

To cite this article:

Fernández-Alonso, A., & Barros-del Río, M. A. (2021). Gender and race in Langston Hughes' poetry of the Spanish Civil War. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 1-13.

**GENDER AND RACE IN LANGSTON HUGHES' POETRY
OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR**

Fernández-Alonso, Alba (corresponding author), albafa@ubu.es

Faculty of Humanities and Communication. University of Burgos, Spain

C/ Paseo de los Comendadores, s/n

09003 – Burgos, Spain

Barros del-Río, María Amor, abarros@ubu.es

Faculty of Humanities and Communication. University of Burgos, Spain

C/ Paseo de los Comendadores, s/n

09003 – Burgos, Spain

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Abstract

African American poet Langston Hughes worked as a press correspondent during the Spanish civil war. This experience left an imprint in his production and particularly in his poetry, giving light to significant advances in his entwinement of race, gender, and identity. The acclaimed diversity of Hughes' feminine models proposed by Joyce (2004), and the inclusive stance argued by Chinitz (2013) find difficult accommodation in the poetic corpus about Spain. Using Anthias and Yuval-Davis' (2005) critical appraisal race, class and gender divisions, the poetic representation of female characters is discussed attending to their different forms of inclusion and exclusion. Their relationship with later developments in Hughes' poetic construction of African American female agency is assessed, and the singularity of certain characters in the Spanish corpus is explored. Finally, conclusions are drawn to demonstrate the relevant and understudied contributions of this corpus for the better understanding of Hughes' feminine universe as a whole.

Keywords: race, gender, Langston Hughes, poetry, Spanish Civil War.

Introduction

When, in 1937, Langston Hughes accepted the contract from the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper to travel to Spain as a civil-war correspondent, the poet saw an

opportunity to deepen his commitment towards social causes and the struggle of the working class for the eradication of racism. As well as writing his journalistic reports, Hughes also echoed the conflict through some works of poetry and essays, various translations of well-known writers of Castilian Spanish,¹ and some autobiographical sketches that would later be included in his second and last autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander* (1993), first published in 1956. This varied production bears witness to his experience in Spain, an episode that ‘would leave a profound absence within him, not only as a person but as a writer (Saz, 2006, p. 384) and that shall be understood as a continuity of the revolutionary poetry he started to produce at the beginning of the 1930s, ‘a moment when he starts to develop a poetry of a more subversive and radical nature’ (Fernandez-Alonso, 2019, p. 62). Illuminated by this confession, this study analyses Hughes’ feminine universe within his poetic production on the Spanish conflict with the aim to detect the particularities of gender representation in his war poems. We proceed to articulate the model typologies of feminine characters representative of this poetic production. At the same time, we analyze the inherent relations between gender, race and class. Finally, we draw conclusions on the unusual relation between gender and race in Hughes’ poetry of the Spanish Civil War and its traces and impact on his poetic feminine universe.

Race, class and gender in times of war

The relations between race, gender, and identity in the work of Hughes have been examined in various studies (Borden, 1994; Joyce, 2004). Known as ‘the first black male feminist writer of African American letters’ (Joyce, 2004, p. 120), Hughes has been recognized for the celebratory and romantic leanings of the black female figures featured in his literary production (Miller, 1989). His sensitivity in terms of gender is particularly evident in his black female characters, which tend to show resilience and optimism, brimming with hopefulness, illusion, and faith despite the pain and humiliations. Miller (1989) noted the interest of Hughes

in portraying the heroism of those women, both physically and spiritually, and Borden (1994) highlighted the way his blues poetry and his female blues singers witness the convergence of race and gender by means of powerful black female voices. Also, Joyce (2004), who mirrored the keen sensitivity of Hughes at painting his feminine universe using different archetype characters, insisted that this diversity saved his portrait of African American women from falling into stereotypes.

Note that Hughes did not write within a vacuum. Prior to the Harlem Renaissance, the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) had been the first antebellum narratives written by African American female writers. Although these works did not intersect race in the feminine discourse directly, they paved the way for some of the most celebrated African American female writers, among whom we find Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset and Dorothy West. This group of postbellum writers contributed to the expansion of the African American literary canon hitherto and gave shape to the characteristic aesthetic of feminine voices in the Harlem Renaissance.² The conjunction of race and gender in their works evidences how these writers challenged the stereotypes associated to gender in the African American literary expression. This convergence was also detectable in the mosaic of female poets of the Harlem Renaissance, which included Ellen Watkins Harper, Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Dunbar-Nelson and Anne Spencer. Their poetry tended to be feminine and personal, falling within the "traditional feminine verse-makers" prototype (Hull, 1987, p. 22) but intertwined with themes addressing the question of race.³ Special attention deserve Harper's poem "Vashti" (1895), one of the earliest manifestations of a woman advocating her right to be released from masculine tyranny, and Douglas Johnson's poem "The Black Woman", which portrays a woman's refusal to comfort her children as a resignation to this traditional role. Both authors "speculate, sometimes frequently, on what the changing roles of women will be" (Kemp, 2013, p. 790), and their works

acquire special significance in the interplay of feminine literary voices amidst the mainstream masculine canon of the Harlem Renaissance.

