalitarian society and the new Black identity. "For My People" like many of Walker's works addresses issues of race, class, gender and modern America. In prophesying the interruption of oppressions in its different forms against Black people, Walker proclaims:

Someday, just as chattel slavery ended, this injustice will also end; this internal suffering will cease; this ache inside for understanding will exist no longer. Someday, I said, when I am fully grown, I will understand, and I will be able to do something about it. I will write books that will prove the history texts were distorted. I will write books about

colored people who have colored faces, books that will not make me ashamed when I read them. (Walker 4)

Through this quote, her identity specifically relies on both the past and the future and an urgent need to address the plight of the marginalized people.

In addressing the hybrid identity of Black people are suffering from, Christian Barbara writes:

Afro-American women writers have necessarily had to confront the interaction between restrictions of racism, sexism, and class that characterize our existence, whatever our individual personalities, backgrounds, talents...And yet it is precisely because this literature reveals a basic truth of our society, of all societies, that it is central. In every society where there is the denigrated Other whether that is designated by sex, race, class, or ethnic background. (Barbara 160)

Walker is positioned between the poles of past and present, insider and outsider. Through her poetry, she toils to reconcile the placement of the 'denigrated Other' in order to grant a balanced identity to Blacks. James Truslow Adams (1931) formulates the American Dream that enshrines redeemed black identity in this way: "That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming it" (Cullen, 4). The preceding statement conveys the evidence that success and racial equality are encompassed in the key values of the American Dream. Such a reality has been a prompt for African Americans to covet and fight for their emancipation.

Notably, Hughes' poem lays pathways for a new Black identity which celebrates black culture. Langston Hughes's "I, Too" expresses Black self-esteem. Written in 1924, when Hughes lost his passport and got stranded in Genoa (Rampersad 9). The speaker encourages Black people to love themselves no matter how other people treat them. Hughes, thereby, foresees the Black brilliant future regardless of their maltreatment. Umapathy argues that Langston Hughes's optimism laughs at the White and handle the situation in a positive manner For this scholar, the speaker believes in the future social change of the American society despite the prevailing segregation of his time.

Black identity has been expressed in different forms over the centuries. For a long period, Black identity is a constructed identity assigned to them through a white-dominated matrix (Beyers 1). After the abolition of slavery, efforts were made to reconstruct black identity. Erik Erikson believes that identity must be examined not just from an individual perspective, but also in terms of the individual's relationship within the social and historical developments of society (Mays 582). In that vein, Hughes argues through the closing lines of "I, Too" that the whites will be ashamed of themselves later as for their maltreatments against Blacks due to their color and skin: "Besides, / 'They'll see how beautiful I am and be ashamed – / I, Too am America" (Ll.7-9). The poet demonstrates the growing Black self-esteem and thereby advocates for equity as a patriotic American citizen despite his Black skin. Considering the painful and tragic experiences of the Afro-Americans in the United States of America, Hughes through his poetic approach urges them to struggle for, and establish an identity of their own (Akakpo-Domé 345).

Conclusion

This article has attempted to highlight how the poets under study have sought to redeem the Black social identity relying on Margaret Walker's "For My People" and Langston Hughes's "I, Too."

From the perspectives of an African-American slave, a free man in the Jim Crow South, or even a domestic servant, Hughes writes "I, Too" to depict his own experiences and those of his people. In specific terms, as a pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes has optimistically criticized racism and its related inhuman practices against Black Americans in the American society influenced by the socio-cultural forces of Jim Crow Laws.

As for Walker, though she has not bitterly experienced racial segregation like Hughes, being a representative poetess, she identifies herself as a victim of racial injustices in the American society. In other words, the speaker in Walker's "For My People" expresses in a somber tone his trouble about race relations and the way the African Americans are disrespected in the past. Her work, like that of Hughes, creates and conjures a new African American identity.

Known as the rebirth of a silenced community, subdued due to their skin-color, the Harlem Renaissance embodied in the American

Dream, has been the utmost force that has aided in reconstructing a new African-American identity as purposed by this article. "I Too" and "For My People" have largely portrayed the injustices of racism against the blacks. In my view, they both stand as outstanding advocates for American equality and freedom as stipulated in the opening statements of *The Declaration of Independence* text. Both poets equally try to revive the buried racial identity because of the Jim Crow's stereotypes. Hughes and Walker have artistically illustrated the hopes of African Americans for freedom and equality in America. Thus, their poems serve as a testimony on how the blacks endured discrimination in its various forms because of their color.

The methodological approach of content analysis and the critical race theory are wielded to conduct our analyses. Focusing on the relationship among race, racism and power, the critical race theory has enabled me to demonstrate how the white supremacy over African Americans in the postbellum America is reestablished over time due to Jim Crow Laws. Moreover, this theory has equally permitted to unveil the transforming Black power of the assets of the Harlem Renaissance during the Jim Crow era in the American society. The content analysis methodological approach makes it easier to single out words and phrases pertained to racism and the quest of Black identity reconstruction through Hughes's "I, Too" and Walker's "For My People."

This study upholds that the fulfillment of African-American identity redemption primarily lies in the hands of Black people themselves. Second, it establishes that the redeemed Black social identity stands as a reachable ideal that cannot be attained when Black people neglect the dynamics of Black Renaissance and the American Dream. Finally, this article has shown that Margaret Walker and Langston Hughes, through their portrayal of black self-affirmation against the White supremacy, appeal the White Americans to reconsider the ideal of racial equality of the American creed enshrined in the American *Declaration of Independence*.

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