

Appeals for (Mis)recognition

Theorizing the Diaspora

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In 1920, some three years before he actually visited the African continent, Langston Hughes had implicitly theorized his connection to Africa in such poems as "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Written on a train as Hughes traveled across the Mississippi river, the poem became a signature piece, its first line providing the title for one of the chapters of Hughes's autobiography *The Big Sea*:

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.¹

To see the poem as a theory one has to see it as a claim of racial identity, of shared consciousness, of a Negro intersubjectivity in which old world and new world stand together in a mutual relationship that predates European civilization. The voice of Hughes's Negro, despite its movement across time from the "dawn of civilization" to the emancipation of enslaved black Americans, is presented as

timeless. The poem creates "a unified image of . . . racial and spiritual antecedents" which has been deemed characteristic of African American thinking about the African mainland.² Emphasizing the African American's "original bonds with the ancestral continent," Hughes's "theory" sutures the new world and the old, thus positing the possibility of erasing the diaspora since the consciousness alluded to in the poem knows no separation: Africa is where its people are, and going to Africa is going to the self one already knows. Africa is not so much a discovery as a reconfirmation.

By reprinting his poem in *The Big Sea* Hughes suggests that his theory of African identity was subjected to a more or less empirical test when in 1923 he first visited Africa while serving as a mess-boy on a freighter. As Hughes narrates his voyage, he recalls that upon finally reaching "the great Africa of my dreams," he was forced to realize that "the Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro" (11). They called Hughes a "'white man,'" making Africa "the only place in the world where I've ever been called a white man" (103). This paradox opens Hughes's autobiography, a book which ends with the failure of the Harlem Renaissance and with Hughes heading to Haiti, rather than to Africa, because he "needed sun" (334).

Framed by voyages to Africa and the Caribbean, *The Big Sea* marks out the contradictions that often haunted attempts to realize black transatlantic political visions through the first forty years of the twentieth century. What I want to discuss here are not so much the overwhelming obstacles—the intellectual, political, economic, and military interventions of Western governments—that have impeded or undermined attempts to mobilize intercontinental black alliances against colonialism and imperialism, whether those attempts took the form of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association or of W.E.B. Du Bois's call in *Darkwater* for the "building of a new African State."³ Rather, using *The Big Sea* as a template, I would first like to explore the way that Hughes's biography illuminates the ambiguities that inhere in diasporic thought—ambiguities that make diasporic visions possible. Then I would like to address the way that those ambiguities encourage and frustrate both the desire to forge links between blacks in Africa and the West and the attempt to establish connections between black elites and masses in urban centers in the United States. If Hughes's poem proclaims the identity of the disparate peoples of the diaspora, his narrative confronts the difficulty of sustaining, from a new world perspective, the imaginative contemporaneity of Africa and the "West" and of black elites and masses.

Although "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" seeks to bring together the voices of the diaspora, the poem can make coincident only an African past and an African American present, leaving uninterrogated the relationship of Africans to black Americans in 1920.⁴ Ancient Egypt in the poem is closer to blacks in the United States than is the Dakar or the Monrovia of the 1920s. Where Benedict Anderson has argued that nationalisms were launched largely upon the engine of print capitalism (the novel and the newspaper guaranteeing the simultaneity of experience that makes possible the imagined communities of nations),⁵ Hughes tries to imagine an African transnationalism that dispenses with the technologies of print culture. As he embarks for Africa, Hughes throws his books, "all the books I had had at Columbia, and all the books I had lately bought to read," into the ocean (3).⁶ Treating books as if they would be an impediment to his encounter with his idealized homeland, Hughes in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" proffers the river itself, which is timeless and not marked by any date, as the shared text of the African imagination.