As part of a literary movement that was essentially “race oriented” (Hull, 1987, p. 17), Hughes’ diverse and inclusive deployment of female characters leads to reflection on the traditional construction of black masculinity and the negotiation of symmetries between men and women of color. This ‘ethic of inclusion’ (Chinitz, 2013, p. 63) steams from the subjectivity of the African American mind projected by Hughes and is particularly noticeable in the collection of short stories *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), where men and women of color express themselves with liberty and their racial perspective suggests the construction of a plural African American identity (Joyce, 1995). Also the ‘Madam poems’, a series of six poems launched in 1943, voice the energetic personality of Alberta K. Johnson – ‘a Black woman surviving in the city, who asserts her pride in part by taking the name Madam when negotiating with her landlord, the census taker, her employer, and the reader’ (Borden, 1994, p. 335). This series includes good examples of women characters whose ‘broken dreams and deferred promises’ (Martin, 1981, p. 97) are fearlessly outspoken. Hughes’ questioning of the binary construction of male and female Africa-American identity points at oppression as commonplace. All in all, both Borden (1994) and Joyce (2004) highlight the fusion of gender and race in an explicit intention that both authors have referred to as *genderracial*.⁴ Despite such large body of work, the ‘ethic of inclusion’ and the convergence of gender and race finds no stable foothold in Hughes’ poetry inspired during the Spanish Civil War. On the contrary, these war poems present an essentially masculine perspective with male characters as protagonists of the conflict and women as subservient to the events and needs of the conflict. This anomaly in the poetic production of Hughes is limited to the poems written under the inspiration of his Spanish experience and calls for a thorough examination. Among the reasons for this inconsistency, we find two determining factors:

First, by the late 1930s Hughes had travelled all over the world witnessing many differing cultures first-hand. Yet his time in Spain, from August to December 1937, offered him a glimpse at the brutality of war. Also, Hughes foresaw in the anti-fascist fight of Spain an evident correlation with fascist aggression in the African continent, especially the invasion of Ethiopia by Mussolini in 1932. As a result, this corpus accredits the relation of self-recognition between the Spanish and the African American culture and its mutual fascination, as he would confess: ‘the Spaniards remind us of us’ [...], it was inevitable that some of us would find our way to the Peninsula. Whether our hands were empty or loaded with deadly metal, we had scores to settle’ (Reid-Pharr, 2016, p. 42). As in the rest of his poetic production, here Hughes also breaks with the white-black binomial, managing to achieve a renewed conceptualization of the struggle against fascism, waving a flag of unity and the racial brotherhood of the working class.

Second, it must be noted that this corpus was inspired by the African American brigade volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion and the comrades who fought in the name of the working classes. Hence, the reader encounters an extremely masculinized corpus and a limited number of poems with outstanding female characters. Correspondingly, these poems deviate from the alleged diversity of feminine models proposed by Joyce (2004), and the inclusive stance defended by Chinitz (2013) and demand a careful selection of the pieces to study.

In the light of the above, and in order to assess the representation of female characters in these war poems, an appropriate model categorization can help organize Hughes’ feminine universe and its symbolic meaning and aesthetic. According to Summerfield (1997), the presence of female characters in war contexts can be tagged in the following four distinctive categories: the participation of women in tasks of warfare, both military and civil; their traditional role as women, mothers, and betrothed; the implications of female pacifist movements against war; and the relation between female participation in nationalist struggles and feminist demands for equality. However, this variety of roles encounters some

discrepancies in the context of the Spanish Civil War, as well as significant limitations that feminist historiography has tried to amend with the inclusion of other marginal experiences, such as those of exiled women and women in prison (Mangini, 1995; Nash, 1995; Morcillo, 2014). For our purpose, we consider the songbook of the Republican band to be a relevant source. This songbook was a folkloric and propagandistic corpus used to traffic ideas between a multilingual population with a high degree of illiteracy. Far from being a steady compilation, this was a dynamic corpus that evolved along with the conflict. Also, the active role of writers and intellectuals such as Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti and Miguel Hernández in the creation of many songs for the Republican band has been well documented in Piñeiro Otero (2008). In the same way, other sources testify that the North-American brigade members amused themselves teaching revolutionary songs in English to the Spanish children (Spener, 2016).⁵ More particularly, Piñeiro Otero (2008) studied the participation of women in the Spanish conflict according to the mentioned songbook, distinguishing five main categories: the mother, the betrothed/wife, the companion, the weak being, and the emphatic (evocative) resource. Bearing in mind the limited presence of female characters in Hughes' war poems, we proceed to scrutinize them according to Summerfield and Piñeiro Otero's classifications. For the sake of empathy on the part of the reader, the poet was interested in presenting real characters that would add realism to his production and facilitate identification. This commitment aligns with bell hooks' (2000) understanding of feminism, which "calls attention to the diversity of women's social and political reality and centralizes the experiences of all women, especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about" (p. 27) . Also, in her introduction to the volume of the translated works of Hughes into Spanish on the Spanish Civil War, Cruzado Soria (Hughes & Cruzado Soria, 2011) highlighted the poet's mastery at narrating the horrors of war, not as epic collectives, but through the particular tragedy of the individuals. For these reasons, we bring to the fore selected poems that address the

particular experiences of women rather than categories. Likewise, his treatment of female characters was mediated by his antifascist determination, his commitment to social justice, and his strive for the emancipation of the African American race. Therefore, a close examination of Hughes' feminine universe requires a gender lens with an intersectional consideration of other categories. In their seminal work *Racialized Boundaries*, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (2005) affirm that 'gender relates to the way in which sexual difference is represented and organized and is thus a product of social relations including those of class (and ethnicity)' (p. 71). Considering these intersecting categories, special attention will be paid to the practices of differentiation and exclusion linked to the female characters of this limited corpus. More particularly, they will be analyzed through the binomials inclusion/exclusion and essentialism/diversity in order to assess the degree of agency they are given in a war context by the poet.

