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Astrid Haas

ASTRID HAAS (Universität Bielefeld)

Introduction: The Harlem Renaissance in an Inter-American Perspective

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In the preface to his seminal anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), the first collection of black U.S. American verse to appear with a major United States publishing house (Edwards 45), James Weldon Johnson employs the term “Aframerican” in the widest possible sense, as a designator for people of African descent from the entire American hemisphere rather than as an exclusive label for blacks from the United States (1959, 37-40; also Edwards 48). In his preface he emphasizes that alongside such luminaries of black U.S. writing as Paul Lawrence Dunbar stand Afro-Latin American poets like “Plácido and Mantano in Cuba; Vieux and Durand in Haiti; Machado de Assis in Brazil, and others” (“Creative” 37; also Chrisman 807; Edwards 48). The collection itself, although focusing largely on U.S.-American writing, adequately includes a few poems by black anglo- and hispanophone Caribbean writers (Edwards 47, 50; Chrisman 807). In 1966, Julio Le Riverend (re)conceptualizes a hemispheric “Afroamérica,” which he defines as “the black zone ... situated basically on the Atlantic coast of the two continents” (23; trans. and qtd. in Coser 175-76, n. 6). More recently, Agustín Lao-Montes calls for a notion of “Afroamerica” that encompasses the black experience throughout the Americas [1], and Abdul Alkalimat envisions a concept of “African American Studies” that “covers the entire American hemisphere, including North, Central, and South America, the Caribbean, and ... Greenland. ... [T]here are more than 103 million Black people of African descent throughout the Americas, of which only 27% are in the U.S.A., while 47% are in Brazil” (1).

Interactions between Afro U.S. and Latin American cultures, however, have never been limited to the *black* experience in the Latin and Caribbean countries. As Ifeoma C.K. Nwankwo points out, “engagements with Latin America and Latin Americans have constituted a crucial element of US African-American attempts to gain access to and recognition within mainstream US literary, intellectual, and political discourses” (580; see also Coser; Jackson). In his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), James Weldon Johnson depicts the interactions among black (or

mulatto) U.S. Americans and Cuban migrant workers in Florida (*Autobiography*; Chrisman 807). Three years after Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry*, another volume of black writing and thought, the text collection *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke and based on a special issue of *Survey Graphic* magazine earlier that year, includes a short story set in Panama and written by Panamanian-Guayanese writer Eric Walrond (Locke, *New*; also Nwankwo 598 n.10). In his foreword, Locke cites the Harlem Renaissance in the United States and the Mexican *Indigenismo* movement of the 1920s, also labeled "Mexican Renaissance," as two among several "nascent movements of folk expression and self-determination which are playing a creative part in the world to-day". [2] Locke was probably also familiar with an earlier issue of *Survey Graphic* entitled *Mexico: A Promise* (1924). The contributors to that volume included, among others, the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos, the Mexican artist and key proponent of the *Indigenismo* movement, Diego Rivera, and the U.S.-based German artist Winold Reiss, who created the graphic design for Locke's *The New Negro* and became one of the major artists of the Harlem Renaissance (Porter; also Mehring 237-39).

As these examples indicate, the Harlem Renaissance always had a transnational dimension, to which black Caribbean immigrants to Harlem contributed (Watkins-Owens), most prominently among them the Afro-Puerto Rican writer, historian, and activist Arturo/Arthur Schomburg (Kirschner 36-37), as well as black U.S.-American travels and travails abroad, or the interactions among artists and intellectuals of different nations and their affiliation with the poor and ethnically/racially oppressed populations within and beyond their national borders (Edwards; Luis-Brown 147-201). Latin American writing from the same period further attests to the integration of the Harlem Renaissance in an international array of socio-aesthetic movements, for example when the Cuban journalist José Antonio Fernández de Castro labels the Harlem-based Mexican caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias "the discoverer of the Negroes of Harlem" (43, my translation; also Chrisman 813; Guridy 127). That Latin Americans were critically aware of the differences that would remain between black U.S. and Latin American cultures becomes evident most pronouncedly in Nicolás Guillén's essay "El camino de Harlem" (1929). Here, the Afro-Cuban poet warns against the spread of the U.S.-American system of racial segregation in his native country due to the growing political, economic, and cultural influence of the United States in the Caribbean. The titular "road to Harlem" signifies the path to racial segregation and black ghettoization, despite the merits of Harlem for black culture. [3] Nonetheless, as one result of these multiple exchanges among the New Negro movement in the United States, the different *Negrismo* movements in hispano- and lusophone Latin America, and the French Caribbean *Négritude* [4], a black diasporic [5] consciousness emerged that "enabled black people to 'feel' part of the same 'gente' ... irrespective of their cultural and linguistic background." [6]

The Black Atlantic's Western shores stretch from Newfoundland to Tierra del Fuego and that "the heart of the New World African diaspora lies not north of the border, [between Mexico and] the United States, but south" (Andrews 3). The present volume ventures into exploring the hemispheric scope of this black diaspora, taking the example of the Harlem Renaissance—its artists, intellectuals, and activists and their work, agendas, and reception— as a phenomenon of international dimensions. In so doing, this issue of *FIAR* hopes to be a worthy homonym of *Fire!!* (1926), the (albeit short-lived) black literary magazine of the Harlem Renaissance, whose exploring controversial subjects like homosexuality, prostitution, or color prejudice in the African American community challenged established conventions of black (self-)representation (Johnson and Johnson 78-84). In a similar, though less radical, vein, the present volume contributes to a growing body of scholarship that strives to bridge the gap between the research paradigms of African U.S. American, Black Caribbean, and Black Atlantic Studies with their predominant focus on the English- and French-speaking sections of the American hemisphere, on the one hand (Cosser 7-8; Evans), and of U.S. Latina/o, Latin American, and Hispanic Caribbean Studies, in which Afro-Latin perspectives remain under-discussed, on the other (Kirschner 7-14, 27, 36-38; Lao-Montes). Inter-American Studies, as a body of transnational and -regional scholarship on the Americas in the sense of hemispheric (Post-)Area Studies, I argue, enables a viable expansion, yet not a displacement, of existing disciplinary and regional approaches, as it offers the opportunity of a non-hierarchical dialogue with scholarship and paradigms of thought not only from various areas of inquiry but also from outside the hitherto dominant North American—and with regard to scholarship on Latin America also continental Latin American—academe (Thies and Raab 8-16). The study of Afro-America/América/Amérique proves particularly relevant here. While there have always, and always will be, conflicts among black populations as well as between blacks and other racial/ethnic groups in the hemisphere and beyond, the shared experiences of slavery, racial discrimination, and political as well as cultural emancipation brought forth a long and fruitful history of black interaction and diasporic consciousness across geographic, linguistic, and cultural lines in the Americas.

Within the history of Afro-America/América/Amérique, the Harlem Renaissance provides a crucial case in point, as it represents probably the first, and definitely the most prominent, black cultural movement that was profoundly shaped by, and in turn would itself shape, people, ideas, and (black) cultural exchanges throughout the Americas. The present volume seeks to explore some of the Harlem Renaissance's and Renaissance Harlem's interactions with the Caribbean as well as Latin America—to be understood in the widest possible sense of the term as encompassing the anglo-, franco-, hispano, and lusophone hemisphere. The following essays address a variety of topics pertaining to some of the major Harlem Renaissance artists, intellectuals, and activists:

Sandra Becker, Paul Franke, and Florian Reschke's documentary film, "The Boiled-Down Juice of Human Living: The Anthropological Fieldwork of Zora Neale Hurston," looks at the scholarship of this African U.S. American anthropologist-turned-writer in the context of the international scholarly community of this emerging academic discipline. In his article "Mediating Mexico: Winold Reiss and the Transcultural Dimension of "Harlem" in the 1920s," Frank Mehring analyzes the Mexican journey of German immigrant painter Winold Reiss and its influence on his subsequent engagement with Mexican and African U.S. American cultures, which turned him into one of the leading artistic figures of the ensuing Harlem Renaissance. My own contribution, "Un continente 'de color': Langston Hughes y América Latina," studies the way black U.S. American writer Langston Hughes developed an intersecting hemispheric black and leftist political consciousness through his travels to and autobiographic as well as fictional literary dealings with Latin America, especially Mexico and Cuba. In her essay "A Vagabond with a Purpose," Tatiana Tagirova explores the crucial role Jamaican writer Claude McKay's Caribbean beginnings and international sojourns played in his search for an original form of black American literary expression. As this rather short list indicates, the present volume views does not understand itself as a comprehensive survey but as a beginning that seeks to inspire further inquiry to explore the interrelations and *mutual* influences between the Harlem Renaissance and its larger entanglements with the American hemisphere, its black diasporas and beyond.

Endnotes

[1] Lao-Montes 323-24. Neither he nor Le Riverend mentions Johnson's earlier formulation of this concept, though.

[2] Locke, "Foreword" xxvii; also qtd. in Luis-Brown 147. On the Harlem Renaissance see Lewis; on the Mexican *Indigenismo* movement of the 1920s-1940s see Knight.

[3] Guillén 6; also Jackson 94, 114; Kaup 97-100. For this and similar critiques by Guillén and other Cuban artists and intellectuals see Leary 136, 140-41, 144-55.

[4] De Jongh 48-70; Jackson 86, 92, 171; Leary 147-55; on *Afrocubanismo* see ; on the *Négritude* movement see Thompson.

[5] For a detailed definition of the term "diaspora" and its particular meaning with regard to the Black Diaspora see Edwards 11-15; Lao-Montes 309-18.

[6] Guridy 135, italics in the original. For a critique of this concept, especially of the marginalization of black U.S. Latinos and Afro Latin Americans see Lao-Montes 318-23.

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Mediating Mexico

Winold Reiss and the Transcultural Dimension of “Harlem” in the 1920s

10

Abstract:

Through the mediating element of travel, European and Latin American visual artists contributed to turning the physical space of Harlem into a central metaphor of modernity. Artists such as the German immigrant Winold Reiss, the Mexican caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias, and the African American student of Reiss, Aaron Douglas, played an integral part in Alain Locke’s idea of an international approach to African American culture. [1] By turning to concepts of space as cultural space (Winfried Fluck), processes of mediation, and the role of cultural mobilizers (Stephen Greenblatt), the essay traces how Winold Reiss’ Mexican experience shaped the visual narrative of the Harlem Renaissance.

Keywords: African-American culture, Mexico, transculturality, Winold Reiss, visual arts

Introduction [2]

The visual design of *The Weary Blues* poem collection, published by Alfred Knopf in 1926, features a remarkable international subtext. “His verses are by no means limited to an exclusive mood; he writes caressingly of little black prostitutes in Harlem; his cabaret songs throb with the true jazz rhythm; his sea-pieces ache with a calm melancholy lyricism; he cries bitterly from the heart of his race in *Cross and the Jester*” (Van Vechten 13). Thus writes the white author, photographer, and patron of many Harlem writers, Carl van Vechten, in his introduction to Langston Hughes’s first volume of poems. The evocation of prostitutes in Harlem, authentic jazz rhythms, and the aching feelings from the heart of the “black race” are printed on the dust cover designed by the influential Mexican caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias in stark red, black and yellow colors. The silhouette figure, the light of a dull gas light and the piano keys offer a visual translation of the first poem of the collection, which also provides the title for the book, “The Weary Blues.” Before he emerged as the poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes had returned from his third trip to Mexico to visit his father, who at the time had a German housekeeper called “Frau Schultz” and was in contact with other German immigrants (Hughes, *Big Sea* 67-80). Considering this German cultural connection in the family history, it is not surprising that Hughes dedicated a copy of *The Weary Blues* to the German immigrant artist and designer Winold Reiss (Hughes, *Weary* n.p.). Reiss had produced a sketch for the magazine *The Forum* to create a visual introduction to Hughes’s poem “The Weary Blues.” The sketch served as basis for the by now iconographic portrait of Hughes with an art deco background translating impressions from the poem. While his portrait of Langston Hughes represents one of the quintessential portraits of Harlem Renaissance intellectuals and artists, Reiss’ student, the African American artist Aaron Douglas, is today considered the most important visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance who successfully translated blues aesthetics and the modern German forays of advertisement into a persuasive visual silhouette style.