To be sure, the construction of pasts and traditions and the shedding of "foreign" influences are central features of nationalist visions. Here, however, Hughes's repudiation of written texts sets the stage for confounding the very project he is seeking to accomplish. To return again to Anderson's argument, the novel, the newspaper, and the "steady onward clocking of homogenous, empty time" denoted by the latter helped create an "imagined linkage" among disparate individuals, necessary for imagined communities. The newspaper guarantees the movement of time so that "if Mali disappears from the pages of *The New York Times* after two days of famine reportage, for months on end, readers do not for a moment imagine that Mali has disappeared or that famine has wiped out all its citizens. The novelistic format of the newspaper assures them that somewhere out there the character Mali moves along quietly, awaiting its next reappearance in the plot."⁷ The series of rivers in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," however, is really one continuing flow of water. Though it, too, assures us of Africa's continued existence, it does so only in terms of an endless extension of an "original bond." One never imagines that Mali ceases to exist; Africa is always there. Upon reencountering Mali, however, the voyager in Hughes's poetic vision also asserts that "time" has not meant anything to it or, for that matter, to any African geography. The Nile in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is the Nile of the pyramids. There is nothing new in Africa.

In fact, Africa is routinely imagined as the place about which, and from which, it is difficult to get the news. W. E. B. Du Bois, writing in his

1940 autobiography *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (and writing, not so coincidentally, about his trip to Liberia in 1923), observed that "The one great lack in Africa is communication—communication as represented by human contact, movement of goods, dissemination of knowledge. All these things we have. . . . [O]ur newspapers and magazines so overwhelm us with knowledge—knowledge of all sorts and kinds from particulars as to our neighbors' underwear to Einstein's mathematics—that one of the great and glorious joys of the African bush is to escape from 'news'"⁸ The dateline that provides the pretext for simultaneous activity in the cultures of print capitalism would serve no purpose here. Africa is always imagined in retrospect—as the place one has come from—or in a retrospective prospect—as the home one is going to. In either case the contemporary "reality" of Africa and Africans is largely occluded by retrospective and prospective visions. Even when not fully occluded, African contemporaneity requires a re-shuffling of temporal categories. "At the same time" acquires a different meaning when Du Bois attempts to place Africans and Westerners in the same temporal frame. "Primitive men," Du Bois writes, "are not following us afar, frantically waving and seeking our goals: primitive men are not behind us in some swift foot-race. Primitive men have already arrived. They are abreast, and in places ahead of us; in others behind. But all their curving advance line is contemporary, not prehistoric. They have used other paths and these paths have led them by scenes sometimes fairer, sometimes uglier than ours, but always toward the Pools of Happiness."⁹ A version of the separate development argument, Du Bois's efforts to put Africa and the West on an equal temporal footing seems to require putting them on a "separate" temporal footing.

Upsetting Du Bois's harmonic diachrony, however, is the discovery that in having gotten at least some of the latest news, Africans are not only treading different paths, but intruding on Du Bois's own. Elsewhere in *Dusk of Dawn*, when describing the trouble he encountered while trying to establish the Pan-African Congress, Du Bois concedes that some communication was not difficult to get, even on the African continent: "News of [Marcus Garvey's] movement . . . [had] penetrated every corner of Africa."¹⁰ Confirming Du Bois's observation, Hughes also observes that "the name of Marcus Garvey was known the length and breadth of the West Coast of Africa" (102). Moreover, not only had Africans heard of Garvey, they were willing to contest metropolitan readings of the news about him and to "read" Hughes and Du Bois in the light of the Garveyesque text. Hughes notes that many of the Africans he encountered re-

garded Garvey with a seriousness that he was no longer able to command in New York. "The Africans did not laugh at Marcus Garvey, as so many people laughed in New York. They hoped what they had heard about him was true—that he really would unify the black world, and free and exalt Africa" (102). African interpretations of Western news about Garvey were such that Du Bois was moved to complain that his own "Pan-African Congress was [often] confounded with the Garvey movement." As a result, Du Bois lamented that Garvey's problems reverberated beyond the sphere of his own organization, likewise subjecting Du Bois's enterprise to "suspicion and attack."¹¹

Du Bois and Hughes discover that their own encounters with peoples from Africa were necessarily shaped by the Africans' prior encounters with those "presumably like them" (or with news about those presumably like them). Prior encounters and prior news mark the history of continued contact between Africa and African descendants in the West, a history which tends to get written out of imaginings such as those in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and which though acknowledged in *The Big Sea* does not become the basis of continued interactions. This elision both makes possible the misrecognitions that I will speak of shortly and points up how differences among black intellectuals and political leaders in the West (especially as these elites sought to legitimate themselves vis-à-vis the newly urbanized black masses) figure as central features of diasporic thinking.