The wife and mother in the conflict

Langston Hughes' maternal characters are key in his poetic universe on the basis of their frequency and strength.⁶ Motives of sentimentalism, kindness, empowerment, and resilience prevail in his maternal representations. But this feature persists in the poems on the Spanish Civil War with a much lesser intensity. As is often the case in nationalist contexts, the wife and the mother were very popular characters in the Spanish tradition of song at the time. Both factions mythicized this figure as the heroine who gives up her children for the cause, thus signifying and reproducing the symbolic and legal boundaries of the collectivity (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 2005). The undated poem 'Mother and Child' (Hughes et al. 2012, pp. 46-47), remarkable for its very strong emotional force, is preserved in the collection of the African American activist *Thyra Edwards' Collection of Langston Hughes Materials, 1935-1941*.⁷ According to Donlon (Hughes et al., 2012), Hughes could have written it during the Second

World War, a statement sustained by the explicit allusion to the symbol of the swastika in one of its verses. However, other signals in the poem suggest that he could have been inspired in the events occurred during the Spanish Civil War. On the one hand, the imperial eagle of the swastikas to which Hughes refers in the verses ‘And out of a sunset swept a swastica’d bird / A bird with steel wings! Then another! And another!’ (l. 29-30) inevitably transport the reader to the tragedy of the bombardment of Guernica in April 1936 by the Stukas of the Condor Legion. To this argument, Donlon (Hughes et al., 2012) adds that in the manuscript of Thyra Edwards’ collection Hughes wrote: ‘Good health, Thyra!’. This inscription could refer to a greeting formula common among those with Republican sympathies during the time of the II Republic (1931-1939). Equally, this argument suggests that the poem could have been motivated by the memories of the poet as a press correspondent in Spain. Moreover, the lines ‘Somewhere in Europe / A village on the countryside’ (ll. 1-2) and ‘Fields of golden grain wavey and wide’ (l. 3) recall visions of the vast fields of cereal soaked in sunshine that Hughes must have observed during his journey from Barcelona to Valencia after witnessing an aerial attack. Furthermore, he set down his impressions in his second dispatch for the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper as follows: ‘driving through the fields of wheat and groves of olives and oranges and cities that recently had been bombed’ (Hughes et al. 2002, p. 162). Likewise, the verse ‘Into the cellars women with babies, the old, and the lame’ (l. 32) recalls the basements where the women huddled together with their children during the war and which Hughes described in his first journalistic piece as a war correspondent as follows: ‘In the street a few women hurried along to public bomb-proof cellars’ (Hughes et al., 2002, p. 160). In light of these arguments, here is ground to consider ‘Mother and Child’ a poem inspired in the Spanish Civil War, and we proceed to delve into the representation of an iconic character, the wife and mother.

The poet starts by describing touching sequences of youth and traditional marriage in an idealized rural context, ‘Fields of Golden grain wavey and wide’ (l. 3), with an explicit

Christian ethic: 'A boy and girl. A wedding. Dancing and joy' (l. 4) 'In the doorway of her village a young mother there / Sat singing at sunset and her song was a prayer' (ll. 19-20), and the inevitable outcome of which is maternity: 'Ten months of love, and then there comes – a baby boy!' (l. 5). The scenery that the poet depicts is summarized in a bucolic and repetitive scene of the mother singing a lullaby to her new-born baby every night at the threshold of her door: 'I'm singing, I'm rocking my baby to sleep' (ll. 14, 27 and 40). Here the author projects an idealized female figure who having become a mother, finds her full self-realization in her loving care for the child. This scene clearly links female sexual differentiation with a gendered social function, namely, reproduction and care at the service of a patriarchal social organization. As a result, this specific role impacts on the symbolic and the real limitations in the agency of women. Contrary to the potentially transformative roles given to black mothers in earlier poems such as 'Spirituals' and 'America', in 'Mother and Child', Hughes deprives the Spanish mother of any sort of agency beyond motherhood and care.

As the poem unfolds, the start and the development of the conflict break what would be the 'natural' course of events. Displaying a detailed description of the aerial attack, the poem testifies to the atrocities of war –an aspect that Hughes also explored in other poems such as 'Air Raid: Barcelona' (1938), (Hughes, 1995, pp. 207-209); 'Moonlight in Valencia: Civil War' (1944), (306), and 'Madrid' (1938), (pp. 614-616).⁸ The poet lingers over the impotence and the solitude of the mother with her new-born child as her only company: 'The men all have gone, but women have stayed' (l. 23), reads the poem 'Mother and Child'. Note the intentional use here of the preposition 'but'. The poet links two phrases, placing them in contraposition, and situates both sexes in their respective and separated spheres of action. Once again, this practice of sexual segregation, especially visible in rural environments as described in the poem, is framed within a strict patriarchal system in which women are usually the passive receptors of the oppression that is exercised over them. Paradoxically, in 'Mother and Child' the poet

corroborates such exclusive practices that he nevertheless sought to overcome from the gender-racial perspective elsewhere.

