African Americans Fight Othering with Othering in the Harlem Renaissance

Othering is described as ‘a way of defining and securing one’s positive identity through the stigmatization of an “other”’ (Othering, par. 1) When looking at examples of othering, most people turn to the dominant group for example of othering. The Spanish conquered the Amerindians, the Europeans colonized Africa, and Americans kept slaves. But othering is a two-way street. The “inferior”, or more appropriately, disadvantaged, group is strongly affected by othering. This group not only is harmed by the dominance of the other group, but they might also experience othering in the other direction, defining themselves by what they are not. This other example of othering isn’t rare or new; it was present when Guaman Poma wrote New Chronicle and Good Government; it was present when the Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence in open defiance of the British Empire; and it was present in African American culture when James Weldon Johnson and other black leading intellectuals organized the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was an outpouring of African American literature and music in response to the centuries of othering they had found in America. This wealth of art established a black identity and a unique genre from anything in America at the time. While the Harlem Renaissance was a protest against white’s discrimination, blacks not only sought to be accepted in mainstream America, but also created their own unique black America within America. While this is attested to in their art, novels, music, and ideas, their poetry is a representative example of this unique response to othering.

The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance can be broken down into three consecutive stages. The first, from 1922 to 1923, was dominated and highly influenced by white artists and writers mostly from the Lost Generation, Bohemians dissatisfied with the materialism prevalent in America. These writers sought
to write of the African American experience, but lacked first-hand experience. Blacks took the wheel in 1924 as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL) and their respective magazines, *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, organized a group of talented young blacks to represent African Americans in the world of the arts. This Talented Tenth worked closely with white writers struggling to be accepted in America by demonstrating that black could write just as well as whites. The writing of this period was elegant and genteel with tragic heroes and Noble Savages dotting the foreground. The last phase began in 1926 as a rebellion against the NAACP- and NUL- dominated world of blacks trying to live up to their white counterparts (Lewis, xv-xvi). Writers like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay believed that the organized obsession with cultural acceptance would “cost the race its vitality” (Lewis, xxxi). This is when the true black identity became established. While some blacks believed that this “vulgarity has been mistaken for art,” for others it represented the true situation in which African Americans found themselves (Lewis, xxx). What originally started as an effort to overcome othering from white Americans became an effort to preserve black nationalism, othering in the opposite direction.

**Langston Hughes**

This transition from seeking acceptance to preserving individualism is exemplified in the works of Langston Hughes. Hughes had experienced the racial othering from his job as a messman to his harassment from the FBI for alleged communist activities. His initial entry into the world of poetry was tread carefully; his works reflected white poets such as Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. His early fit into mainstream literature at the time, just what the NAACP and NUL were looking for in their picture of the Harlem Renaissance (Rampersad and Roessel, 8-11). One such poem is his first poem published in *The Crisis*, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”:

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I’ve known rivers:
I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:
Ancient dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
(Thaddeus and Roessel, 23)

The poem, while addressing racial problems, does not challenge the status quo. It simply
forms that emulated black nationalism like chant-like forms in poetry and ideas from folk songs used as themes (“20th Century”, par. 1). Hughes challenged the centuries of slavery and discrimination that occurred in America. Such themes are present in his two poems “Black Seed” and “Negro Servant” (see text boxes, Rampersad and Roessel, 130-131):

The short lines and exclamations found in the poems do reflect more of a tribal chant than a poem of Sandburg or Whitman. Unlike his other poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes now addresses the white man’s discrimination. He calls them “white-faced gardeners” and “faces that are white.” This signified the shift in the Harlem Renaissance from passive acceptance of wrongs and struggles to be accepted by white society to the effort to preserve black culture while fighting to be respected. Not only did blacks reject white othering, they also engaged in their own form of othering; instead of embracing the things from the white man’s world, they cherished the qualities of their own.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black Seed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World-wide dusk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Of dear dark faces</td>
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<tr>
<td>Driven before an alien wind,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scattered like seed</td>
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<tr>
<td>From far-off places</td>
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<tr>
<td>Growing in soil</td>
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<tr>
<td>That’s strange and thin,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hybrid plants</td>
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<tr>
<td>In another’s garden,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flowers</td>
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<tr>
<td>In a land</td>
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<tr>
<td>That’s not your own,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cut by the shears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of the white-faced gardeners—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell them to leave you alone!</td>
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Chad Curtis
English 2010
Midterm Portfolio
Those of African descent have suffered greatly for centuries under the hands of the white man. Nearly 11 million blacks were carried from Africa to America between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Divine, 176). Europeans formed colonies, imposed artificial borders, and forced their own culture on the African continent. Slavery wasn’t outlawed in the United States until 1865, and discrimination continues to this day. The othering of the white man caused much suffering to blacks, but it also sparked an outpouring of art and culture. This culminated in the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. This created an outlet for blacks to release the pent-up hurt from centuries of abuse. Blacks did try to stay within the accepted bounds of white America by pushing slowly; they adapted white techniques and gradually pressed for change. But that changed as the Harlem Renaissance progressed into its later stages; poets such as Langston Hughes pushed the envelope by celebrating and using African culture to their own advantage. Blacks actually engaged in reverse othering. Black culture wasn’t inferior to that of the white man; it was different, and even better. Blacks celebrated in their heritage and condemned their mistreatment of their former masters. The Harlem Renaissance was an example of reverse othering in which a disadvantaged culture parries the swipes of the usurped power of the dominant culture.
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Evolution by Intelligent Design