Often described as a primitive, non-Western mass, the African Americans who began migrating to Northern cities during the early decades of the twentieth century presented to black writers and intellectuals a problem similar to that presented by the geographically distant inhabitants of Africa. In Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, another text contemporary with *The Big Sea*, Wright describes the migrating peasantry as a people whose "faces do not change . . . [whose] cheek bones remain as unaltered as the stony countenance of the Sphinx."¹² These masses read the newspapers, but take from these papers not an assurance that time moves on evenly throughout the world. Instead what they discover is that time moves for others and not for themselves: "We pick up the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, or the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, or the *Detroit Free Press*, or the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, or the *New York Times*, and see that some former neighbor of ours, a Mr. and Mrs. Klein or Murphy or Potaci or Pierre or Cromwell or Stepanovich and their children—kids we once played with upon slag piles—are now living in the suburban areas, having swum upstream through the American waters of opportunity into the professional

classes."¹³ Wright's river, which he himself has successfully navigated, is not a river of memory but a river of progress. (In contrast to Hughes who hymns the Mississippi River as timeless, Wright sings the praises of the Ohio River as a threshold for the future—"it is a symbol, a line that runs through our hearts, dividing hope from despair, just as once it bisected the nation, dividing freedom from slavery" [205].) And like the immigrants he names in *Voices*, Wright has moved into the world defined by the newspaper, leaving behind those black Americans who "move slowly and speak slowly,"¹⁴ and who in fact resemble Wright's father—"a black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life, but who had failed in the city . . . that same city which had lifted me in its burning arms and borne me toward alien and undreamed-of shores of knowing." The writer and the black peasant are "forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly different planes of reality."¹⁵ Written in the first-person plural as if to suggest that Wright's voice and that of the black laboring classes are one and the same, *12 Million Black Voices* nonetheless underscores the difference between Wright and his black brethren. If the first-person plural of *12 Million Black Voices* were to be realized, it would not be voiced by African Americans as they were, but as they were becoming. It would be uttered by those, who—unlike Wright's father—possessed the capacity to "mov[e] into the sphere of conscious history."¹⁶

While Hughes's account of the newly urbanized black peasantry departed dramatically from Wright's description of them as the backwater of racial progress, their visions share similar features. For Hughes, "the ordinary Negroes . . . who work hard for a living with their hands . . . [were] the people who keep on going" (208–9). The laboring folk who persisted in their country ways provided the guarantee of cultural continuity. Nonetheless these folk in Hughes's vision did not inhabit the same world as the black elites. In Harlem for example, time and experience are not at all homogenous for the different classes of blacks, but bifurcated: "The ordinary Negroes," Hughes observes, "hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance" that had come to define the black literati (228). One had to have been an intellectual to have believed that the Harlem Renaissance had revolutionized the nation's racial hierarchy. According to Hughes, the renaissance had had a class-specific character to it, leaving the ordinary Negroes, like African blacks, in a different time frame.

What also functions in these narratives (other than temporal bifurcation) as a powerful organizing force is the emergence of the metropolis, not merely as the locus for trade but as the psychic map for renegotiating personal and group identity. The emergence of the urban center

signals an initially subtle but ultimately decisive rewriting of points of origin—whether African homeland or rural small town—in terms of a telos of urbanization. This emergence did not necessarily mean, as Eric Hobsbawm points out, that the “urban poor were prepared to follow the lead of the frankly anti-traditionalist modernizers.”¹⁷ It signaled, rather, that these new urban masses were changing the world within which their “leaders” had traditionally operated.