Emotionally and symbolically, the poem is aligned with the African American tradition in which the mother embodies 'the impetus and example for perseverance in a hostile world' (Washington, 1988, p. 193). Undoubtedly, it echoes the poet's early portraits of African American mothers who care for and eventually mourn their children. Hughes takes up the concept of resilience, characteristic of his first poetry, and situates mothers at the epicenter of a struggle: 'The darkness is here and your mother is alone' (l. 48). As Washington (1988) affirms, the black mother 'is not a cushion from troubled and chaotic conditions but the impetus and example for perseverance in a hostile world' (p. 193). In this poetic imaginary, the maternal image fits the category of woman with a strong personality, proposed by Joyce (2004), who maintains herself active in her resilience despite the pain. In the middle of a devastated scenario, Hughes places the mother as the star of a sustained struggle, that of caring for life: 'The darkness is here and your mother's alone' / Digging all night in these ruins of stone (ll. 48-49)'. The tenacity and fortitude of the mother stem from the poetic verses and the poet projects his sensitivity towards maternity. This attitude is particularly visible in his first poems, especially in 'Mother to Son' (1922), (Hughes 1995: 30) in which the sad experience of the preceding generations finds a voice through the resilient maternal icon (Fernandez-Alonso & Barros del-Río, 2019). This poem, together with 'The Negro Mother' (1931), is according to Miller 'the most famous of the matriarchal verses' (Miller, 1975, p. 109). But the identification achieved through the use of the first person, and the possibility of agency that is bestowed on this African American mother, turns weaker in its Spanish counterpart. In 'Mother and Child', the first person is limited to mothering, implicitly narrowing her active role to rocking the baby. Hence, the poet not only deprives the mother of a voice of her own, unlike the African American

matron, but also stresses her confinement to the domestic sphere and her submission to the interests of a male war.

As the pace of the poem progresses in the spiral of events, Hughes starkly expresses the devastating effects of the conflict among the feminine population, which he identifies with maternity. As feminist historiography has demonstrated, this war made a strong impact on the lives of women and mothers, making their daily tasks “infinitely more difficult” (Mangini, 1995, p. 101), and forcing them to develop “a culture of coping” (Schmoll, 2014, p. 476). Accordingly, the poem abounds in attributes relating to the protection of the child, suffering, terror, and desperation. This essentialist posture is corroborated in verse 51, where the centrality of the nuclear heteronormative family is revealed as an ideological social construct ‘[...] the end of our dream!’. The culmination of the poem comes with the bombardment and the explicit description of the death of the baby: ‘The mother and the child are lifted and thrown. / The baby is crushed in an avalanche of stone’ (ll. 45-46). The poem does not hold back on the deep pain facing the loss of the new-born child. On the contrary, the scene is magnificently mirrored in the cry of the mother in the first person after finding the inert body of her baby: ‘DEAR GOD, I CAN’T WEEP!’ (l. 53). The fatal catastrophe effaces the primary role of the mother, the carer, masterfully reflected in the change of the chorus then gerundial, ‘I was... rocking my baby to sleep!’, to an action in the preterit or past simple (54). The implicit exclusion of the female figure from any scope of agency once she has been deprived of her child confirms the role of women as biological reproducers of ‘the nation’, as demonstrated by Yuval-Davis (1993), and perpetuates her subordination to the interests of the conflict.

Interestingly, the projection of the mother figure at the backstage of the conflict in ‘Mother and Child’ contrasts with the treatment of the mother in the undated poem ‘Boy’ (Donlon & Scaramella, 2019, p. 566). ‘Boy’ relates the death of an African American volunteer in Fuentes de Ebro and how his mother, from Iowa, tries to situate the place on a map to

assimilate the death of her son.⁹ The parallelism between both poems is evident from the first verses, as the poet strives to situate the narration of the events within a physical and social space with the objective of giving greater realism to the facts. In 'Boy', Hughes is swift to underline the traits of the young soldier 'He was a simple boy' (line 1), in the same way as in 'Mother and Child' he wrote: 'A boy and a girl. A wedding. Dancing and joy' (l. 4). In his eagerness to provoke the identification of the reader, the poet underlines the universality of the characters, thereby indicating that the conflict affected society in general, as Borden affirms: 'His work is strengthened by a poetic imagination which enters the consciousness of those with varying experience' (Borden, 1994, p. 333).

Also, the similarities between the Spanish mother and the African American mother hold special interest. Keeping a distance through the use of the third person, in both poems the poet manages to express the abnegation and the resilience of the maternal characters facing the loss of their children. The universalisation of this experience is a strategy displayed to promote brotherhood between both races. Both mother figures, through their roles as passive onlookers of the conflict, are witnesses to the barbarism. Their role is limited to accepting the tragedy, even without managing to understand it, as these verses suggest: 'She looked / An even longer time / At its wavering black line— /Then closed the book' (ll. 36-39). Evidently, the social concerns of Hughes over underlining the ramifications of the conflict beyond the tragic deaths of the soldiers, reaches out to these maternal icons. But, at the same time, his androcentric perspective and his unequivocal conceptualization of women as mothers underline latent forms of exclusion in daily life and, more explicitly, in the conflict. Thus, deprived of a voice of their own and confined within their domestic universes, these characters are subordinated to the unravelling of events and restricted to a role of sufferance and resilience. According to these conclusions, we could affirm that Hughes' particular treatment of the wife-and-mother figures in war contexts remain constant and invariable despite racial and geographical differences.