A recurring motif throughout history is the muffling of science by religion. Early astronomers and scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler were regarded as heretics because their finding defied the beliefs of the dominant power at the time, the Catholic church. The conflict continued in the form of evolution vs. intelligent design after Charles Darwin published his work, *The Origin of Species*. What caused such tension between the two? According to Michael Zimmerman, “Where Copernicus made it clear that our planet was not the center of the universe and, indeed, that the earth revolved around the sun, Darwin articulated a vision that showed humans to be a part of nature rather than above it. In both cases, we lost what some saw as a privileged status” (para. 2-3). Christianity may seem anthropocentric, and evolution may appear atheist; however, both can be reconciled. The scientist can lead a spiritual life while the Christian can accept the principle of natural selection.

Evidence for Evolution

Many Americans dismiss evolution as “just a theory.” But what is a theory? The definition the science community uses is “an idea that has broad explanatory and predictive power that has been well supported by experimental and observational evidence;” the vernacular usage of “theory” on the other hand is “equivalent to a thought, any thought” (Zimmerman para. 16). Evolution is just a theory; but theories are the backbone of science. Gravity is “just a theory”, but no one questions gravity.
The most basic definition of evolution is change in a species or population over time. Evolution was not proposed by Darwin; Darwin simply proposed a mechanism by which evolution works, natural selection. Evolution has been around for centuries and is no longer disputed in the scientific community. Evolution draws evidence everywhere from the fossil record to comparative embryology. Darwin used finches as his evidence for evolution; Darwin found thirty-one unique species of finches that were very similar in the Galapagos islands. Their close proximity couldn’t have been by chance; an ancestral species of finch much have migrated to the islands giving rise to different species adapted to different habitats. The fossil record contains intermediates documenting the evolution on a massive timescale. The most famous, *Archaeopteryx* is the intermediate from reptiles to birds; more recently discovered are the species *Ambulocetus natans* and *Rodhocetus kasrani*, the intermediates from four-hoofed land mammals to whales. Homologous structures in different species also points to evolution; different species of vertebrates—whales, bats, humans, dogs—all have similar forearm and finger bones; however, those bones have been put to different tasks. The similar structures didn’t arise independently; they all originated from a common ancestor (Mason, p. 269).

**Evolution Criticism**

Despite the conclusive evidence backing evolution, many still don’t accept it as fact. The first argument made against evolution was William Paley’s famous watch: “the existence of a watch implied a watchmaker, the existence of design implied an intelligent designer.” Random
processes in nature can’t create the complex organs of living creatures. But natural selection isn’t random; it selects the best possible traits. The presence of vestigial structures, useless organs left over in the course of evolution, argue against an intelligent designer.

Anti-evolutionists also cite the Second Law of Thermodynamics as evidence against evolution. This law states that in a closed system, “a process that occurs will tend to increase the total entropy of the universe” (The Second Law para. 6) Entropy is a measure of disorder in the universe. In the entire universe, entropy is always increasing. “A jumble of soda cans doesn’t by itself jump neatly into a stack” (Mason, p. 258). This view incorrectly applies the Second Law; it only applies to closed systems. The Earth is constantly being fed energy from the Sun—definitely not a closed system. (Milner, para. 27)

Another argument is that natural selection doesn’t imply evolution. Natural selection does select the best traits, but those small changes in populations can’t create an entire new species. Scientists have evidence of natural selection, but none of evolution. It is true that scientists haven’t designed an experiment to test evolution, but that’s because evolution takes millions of years. But some occurrences can testify to evolution through selection. Artificial selection by humans was the driving force that created the many species of dogs from wolves. Chihuahuas and mastiffs are different species, but they originated from the same ancestors. In addition, scientists have been able to produce forms that cannot interbreed, which are considered independent species (Mason, p. 270).