From this short outline of the Mexican, German, and African American nexus in the illustration and visualization of “The Weary Blues,” the question arises of whether the cultural construct behind the term “Harlem” should be remapped by including a transnational perspective. [3] In the 1920s, the Latin American and Mexican presence was particularly strong in the New York art scene. However, as Deborah Cullen recently lamented, comparatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the intercultural encounters and productive artistic exchanges generated by those artists “from Central and South America who gravitated to the city before and between wars” (10). [4]

This essay is structured into two parts. First, I will re-define the place of “Harlem” in the cultural imaginary of the United States as a transcultural space in the sense of representing a liminal zone of human activity and cross-cultural contact zones. I will argue that the Mexican imagination in the visual narrative of the Harlem Renaissance plays a crucial role and helps to open up a new, broader perspective on the function of Harlem beyond what Paul Gilroy called the *Black Atlantic*. [5] Second, I will trace the Mexican imagination from a German American perspective. Winold Reiss’ trip to Mexico in 1920 represents an epiphany, which redirected his attention to African American culture in New York City. [6] In the process of translating his Mexican travel experience to canvas and interior design of public places in the United States, he emerged as a cultural mediator of transatlantic modernism. [7] My analysis will reveal transatlantic and Latin American cultural contact zones to open up a new way to understand Harlem as a transcultural space. [8] Thereby, it will be possible to identify processes of mediation [9] as a key ingredient in advertising Harlem in a specific manner: as a “Mecca” of a renewed sense of cultural recognition and a beacon of hope to overcome the democratic gap, namely the discrepancy between democratic principles and practices. With this trajectory I am interested in reconfiguring familiar visual narratives in a transatlantic and transnational context. [10]

1. Harlem as a Transcultural Space

In the 1920s, Harlem was a racially and culturally distinctive community between Manhattan’s 110th and 155th Street with its famed nightlife on a strip of 133rd Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenue. African American authors created descriptive metaphors to re-signify this district as a cultural center in which black literature, art, and music flourished. Alain Locke edited a special issue of the *Graphic Survey* entitled “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” which was one of the most successful editions of the magazine. [11] It had far-reaching effects for African American writers featured in this issue. Benjamin G. Brawley described the new literary productions and poetry of black authors as a “Negro Literary Renaissance” (178). In his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), Langston Hughes referred to the predominantly African American neighbourhood of Harlem as “Manhattan’s black Renaissance” (223), emphasizing the lively literary art scene. [12] In the expression “Harlem Renaissance,” the location of Harlem functions as a bridge to link the traumatic past of slavery with a new notion of self-esteem and self-recognition within the history of African American culture.

The 1987 travelling exhibition “Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America” continued to further the intrinsic connection between Harlem and the African American history of ideas and art. [13] While the term, as Richard Powell argues, is indeed an “accurate yet elastic description of the levels and range of black creativity in the 1920s” (41), it nevertheless hardly allows for the recognition of influential artists beyond the agency of African American creative activity. Thus, in the visual narratives of the Harlem Renaissance we usually find references to the photographer James Van Der Zee or the African American painter Aaron Douglas. Coming from Kansas City, Douglas holds a special place as the quintessential “African American Modernist.” In the recent catalogue of a large-scale exhibition of his work, Douglas’s journey to New York is described in religious terms as a “pilgrimage” to the “Mecca of the era” (Douglas, Earle, and Ater 11-13). In addition, the sculptures of Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, with their allegorical approach to black culture as in *Ethiopia Awakening* (1914), are regularly referenced. With a gesture of extracting herself from the mummy-like bandages that are wrapped around her lower half of the body, Powell interprets the sculpture as a means for the “representational needs not only of a disillusioned but hopeful black elite in the years 1914-17, but also of successive generations of ‘race’ men and ‘women’” (36). Besides Douglas, the works of Archibald J. Motley Jr., Palmer Hayden, and Jacob Lawrence’s *The Migration of the Negro* (1940-1) emphasize how African American painters shaped, in the words of Erika Doss, “a modern visual art that accommodated ethnocentric perspectives” (93; see also Hills).

These artworks are set in position as an authentic African American response to degrading white fantasies. [14] An iconic set of African American paintings, photographs, and sculptures has become canonized and is cited in basically all major overviews of American art history (see, for instance, Powell; Doss; Bjelajac). In the 1920s, however, the evolution of a visual narrative for the Harlem Renaissance was less clear.

When Langston Hughes’s *The Weary Blues* appeared in 1926, the influential black journalist George S. Schuyler attacked the foundation of blues poetry in this seminal collection of poetry in a telling way. In his article “The Negro-Art Hokum” published in *The Nation* in 1926, he critically commented that African American art “made in America” was non-existent (662). Schuyler emphasized the European background of African American artists and intellectuals. He explained that “the dean of the Aframerican literati,” namely W.E.B. du Bois, represented a product of Harvard University and Friedrich-Wilhelm-University in Berlin. Meta Fuller was a student of the French artist Rodin, and Schuyler identified the painter Henry Ossawa Tanner as “dean of American painters in Paris” who had been “decorated by the French Government” (662). From this

perspective, Schuyler set out to deconstruct the African American heritage in order to denounce *The Weary Blues* and its prominent place in the “New Negro Movement” as a kind of false advertisement. “Now the work of these artists is no more ‘expressive of the Negro soul’—as the gushers put it—than are the scribblings of Octavus Cohen or Hugh Wiley” (663). Today, many African American scholars concede that Schuyler’s assessment is quite appropriate as far as deterritorialization is concerned. However, scholars such as Robert Reid-Pharr found a new way to reframe the problem in a more positive light. What Schuyler criticized, the argument goes, is actually one of the greatest assets of African American cultural expressions: its international dimension.

By pinpointing towards the international background of artists as Alain Locke, Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, or Langston Hughes, scholars such as Jeffrey Stewart or George Hutchinson emphasize in the recent *Cambridge Companion to The Harlem Renaissance* (2007) the “black internationalist” lens on African roots. This focal point could clearly be defined as U.S. American (4). Michael A. Chaney argues, the centralization of what he calls “self-directed ‘Negro’ arts and letters” in Harlem needs to be conceived in international contexts (41). This conception should not only reveal the complex inter-cultural and inter-racial networks but also reflect the international mobility of black representatives of the Harlem Renaissance such as the expatriate experience of Du Bois during his two years of graduate studies in Germany, James Weldon Johnson’s three-year experience as United States consul in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, or Langston Hughes, who taught English in Mexico before he became a world traveller like Richard Wright or James Baldwin after him. [15] In this seemingly boundless international sphere, the district of Harlem assumed the function of an anchor and ultimate point of reference for the African American diasporic art scene. The focus is understandable. Scholars such as Reid-Pharr argue that the search for alternative ways to read the African Diaspora should not “first and foremost” be conceived “as a world historical process in which our enslaved forebears were victims but never agents.” [16] I would like to suggest that agency is not lost but rather strengthened if we look at international and inter-racial forms of collaborations and spatial imaginations. [17]

The literary, musical, and visual stylizations of the physical space around Lennox Avenue in the district of Harlem reveal that the perceptions of space are constructs shaped by aesthetic perceptions and political interests of artists. In the process of writing or painting, the physical space becomes translated into an artistic object. The concrete geographical region of “Harlem” functions as a signifier for a new perspective on African American creativity and culture. As a premise for my analysis of “Harlem” as a transcultural space with Reiss as a paradigm for intercultural encounters

and confrontations, I will use Winfried Fluck's definition of space as aesthetic object as a starting point: "In order to gain cultural meaning, physical space has to become mental space or, more precisely, imaginary space" (25). I will look at some of the processes that take place when the physical space of Harlem is culturally appropriated as imaginary space and how issues of agency assumed control of turning "Harlem" into an aesthetic object with allegedly clear cultural markers. [18]

I do not intend to challenge African American assessments that an internationalist element is at the heart of many African American writers due to their biographical background. There is also, I would argue, a transcultural perspective encoded in the early artwork in Harlem, which transcends the productions of African Americans. Non-black visual artists helped to turn the physical space of Harlem into a central metaphor of modernity. They played an integral part in Locke's idea of an international approach to advertising African American culture.

2. Crossing the Rio Grande and Confronting the Metropolitan Moloch

Reiss' use of bold colors in poster art and portraiture was designed to counterbalance artistic tendencies of German as well as United States traditions upheld by U.S. artists who became known as The Ten or the Ash Can School. In the course of the 1920s, Reiss increasingly identified with "being American" at the beginning of the "young nation's" artistic development where color had the greatest potential to become a key for a new form of visual expression. The "Mexico Diary" from 1920 aptly documents that, for Reiss, the term "color" transcended the use on canvas. With his particular interest in folk culture and the ethnic richness of North America, references to national "embarrassment," "vulgarity," and "false pretenses" acquire a double meaning. Behind his comments on the use of color in the arts appears a new political commitment to cultural pluralism and the promise of U.S. American democracy, which would soon permeate his drawings (Mehring, "Portraying" and "Unfinished").

Reiss was among the earliest artists who traveled from the United States into Mexico after the Revolution and contributed to an intense process of cultural exchange. His visual artwork inspired an American fascination with the colors of the Mexican earth, its volcanoes, the ruins of the Pre-Columbian pyramids, and the religious piety of the people. From his diary, we can trace the change of a German immigrant perspective on the promise of U.S. American democracy, his moralist response to the initial shock of disillusion, and the revelation of encountering Mexican culture. [19] On the first day of his trip, he expresses his disenchantment with "America" and relocates the

proverbial “promised land” across the Rio Grande in Mexico. The binary juxtaposition of “America” and “Mexico” in very general terms continues throughout the diary. Reiss contrasts the U.S. American dream of freedom gone wrong with a glimpse of a Mexican paradise lost. [20] During this trip, he had an epiphany: Standing in the midst of people from all over Mexico with his board and canvas in front of him, Reiss felt like finally having come “home.” For Reiss, the German term *Heimat* (homeland) does not so much represent a concrete location such as the Black Forest or Munich. Neither is there a patriotic sense of “fatherland.” Instead, Reiss’ term *Heimat* refers to the spiritual realm combined with the gratifying experience of being among people in rural areas who are very much in tune with their specific folk culture and environment. Before he left Mexico to return to the United States, Reiss conflated a German sense of *Heimat* and *Heimweh* (homesickness) with his Mexican experience: “once again the indescribable Mexican something glimmered in my soul, engraving itself in there, to make me homesick when I am back in the land of materialism.” [21] Encountering the rich colors of Mexican culture and the joyfulness of the people, he added a spiritual component to the notion of belonging, which transcends an actual territory and national borders. Compared to Mexico, the United States appeared to be “terrifyingly dead and lifeless.” Thus, his trip to Mexico represents not so much an expatriation but a reconnection with something he had lost during his stay in New York City. [22] The final entry of the “Mexico Diary” marks a turning point, as Reiss recognizes the power of color both in an aesthetic and political sense:

It has taken 34 years until this has become clear in me, but now it is like a hand that shows me the way. We must not be weak in our faith, faith must make us proud and give us courage for life, and all who touch us must receive of this, for we do not belong to ourselves, we are born into a whole and must help the big whole, not just the small part. Not selfishness, not egotism, and out of the graves of the war will arise a new and finally a better world. We have the key in hand—but they all can’t find the lock because they always run in the wrong direction. Die, vanity, and beget a race of great and selfless Men. The new religion is to be Man, and we ourselves are the Temple, and our deeds and the nourishment that we bring, are the happiness that streams from us. [23]

Reiss envisaged a future generation of world citizens in which the term ‘color’ would not function as a marker of racial or ethnic hierarchies. Thus, the diary represents a story of a rite of passage starting with a disillusion of the promise of U.S. American democracy and ending on a self-confident dedication to using art as a means to work towards a new concept of universal humanity.

After his return from his trip to Mexico, Reiss felt physically exhausted from a severe illness but also spiritually rejuvenated. Full of inspiration and passion for the spirit of Mexican folk-life, he was more self-assured of his creative power than ever. Despite his love for wide-open spaces and small-town places, he knew that only the metropolitan scene of New York could provide him with economically viable venues for his artwork. The inner battle between the urge of leaving the city and the economic necessity of living in the metropolis gave his work direction. Although Reiss did not date the woodblock print entitled *Love*, it perfectly captures the spirit of the time period after his return from Cuernavaca, Guadalupe, Oaxaca, Tepoztlán, Xochimilco, or Mexico City.

The image negotiates powerful feelings within three spheres: the natural environment with trees, flowers, and rolling hills; the city with its towering architecture; and the night-sky with its celestial beauty. Reiss' visual alter ego stands within the natural environment with his eyes fixed in a vertical line towards a transcendental sphere. His left hand forms a clenched fist ready to fight for the higher ideals the figure receives from contemplation of spiritual matters. Placed in a natural environment, which emphasizes growth and the beauty of plant-life, the city with its man-made constructions represents an anonymous, empty space where human beings are hidden from view. After Reiss had crossed the Rio Grande and arrived in San Antonio on December 6, he had recorded his frustration with a reference to the necessity of making an almost super-human effort in order to deal with the reality of life in the United States:

With wide eyes I looked at the surroundings which appeared so cold and soulless, and an indescribable loneliness rose in me, so powerful that I could have screamed, screamed with disappointment and with longing for what I left behind. Instead I clenched my fists and struck out into the callous coarseness that lay before me. [24]

The woodcut *Love* conveys a sense of self-empowerment. The clenched fist shows that the character is ready to fight for his beliefs. But it is not only the insight into a transcendental sphere, which allows the figure to stand tall. With a string-like spiritual power cord attached to the heart, the figure pulls itself up and redirects its force unto the city. Reiss returns to his former strength and willpower, which supported him during the transatlantic crossing and the dire economic situation during his early time in New York City. Compared to the clear visual connection between the central triangle of city, nature, and transcendental sphere, the expression of emotional impact is more ambiguous. Reiss chose the suggestive title *Love* for this woodcut, which might lead to insight into his inner state after returning to New York and re-assuming his function as an art teacher in his studio.