Invariably, the poet concentrates on the African American soldiers, the description of the conflict, and the class issue, relegating the exploration of the female characters to traditional and stereotyped etiquette. Promoting one social struggle over another, Beale 1970 points out, is a tendency that is characteristic of social movements. Considering this, we can conclude that Hughes' poetry on the Spanish Civil War prioritizes class struggle over other forms of discrimination on the grounds of race and sex and subordinates the wife-and-mother figures to the poet harness for his social ideals.

The companion: female activism in the Spanish Civil War

As may be ascertained from the customary expressions that abound in his correspondence and his poetry at the time, Hughes settled into the Spanish culture and established close ties with literary figures.¹⁰ He visited the front and the barricades, witnessing the horror of a civil conflict and taking notes of the active participation of common citizens. As Piñeiro Otero (2008) explains, women also played very active roles as Militia members, rearguard workers, informants, godmothers, volunteers and suppliers in the antifascist struggle. But as Llona (2014) has accurately noticed, the militia women personified a symbolic disorder that challenged traditional gender constructions. Hence, their presence on the field of battle, initially notable, progressively diminished until the propaganda had them relegated to a rearguard position. Naturally, Hughes knew of the existence of this militia women and the decisive role that they played in the conflict. The intertextual evidence found by Donlon in 'Spanish Folk Songs of the War' (Hughes et al., 2012, pp. 44-45) may distil from this assimilation of social and combative life.

Leaving aside whether this contribution is a faithful translation of the popular songwriter or a reworking or free interpretation,¹¹ the poem 'Spanish Folk Songs of the War' stands out as the only time when Hughes refers to the Spanish women's militias, a female group that actively

participated in the armed struggle. Departing from an ideal harmonic order of peace and liberty, the verses of this poem ‘The men sing as they work. / The women sing at their tasks,’ (ll. 13-14) are evidence of the interest in universalizing the struggle that, nevertheless, maintains the rigid separation of spheres of action traditionally linked to each sex. Added to this, the last verses of the poem read: ‘Girl of the People’s Army, / Do not be jealous of me / If to my heart I take / Both you and Liberty’ (ll. 25-28).¹² Under a gender lens, these words hinder a one-sided representation of the female militia member, whose scope of agency is limited to her wish to possess the poet-soldier’s heart. He, in turn, divides his affections between the woman and liberty. This arrangement places the implicitly masculine narrative voice in a position of moral superiority and reduces the performative agency of the female companion snatching her active role in the struggle from her. The dichotomous relation between male and female becomes evident as the category woman is endowed with an essential and passive property. The verses suggest that her ideal of romantic love is the main reason for her engagement in the conflict, a poetic strategy used by Hughes to dismiss the disturbing idea of the militia women ‘occupying the place of men at the front’ which ‘projected shadows over masculine dignity’ (Llona, 2013, p. 191). As a result, femininity becomes subaltern to male agency and the poet ‘marginalizes the active and passive forms of resistance within which women have been historically engaged’(Anthias and Yuval-Davis 2005, p. 76). In the end, her active engagement in the conflict is diminished in favor of a romantic devotion towards the male personality.

Given that there are no further references to women combatants in this corpus, it is not possible to assess Hughes’ position more extensively towards this issue. However, it is possible to establish a link between the Spanish and the African American female activist. In the poem ‘A Note from Spain’, the verses 41-43 (Hughes et al., 2012)¹³ focus on an African American comrade and calls her out for militant action and active participation. Here, the poet draws upon

Johnny, a common name for a soldier, to address with some familiarity an Afro American woman, –‘Dear Sis’ (line 1)–, urging her to become a catalytic agent for change in the USA.¹⁴ This activist embodies the archetype of a black woman with a limited role both in public life and in the struggle of the working class. To face up to these limitations, Hughes turns to an inclusive masculine voice, and uses an imperative and direct but warming tone, taking the participation of the activist in the struggle as a foregone conclusion. As a result, the reader feels called to action. As Joyce has detected, this strategy is a recurrent device in Hughes’ production: ‘Hughes in his poetry does not present us with a direct statement of the thing; instead, we get the thing itself’ (Joyce, 2004, p. 128).

From the ideological point of view, this poem incorporates a qualitative and unique pace in the attitudinal stance of the author. His discourse is directed at the feminine African American collective, personified in ‘Sis’, suggesting in this way the importance of individual political action over and above gender differences. Steaming from these verses is the poet’s belief that the emancipation of class is only possible after joining the struggle of the working class: ‘Sis, try to make things better, hear? / Join the workin’ class’ (ll. 19-20), organized into trades unions: ‘Tell Buddy to join the C.I.O. / (He couldn’t join the A.F. of L.’ (ll. 23-24).¹⁵ Unlike his earlier poems, Hughes now expresses his conviction that overcoming racial difference can only be achieved through the banishing of gender differences in favour of a single class, the working class: ‘Poor whites and blacks together / Could make a new age come to pass! (ll. 21-22) [...] ‘And given them bosses hell’ (l. 25).

In the last verses, Johnny’s narrative voice acquires a more resolute tone to inoculate the female comrade with a message of determination. This way, Hughes uplifts her status and makes her responsible for hearing the testimony of the soldier and transmitting his message: ‘Sis, tell all the people / What Spain has taught me: / Bow down and get your backsides kicked– / Or stand up and be free!’ (ll. 27-30). Also, the fusion of gender and race is evident albeit the

absence of the female voice who is never heard.