**Intelligent Design and Irreducible Complexity**

In response to the theory of evolution, the theory of intelligent design (ID) arose. What is “design”? According to Dawes, design is “the work of some intelligent agent acting purposefully” (2007, 73). ID relies on Darwin for its argument: “If it could be demonstrated that
any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down” (Milner, para. 5). Defendants of ID rely on the defeat of Darwin rather than proof of design (Dawes p. 70).

Behe, one of the figureheads of ID, describes this biological structure as *irreducibly complex*, which he defines as “a single system composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning. An irreducibly complex system cannot be produced directly… because any precursor to an irreducibly complex system that is missing a part is by definition nonfunctional” (“Irreducible Complexity”, para. 1). This argument makes sense. As an example, Behe uses a mousetrap. A mousetrap has multiple parts: a flat platform, a metal hammer, a spring, a catch to release the spring, and a metal bar to hold the hammer back. If any one piece is missing, the mousetrap doesn’t work. Biological structures comparable to the mousetrap are flagella. Flagella are used by some cells to move, but they are made of many different proteins, the absence of one ruining the whole system. Other examples are cell organelles and blood clotting in animals (Milner, para. 7-8).

But evolutionists argue that irreducible complexity is a fabrication. Behe’s examples of irreducible complexity were found to be on faulty ground. The mousetrap can only catch mice when all the parts are present, but individual pieces can be used for other functions; the catch could be used as a fishhook, the base, a paperweight. One of the proteins in flagella was originally used by bacteria to inject poison into other cells (Milner, para. 14). The venom of snakes evolved from enzymes used to digest large prey (Mason p. 254). While the function of the whole system can’t be built by natural selection, its individual parts can; natural selection just adds functions.
While some systems have been proven to have evolved by evolution, others still need explanation. Irreducible complexity is still possible. Perhaps intelligent design and evolution are both true; an intelligent designer provided the raw material for evolution to work with. This view has been summed up in a widely accepted view, guided evolution. Evolution is a tool used by the intelligent designer (Brin 61).

Science Meets Religion

The debate on evolution isn’t likely to end; each side will find more evidence to disprove or discredit the other. However, the argument doesn’t need to be one-sided; religion and evolution can coexist. Evolution in no way disproves the bible, even the Genesis story. According to John Polkinghorne, ‘The Bible is not concerned with scientific minutiae….So when the Bible says that “God formed man from the dust of the earth,” it is not concerned with contradicting science or evolution any more than astrophysics contradicts the Bible when the latter says that God “also made the stars”’ (58). The Bible wasn’t written like a science textbook; it was made to testify to the power of God. If it doesn’t mention evolution or the birth of stars, it doesn’t mean the Bible is false; it’s simply abbreviated.

Most Christian religions haven’t adopted evolution into their teachings, but rather leave their members to reconcile their faith with science by themselves. One explanation is given in the LDS text the Book of Mormon: “Behold, great and marvelous are the works of the Lord. How unsearchable are the depths of the mysteries of him; and it is impossible that man should find out all his ways.” Evolution doesn’t disprove the beliefs of millions of Christians; it simply is one of the mysteries man has unfolded of God. Christians don’t look for proof, but rely on faith. This argument can be concluded with the words of the Clergy Letter Project: ““We ask
that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth” (Zimmerman, para. 46)”
Evolution is a very broad topic, but as I assumed most of my audience weren’t science majors. I decided to make my essay understandable to a more uniformed audience, so I didn’t touch many of the technical stuff. I also assumed a general background knowledge of evolution, as most of the audience has had a basic high school biology course. I knew my audience would have different views on the evolution debate, and my essay relies on a certain common ground. I tried to make my argument from both sides; evolution can be accepted as fact, but it doesn’t conflict with religion.

Having recently taken AP biology, I have a lot of background knowledge on the topic of evolution. I knew my paper wouldn’t be able to cover everything I wanted to talk about—speciation, isolation mechanisms, Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium—but I wanted to address the debate of evolution vs. intelligent design, not evolution itself. As I knew many of the mechanisms of evolution, I’ve had to reconcile evolution into my overall beliefs, so I tried to take what I’ve come up with myself and add what I’ve learned from my sources. I’ve become more informed about the debate through my research for this paper. I know some of the basic arguments behind intelligent design and the responses from evolutionists.