The symbol of love on the protagonist's chest functions as a pendant to the physical strength. Reiss renders the power of love in an idealized sense of emotional self-sacrifice beyond egotistical or materialist interests. It is a selfless gift to the world. The religious overtones can hardly be dismissed. The figure of Jesus seems to blend with a Wagnerian hero. The girl with long hair and tender bodily features leans on to the towering physical and emotional

Fig. 1: W. Reiss, Love. Woodcut print on paper, 19 x 18", ca. 1920. Private Collection



Fig. 2: W. Reiss, Face and Hands over City. Ink on paper, 10 7/8 x 8 3/4, n.d. Private Collection

strength of the male figure. There is, however, a melancholy undertone in the presentation of the couple. In order to let his emotional power penetrate the geometrical urban environment, the hero must forsake the pleasures of traditional family life. The “tree of life” at the center of the image suggests regenerative forces of nature. It provides the fertile ground on which the figure firmly stands. [25] This image resonates strongly with less hopeful depictions of the emotional impact of modern city life in Reiss’ visual repertoire. In the undated drawing *Face and Hands over City* an ugly devilish red face threatens to swallow an industrial cityscape. Fritz Lang would use a similar visual scenario for the futuristic factory building with its gigantic “heart machine” in his landmark science fiction film *Metropolis* (1927). [26]

One promising venue for Reiss to translate his new image of himself as the harbinger of spiritual powers of Nature to the city was to continue to engage in interior design of public spaces. Undoubtedly impressed by mural artwork in Mexico, he created themed rooms with images from Mexico or stylizations of an imaginary Africa. [27] His use of bold color in his portraits goes beyond the obvious references to the world of painting. Considering his choice of models as well as his perspective as an immigrant, his use of color can also be read as a coded message regarding what Du Bois described as the problem of the twentieth century, namely the “color line.” Reiss did not choose to become an outspoken activist against racial segregation, lynching, genocide, and white supremacy. Instead, he used his art to encode his longing for an “America” that would live up to its promise of equality and democracy. The hidden political motif can be decoded from the perspective of his special status as a German immigrant. He was well aware of the power struggle artists faced when they openly confronted the political system or the expectations of art patrons. Nevertheless, Reiss’ portraits tell of cultural frictions, collisions, and confrontations. Shortly before Diego Rivera created a public controversy with his critical comment on the United States’ economic success story in his mural “Man at the Crossroads” at the Rockefeller Center, Reiss recommended diplomacy and tact to artists. In case of discrepancies between the client’s intent and the artist’s vision, “the painter should try to bring [the client] around to an aesthetic viewpoint by indirection. Sometimes this can be accomplished in such a manner that the owner will not be aware that his ideas have been changed” (“Plea” 24). [28] Considering the remarkable productivity of Reiss in the production of murals and design work for American restaurants, Reiss succeeded in his efforts to carefully translate his aesthetic vision regarding “Mexico” into public urban spaces.



Fig. 3: Winold Reiss, Mexican Mural at the Restaurant Crillon, New York City. Photographs by Nickolas Muray, ca. 1921.



Fig. 4: Detail of the Mexican Mural by Winold Reiss. Photograph by Nickolas Muray



Fig. 5: Winold Reiss, Congo Room at the Alamac Hotel, New York City, 1923. Photograph by Underwood & Underwood.

3. Mediating the Mexican Experience

In the early 1920s, Reiss was able to make prolific use of many sketches he brought with him from his trip to Mexico. An exhibition at the Anderson Galleries in New York City from November 13-25, 1922 provided a summary of his dedication to the New World. At the same time, it emphasized his cultural roots in Europe. Reiss' special sensitivity regarding the beauty of those people, whose liberating sense of simplicity had been overlooked, had a great appeal to North American city dwellers. The title of the exhibition offers a remarkable mixture of transatlantic folklore: *The Passion Players of Oberammergau: Drawings by Winold Reiss. Also Drawings from Sweden, Black Forest, Mexico, and Portraits, Woodcuts, and Decorations* (cover page). The 154 paintings, fantasies, and woodblock prints create cultural confrontations and challenge the then-prevailing concepts of cultural assimilation and "Americanization." Among the 50 Mexican images on display

were portraits, landscapes, fantasies, representations of Mexican street life, textile paintings, and “decorations.” The exhibition was well timed. In 1922, a traveling Mexican popular arts exhibition under the auspices of the Minister of Industry, Commerce, and Labor of Mexico, Don Xavier Guerrero, helped to generate widespread interest in Mexican culture, traditions, and art. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue edited by Katherine Anne Porter. She provided a detailed overview of the Mexican popular arts and crafts, thereby preparing the public for a positive reception of the cultural mediations of Winold Reiss, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Miguel Covarrubias, and others. [29]

During the early phase of US American fascination with the culture and traditions of Mexico after the Mexican Revolution, Reiss’ portraits and street scenes from Mexico appeared in several newspapers as well as in magazines such as *The Century* or *Survey Graphic*. The personal connection between Reiss and Katherine Anne Porter was crucial for the successful publication, distribution, and mediation of the Mexican drawings. [30] The “Mexico Diary” reveals how and when the two artists met: “The next day, Sunday [December 5] I took Best’s girlfriend, Miss Porter, and Mrs. Habermann to Tepozotlan. It was a sunny, wonderful, Mexican day” (MS). Porter emerged as an important cultural mediator in the early 1920s between Mexican folklore and the U.S. American literary market. Shortly after Porter met Reiss on their walking tour to Tepoztlán, she wrote several stories and sketches about Xochimilco including “In a Mexican Patio” for the *Magazine of Mexico* (April 1921), “Xochimilco” for the *Christian Science Monitor* (May 31, 1921), and “Children of Xochitl” (unpublished, ca. March 1921). She describes this town as an “Island of the Blest” and the people as living in perfect harmony with a beautiful and benign nature. As Thomas F. Walsh has argued, “Xochimilco” expressed “her hope in Mexico as the promised land” (35).

When she was asked to edit a special issue on Mexico for the *Survey Graphic*, she remembered the encounter with Reiss and the sketches he had produced during his trip through Mexico. Besides seven Rivera murals, ten examples of Mexican children’s art, a portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Best Maugard’s drawings, Reiss’ portraits of Indians and a painting of Cuernavaca hold a special place in the magazine with its bold issue topic *Mexico: A Promise*. It is striking that Porter included not only visual examples of Mexican folklore and Mexican painters such as Diego Rivera or Xavier Guerrero but also portraits and urban scenes from the German immigrant Reiss. She used him as a non-Mexican presence from the international art scene of New York to document the promising qualities inherent in the emerging Mexican art scene after the Revolution. Similar to the “types” studies Reiss would contribute to Alain Locke’s *Survey Graphic* special

edition *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro* a year later, Porter included a section called “Mexican Types” in *Mexico: A Promise*, which she introduced in the following way:

Up and down a troubled land, in the autumn and winter of 1921 [31], the painter made his tranquil pilgrimage, meeting friendliness and courtesy and faithfully recording not only the faces but the spirit of the people. Mr. Reiss presents us two men of Tepozotlan and one from Taquepaque near Guadalajara; together with a glimpse of a market town. (153)

The expression “pilgrimage” is of particular importance. Porter creates a nexus between Reiss’ search for new inspiration and vitality beyond the United States urban life of ever increasing mechanization with her own project of stylizing post-revolutionary Mexico as a promise—not only for its own national future but also for U.S. Americans eager to encounter a kind of spirituality from which modern U.S. city dwellers had become estranged. Porter’s efforts to draw a highly persuasive image of Mexican “friendliness and courtesy,” the art scene, and the lively vignettes of Mexican folk life captured in her writings stand at the beginning of a soon-to-be flourishing tourist industry.

With her reference to the kind of faithful dedication, which Reiss’ portraits exhibit, Porter implies that the viewer can find a genuine sense of authenticity in the depictions, which former representations of Mexicans were lacking. The combination of counterbalancing allegedly less truthful portraits of non-European people in the Americas and bringing out a sense of spiritual dignity finds an echo in the explanatory notes Alain Locke added to the artwork Reiss produced for the *Survey Graphic* special edition on Harlem about a year after Porter’s Mexico issue. One might wonder in how far Reiss could intimately enter into the “spirit of a people,” as Katherine Porter suggested, after spending less than three months in Mexico. Porter praises Reiss as an extremely gifted cultural mediator:

Concretely in his portrait sketches, abstract in his symbolic designs, [Reiss] has aimed to portray the soul and spirit of a people [sic]. And by the simple but rare process of not setting up petty canons in face of nature’s own artistry, Winold Reiss has achieved what amounts to a revealing discovery of the significance, human and artistic, of one of the great dialects of human physiognomy, of some of the little understood but powerful idioms of nature’s speech. (*SG Promise* 651)

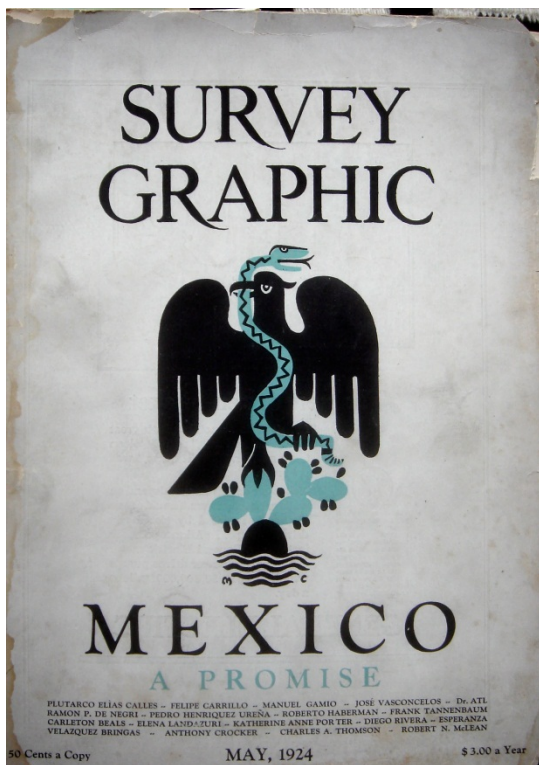


Fig. 6: Miguel Covarrubias, Cover of the May 1924 issue of the magazine Survey Graphic. Mexico: A Promise

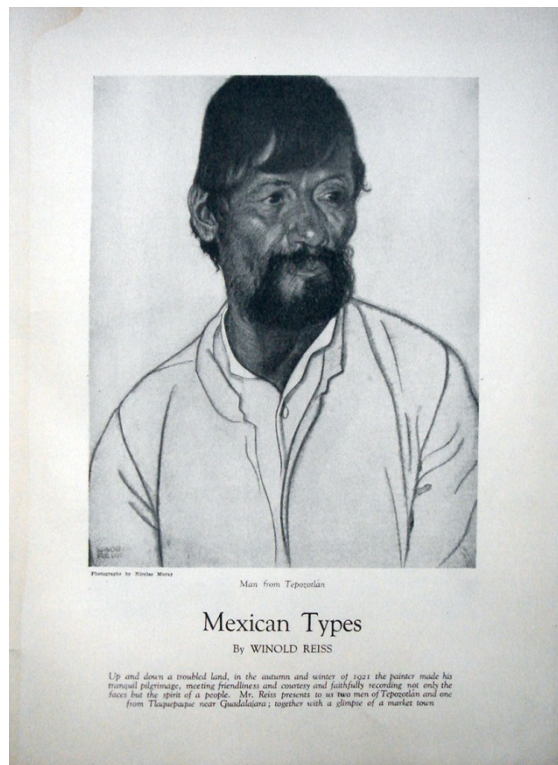


Fig. 7: Winold Reiss, Man from Tepoztlán, reproduced in the May 1924 issue of the magazine Survey Graphic. Mexico: A Promise

Porter's description of the colorful market places and the function of Mexican folk ballads in her essay "Corridos" offers a striking pendant to Reiss' visual narrative. Among the contributors in the special edition was also José Vasconcelos. His book *La Raza Cósmica (The Cosmic Race)* from 1925 foreshadows a new concept of race, which was very much in line with what Winold Reiss tried to translate into forms and colors on canvas. Here, Vasconcelos predicted the coming of a new age, called the "Aesthetic Era," in which joy, love, fantasy, and creativity would prevail over the rationalism he saw as dominating the present age. Arguing for a fusion of races into a new cosmic race he considered the *mestizo*, the Indian, and the Black superior to the White race "in a countless number of properly spiritual capacities" (32). In his transnational outline, he insisted that

the Iberian part of the continent held the highest promise since that part possessed “the spiritual factors, the race, and the territory necessary for the great enterprise of initiating the new universal era of Humanity” (38-39). [32]

For Alain Locke’s project of racial recognition and of turning Harlem into the “Mecca of the New Negro,” Reiss’ task was to provide portraits and design elements. In a commentary on Reiss’ visual work in the Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic*, Locke praised Reiss as a “folk-lorist of brush and palette seeking always the folk character back of the individual, the psychology behind the physiognomy” (*Harlem* 653). He emphasized the spiritual depth of Reiss’ work, which provided his portraits with an organic structure distinct from the Art Deco style popular at the time: “In design, he looks not merely for the decorative elements, but for the pattern of the culture from which it sprang” (653). Later that year, the Harlem edition was expanded and published under the title *The New Negro: An Interpretation* and including several of Reiss’ portraits of leading black intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, or Zora Neale Hurston. [33] Locke explained his choice in the following manner:

The work of Winold Reiss, fellow-countryman of Slevogt and von Reuckterschell [34], which has supplied the main illustrative material for this volume, has been deliberately conceived and executed as a path-breaking guide and encouragement to this new foray of the younger Negro artists. In idiom, technical treatment and objective social angle, it is a bold iconoclastic break with the current traditions that have grown up about the Negro subject in American art (*New Negro* 266).