When Booker T. Washington wrote *Up From Slavery* at the turn of the century, he could still lament urbanization as a false start for the development of black people. Troubled by the African Americans he saw in Washington, D. C., the Wizard of Tuskegee uttered the wish “that by some power of magic I might remove the great bulk of these people into the country districts and plant them upon the soil, upon the solid foundation of Mother Nature, where all nations and races that have ever succeeded have gotten their start—, a start that at first may be slow and toilsome, but one that is nevertheless real.”¹⁸ Though his wizardry was not equal to his wish, Washington’s power as a Southern race leader was sufficient to impel a number of others to try to impede the black migration northward. “From Hampton Institute, Tuskegee, and elsewhere, Washingtonian spokesmen advised black southerners to stay on the farm.”¹⁹

Washington’s lament and efforts notwithstanding (he died in 1915), Northern cities by the 1920s had become the sites of the most up-to-date production of black identities which, it was assumed, would inspire emulation in those from the hinterlands. James Weldon Johnson’s *Black Manhattan* (1930) in essence writes the history of African Americans as a journey to Harlem, with heroic figures from the black past—Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass—performing not merely as black Americans, but as prototypical New Yorkers. Of the latter, Johnson writes that “As long as there are American Negroes Frederick Douglass will be remembered, but he will be remembered and honoured chiefly for the prodigious things he accomplished as a Negro in New York.”²⁰

While it is undeniably true that a great deal of nostalgia for African American folk life attended the accelerated urbanization of the 1920s, it is important to see that such nostalgia did not necessarily bespeak a real desire to return to the countryside. The fact that Harlem itself, even during its 1920s heyday, was often the object of nostalgic longings indicates otherwise. These longings for return were rather a way of wondering whether “white” civilization on the one hand and black peasant culture on the other could be retrofitted with components taken from one another. If such an operation were plausible, then quite possibly an urbanized

black intellectual elite would emerge not merely as the leadership cadre of blacks in the United States but as the vanguard of blacks worldwide. In the opinion of Antonio Gramsci, there was reason to welcome the “influence that these negro intellectuals could exercise on the backward masses of Africa.”²¹

Whether uttered by Du Bois, Garvey, Gramsci, and others, optimism about the possibility of worldwide black leadership tended to assume that this process would proceed, at least for a time, along imperialist lines of power established between the West and Africa. In general, as Judith Stein points out, there was widespread agreement that jump-starting African modernity would require the “European . . . planning and efficiency” of the “new imperialism.”²² African American influence on the African continent would depend, according to Gramsci, largely on whether “American expansionism should use American negroes as its agents of conquest of the African market and the extension of American civilisation.”²³ Striking similar notes, E. W. Blyden favor[ed] both English language and colonization as means for grafting “European progress wholesale on African conservatism and stagnation,”²⁴ and Marcus Garvey imagined the “trade relationship . . . in Africa, in the United States, in South and Central America and the West Indies” in such a way that the binding ties among black folk would have looked little different from those that linked American whites to African blacks. Had his enterprise succeeded, Garvey proclaimed, “we would have been removing raw materials from plantations of far-off Africa, from South and Central America, and the West Indies, to our factories in the United States.”²⁵

If the placement of Africa under direct control of European nation-states would make possible the capitalist transformation that African blacks, left to themselves, could not bring about, then all Western black elites need insist on was the ultimate right of blacks to rule in the stead of Europeans.²⁶ To be sure there were critical differences, real and imagined, between black and white imperialism. For example, the commission for the African State that Du Bois imagined in the 1920s was infused with socialist principles and urged that “there should be no violent tampering with the curiously efficient African institutions of local self-government through family and the tribe.”²⁷ Nonetheless, though he was visiting Liberia under the auspices of the United States government, Du Bois clearly hoped that there was no chance of mistaking his intentions for those of untrustworthy white government officials. It should either have been possible for Liberians to recognize at a glance that Du Bois represented progressive rather than exploitative transatlantic relations or for

Du Bois to assure the Liberians that "the wishes and hopes of Negro Americans . . . [for] the advancement and integrity of Liberia [were] the sincere prayer[s] of America."²⁸

If nothing else, Hughes's *The Big Sea* illustrates how uncertain was the likelihood of either possibility. Returning for the moment to the unwillingness of the Africans to regard Hughes as black, what Hughes receives from a Kru man from Liberia, presumably the Tom Pey who is mentioned elsewhere in the narrative, is an explanation which reveals that the refusal was more than a matter of color:

"Here," he said, "on the West Coast, there are not many colored people—people of mixed blood—and those foreign colored men who are here come mostly as missionaries, to teach us something, since they think we know nothing. Or they come from the West Indies, as clerks and administrators in the colonial governments, to help carry out the white man's laws. So the Africans call them all *white men*."