I relied heavily on two sources: my high school biology textbook and the SLCC library databases. My biology book provided me with a lot of the technical stuff, while the SLCC databases helped my find different sides of the debate. I used a comic to illustrate the evolution vs. intelligent design debate and to add a bit of humor. I did try to include a mix of logos, pathos, and ethos. For logos, I used many of the facts and mechanisms behind how cells work; logos worked well to back up the evolution side of the debate. Pathos backed up the religious side of the debate. Ethos worked to reconcile both sides; I used such sources as the clergy and scriptural texts as well as leading scientists open to religion.
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Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 1 Jul 2009


Writing about something on which you have background knowledge usually improves your paper; writing about something you enjoy makes it even better. I tried to pick topics that met both of these requirements when brainstorming for a subject. I studied both the Harlem Renaissance and evolution in my other courses. I also studied Langston Hughes in previous English classes. I was introduced to the Harlem Renaissance in my AP US History class; I was fascinated. From previous history classes, the only knowledge I had of African Americans was slavery. I knew little of their culture or progression to the present day. When we started reading the poetry of Hughes in English class, I went out of my way to find more poetry by Hughes’ contemporaries. This report I wrote reflects what I learned in my classes as well as my new understanding I learned in my reports. All these experiences have sharpened my respect of African Americans.

My evolution paper was based on another topic I had previously encountered in school. Up until high school, evolution was always a joke—humans came from monkeys and all that. I didn’t really understand evolution until my AP biology class. There I learned about reproductive isolation mechanisms, Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium, and geographic radiation. I enjoyed learning the mechanisms behind evolution, but the topic became slightly uncomfortable when we began human evolution. I knew I’d eventually have to face the evolution vs. creationism debate myself. This report gave me the opportunity to really define what I believe while learning about others’ opinions.

The Harlem Renaissance isn’t a topic that most people know about, so my topic was purely informative. I made sure to give a brief overview of the Harlem Renaissance before I went very specific into poetry and Langston Hughes, so my audience wouldn’t
be lost. Evolution is the more touchy subject. The entire science community accepts evolution as fact, while many of the uninformed public refuse to believe it exists. Some believe that evolution disproves the existence of a god, others firmly deny any evidence of evolution, while others have shaky faith in light of evolution. In my paper, I sought to stabilize the situation and move all sides closer to the same playing field. I wanted to offer the view that there isn’t a solid straight line between evolution and God. I tried to construct a safe house where evolutionists and churchgoers could meet and perhaps see the other’s view.

I think both my papers were strong, but I did enjoy my report more. I also think it looks better stylistically. My report expressed the “Othering” theme throughout the entire paper. I regret not making this move in my position paper, because it could give my paper a more universal theme. I liked this effect because it united the piece into a cohesive whole. While I introduced new points and different aspects on the topic, it all tied back to othering. I think it also made the audience (our class) think a bit on the othering theme; I took the othering theme and turned it on its side looking at othering of the subjected culture. I wanted to make my paper unusual so my audience could be enriched and entertained. I used both of these methods at the advice of my teacher; the othering theme makes my paper applicable to parallel situations while the new twist on othering moves my paper a step above simply repeating what previous writers have said.

For sources, I used a lot of texts from previous courses. This provided a solid base for my research because it contained all my previous experience with the topic. But research entails more than quoting what you already know; I made sure to try new places to incorporate views I haven’t learned. One of my favorite sources was the SLCC
databases. This was especially useful on my evolution paper because it had many varied sources from both sides of the debate. I did use Google to find a couple sources such as pictures, but I tried to tone down on search engines. I could find more credible sources elsewhere. I spent a lot of time at the library and bookstore. This was one of my best sources for my report; the complete collection of Lanston Hughes was prefect for my paper on the Harlem Renaissance.

To make appeals to my audience, I used various methods. In my research paper, I used logos to establish my overall othering theme; I used reasoning to establish how blacks used othering to establish their unique identity. I also used pathos when describing the hardships African Americans went through during the time period. My choice of poems also backed up my appeals to emotion and authority. Langston Hughes was one of the most respected poets of the time. The poems I picked illustrated the difficulties blacks suffered under white rule.

My evolution paper used less pathos. Logos worked well to establish the evidence of evolution. Logos was the basis of the entire evolutionist side of the debate. I used a lot of scriptural texts and quoted the clergy for my religious argument making an appeal to authority.

Have I improved as a writer? I’ve made more conscious decisions about stylistic measures than I have before. I made sure my pictures were rhetorical and supported my argument. I tried using rhetorical devices such as comparisons and examples to illustrate topics. I tried persuasive strategies such as citing precedents and disproving opposing arguments. I’ve consciously decided which appeal would make the best argument before writing. I think I can say answer the question of improvement with a resounding yes.