Fig. 8: Winold Reiss, Cover of the March 1925 issue of the magazine *Survey Graphic*. Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro.

Fig. 9: Winold Reiss, *A College Lad*, reproduced in the March 1925 issue of the magazine *Survey Graphic*. Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro.

Conclusion

Given his immigrant status and his experience of xenophobia during World War I, Winold Reiss must have been aware of the anti-Mexican sentiments and negative stereotypes among U.S. Americans. His artwork shows that he recognized the difference in socio-political status held by European and Mexican immigrants due to the highly contested category of race in the United States. The quality of discrimination and xenophobia from which European immigrants suffered during the major waves of immigration in the nineteenth century was, however, different from what historians such as Manuel G. Gonzales describe as “the great migration” of Mexicans (137). These immigrants were mostly *mestizo* and Indian who had worked as peasants. In the 1920s, the racial otherness of Mexicans became pronounced in various ways. Gonzales argues that harsh racist views of white U.S. Americans functioned as “justification for the exploitation of Mexicans” and continual ill-treatment. (137) Winold Reiss’ successful exhibitions of his Mexican images and his

efforts to create public art that emphasized a positive perspective on Mexican history, culture, and people set a persuasive counter-point to the dominant Eurocentric perspective of racial superiority in the United States.

Reiss' effort to redirect the gaze of U.S. Americans towards the beauty of the Mexican land and the riches of its cultural traditions, however, came at a price. Reiss criticized specific developments in modern North American urban, industrial societies by positioning Mexican people in an idealized space defined by spiritual integrity, a healthy work ethic, patriarchal family structures, and colourful sunny landscapes. On canvas, poverty becomes aestheticized via the beauty of what Reiss describes as pure "Mexican types." The portraits can function as antidote to the despair and uniformity of modern urban dwellers in the United States, who appear to be deprived of joy in their daily routines of working in factories and who are cramped into housing blocks where sunlight can hardly pierce through.

In New York City, Reiss' colourful, joyful, celebratory images left a particularly strong impression. Before the great migration of Mexicans in the 1920s, New York had seen another great migration, that of African Americans, whose cultural presence had been inscribed in U.S. American entertainment in a much more thorough way than that of Mexicans. With the history of slavery, exploitation, lynching, and the struggle for civil rights, Reiss felt drawn to the cause of African American intellectuals in Harlem. The experience of a spiritual self-renewal during his trip through Mexico played a crucial role in his dedication to the "New Negro" project. When he ends his "Mexico Diary" with the prophetic insight that after 34 years he had finally come to realize in which direction he needed to take his artistry, one might argue that Reiss found in Alain Locke a collaborator who embraced Reiss' dedication to what Locke called "the unfinished business of democracy" (*Color cover*).

Reiss' resourceful visual approach to "Harlem" combines a longing for rustic German peasant life with fantasies of a pre-Columbian past still traceable in the Mexican landscapes and the rural population. The "Harlem imaginatives" similarly draw on the potential that African American culture in the heart of New York City can create a link to the colorful vitality Reiss encountered south of the U.S. border. The comparison of Reiss' Mexican imagination with the artwork in *The New Negro* anthology reveals that Harlem can best be described as a transcultural space, which opens up a broader perspective on agency and cross-cultural networks than many scholars of the Harlem Renaissance have so far suggested.

Endnotes

[1] With the frequently used term “African American” I refer to blacks from the United States and—especially with regard to Harlem Renaissance artists—the Anglophone Caribbean.

[2] The present essay is based on a talk I presented at the first international conference on Winold Reiss, “Cultural Mobility and Transcultural Confrontations: Winold Reiss as a Paradigm of Transnational Studies,” held on Dec. 1-3, 2011 at the John F. Kennedy-Institute in Berlin (www.fu-berlin.de/winold-reiss). I am grateful to the Terra Foundation for their continued support in rediscovering the life and work of Winold Reiss. The project evolved from a TERRA research grant in 2007 and was followed by archival trips to various galleries and museums in the United States in 2008 and 2009. Special thanks go to Werner Sollors and Veerle Thielemans for their support and encouragement. At the Smithsonian I would like to thank Anne Collins Goodyear, Frank Goodyear III, Virginia Mecklenburg, Ellen Miles, Cyndi Mills, David Ward and particularly Wendy Wick Reaves. I am thankful for the friendship and suggestions by Ned Jacob, Michael Gladstone, Ford Peatross, Douglas Smith, and Jeffrey Stewart. The John F. Kennedy-Institute for North American Studies has been very supportive in many ways. The institute functioned as the primary venue of the first international Winold Reiss Conference entitled “Cultural Mobility and Transcultural Confrontations: Winold Reiss as a Paradigm of Transnational Studies” (Dec. 1-3, 2011). In particular I would like to thank Winfried Fluck for encouraging me early on to pursue my research on Winold Reiss. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Reiss family for their very warm support.

[3] As Günter Lenz has pointed out, the term “transnational” must be understood in a double sense: “(1) It questions the meaning of ‘America’ (qua USA), decentering the US perspective; it takes views from outside as co-foundational and emphasizes dialogue. (2) It reflects on and deconstructs the focus on the nation-state without simply dismissing its boundaries in its political analyses, and it addresses intracultural and multicultural diversity and hybridity of US culture(s) and transnational interactions and negotiations in a time of globalization and relocalizations.” (4) For my investigation of mediating the Mexican experience of the German immigrant Winold Reiss and his impact on the Harlem Renaissance, I follow Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease, and John Carlos Rowe’s differentiation between the international and the transnational. They argue that the “transnational differs from the international in that it forecloses the possibility that either nation in the transaction will remain self-enclosed and unitary.” (5) From this perspective it will be possible to understand the transcultural dimension in the imaginary construct of “Harlem.”

[4] The goals of the *Mexicanidad* movement and the search for a new form of recognition behind the “New Negro” concept feature fascinating similarities (see Barnitz; Cancel; Ramírez and Olea). Instead of merely focusing on individual artists, scholars such as Deborah Cullen, Katherine E. Manthorne, Elvis Fuentes, Antonio Saborit, Cecilia de Torres, James Wechseler, Michele Greet or Katy Rogers have turned to analyzing moments of intercultural and artistic exchange (see Cullen). This scholarship continues intercultural research to emphasize the complex international dimension of American modernism along the lines of Ann Douglas or Wanda Corn.

[5] Gilroy proposed a radical rethinking of the “history of black in the west” emphasizing “that the history of the African diaspora and a reassessment of the relationship between modernity and slavery may require a [...] complete revision of the terms in which the modernity debates have been constructed.” (44) My investigation of the transcultural confrontations of the German immigrant artist Winold Reiss in New York City shortly before World War I, the disconcerting experience of xenophobia and racism during the war, and the mediating element of travelling to Indian reservations and Mexico in the 1920s is designed to contribute to our understanding of discontinuities in modern experiences and to underscore the plural nature of modern subjectivity and identity. For a more comprehensive approach to the response patterns of German immigrants to the discrepancy between American democratic principle and practice in the arts see Mehring, *Democratic*.

[6] I follow Caren Kaplan’s suggestion that the mediating element of travel can offer new ways to investigate questions of aestheticized and ahistorical accounts of Euro-American displacement: “The question of travel signifies the possibilities of multiple figures and tropes of displacement that might lead us to a more complex and accurate map of cultural production” (41).

[7] Reiss' impressive range of creativity, his rich work of ethnic portrait paintings, distinctive interior modernist design, and cutting edge graphic design has been relegated to the footnotes of American art history. In Germany, he is hardly known at all. Wanda Corn has speculated that Reiss' work may indeed embarrass scholars. Recent scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance (e.g. Hutchinson; Lemke) has shifted its focus from individual figures to racial interactions, crossovers, and transatlantic interchanges. Caroline Goeser has brought attention to Reiss' ground-breaking illustrations for book covers. Since 1986, the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress has acquired more than 465 drawings and prints by Winold Reiss that are now included in its "Winold Reiss Design Collection."

[8] It is revealing to contextualize Reiss' fascination with all things Mexican with the philosophical concepts of the African American professor of philosophy Alain Locke and the concept of the "Cosmic Race" by the Mexican philosopher and politician José Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos's ground-breaking outlook on the future of a post-racial civilization was published in 1925, the year which also marks the beginning of what is commonly referred to as the "New Negro" movement.

[9] Frederic Jameson argued that new media become systemically dependent on each other and on prior media to gain cultural significance. In Winold Reiss' drawings, poster art, book covers, and mural design we can identify a kind of genealogy of (re)mediation which has become a staple in postmodern societies (and, one might argue, in the history of Western representation in general). The "pictorial turn" of the late 20th century (Miller, Boehm, Mirzoeff) has contributed to processes of remediation that challenge the dominance literary theory based on texts. "It is because we have had to learn that culture today is a matter of media that we have finally begun to get it through our heads that culture was always that, and that the older forms or genres, or indeed the older spiritual exercises and mediations, thoughts and expressions, were also in their very different ways media products." (68). With mediation I refer to an understanding of visual media that are in the sense of David Bolter and Richard Grusin "continually commenting upon, reproducing and replacing each other" (18).

[10] The limited recognition of Reiss' innovative approaches to poster art, lettering, and interior design stems to a certain degree from the continuing stigma of commercial art among art historians. For an excellent introduction and overview of Reiss' translation of German concepts of decorative arts to the American context see Peatross. Jeffrey Stewart offers an introduction to Reiss' life and dedication to drawing ethnic minorities in North America in the catalogue to the 1989-90 National Portrait Gallery exhibition he curated. This exhibition was the most comprehensive of various posthumous exhibitions of Reiss' oeuvre, e.g. *American Indian Paintings by Winold Reiss* at the Remington Art Museum, Ogdensburg, NY (June 1-Sept. 3, 1979, solo exhibition, 30 works); *Portraits of the Races* at the C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MO (Sept. 16-Oct. 31, 1986, solo exhibition, 63 works); or *Insights of an Artist: The Works of Winold Reiss* at Channing, Dale & Throckmorton, Santa Fe, NM (Sept. 22-Oct. 20, 1988, solo exhibition, 68 works) among others. Invaluable research on Reiss' artistic background and his New York-based art school is offered by Brauen.

[11] Gates and Jarrett describe the trope of "the New Negro" as one of the "most compelling stories of racial uplift that circulated through U.S. intellectual society, culture, and politics" (1).

[12] The now iconic term "Harlem Renaissance," which echoes the term "American Renaissance" with writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, or Whitman, was introduced by historian John Hope Franklin in 1947.

[13] For new interventions by African American scholars to counter-balance the Euro-American dimension of the Harlem Renaissance see Baker; Morrison; or Edwards.

[14] For an example of the period's many distorting representations of African Americans as "savage" and "carnal" see Paul Colin's lithographs of the caged, half naked Josephine Baker (1927) for the revue *Le Tumulte Noir* in Paris (Gates, Dalton, and Nègre).

[15] For a discussion of Langston Hughes's prose and poetry from the perspective of displacement and the mediating element of traveling see Soto, who argues convincingly that traveling in the literal and figurative sense "was an aesthetically enabling experience for Hughes, articulating and enhancing" what she describes as Hughes' "poetics of reciprocity or mutuality" (171).

[16] Quoted from an unpublished manuscript for his talk “Imperial Remains: The Spanish Trace in the Afro-American Imaginary” delivered in the colloquium series at the John F. Kennedy-Institute for North American Studies in Berlin in 2010.

[17] With this project I adapt Stephen Greenblatt’s “Mobility Studies Manifesto” combining an analysis of contact zones, the tension between individual agency and structural constraint, and the sensation of rootedness (250-52) to investigate the transcultural dimension of “Harlem.”

[18] In order to understand how “Harlem” can be decoded as an imaginary space from a transcultural perspective, I suggest that we recalibrate our senses to bring back Winold Reiss to the visual center of the “New Negro” project, which Alain Locke had in mind when he asked the German immigrant to collaborate on the Harlem-themed special issue of the *Survey Graphic* (Locke, *Harlem*).

[19] I am in the process of publishing a critical edition of Winold Reiss’ “Mexico Diary.” The diary is written in German combining three stylistic forms: First, the text consists of matter-of-fact travel information regarding Mexican places, spaces, and people. Second, the diary offers meditations on the function of color in Mexican landscapes. These passages also identify people and locations, which Reiss portrayed and painted. Third, the text offers critical observations on borders and philosophical reflections on issues of gender constructions, racial conflicts, and the function of art in metropolitan cities. There are two manuscript versions: the first version Reiss wrote during his trip. It has a sense of immediacy with long passages exploring his state of emotions, his observations regarding colors, sounds, landscapes, and people. He ends this account by referring to his other efforts in the field of creative writing. “I therewith close this book and put it with all the rest of my poems and writings” (Dec. 10, 1920. MS). After his return to New York City, he revisited his diary. The second version represents a careful transfer with slight editorial changes. While the first manuscript does not have a proper cover page, the second version features a concrete title: “Meine Reise durch Mexico” (“My Journey Through Mexico”). Considering that there are two versions, it seems likely that Reiss intended to publish the account in the 1920s. After all, travelogues to Mexico with lush illustrations had become popular in the United States (e.g. Winter; Chase). However, Reiss’ editorial work and the transfer from the original sketches remain incomplete. We can only speculate about the reasons why he abandoned the project of revising and publishing. For one thing, the multi-talented artist, who easily transgressed the (artificial) boundaries of commercial design and the fine arts, was so high in demand that he hardly had time to polish his literary work. Also, the negative presentation of U.S. American culture in the diary combined with a rather celebratory tone of everything Mexican resembles a self-defeating project for somebody who is interested in commercial opportunities in the urban centers of the United States.