"But I am not white," I said.

"You are not black either," the Kru man said simply. "There is a man of my color." And he pointed to George, the pantryman, who protested loudly.

"Don't point at me," George said. "I'm from Lexington, Kentucky, U.S.A. And no African blood, nowhere."

"You black," said the Kru man.

"I can part my hair," said George, "and it ain't nappy."

But to tell the truth, George shaved a part in his hair every other week, since the comb wouldn't work. The Kru man knew this, so they both laughed loudly, for George's face was as African as Africa. (103)

This comedy of misrecognition, in which Hughes who appeals for misrecognition as an African is misrecognized as white and George who appeals for misrecognition as a Kentuckian is misrecognized as African points up the conditions of the diasporan subject. Recognition can never preclude misrecognition because one can always be identified as other than what one claims to be. Hughes's appeal to be recognized by the Kru man as a fellow African opens up the possibility that he can be misrecognized as something other than African, as someone from a place outside of Africa, with interests distinct from those with whom he claims affinity. By Hughes's own admission the Kru man's misrecognition is correct. For example, in regard to his labor relations with the native people, Hughes, like "everybody else on board," had "an African boy to do my washing, my cleaning, and almost all my work" (7). Thus to be cognizant of oneself as a diasporan subject is always to be aware of oneself, no matter where

one is, as from elsewhere, in the process of making a not quite legitimate appeal to be considered as if one were from here.

Even when Hughes "tell[s] the truth" about George's hair, he has not settled the matter. In light of the reasons that West Africans label colored people white, George would be no more African than Hughes. He is part of the crew on which Langston serves and which participates in the despoiling of the African towns where the ship docks. As if to depict graphically the ambiguity of diasporan identity, Hughes recalls a day when "crew-solidarity out weighed race" (116): During a fight against a multiracial crew from a British ship, "George and the Puerto Ricans and I yelled, too: 'Get them niggers! Get them limeys,'" forgetting that "we didn't like the word *nigger* applied to ourselves" (116).

The rather surprising ease with which racial solidarity is supplanted, even if only momentarily, by another group identification further indicates that the Kru man's suspicion about Hughes's claims of racial affinity are at least partially warranted. Had Hughes's critic been watching the altercation between the Malone and the British ship and overheard the epithets yelled by Hughes and his shipmates, he would have felt more than justified in labeling Hughes a white man. Nonetheless, Hughes's willingness to report this embarrassing episode suggests that a central concern of *The Big Sea* is not to hide, but to explore the various failures to secure black transatlantic aims. For example, Hughes dramatizes the failure of Garveyism by presenting "a colored tailor, a Garveyite who had long worshipped Africa from afar, and who had a theory of civilization all his own." An unmistakable air of ridicule pervades Hughes representation of the tailor's belief "that if he could just teach the Africans to wear proper clothes, coats and pants, they would be brought forward a long way toward the standards of our world" (8). In contrast to the sailors like Hughes who "carried nothing but ourselves" to the African continent, the Garveyite "carried with him on his journey numberless bolts of cloth, shears, and tailoring tools, and a trunk full of smart patterns" (8). The tailor's supplies, Hughes tells us, are of no use. Hughes goes on to claim that "years later, by accident, I ran into that same tailor in Washington and he said he had had no luck at all selling suits to Africans" (112).