Despite it all, 'A Note from Spain' offers a glimpse of emancipation for black women and exemplifies a form of inclusion. Furthermore, this poem is a landmark in Hughes' progressive stance 'to portray black women and men as equal partners in African American subjectivity (Chinitz, 2013, p. 63) and bears witness to the qualitative leap forward in the representation of the feminine universe of the author after his visit to Spain. In fact, there is evidence of the Spanish imprint in Hughes' attitude towards gender struggle and equality. In his second autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander* (1993), the poet relates an episode where Spanish writer María Teresa de León was the subject of rude and obscene comments from a soldier. When she reprimanded him overtly, the incident escalated and ended with the arrival of the police and the soldier confined to his barracks. But later, when sharing the tale at the Alliance –(where) 'women were on a par with men' (Hughes, 1993, p. 386)– the support of her male counterparts was not forthcoming for María Teresa, not even that of her husband, the poet Rafael Alberti. According to Hughes, María Teresa was a woman ahead of her time who openly denounced the abusive attitudes of the masculine gender. Hughes aligned himself with her, criticizing the chauvinist behavior in Spain, and judging it intolerable for the transformation of the country. This episode and other observations during his time in Spain could have spurred Hughes' sensitivity towards gender equality, a matter also reflected on his poetry, particularly in 'A Note from Spain'. Note that in terms of gender advancement 'A Note from Spain' is an isolated milestone in the poetic corpus about the Spanish civil war, mostly characterized by its androcentric focus and essentialist and romanticized treatment of female characters. Its scent can be traced some years later in the series 'Madam poems' where the genderracial resistance of African American women would be more openly present. Likewise, the poem 'Southern Mammy Sings' (1941), (Hughes, 1995, p. 227) would also evoke the resistance of African American mothers and voice their desires. All in all, 'A Note from Spain' can be regarded as

precedent of these later poems where Hughes ‘contributes to African American dialogue on gender’ as Borden (1994, p. 337) has affirmed.

The Roma woman, an expression of Spanish national identity

The analysis of the feminine universe in the poetic work of Hughes during the Spanish Civil War would not be complete without considering the recently printed poem ‘Girl’ (Donlon & Scaramella, 2019, p. 566), a brief composition of eight verses in which the poet describes a Spanish Roma woman in a bucolic mood and expresses his fascination for her music and ethnicity.¹⁶ Hughes was well aware of the Spanish racial diversity and its Afro-Atlantic idiosyncrasy and even before arriving in Spain as a press correspondent, the poet had already had an enormous interest in getting to know Andalusia.¹⁷ Although this dream was never to materialize, his attraction towards the Roma culture was also shared by his much-admired Federico García Lorca. Compositions such as ‘A Farewell’ (1926), ‘Ballad of the Gypsy’ (1942) ‘Bad Luck Card’ (1926) ‘Gypsy Man’ (1926) ‘Gypsy Melodies’ (1941), ‘Fortune Teller Blues’ (1926) and ‘Song of Spain’ (1937) witness to Hughes’ interest in the Roma tradition in which he must have perceived the traces of Africanism.

Among his production, ‘Girl’ epitomizes the author’s treatment of race, class, and nation incorporating the categories of ethnicity and gender to this threesome. The Spanish Romani women have occupied an outstanding place in the ranking of mass culture myths, strongly influenced by Orientalism and loaded with sensuality. As Pagán and Ivanova (2020) have affirmed, this symbolic elaboration contributed to the consolidation of the nationalist discourse, which turned out to be problematic in terms of gender construction. For Roma women, it entailed both exclusion from the ideological construction of middle-class women, and at the same time personification of the Spanish nation. The poem ‘Girl’ aligns with this second identification and revolves around a stereotyped and idealized image of a Roma woman.

The character in 'Girl' could have been prompted by *La Niña de los Peines*, or Pastora María Pavón, a well-known flamenco singer that Hughes saw in Madrid. Through the use of adjectives such as 'gay and wild' (l. 8), nouns such as 'sun' (l. 2), 'gold' (l. 3), and 'smile' (l. 6), and the verb 'Laughing' (l. 5), this Roma woman is fetishized and identified with positive terms that contrast with the pain and destruction of war. In the poem, the poet detaches himself from the civil conflict and its hardships, and rejoices in the particularities of the Spanish folklore somehow akin to blues in its essence (Rabassó, 1998; Saz, 2006). The bursting passion displayed in 'Girl' is corroborated in his description of the singer in his second autobiography: 'this plain old woman could make the hair rise on your head, could do to your insides what the moan of an air-raid siren did, could rip your soul-case with her voice' (Hughes, 1993, p. 333).

Admitting that this poem merely points to the ethnic essence rather than a rethinking of an inclusive perspective of gender, the description of this character, albeit idealized, challenges race essentialism within the Spanish context and enriches Hughes' female universe. It is in 'Girl' that his 'racialization of Spanishness' (Soto, 2020, p. 154) most strongly debunks race as an internally homogeneous category. With the inclusion of gender in his portrayal of the Spanish multi-ethnic war, the poet envisages its heterogeneity.