[20] Reiss follows in the footsteps of a long line of German émigrés who sought out Mexico as a place of refuge, recreation, and opportunities. For example, Alexander von Humboldt’s travels in the early nineteenth century function as a crucial reference point for the Mexican imagination in the German American context. He portrayed the country as a land of vast untapped riches. His *Ansichten der Cordilleren* (*Vues des Cordilleres*) represents one of the founding texts in the French-, English-, and Spanish-speaking world. It features lavish sketches of Mexican landscapes but also portraits and reproductions of ancient Aztec designs, frescos and architectural designs. The visually rich publication of Christian Satorius’ travelogue became a touchstone for thousands of German-speaking immigrants in the mid-1860s who flocked to Mexico due to the liberal *Reforma* supported by the Austrian-born Emperor Maximilian, which fostered free trade and individual ownership of land. One of the prominent German immigrants in the art world was Carl Wilhelm Kahlo (who later called himself Guillermo), whose daughter Frida entered with Diego Rivera the New York art scene at the time Reiss produced his Mexican murals and shaped the imaginary space of Harlem. Guillermo Kahlo worked as a professional photographer whose perspective of an immigrant was used by the Porfirian regime to construct a “new Mexico” and redefine *mexicanidad* at the turn of the century. Although his commission to photograph colonial churches (see Kahlo) was designed to monumentalize Mexico’s European heritage, the revolutionary artist Dr. Atl republished the photos during 1924-27 to inscribe new meaning into the images in line with the American interest in all things Mexican. In the field of photography, Hugo Brehme stands out as the German immigrant who arrived in Mexico in 1906 producing the quintessential visual narrative of the early twentieth century to construct a picturesque, nostalgic Mexican image. His peaceful, complacent and lively depictions of rural Mexico and longing for pre-Columbian architecture became an integral part of the Mexican American tourist industry via popular postcards. His

work was widely publicized in tourist guides, magazines, newspapers and books in the United States and Germany. No doubt, Reiss was familiar with these images. A postcard he sent to his wife Henriette is by Hugo Brehme.

[21] “Noch einmal schimmerte das unbeschreibliche etwas Mexicos in meine Seele, sich darin vergrabend, verklammernd, um mich heimwehkrank zu machen, wenn ich wieder im Lande des Materialismuses bin.” I am currently in the process of editing a critical edition of the unpublished German diary with an English translation. The transcription offered in this article remains true to the spirit of immediacy in which the diary was produced. Only the punctuation has been carefully adapted to modern standards in those cases where it helps the reading process. All Reiss quotations are from Winold Reiss, “Mexico Diary,” 1920. English translation of the original German diary account by Renate Reiss with editing by Arnold Logan. Excerpts published with permission from the Winold Reiss Estate.

[22] The statement is in line with the sentiment of another cultural mediator between Mexican art and U.S. American culture, who had left her home in New York City’s Greenwich Village and entered the space south of the Rio Grande at the same time: Katherine Anne Porter. She explained: “I went to Mexico because I was not going into exile, but I was going back to a place I knew and loved” (qtd. in Brinkmeyer 29). Similar to Reiss, she argued in a letter to the editor of *Century*, “Why I Write about Mexico,” that “New York is the most foreign place I know” (33). Yet both artists knew that their artistic calling could only come to fruition by working in the urban center where they could function as a bridge between the southern landscape and the cityscapes.

[23] “Es hat nun 34 Jahre genommen, bis dies alles klar in mir war, doch jetzt ist es wie eine Hand, die meinen Weg bestimmt. Wir müssen nicht schwach sein in unserem Glauben, der Glaube muss uns stolz und lebensmutig machen und alle, die uns berühren, müssen davon erhalten, denn wir sind nicht unser eigen, wir sind im Ganzen geboren und müssen im ganzen Grossen und nicht nur im Kleinen helfen. Keine Selbstsucht, kein Egoismus, und aus den Gräbern des Krieges wird eine neue, eine endlich bessere Welt erstehen. Wir haben den Schlüssel in der Hand—nur können sie alle das Schloss nicht finden, da sie stets nach der falschen Seite laufen. Sterbe, Eitelkeit, und erzeuge ein Geschlecht grosser und selbstloser Menschen. Menschlich sein heisst die neue Religion, und der Tempel sind wir selbst, und unsere Taten und die Nahrung, die wir geben, ist das Glück, das aus uns strahlt.” For an overview of the “Mexico Diary” see Mehring, “Visual.”

[24] “Mit grossen Augen blickte ich auf die Umgebung, die so kalt erschien, so seelenlos, und eine unbeschreibliche Einsamkeit stieg in mir auf, so mächtig, dass ich hätte schreien können, schreien vor Enttäuschung und Sehnsucht nach dem, was ich verlassen. Doch Fäuste machte ich und hieb mich hinein in das gefühllose Rohe, das vor mir lag.”

[25] Escaping from U.S. American metropolitan life into the experience of spending three months in Mexico revealed to Reiss how he might contribute to the then-prevailing discourse on “Transnational America” and “Democracy vs. the Melting Pot” by thinkers such as Randolph Bourne or Horace Kallen. His Mexican imagination in the visual narrative of the Harlem Renaissance is crucial, but complicated. While scholars have emphasized the nexus of the artistic developments in New York City and Mexico, a figure such as Reiss flouts the investigations, which look at different forms of cultural mobility in the sense of physical migration. Reiss’ German background adds an additional dimension to the Mexican imagination in the artistic detours to “Harlem.”

[26] The representation of the selfless artist and his struggles with an unfulfilled love clearly comments on the emotional turmoil Reiss experienced at the time. Winold Reiss and his wife Henriette had a troubled relationship.

[27] Reiss became dedicated to counterbalancing prevailing stereotypes of Mexicans. In New York, far away from the experience of wide-open Mexican spaces, colors, habits, fabrics and traditions, the movie industry could easily promote overdrawn images of gun-wielding bandits for excitement or drunk good-for-nothings for comic relief. Reiss recognized the affinities between the renaissance of spirit and cultural rediscovery in the bohemian circles of Mexico and Harlem. His dedication to Mexican themes and interest in African American culture brought him into contact with people like Miguel Covarrubias who arrived in New York in 1923.

[28] By the time Reiss published this statement, he had just secured one of the most significant commissions of his life. He was offered to create murals for the Cincinnati Union Terminal. How did Reiss negotiate expectations of (conservative) clients and his own progressive visions of “America”?

[29] Sydelle Rubin-Dienstfrey has painstakingly traced the relationship of Reiss and Covarrubias arguing that they were among “the first visual artists to engage themselves in New Negro representations and physically work in Harlem” (290). See also Martha J. Nadell’s reading of Covarrubias and his association with illustrating “Harlem.”

[30] Reiss’ diary documents in great detail an extensive discussion with Porter about the role of women in modern urban environments compared to the traditional family structures they encountered in “primitivist cultures.” Due to the limits of this article, the analysis of the arguments will be presented in a critical edition of the Mexico Diary entitled *Detours to Harlem: Winold Reiss’ Mexico Diary and the Latin-American Nexus of The New Negro* [forthcoming].

[31] Porter’s date is an error. The trip took place in the fall and winter of 1920.

[32] After illustrating the special thematic issue of the *Survey Graphic* on Mexicans, Reiss began his major portrait studies of African Americans and their international heritage in collaboration with Alain Locke. He was commissioned to supply the visuals for the by now famous Harlem-themed March 1925 *Survey Graphic* issue to highlight black art, literature, and cultural progress in Harlem. If Locke chose Covarrubias to create an international link to the Latin American dimension of racial issues in New York, he selected Reiss’ artwork to create a cultural bridge to the artistic and philosophical world of Europe.

[33] Reiss and Locke reunited for another special *Survey Graphic* issue entitled *Color: The Unfinished Business of Democracy* (1942).

[34] Locke consistently used this erroneous spelling of von Ruckteschell’s name. For a close analysis of Walter von Ruckteschell’s lithograph *Young Africa* reproduced in the March 1925 edition of the *Survey Graphic* see Schneck.

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Un Continente “de color”: Langston Hughes y América Latina [1]

Abstract:

The essay analyzes the political-poetic vision of Latin America formulated in the literary, autobiographical, and essayist works of the black U.S.-American writer Langston Hughes. Hughes was not only one of the most outstanding and prolific artists of the Harlem Renaissance but also the one most interested Latin America and most closely engaging with Latin American artists, intellectuals, and “ordinary” people. He lived in Mexico for some time, paid several visits to Cuba, and wrote about these experiences in his two volumes of autobiography as well as in various poems and essays. Focusing in particular on his encounters with the black and indigenous populations of the two countries, these texts articulate a vision of an Afro-diasporic and leftist political consciousness. Latin America emerges here as a “continent of color,” a hemisphere especially shaped by the experiences of peoples of non-European descent. Hughes’s engagement with the black and indigenous cultures of Latin America further forms part of the writer’s larger vision of a global “world of color” that he sets against the hegemony of European and Euro-American thought.

Keywords: Afro-diaspora, continent of color, Langston Hughes, Latin America

Introducción

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) no sólo era uno de los artistas más importantes de la *Harlem Renaissance* (sobre ella, véase Lewis) sino también el más engranado con América Latina. Según Vera Kutzinski, se mira a Hughes como “el poeta estadounidense mejor conocido y admirado en América Latina” y como “el más importante ‘poeta negro’ de los años 1920 en muchas partes del mundo hispano” [2], mientras que en EE.UU. su obra encontró hostilidad por mucho tiempo (Mullen, *Langston* 11, 15; Scott 46-47, 51). En su autobiografía, Hughes confiesa: “tengo una afinidad para latinoamericanos, y siempre me ha gustado la lengua castellana” (*I Wonder* 291; véase 288). Él compara la sensación de su primer viaje en el metro de Nueva York con la agitación que sentía cuando miraba corridas de toros en México D.F. (*Big Sea* 81; véase Soto 175). Hughes, muchas de sus obras literarias se tradujeron al castellano y al portugués así como también fueron reseñadas en periódicos latinoamericanos, informó a varios escritores latinoamericanos. Al mismo tiempo, el poeta fue influido por escritores y culturas latinoamericanos. Entre otros, promovió a escritores negros hispanohablantes y francófonos de América Latina y del Caribe en EEUU y tradujo sus obras al inglés. [3]

En este artículo no trataremos estos aspectos de la obra de Langston Hughes, sino que examinaremos el tratamiento temático de Hispanoamérica [4], sobre todo de México y Cuba, en sus ensayos, cuentos, poemas, y en dos tomos de su autobiografía. Focalizaremos especialmente su representación de las experiencias negras en el continente y la manera en que su obra explota la visión de una conciencia afro-diaspórica y de política de izquierda. Argumentaremos, que Hughes presenta América Latina en sus textos como “continente de color” —un hemisferio formado particularmente por las experiencias de poblaciones indígenas y afrodescendientes y formando parte de una visión más larga: un verdadero “mundo de color”, que contrapone al eurocentrismo del pensamiento hegemónico “blanco” de Europa con el de EE.UU.

México

Langston Hughes tuvo cuatro estadías en México en diferentes períodos de su vida: Cuando era niño, vivía con su familia en México D.F. por algunos meses en 1905. Tras su penúltimo año de escuela pasó el verano con su padre, un empresario afro-estadounidense que había se mudado definitivamente a Toluca varios años antes. Aunque más tarde describió esta estancia como una

experiencia infeliz, Hughes, esperando convencer al padre de pagar los gastos de sus estudios universitarios en EE.UU., volvió a Toluca tras su graduación escolar. Allá pasó más de un año, trabajando como maestro de inglés en dos escuelas de lengua. Durante visitas breves a México D.F. conoció al grupo de escritores mexicanos, Contemporáneos (sobre ello, véase Mullen, *Contemporáneos*) —contactos que se prolongan hasta los años 30. Hughes volvió a visitar México en invierno de 1933-34, después la muerte de su padre. Esta vez, pasó el tiempo sólo en México D.F., donde se movió en círculos bohemios, especialmente entre los artistas exponentes del Indigenismo de los años 20 y 30 (sobre ello, véase Knight). Su asociación siguiente con la *Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios* ha fortalecido su popularidad duradera en América Latina. [5]

Durante toda su carrera, Hughes escribió varios textos sobre México y sus propias experiencias en el país. Algunos de estos textos figuran entre sus primeras publicaciones: cuando estaba en Toluca por segunda vez, publicaba una serie de contribuciones sobre la vida en México para *The Brownies' Book*, una revista estadounidense para niños negros editada por Jessie Fauset y W.E.B. Du Bois (*Big Sea* 72; véase Johnson 1-2; Mullen, “Langston” 25; Rampersad, *I, Too* 45-46, 48). Los textos de esta serie se pueden ver como “obras de literatura etnográfica” (Johnson 2). Aunque validan la diferencia cultural, su “vista turística” (Mullen, *Langston* 19; véase Gunn 84) con el enfoque en los aspectos pintorescos de los paisajes, ciudades, y costumbres mexicanos subraya la alteridad del país visto por EE.UU. (“Mexican City”; “Mexican Games”; “Up”; véase Gunn 84). Tratando de la amistad entre dos jóvenes, el uno indígena mexicano y el otro estadounidense, la novela para niños *The Pasteboard Bandit* (1935), escrita junto con Arna Bontemps pero inédita durante la vida de ambos autores, ofrece una representación más equilibrada. Aquí, se integran imágenes de distinción cultural, como la cocina o las tradiciones de días de feria, en una narrativa que destaca similitudes —ambos chicos, por ejemplo, tienen un padre artista o artesano— y la importancia del respeto mutuo entre estadounidenses y mexicanos (*Pasteboard Bandit*).