Hughes's luck among the Africans in *The Big Sea*, however, is little better. If carrying copious supplies proves to be of no avail to the tailor's attempt to secure connections on the African continent, carrying nothing but oneself is shown to be equally ineffective for Hughes and his fellow black sailors, if their desire is to secure mutually beneficial rela-

tions. Hughes is rebuffed in his attempt to see the Omali dance because he is identified as "a white man." And when the penniless George spends the night with a woman on shore, it is only a Garveyesque maneuver that saves him. Having been given a suit of clothes by the chief engineer, "George later gave the suit to a woman in Lagos with whom he stayed the night, because, in the morning he had no money to pay her, so she raised hell. Therefore, he gave her the suit" (110).

More curiously, when met with an African of mixed racial background named Edward, it is Hughes who rebuffs the attempted connection. Described as "a mulatto boy of perhaps sixteen or seventeen, whose skin was golden, not brown, or black" and "dressed in European clothing," Edward shows an extraordinary interest in England and the United States and "ask[s] if we had any English papers or magazines" (104). The boy's interest in the West derives largely from his isolation in his village where disapproval of his mother's relationship with a white man leaves Edward with "almost nobody to talk to" (104). Hughes, however, fails to provide the needed rescue. Studiously avoiding referring to Edward as an African, Hughes sympathizes with the young man's plight, but does not apparently assist him. Having thrown his books into the ocean, Hughes presumably has little to offer the young man except the news of the place he is trying to forget. Lonely and isolated, Edward is clearly seeking companionship and possibly passage out of Africa. He wishes to be a part of the world of print and print culture and to that end "had taken [Hughes's] address to write [him] in America" (105). The boy does write, but Hughes fails to respond, saying that he did not "know what to say" (105).

Hughes's failure to respond to Edward's letter—his inability to sustain a connection with the young man (Hughes does write a short story, "African Morning," based on the boy's troubles) marks a turning point in the narrative. The exploits of the sailors aboard the *Malone* grow more hostile to the coastal peoples. Having nothing to give in exchange for what one wants sets the stage for gross depredations by the *Malone's* crew. On one occasion Hughes's crew finds itself carrying British currency in a French colony, making it impossible for them to trade with the inhabitants: "The natives would not take the British money. They didn't know what it was. In fact, they thought it wasn't money at all, so we couldn't buy anything" (108). Like the rest of his crew, Hughes cannot conduct business. When, however, another boy in Hughes's crew discovers that United Cigar Coupons look passably like French francs, the crew is able to put this worthless currency into circulation so that they "bought up the town" (109). They go from being unable to buy anything to being able to buy

everything, giving the peoples with whom they conduct business nothing of value in exchange. Then when two "African girls" row out to the *Malone* in order to sell sexual favors, they are exploited by crew. The "bo'sun" takes one of the girls for himself, and the other is raped repeatedly by the crew, who leave unanswered her cries for "Mon-nee! Mon-nee!" (108).

Hughes's text in no way endorses the *Malone's* more heinous exploits—Hughes goes to bed during the rape because he "couldn't bear to hear [the girl] crying," and when the African men in Burutu tell Hughes that "white strong men come to take our palm oil and ivory, our ebony and mahogany, to buy our women and bribe our chiefs" (108, 120), Hughes is deeply disturbed by a vision of a trade in African flesh that has not ended even in the twentieth century. Yet while registering Hughes's disgust with the actions of his shipmates, the autobiography mimics the *Malone's* desire to place distance between itself and its African transactions. For Hughes the text displays a desire to put distance between himself and the obligation that poems like "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" had implicitly assumed. These poems had attracted the attention of his wealthy white patron Charlotte Mason, whose preoccupation with a primitive vision of Africa threatened to fix Hughes in a rigid relationship with the continent. Wishing to create a museum of African art, she imagined, "little Negro children running in and out learning to respect themselves through the realization of those treasures. And . . . as the fire burned in me, I had the mystical vision of a great bridge reaching from Harlem to the heart of Africa, across which the Negro world, that our white United States had done everything to annihilate, should see the flaming pathway . . . and recover the treasure their people had had in the beginning of African life on the earth."²⁹ Hers is a vision that seeks to heal the separation constitutive of the diaspora, and it finds a welcome echo in Hughes's work.