In 'Girl', Hughes (1993) turns this female figure into an exemplary role model of the antifascist fight in Spain, according to the following description extracted from *I Wonder as I Wander*: 'vibrant with resistance to defeat, and hard with the will to savor life in spite of its vicissitudes' [...] 'whose voice became part of the strength of Madrid's stubborn resistance under the long-range guns, a few miles away' (p. 333). These lines suggest an underlying identification of the Roma woman with the Republican ideals and the workers' cause. Furthermore, Hughes' treatment of the category 'woman' incorporates an intersectional perspective where gender, class and race, ethnicity in this case, converge and elevate the status of this Roma artist to a paradigmatic voice of resistance that echoes the African American

struggle.

Implicitly, the poet acknowledges how the multiple axis of differentiation intersect in historically specific contexts (hooks, 1981; Brah & Phoenix, 2004) and, as a result, the double exclusion that Roma women usually suffered on the grounds of sex and ethnic origin becomes totally eclipsed in his female imaginary of the Spanish Civil War. Furthermore, the Roma woman arises as an example of resistance to the masculine rhetoric typical of contexts in conflict, and finds her own feminine space, 'reinscribing it as a response to masculinist proscription and violence, forcing us to rethink race, gender, and genre as well as their sites of convergence' (Soto, 2020, p. 168). A correlation between the African American woman and the idealized figure of the Spanish woman, centered around the figure of this Roma character, can be found in their active roles against oppression which, albeit differently, speak of resistance and hope.

It is our belief that the ethnic diversity of the Spanish culture contributed decisively to modify Hughes' perception on race. After his voyage through a turbulent Spain, he saw it as a diverse and accommodating category. In 'Girl', ethnic nuances are merged with gender and class, resulting in an idealized praise of the Spanish Roma woman who becomes a symbol.

Conclusion

The main objective of the poetry of Langston Hughes on the Spanish Civil War was to render account of the armed struggle, to bear witness to the African American volunteers in combat, and to seek the identification of the African American public with the ideals of the Republican band. Despite the overwhelming masculine essence of this corpus, a close examination under a gender lens unveils the significant influence of the poet's personal experience during the conflict and the presence of a diverse feminine universe overshadowed by the context of war. In accordance with the *Frente Popular* songbook, with which the poet was familiar, female characters are scarce and tend to play a secondary role, subordinated to the theatre of war at all times with men in the leading roles. These particularities deviate from

Joyce's (2004) arguments defending the diversity of female characters in Hughes' poetic corpus, and from Chinitz' (2013) claims on the poet's inclusive ethics. As a result, we can affirm that the feminine development is already evident in the war-related poems 'Mother and Child' and 'Boy', showing a tendency to create stronger and more autonomous female characters that would evolve into stronger female voices later in his production.

Another significant character is the female militia member who, lacking progeny, is more actively linked to the conflict than the wife-mother archetype. Nonetheless, Hughes' masculine gaze again subordinates the female companion to the interests of the conflict and her treatment is strongly biased by the myth of romantic love as has been detected in 'Spanish Folk Songs of the War'. Interestingly, the one possible prolongation of this Spanish tale overseas can be found in 'A Note from Spain', a poem where the African American comrade, 'Sis', is called to collaborate with social and political action. In contrast to its Spanish counterpart, this poem lacks the burden of romantic love and offers a distinctive path for inclusion to the black woman. Race plays a decisive role in the different treatment of the woman fighter, who finds more scope for agency in the American version, and who can be considered a precedent of the strongest female characters of his production.

Added to these two role models, the essentially folkloric representation of the Roma woman stands out in Hughes' feminine universe. In the poetic imaginary of Hughes this archetype is symbolically identified with the Spanish idiosyncrasy, falling into a folkloric representation of the racial diversity in Spain. Hence, thanks to Hughes' personal experience in the multi-ethnic conflict is the poet able to introduce the category of ethnicity and expand his prior conception of race, as evidenced in 'Girl'. Furthermore, in this brief poetic piece, gender, race and ethnicity intertwine to endow the conflict with a diversity of its own. More important still, from the symbolic point of view, the poet recognizes the invaluable emotional and ideological contribution of the Roma people to the resistance and reconstitutes their status and

decisive role in the Spanish conflict.

In light of these conclusions, we can affirm that Hughes' poetic corpus inspired by the Spanish Civil War includes unusual features that had been overlooked so far and that deserved a closer attention. In an extremely masculinized war context, the presence of female characters in his poetry is scarce and often marginal with a clear influence of the popular songbook of the Republican *Frente Popular*. The poetic resources put to work, such as the use of voices, the description of the characters, and the customary scenes that accompany them reveal a strong separation of spheres of action between sexes and comply with practices of exclusion that remain immutable throughout the conflict. Nonetheless, the inclusion of these female characters, albeit characterized by a strong essentialist nature, and sometimes an extremely folkloric essence as in the case of 'Girl', illustrate qualitative advances. First, the poet's personal experiences prompt a more flexible and inclusive understanding of race, incorporating ethnicity and gender as significant nuances. Second, Hughes manages to project overseas the Spanish Civil War bestowing the national conflict with an international nature. It is in 'Boy' and 'A Note from Spain' that Hughes' feminine universe echoes his internationalist ideals. Third, the analysis of the selected corpus suggests a relation of self-recognition between the Spanish and the African American culture, although the African American female characters tend to enjoy more inclusive practices on the part of the poet than their Spanish counterparts and so, they are endowed with a higher degree of agency. Hence, we contend that one of the principal contributions of this corpus is the effective geographic transposition of the female characters in situations of conflict and their qualitative genderracial advancement. With this symbolic sisterhood the poet ratifies the universality of female subordination in contexts of war and manages to depict a plurality of roles with which women from both continents can identify. These qualities, still limited by various modes of oppression on the grounds of race, ethnic background, and class, flesh out the harshness of the conflict and its sequels, offering a glimpse

of the emancipatory potential of the threesome race, class and gender.