Un enfoque en la diferencia cultural entre México y EE.UU. también caracteriza varios de los ensayos y cuentos no-juveniles de Hughes sobre temas mexicanos. El primer ensayo que publicó en *The Crisis*, “The Virgin of Guadalupe” (1921), narra la leyenda titular del siglo XVI. Menciona, que la Virgen apareció a un pobre joven indígena (y no a un español), pero pierde la ocasión de enfatizar el segundo factor importante de la leyenda y además conforme a la agenda socio-política de Hughes: El hecho, que la imagen de la Virgen preservada en la mantilla del joven, en contraste a las representaciones europeas de ella, tiene la piel negra y los rasgos indígenas (“Virgin”). Christopher De Santis elogia el ensayo de Hughes “The Fascination of Cities” (1926) por su estilo

“impresionista”, que no sólo “evoca bellamente la maravilla infantil del descubrimiento..., suavizando los aspectos ásperos de la vida urbana detrás un velo de grandeza”, sino también aborda “momentos crueles de injusticia racial” (3). Representando México D.F. exclusivamente por la narración de una corrida de toros y sus secuelas, el texto reduce la vida moderna en la capital a un espectáculo exótico y tradicional (“Fascination” 28-30). Tanto en el ensayo “Love in Mexico”, publicado en la revista negra estadounidense *Opportunity* en 1940 e integrada en el primer tomo de su autobiografía (*Big Sea* 63-65, 67-69), como en el cuento “Tragedy at the Baths” (1952), Hughes observa agudamente el doble estándar caracterizando los papeles vinculados del género y de la clase social en México. Los textos lo hacen en una manera etnográfica que destaca la distinción entre la cultura católica de América Latina y la cultura protestante de EE.UU. (“Love”; “Tragedy”). Estas representaciones de México contrastan al ensayo inédito “Memories of Christmas” (1946), que trata de costumbres mexicanas y estadounidenses de Navidad para subrayar la semejante importancia cultural de este día de feria en sociedades diferentes (“Memories”).

En reiteradas oportunidades Hughes acentúa el papel que desempeña México como país multiétnico en tanto ofrece a todos los grupos étnicos mejores oportunidades que la sociedad estadounidense. Registra en julio de 1920 en su diario, que en México “No se me priva de nada. Estoy entre mi propia gente, porque... México es un país del hombre moreno. ¿Se puede culpar a ellos por tener miedo una invasión ‘gringa’ con su concomitante horror de odio de color?” (citado en Rampersad, *I, Too* 40). En el relato de viaje “Up to the Crater of an Old Volcano” Hughes subraya las semejanzas entre los niños indígenas y mestizos de México, por un lado, y sus jóvenes lectores afro-estadounidenses, cuando constata: “Estos colegiales amables de rasgo oscuro eran así como los chicos de mi propia raza, a quiénes conocía en Estados Unidos” (32; véase Johnson 2-3). El ensayo “In a Mexican City” describe la mezcla de etnicidades y clases sociales en el mercado semanal de Toluca, donde señoritas ricas, mujeres indígenas, jóvenes pobres mestizos y mendigos inválidos formaban una “multitud tan densa que nadie puede moverse rápidamente” (24).

Al mismo tiempo que elogia la ideología del mestizaje (sobre ella, véase Luis-Brown 15-16) en el México post-revolucionario, Hughes críticamente apunta el carácter étnico que a menudo tiene la estratificación social en el país. En 1920 observa en su diario, que “las revoluciones han dejado tanta gente pobre, quebrada en la rueda de la libertad que siguen buscando” (citado en Rampersad, *I, Too* 40). “In a Mexican City” muestra cómo la pobreza de la clase baja se manifiesta en la gente que esta descalzada aún en tiempo frío o en la falta de muebles en muchas

casas en Toluca (22-23; véase Johnson 2-3). Narrando cómo una pareja ayuda a una mujer pobre con una donación de dinero, el drama en un acto “The Gold Piece” (1921) no sólo aborda el impacto de la pobreza, sino también muestra una solución a este problema. Siendo una obra para niños, su estilo y moral de cuento de hadas destacan la generosidad individual (“Gold”; véase Johnson 4) en lugar de exigir el cambio de estructuras sociales, como lo hace Hughes en sus obras dirigidas a lectores adultos. Su único poema con un tema mexicano (Rampersad, *I, Too* 56-57), “Mexican Market Woman” (1922), focaliza las vinculadas desigualdades étnicas y de clase social en su retrato de una vieja placera “morena”, que “está sentada en la tierra / vendiendo su mercancía escasa / día tras día” (54; véase Gunn 83-84; Luis-Brown 163).

En sus dos autobiografías, *The Big Sea* (1940) y *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), Hughes representa sus encuentros con México entre 1919 y 1934 con más complejidad. Antes de su primera visita, tenía una visión romántica del país, informada por su propia experiencia de ser afro-estadounidense de clase baja: “un país, donde no hay gente blanca a trazar la línea de color y no hay viviendas con alquiler a pagar —sólo montañas y sol y nopales” (*Big Sea* 36). Los conflictos en aumento con su padre, que resultaron con el joven Hughes sufriendo una crisis nerviosa (39-49), dominan la descripción de su primera estadía en Toluca, mientras que los relatos de sus visitas siguientes a México en gran parte presentan imágenes pintorescas de la vida cotidiana o de incidentes extraordinarios en Toluca como así también de la vida bohemia y de las corridas de toro en México D.F. (63-77; *I Wonder* 291-300).

En *The Big Sea*, el padre de Hughes encarna el estereotipo del ‘gringo’ obsesionado por el dinero, siguiendo una ética estricta de trabajo y manteniendo contacto sólo con europeos y mexicanos de clase alta (39-46, 57, 59). A pesar de su propia identidad afro-estadounidense, James Hughes en la representación de su hijo había internalizado un desprecio profundo por la población negra, a la cual acusaba ser indolente e incapaz de manejar dinero, aunque al mismo tiempo odiaba EE.UU. por su línea de color que le negaba oportunidades profesionales a los negros. Elogiaba el México post-revolucionario por la ausencia de esta línea, simultáneamente despreciaba a los mexicanos, especialmente a los pobres y los indígenas, mirando a ellos como gente ingrata, proclive al bandolerismo, ignorante, retrasada y floja (*Big Sea* 39-44; véase *I Wonder* 294; Gunn 83; Luis-Brown 161-62). El joven Langston, al contrario, mostraba “sensibilidad y humor” (Miller, *Art* 22), rechazando los prejuicios de James cuando compartía cigarrillos con el sirviente indígena de la familia y a cambio, aprendía facultades prácticas de él (*Big Sea* 42-44; véase Miller, *Art* 22). Según su texto, Hughes se oponía a la opinión política de su padre durante su segunda estancia en Toluca: simpatizaba abiertamente con la Revolución mexicana, argumentando que los

revolucionarios alrededor de Emiliano Zapata no habían sido bandoleros sino gente pobre luchando por reformas agrarias (*Big Sea* 59-60).

En su autobiografía, así como también en algunos textos ficticios sobre México, Hughes establece enlaces y analogías entre la experiencia mexicana, especialmente de los indígenas, por un lado, y la vida y cultura negra de EE.UU. por el otro. En *The Big Sea* menciona que, con su piel morena clara, se pareció a un mexicano (40, 78), un hecho que le permitió reservar un puesto en un coche-cama en Texas —lo cual a los negros les estaba prohibido según las leyes de segregación en el sur de EE.UU. (50; véase Luis-Brown 163). Recordando la estratificación de clase social basada en diferencias étnicas en Toluca en los años 20, Hughes escribe: “pocas familias indígenas eran consideradas como ‘aristocracia’ en Toluca, donde la sangre española prevalecía en los círculos más altos, y la exaltación de cosas indígenas todavía no había triunfado —porque Diego Rivera aún estaba en París” (67). Esta referencia al pintor mexicano y exponente clave del Indigenismo de los años 20 y 30 establece una conexión entre aquel esfuerzo estético-político de validar el patrimonio indígena mexicano y el simultáneo movimiento del “New Negro” en EE.UU. Este enlace es más evidente en la descripción que Hughes ofrece en *I Wonder as I Wander*. Aquí, llama a Rivera “esta montaña de hombre, con la piel más oscura que la tengo yo. Cuando decía a Diego, que se parecía más afro-estadounidense que indígena mexicano, Rivera respondía: ‘Una de mis abuelas era negra’” (294). Más tarde, Rivera relató a Hughes la historia negra de México y su contribución a la identidad etno-racial “morena” en el país (294; sobre esta historia, véase Andrews 13, 17, 20), que, según Hughes, claramente representa una fuente de orgullo social. Esta vista romántica de Hughes, que subsume las identidades afro-estadounidenses e indígenas mexicanas bajo la rúbrica “morena”, ofrece un potencial de política de identidad transnacional largamente ignorada en la investigación de ambos la *Harlem Renaissance* y el Indigenismo mexicano de los años 20 y 30. Sin embargo, lo que queda problemático en esta vinculación de movimientos y términos son la mala atención de Hughes a las diferencias (históricas) entre grupos étnicos distintos, por un lado, y su suposición mayor, que el color de piel en su mismo ya funcione como “significado emancipador” (Gayatri Spivak, citada en Luis-Brown 163; véase 164, 170), por el otro.

Cuba

Langston Hughes nunca vivió en Cuba, pero viajó tres veces allá. Después de una breve visita turística en 1927 (Guridy 125), Hughes volvió a la isla en 1930 y 1931, cada vez por dos semanas.

En ambos casos, la prensa cubana lo recibió bien y apuntó la relación entre su obra y la literatura afro-cubana. Hughes fue introducido a varios artistas e intelectuales cubanos, particularmente a los que estaban afiliados con el Afrocubanismo de los años 20 y 30 (sobre ello, véase Moore, *Nationalizing*), y el poeta estadounidense se hizo amigo de algunos de ellos. Ambos en 1930 y 1931, buscaron la experiencia de la vida y la cultura negra en Cuba. Durante su visita en 1930, intentó —sin éxito— hallar un compositor afro-cubano para escribir junto con él una ópera comisionada por el benefactor nueva-yorkense de Hughes (*I Wonder* 6-15, 34-37; véase Guridy 124-35; Mullen, *Langston* 25-31; Rampersad, *I, Too* 150, 176-81, 201-04).

Ya antes de su primera estancia, Hughes publicó un poema con un tema cubano en su primera compilación de poemas, *The Weary Blues* (1926). Titulado “Soledad: A Cuban Portrait”, el poema describe el cuerpo cansado y el alma “gravemente cicatrizada” de una mujer, la vida de la cual ha sido “llena de pena y pasión /...llena de mentiras” (53). Mientras que no hay nada específicamente cubano en esta mujer, su retrato en una manera prefigura los encuentros silenciosos de los compañeros de viaje de Hughes en 1927, un grupo de cocineros-marineros chinos, con prostitutas en La Habana descritos en *The Big Sea* (292-93). Una vista a Cuba completamente diferente a lo que ella es (diferente a las otras), pero igualmente turística como aparece en el poema “Havana Dreams”, publicado en *Opportunity* en 1933. Esta “reflexión algo estilizada sobre la vida de lujo en Cuba” (Mullen, *Langston* 31), enumera no sólo estereotipos populares de “artículos consumibles” cubanos —cócteles exóticos, viajes al campo, mujeres bonitas, o mercancías exquisitas— sino que los interroga al mismo tiempo (“Havana”; para una lectura alternativa, véase Rampersad, *I, Too* 204).

Aunque se preocupó por las culturas españoles e indígenas, aun cuando no con ella de los afrodescendientes en México, Hughes “miró el Caribe, así como el sur de EE.UU., como repositorio de formas culturales afro-diaspóricas auténticas” (Guridy 124). En una entrevista con Hughes, el poeta afro-cubano Nicolás Guillén comenta:

En Cuba el Negro...es la constante preocupación de Mr. H[ughes]. Por donde quiera que pasa, indaga por el negro. ... Lo llevo a una academia de baile, de esas en que sólo danzan los individuos de nuestra raza. Desde que penetra en el local, el poeta está como poseído del espíritu de los *suezos* —de lo mío. “¡Mi gente!” exclama (“Conversación” 175, cursivas en el original; véase Guridy 134-35; Rampersad, *I, Too* 180)

Sin duda, Huges era consciente de que su clasificación como mulato en la compleja taxonomía racial de Cuba [6], le daba una posición privilegiada de la cual no disponía en EE.UU. con sus línea de color distinguiendo solamente entre blancos y gente “de color” (Scott 49-51). Guillén

apunta: “Mientras contempla al bongosero ‘negro como la noche,’ [Hughes] exclama, con un suspiro de ansia insatisfecha: ‘Yo quisiera ser negro. Bien Negro. ¡Negro de verdad!’” (“Conversación” 175; véase Kutzenski, “Yo” 566; Leary 143; Mullen, *Langston* 29; Rampersad, *I, Too* 180; Scott 35-36, 45).