In the light of her vision of a transatlantic highway, Mason insisted that Hughes continue to turn out poetry celebrating black "primitiveness." But as Hughes describes his decision in *The Big Sea*, he resisted her vision by adopting George's strategy of claiming an identity located in American geography: "She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. And I was not what she wanted me to be" (325). While Hughes could have objected to his patron's expectations by challenging her definition of Africa as the

locale of the primitive (he might have, for example, told her of Tom Pey and of Edward), he chooses instead to locate himself within an American geography, an urban geography, reinvoicing George's protest to the Kruman. However, while George's invocation of American geography was calculated simply as a denial of an African connection, Hughes uses the American claim to assert a specific political identity. He claims a class identification within the African-American social structure which sets him against the "upper class colored people consist[ing] largely of government workers, professors and teachers, doctors, lawyers, and resident politicians" (206), giving in the text a hint at the radical politics that had really upset Mason. Having written poems that subsume race within an interracial class identification, Hughes had precipitated a break with his patron.

But in *The Big Sea* even his embrace of a radical identity is more a strategy of disavowal than an assumption of another obligation. Poems which would have irked Mason, like "An Open Letter to the South" which laid claim to "the mines and the factories and the office towers/At Harlan, Richmond, Gastonia, Atlanta, New Orleans," are largely supplanted in the text by the urban geographies of lower-class black folk.³⁰ While Arnold Rampersad overstates the case in saying that in *The Big Sea* Hughes's "leftist opinions and involvements have vanished without a trace"³¹—Hughes reminds his readers that his poems had been called "proletarian" (272)—Hughes was indeed worried about his possible "estrang[ement] from the black masses." The problem, however, was not that "radicalism paid very poorly in America,"³² but that poetry itself was not a mass art form, and Hughes's aesthetic called for him to be a poet of the people who was paid like a professional.

Although Hughes opens his text by throwing his books into the ocean, the desire that becomes most evident by the end of the narrative is the desire "to put into books" the "masses of our people" and to "mak[e] my living from writing." Correspondingly, Hughes ends *The Big Sea* with a gesture of retrieval: "Literature is a big sea full of many fish. I let down my nets and pulled" (335). The sea that Hughes imagines, however, is a sea full of fish and not fishermen. The masses have a story worth telling, but Hughes's narrative does not, indeed cannot, fully imagine them doing so. Nonetheless in expressing the desire to connect with others outside the pages of a book, Hughes's text utters the political desires of a literary elite to ground itself in a distinctly black, laboring class identity. This desire was not specious but stemmed from the fact that the expressive power of black literature in the West has derived from its necessary misrecognition

as a world-changing force. *The Big Sea* censures the naive aspects of such misrecognitions by excoriating the millennial expectations of the Harlem literati. Nonetheless, Hughes's commitment to the laboring black masses and to the lingering shadow of Africa was itself evidence that Hughes could not entirely dispense with such misrecognitions himself. This is to say that the world that Hughes's text sought to imagine and represent was indeed undergoing dramatic changes, changes which his work could register and seek to keep abreast of, but which it could not itself affect or control. The well-rounded shape of Hughes's biography notwithstanding, what *The Big Sea*—even through its title—pointed up was that the diaspora is a thought whose closure cannot be seen by any one individual nor imagined by any single text. It both was and was not Garvey's *Black Star Line* and Du Bois's Pan-African Congress. It was and was not Tom Pey's refusal to countenance Hughes's face as African. It was and is, perhaps most of all, a desire to speak these contradictions in a single voice. Yet, as emblemized by Edward's unanswered letter to Langston Hughes, this voice could not be single but was, and is, poignantly dependent on getting an answer from invisible shores.

Notes

- 1 Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), pp. 55–56. Further references appear parenthetically in text.
- 2 Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 90.
- 3 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Hands of Ethiopia," in *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986), p. 948.
- 4 Also see in this regard, "Afro-American Fragment," in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1959; New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 3.
- 5 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), pp. 28–49.
- 6 Hughes did, however, keep his copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. See Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: vol. 1 1902–41, I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 72.
- 7 Anderson, p. 37.
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