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Endnotes

¹ During his stay in Spain, Langston Hughes established close ties with the Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals for the Defense of Culture. Hughes, among others, embarked on the translation of *Bodas de Sangre* by Federico García Lorca, helped by Manuel Altolaguirre and Rafael Alberti. He also translated 15 of the 18 ballads of *Romancero Gitano*, which were later revised by Lorca’s brother, Francisco, and published in the first number of the journal *Beloit Poetry Journal* in 1951.

² As stated by Jones (2002), Hurston, Fauset and West, employed the narrative strategies of the bildungsroman to approach the growth and perception of the black feminine universe, a procedure which allowed them to focus on the maturity and recognition of their identity and role in the world (Abrams, 1993).

³ Several studies affirm that through the use of the lyric “I” persona, these women poets were able to express a certain degree of female identity and paved the road to contemporary African American women writers. For a more elaborated discussion on the topic, see McKay (2006) and Hull (1987).

⁴ The entwinement of the concepts of race and gender in Hughes has become a paradigm of various contemporary female intellectual currents of thought that analyze the effect of these two concepts on the self-conception of women. Audre Lorde or bell hooks represent some examples of this group of feminist intellectuals.

⁵ This circumstance is all the more difficult if the degree of authorship or recreation has to be discerned in the compilation of Langston Hughes: ‘Spanish Folk Songs of the War’.

⁶ The problematic relationship between the poet and his mother is evident in the letters that they both exchanged (McLaren, 1997). The compilation *My Dear Boy: Carrie Hughes's Letters to Langston Hughes, 1926-1938* suggests that the lack of kindness from the maternal figure might have had an impact in the life and work of the poet.

⁷ Emory University, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Atlanta GA.

⁸ The date of publication of this poem has sparked controversy among scholars. According to Arnold Rampersad, it was published in *Fight for Democracy* in 1938, but Faith Berry affirmed that it had remained unpublished until its publication in *Good Morning Revolution* (1973).

⁹ As Donlon and Scaramella (2019) point out, the poet visited Fuentes de Ebro in October 1937 to compile information on the death of the soldier Milton Herndon. The work of Hughes was gathered together in the article ‘Milt Herndon Died Trying to Rescue Wounded Pal’, published 1 January 1938 in the *Baltimore Afro-American* (Hughes, et al, 2002, pp. 181–85).

¹⁰ This desire to translate the Spanish culture for the African American readership is evident in his journalism, which is awash with scenes and experiences that underline the social nature of the Spanish people. The cafés and the street life held his attention in a powerful way. He even attended plays at the height of the defense of Madrid, thanks to María Teresa León, who together with her husband Rafael Alberti, were directors of the Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals, where Hughes found accommodation during his stay in Madrid. Especially in his first four articles published for the *Baltimore Afro-American* and in the last chapters of this second autobiography, Hughes described popular scenes of celebration amidst the conflict.

¹¹ Both practices were common at the time. See Labajo (2004).

¹² This poem is either the result of a personal translation or an interpretation of the popular Spanish militia songbook and would later be published in *Volunteer for Liberty* on 15 June 1938 and in the *Daily Worker* on 16 July of that same year.

¹³ Donlon (Hughes et al., 2012) indicates that his poem appears in Nancy Cunard's papers under the title *Johnny Writes Home from Spain* together with other three ones. According to this author, this poem is, apparently, the only one pending publication.

¹⁴ Johnny represents the generic narrative voice that Hughes used to address the African American population, a character that was in fact a volunteer black soldier from the Lincoln Battalion. The poet would use this same resource in the poem 'Letter from Spain' (1938), addressed to a 'Dear Brother at home', as well as in 'Postcard from Spain' (1938) and 'Love Letter from Spain' (1937).

¹⁵ The acronym in English, C.I.O. refers to the *Congress of Industrial Organizations*. Launched in the 1930s, this Congress defended the association of workers by unions, regardless of their race or their professional qualification and, for the first time in history, made possible the union of black workers. According to Solomon (1998), already in its early days it had 17 semi-qualified and non-qualified

workers from the meat industry and 8.5% from the metal industry. In turn, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had been founded earlier, in 1886, and despite opening the door to black union workers among themselves, never authorized workers of different races during its first few years.

¹⁶ Hughes' genuine interest in the Roma ethnic group has been largely explored by Moreno (2006) and Soto (2020). The black African presence in flamenco had already been acknowledged by W. E. B. Du Bois in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1990). Decades later, Du Bois' thesis were to be corroborated by the live show that Hughes enjoyed in Madrid, which undoubtedly echoed African traits that resonated in the poet's soul. In fact, Goldberg (2014) has traced black African presences in flamenco to conclude that "although this figure became a national symbol, the Gypsy is neither Christian nor Muslim, neither black nor white, neither tragic nor comic" (p. 108).

¹⁷ Undoubtedly, Langston Hughes conflated Gypsy, Andalusian, and Spanish identities as mutually interchangeable identities, an exotic but reductionist view of Spanishness common to the popular imagination, as several studies have attested (Colmeiro, 2002; Simpson, 2007).