No sorprende, que este interés en la cultura negra, la cual Hughes además asociaba estrechamente con la pertenencia a la clase obrera (Scott 35-36), informaba fuertemente la obra del poeta dedicada a Cuba (Mullen, *Langston* 32). La experiencia afro-cubana desempeña un papel central en dos retratos que Hughes hizo del escultor vanguardista afro-cubano Teodoro Ramos Blanco en 1930 (“Cuban”; véase Mullen, *Langston* 31) y de Nicolás Guillén en 1948 (“Concerning”). Elogia al poeta amigo por el valor estético y político de sus poemas: usando ritmos y un lenguaje (afro-) cubanos para tratar “los problemas, la pobreza, y las costumbres populares de su patria Cuba” (485) y para llegar tanto a lectores de clase baja como a otros poetas en el Caribe y América Latina (485). Del mismo modo, Hughes toma nota de Ramos Blanco por su “estatua monumental dedicada a la maternidad negra heroica” (“Cuban Sculptor” 45; véase Leary 150) —su monumento a Mariana Granjales, un ícono de las luchas para los derechos de las mujeres y para una Cuba independiente sin esclavitud en el siglo XIX. Hughes no logra abarcar la importancia de que Ramos Blanco realizó la escultura en mármol italiano blanco, un hecho que se puede interpretar como intento de “blanquear” simbólicamente a Granjales o bien de “ennoblecere” a ella y al escultor por medio de haber utilizado un material tan precioso, prestigioso y difícil. Por tanto, el poeta destaca la relevancia de esta escultura para los afro-estadounidenses, sobre los cuales comenta: “tenemos tan pocos monumentos a los héroes de nuestra raza en EE.UU.,... a Sojourner Truth o Frederick Douglass o Booker Washington o alguna otra de las grandes figuras en nuestra historia tan arriesgada” (“Cuban” 45; véase Leary 150).

Análogo a su preocupación de problemas de clase social en sus textos dedicados a México, Hughes crítica la desigualdad social y el imperialismo en Cuba en su obra. Su poema “To the Little Fort of San Lázaro, on the Ocean Front, Havana”, publicado en el periódico marxista *New Masses* en 1931, rechaza el impacto del imperialismo económico estadounidense en la isla por medio de compararlo a la piratería. El texto contrasta el pasado glorioso del edificio titular como baluarte contra los bucaneros ingleses y españoles, por un lado, con su impotencia en el presente hacia “un pirata llamado / THE NATIONAL CITY BANK” (“Little Fort” 205, capitalización en el original; véase Ellis 141; Leary 139-40; Mullen, *Langston* 32; Rampersad, *I, Too* 203-04), por el otro. Asimismo, usando el caso del despertar político de un marinero cubano, el cuento “The Sailor and

the Steward” (1932) pide activismo laboral organizado para mejorar los derechos de los trabajadores (“The Sailor”).

El sentimiento de ser vigilado por agentes del gobierno después su visita en el taller de Ramos Blanco inspiró a Hughes a escribir el cuento “deliberadamente Hemingwayesco” (Rampersad, *I, Too* 204) “Little Old Spy” (1952). Éste transmite el racismo, el clasismo y la censura política bajo la dictadura de Gerardo Machado (1925-33) como así también la voluntad del pueblo cubano de sublevarse contra el régimen (“Little Old Spy”; véase Mullen, *Langston* 32; Rampersad, *I, Too* 204). Más allá crítica a los turistas estadounidenses que ven la pobreza en Cuba como espectáculo exótico fascinante como así también atestigua el creciente poder político de las masas obreras cubanas, especialmente dentro de los afrodescendientes (“Little Old Spy” 255-57). Según el texto, el gobierno de Machado se había hecho muy temeroso no sólo de su propia población negra, sino también de la posible influencia de los afro-estadounidenses en la isla:

La llegada de un negro nuevo-yorkense a La Habana podría significar que éste habría venido para sublevar a los afro-cubanos —porque en Cuba los negros de Harlem gozan de una reputación de ser ni dócil, ni tonto. ¿No había ido de Harlem Marcus Garvey a suscitar a todo el mundo negro una consciencia de su propia fuerza política? (257)

Por medio de revelar que el espía, que ha seguido al narrador por toda La Habana, es un anciano proxeneta fácil a derrotar, el cuento ridiculiza la paranoia del gobierno cubano así como también, critica al racismo-cum-sexismo del orden socio-político en la isla representado por el espía (258-61).

Describiendo sus viajes a Cuba en su autobiografía, Hughes —semejante a su tratamiento de México en estos tomos— por un lado ofrece un punto de vista un poco etnográfico, con un enfoque casi “turístico” en los aspectos pintorescos de la cultura popular (*Big Sea* 292-93; *I Wonder* 6-15, 34-37). Por otro lado, se preocupa otra vez de la línea de color y su papel en la estratificación social en un país latinoamericano. Conforme con su deseo de formar parte de la cultura afro-cubana, el Hughes de *I Wonder as I Wander* llama a algunos bongoseros negros “los cuales que en cierto modo han salvado —durante siglo tras siglo de esclavitud y milla tras milla aparte de Guinea— el latido del corazón y de la canción de África” (7). Según Frank Guridy, “su propia posición racial de mulato posiblemente lo llevó a Hughes a concluir que el encuentro con música tocada por afrodescendientes de piel oscura en un país extranjero le permitiera probar por un instante el sabor de negritud ‘auténtica’” (135). Como visitante célebre a La Habana, Hughes además era consciente del orden racial de género en Cuba (sobre ello, véase Guridy 129-30; Miller, *Rise* 50-52). Invitado a una fiesta, no sólo recuerda en su autobiografía, que los otros

invitados, sólo hombres, eran acompañados por amantes mulatas del huésped —una diversión aceptada por hombres de clase media—, sino también apunta, que estando él invitado de honor, se le ofreció a pasar la noche con la(s) mujer(es) de su elección (*I Wonder* 8-10; véase Guridy 130).

En *I Wonder as I Wonder*, Hughes llama la atención del lector hacia la “triple línea de color” que dividía a la sociedad cubana en (casi) blancos, mulatos y negros “de sangre pura” (10) sino la cual se trazaba, análogo a otros países del Caribe latino, menos estrictamente que en las Antillas anglófonas (10-11). Hughes concluye que esto “es lo que engaña a muchos visitantes estadounidenses —particularmente a los visitantes negros ansiosamente buscando un país del que puedan decir que no hay *ninguna línea de color*” (11, cursivas en el original). Positivamente apunta, que no había vagones racialmente segregados en los tranvías cubanos (11) y que la población negra de La Habana tenía sus propios clubes sociales. Entre ellos estaba el club de clase alta, Atenas, sobre el cual Hughes comenta: “Me sorprendía y alegraba de su gusto y lujo, porque la población de color en EE.UU. no tenía ningún club parecido” (8). Al mismo tiempo, sin embargo, describe prácticas de discriminación racial en Cuba. En un manuscrito inédito remarca, que en muchos salones de baile en La Habana —análogo a la observación que hacía algunos años antes, en el Cotton Club de Harlem (*Big Sea* 226)— había “una orquesta negra pero no bailarines negros” (citado en Guridy 126), y en *I Wonder as I Wonder* enumera ejemplos de exclusión racial en puestos de trabajo, en la política y la vida social de Cuba, observando que “la más oscura piel de un hombre, lo más rico y famoso el hombre tiene que ser para romper estas divisiones” (11).

Lo que particularmente tocaba a Hughes en Cuba era la extensión del concepto estadounidense de la línea de color en la isla. El crecimiento del turismo estadounidense —como así también de la influencia económica y política del país— “introdujo su cuota de prejuicio racial del sur de EE.UU.” (*I Wonder* 11), como lo formula Hughes. En consecuencia, cuando iba a Cuba, muchas instalaciones en posesión de o dirigiéndose a ciudadanos blancos estadounidenses aplicaban una política más estricta de “whites only”. En su autobiografía, el poeta relata cómo se le impidió a él y a un compañero de viaje negro pisar una playa “estadounidense” en La Habana. El dueño admitía a “políticos y plutócratas mulatos” cubanos, sólo si ellos “tenían bastante influencia política o prestigio social de obligar al dueño a venderles los billetes de temporada alta (11-12; véase Guillén, *Páginas* 106; Ellis 143; Rampersad, *I, Too* 203). Encontrándose en un tribunal donde tuvieron que confrontar acusaciones falsas hechas en nombre del dueño, Hughes y su compañero, no obstante, salieron victoriosos: El juez, “un caballero mulato amable —a quién se

habría clasificado como negro, si hubiera vivido en EEUU, pero que era ‘blanco’ en La Habana” (*I Wonder* 14), rechazó las acusaciones, diciendo a los acusadores: ‘Lo que Ustedes hicieron es contra todos los principios de la hospitalidad y contra la ley cubana, la cual no reconoce diferencias en base a raza o color de piel” (15).

Latinoamérica y el mundo “de color” más largo

Como observa Edward Mullen, “mientras que México y Cuba eran importantes para Langston Hughes luego del contacto, no son más que piezas en un mosaico literario más largo” relativo al hemisferio americano “a lo que Hughes es vinculado” (“Langston” 27). Más allá de los textos ya presentados en este ensayo, Hughes también editó la antología *Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral* (1957). Su introducción pone de relieve los logros de esta poeta chilena en la educación y la política así como en la poesía (“Introduction”). En su ensayo autobiográfico “Early Days in Harlem”, Hughes reconoce el papel importante que desempeñaban los inmigrantes afro-caribeños para transformar el barrio neoyorkino de Harlem en los años 20 en la capital del mundo negro (sobre esto proceso, véase Watkins-Owens): “El Harlem antillano —afectuoso, pendenciero, procaz, recordando a Marcus Garvey. El Harlem haitiano, cubano, pequeños bolsillos de sueños tropicales en lenguas extranjeras. El Harlem magnético, tirando Arthur Schomburg de Puerto Rico” (397; véase Guridy 121). En el cuento “Spanish Blood” (1952) Hughes al mismo tiempo que hace tributo a la población puertorriqueña de Harlem, abarca también la relación a veces conflictiva entre ella y los afro-estadounidenses en el barrio por medio de una historia de una familia multiétnica (“Spanish Blood”).

Pasando por las contribuciones del Caribe a la cultura negra en EE.UU., al Caribe afro-diaspórico propio, Hughes dedicó uno de seis libros para niños sobre el mundo negro, comisionado por la editorial estadounidense Franklin Watts en los años 50 y 60 (Scott 191), a esta región. En *The First Book of the West Indies* (1956) “muestra su reconocimiento de la importancia de la antillanidad a la idea del negrismo y de la identidad americana” (Miller, “Gypsy” 338). El texto introduce al lector la historia, geografía, cultura y vida cotidiana en las Antillas (*First Book* 327-58), una vez más con un enfoque en los aspectos vinculados de raza y clase social. El capítulo introductorio trata de la esclavitud como origen causal del carácter multiétnico que tienen muchas sociedades caribes (328), un carácter que añade la presencia asiática en la sección sobre Jamaica (347). El capítulo dedicado a Haití específicamente subraya la relevancia de la Revolución Haitiana (333-34) que transformó al país en “la primera república negra en el mundo, y

el segundo país en el hemisferio [tras EE.UU.] a obtener su independencia” (333). Varias veces Hughes destaca la pobreza extendida en las Antillas, que se manifiesta tanto en la carencia de casas sólidas, en la ropa de la gente y el hambre (336, 340, 342), como también en el hecho que “la mayor parte de los niños en el Caribe trabaja tanto como juega, si no es que trabaja más.” (341; Véase 342).

En una manera muy distinta, la colección de poemas *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961) integra palabras y frases castellanas en el texto inglés (93, 111) y demanda un acompañamiento instrumental que incluye maracas (92-93, 108-10). Las letras de los poemas establecen relaciones entre la vida negra en el sur de EE.UU. y las culturas afro-diaspóricas en un área pasando del Caribe vía el hemisferio americano a todo el “Tercer Mundo” (91, 93, 108-10, 114, 117), un enlace subrayado por el acompañamiento musical mezclando el gospel afro-estadounidense y el cha-cha-cubano, especialmente en el poema “Gospel Cha-Cha” (108-10). Aunque no es tan explícitamente política como la poesía más radical que escribía Hughes en los años 30 y 40, esta colección valida la agencia política afro-diaspórica y de izquierda, entre otros refiriéndose a Fidel Castro y a diferentes líderes afro-caribeños (91, 93, 108-10).

El interés que tenía Hughes en la experiencia negra en las Américas formaba parte de su preocupación más larga de la injusticia social, notablemente los vínculos de la pobreza, del racismo y de sistemas del colonialismo o imperialismo. En gran parte de su obra articula lo que David Chioni Moore llama el concepto de “color local/global” (54) —un sentido fuerte de ser conectado con gente “de color” en todo el mundo, por un lado, y con gente sufriendo la pobreza o de alguna forma de discriminación, explotación u opresión, por el otro. [7] El tema de protesta social contra líneas de color opresivas locales o globales particularmente distingue la obra de Hughes de los años 30 (De Santis 6-14; Ellis 147-54). Como lo expone R. Baxter Miller, para Hughes “la literatura se convierte en un armazón intelectual contra el colonialismo en todo el mundo” (*Art* 67-68), y “en su literatura se forma el orgullo en las contribuciones de los negros a la cultura mundial” (71). Varios poemas de este período enlazan una América Latina amenazada por el imperialismo estadounidense al mundo más largo “de color” y su lucha contra la hegemonía de EEUU o de países europeos. Publicado por la primera vez en 1930 en *New Masses*, el poema “Merry Christmas”, por ejemplo, llama a las armas a las naciones del Caribe —notamente Cuba y Haití—, de África y Asia contra “la Inglaterra santurróna cristiana” y “la dominación Yanqui” (1991) así como también contra los sospechosos “regalos” suyos del hambre, de la violación, la explotación económica y la opresión cultural (199-200; véase Ellis 148; Luis-Brown 283 n. 59).

Un enfoque más fuerte en la explotación económica de las poblaciones negras rurales de las Américas y de África así como una demanda más explícita de una revolución socialista caracterizan el poema “Always the Same”, un texto de agitación de la misma década (“Always”). Escrito más tarde, “Broadcast to the West Indies” (años 40) tiene una nota más suave. Con el trasfondo de alertar a los caribeños de la propaganda anti-estadounidense de los Poderes del Eje en la Segunda Guerra Mundial, este poema critica la violencia racista contra los negros en EE.UU. (239), pero al mismo tiempo subraya el carácter caribeño de Harlem. Las líneas “Harlem / pequeño país, también / limitado por el mar que lava y mezcla / con todas las aguas en el mundo” (239) enfatizan las similitudes entre Harlem y las Antillas. Estas similitudes no sólo incluyen las experiencias de “Sufrimiento / Dominación / Segregación” (240), sino también, desviando del concepto binario estadounidense de la línea de color, la historia del mestizaje, como lo argumentan las líneas siguientes: “¡HOLA ANTILLAS! / Ustedes son oscuras como yo / Coloradas por tantas sangres como yo / rayando... de negro a blanco como yo” (239; mayúscula en el original; véase Miller, “Gypsy” 337-38). Finalmente, el poema, esta vez subvirtiendo la ideología estadounidense de la superioridad de EE.UU. por sobre América Latina, exprime admiración y apoyo de las cultural afro-antillanas. El yo lírico admite: “Me gustan su gente, su fruta... / su fuerza, su sentido / del bien y del mal / Nos cuidamos los unos a los otros” (Broadcast” 241).

Conclusión

Edward Mullen observa:

En el área de relaciones literarias hemisféricas..., [Langston Hughes] es una figura singular, alguien que es capaz de comunicar a lectores hispanos blancos lo que significa ser negro en E.EUU., mientras que provee a escritores afro-hispanos de una voz... para articular su propia visión de la cultura negra hispana. (“Langston” 27)

En su larga obra de poesía, cuentos, ensayos y autobiografías tratando temas de América Latina, Hughes trata aspectos críticos de la vida, particularmente de la de los negros e indígenas, en esta parte del hemisferio para lectores estadounidenses. Debido a sus experiencias personales, su obra dedicada a la región —además de Haití— focaliza largamente a México y Cuba, dos países que se pueden observar comparativamente: En ambas naciones tuvo lugar un “renacimiento” estético-político simultáneo a, y en interacción con, la *Harlem Renaissance* de los años 20 y 30 del siglo XX, un desarrollo fructífero para la autodeterminación y la validación social de las culturas afro-diaspóricas e indígenas en cuestión. Debido a las condiciones específicas de sus estancias en México y Cuba, los textos de Hughes describen la experiencia indígena mexicana como

largamente marcada por la pobreza y la falta de oportunidades. En cambio, presentan la Cuba negra como socialmente más diversa y más activamente comprometida a la lucha política. Mientras que Hughes elogia la ausencia de una línea de color institucionalizada, crítica la discriminación etno-racial en Cuba, especialmente la difusión de la línea de color estadounidense en la isla, e identifica diferencias de clase social dentro de la comunidad afro-cubana.

En sus textos Hughes escudriña prácticas de la estratificación social basada en clasificaciones etno-raciales en América Latina —una herencia del colonialismo— como así también el imperialismo estadounidense creciente en esta región. David Luis-Brown expone:

Relatando la explotación y la opresión al extranjero, escritores como Hughes... permitieron a los ciudadanos estadounidenses percibir los procesos por medio de los cuales el neocolonialismo privó a los latinoamericanos de sus derechos de ciudadanos. Al hacerlo, los escritores concibieron discursos de ciudadanía hemisférica en que intelectuales de la izquierda estadounidense viajando a América Latina pudieron asumir la responsabilidad de las consecuencias del neocolonialismo. (152; véase 201)

Dirigiéndose particularmente a receptores afro-estadounidenses y sugiriendo paralelismos entre la situación en otros países y la política de segregación racial en EE.UU., Hughes insta críticamente a sus lectores a que se preocupen por la injusticia y explotación en los países vecinos y reflejen su propio papel de ciudadanos de EE.UU. en estas prácticas. En sus textos sobre América Latina así como en su obra en general, el poeta quiere inspirar al público a trabajar para el cambio social, ambos en su propio país y más allá.

Notas

[1] Una versión previa de este artículo se publicó en inglés en Luz Angélica Kirschner, ed., *Expanding Latinidad* (Trier: WVT; Tempe, AZ: Bilingual P, 2012), 177-94. Todas las citas traducidas del inglés en el presente ensayo son las nuestras. Mientras que hay traducciones castellanas publicadas de varios textos de Langston Hughes (véase Mullen, *Langston* 47-67; Kutzinski, “Yo”), la mayor parte de ellas no es disponible en bibliotecas afuera de las Américas o España.

[2] Kutzinski, “Yo” 550; véase Jackson 82, 85-90, 93-94; Mullen, *Langston* 15. Marilyn Miller (“Gypsy” 324) indica la incertidumbre de esta estimación.

[3] Hughes, *I Wonder* 8, 291; véase Jackson 4, 82, 85-86; Kutzinski, “Yo también;” Mullen, *Langston* 16, 19-25, 30; Rampersad, *I Dream* 106, 113, 154-55, 159, 180, 204-05, 264, 270, 273, 281-82 y *I, Too* 47-48, 178, 202-03. Investigadores discutan especialmente la relación entre Hughes y el poeta afro-cubano Nicolás Guillén (la literatura es amplia; véase por ejemplo Ellis; Kutzinski; Leary; Miller, “Gypsy”).

[4] Entre los países latinoamericanos y caribes, además de México y Cuba, Hughes se preocupó particularmente de Haití, un tema ya ampliamente investigado (véase por ejemplo Berry and Lubin; Gardullo; Mullen, *Langston* 33-34).

[5] *Big Sea* 15-16, 34-49, 53-80; *I Wonder* 286-300; véase Mullen, *Langston* 17-25 y “Langston” 24-25; Rampersad, *I, Too* 11, 32-35, 40-49, 300-05. Hughes además hizo un viaje de un día a Ciudad Juárez en 1953 (Gunn 84-85; Rampersad, *I, Too* 227). Según Edward Mullen, fuentes mexicanas indican además otra visita al este país en 1962 (*Langston* 25).

[6] Sobre la taxonomía racial en Cuba, véase Kutzinski, “Yo” 565-66; Miller, *Rise* 59-60. Guillén le llama a Hughes un “mulato/mulatico” (“Conversación” 172; *Páginas* 105; véase Leary 142).

[7] Moore, “Local” 54-56, 63-64. Un aspecto problemático de este sentimiento de afinidad es la manera en que Hughes comprende discriminación social principalmente como discriminación étnica (desatendiendo otros factores como la clase social) y mira a ella en términos de la distinción binaria estadounidense blanco/“de color” (véase Haas 121-25, 130-31).

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“A Vagabond with a Purpose”: Claude McKay and His International Aspirations

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Abstract:

The essay examines Jamaican-born poet and novelist Claude McKay’s search for an original form of literary and political expression. Although he first started this search with Jamaican volumes of poetry, his ongoing search for justice and equality led him on extensive journeys around the world. In the course of which he also came to engage with non-English European literature and to view especially the Russian and Irish literary renaissances as possible models for the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s he had been involved in. Both his travels and his dealing with new literary influences enabled him to view the black diaspora from a wider perspective and from there from there renegotiate his Caribbean consciousness.

Keywords: *Claude McKay, Jamaica, travels, black diaspora, literary consciousness*

It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows.

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Like a multicolored shell that enables an ear to hear the noise of the ocean, the voice of the human ocean—the hundreds of millions of people liberated from colonialism—is heard in the talented poetry of the big and the smallest West Indian islands.

—E.L. Gal'perina, *Vremya Plameneyuschih derev'ev: Poeti Antil'skih Ostrovov* (*The Time of Flamboyant Trees: The Poets of the Antillean Islands* [my trans.]

In this essay, I analyze the importance of Claude McKay's Jamaican beginnings and international travels in his search for an original form of literary expression. Although he first started this search in *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912), his two Jamaican volumes of poetry, his long travels abroad enabled him to see the problem of the black diaspora in a wider perspective and facilitated the growth of his Jamaican consciousness. While Ray, the Haitian writer and protagonist of McKay's first two novels, reads *Crime and Punishment* and refers to Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Turgenev as creators of genuine art in *Home to Harlem*, in *Banjo* he conducts a more complex, longer-lasting dialogue with his literary master, Leo Tolstoy. Bitá Plant, the protagonist of McKay's third novel, *Banana Bottom*, continues the search for a particular Afro-Caribbean identity started by Ray in North American and French settings. In the final novel, there is no longer a surrogate dialogue with Russian writers, but a practical application, an actual integration of the educated colonial with the common Jamaican people and their culture. McKay's Jamaican beginnings, search for justice and equality, extensive journeys around the world, and engagement with nineteenth-century Russian writers in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* left a mark on his fiction and facilitated his formation of national Jamaican consciousness and sentiments.

The writer's two autobiographies, *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and *My Green Hills of Jamaica* (published posthumously in 1979) reveal and illuminate many aspects of McKay's poems, novels, and short stories. While *A Long Way from Home* focuses on his international experiences as a black writer in the United States, Europe, and North Africa, *My Green Hills of Jamaica* discloses his Jamaican background and inspiration. The title of *A Long Way from Home* is taken from an African American spiritual with the opening line, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home" (LeSeur 300). Yet the man of motion that is seen in McKay's first autobiography is neither a representation of the rootless drifter nor an endless seeker in quest of his identity. Instead, his worldwide travels play a significant role in the formation of a national consciousness shaped by his

engagement with the important political and social issues of the twentieth century. As such, the journey provides McKay with an opportunity to express the international consciousness of the black diaspora as he does in *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929), the novels he wrote during his expatriate years in Europe. However, in *Gingertown* (1932) and *Banana Bottom* (1933), his subsequent works written in Africa, he returns to the Jamaican landscape and its people. Whereas in his first autobiography, *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, McKay attempts to reconcile his internationalism with his desire for cultural belonging, in his second autobiography and in the poetry and narrative devoted to his homeland, he shows his ultimate preference for a national identification.

Even though McKay was born in a country with an educational system that encouraged native Jamaicans to accept the superiority of British cultural and literary forms and standards, from early childhood he possessed qualities that prevented him from becoming completely submerged in the foreign culture. He delighted in listening to stories about his Madagascar ancestors who managed to stay together by declaring a strike on the auction block (Eastman). The perseverance and inner strength of Mrs. McKay's ancestors had a profound impact on young Claude.

While most of the previous West Indian writers found their muse in the beautiful landscape of the region, McKay was the first one to turn to Jamaican culture as a source of his inspiration. In his Jamaican poetry, he expresses the everyday reality of the common people in a language created by them. Despite the wide acceptability of the British cultural standard in the Jamaica of his time, McKay turned to Jamaican indigenous language and culture. *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* are "pioneering attempts by a black West Indian to portray realistically the life of his people" (Cooper, "Introduction" 5). It is no wonder that these poems sold over two thousand copies; won the Mulgrave Silver Medal, a prize established by a British family for the best representation of Jamaican literature; and made a significant contribution within the Jamaican context.

In *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, McKay demonstrates his intimate knowledge of the peasants' lives and celebrates their rural, Afro-Jamaican origin. He shows the country as a beloved agrarian motherland that suffers greatly from the white man's interference. McKay realistically depicts the life of a peasant who is annoyed and disturbed by the white man's presence. He clearly expresses his sympathy toward the exploited. Most of the poems of *Constab Ballads* are directed against the Kingston policemen and their hypocrisy and arrogance. McKay describes a cruel world in which the justice system does not protect the oppressed that inhabit the lowest rung of the social ladder.

McKay's formative years on the island and his Jamaican literary beginnings influenced his subsequent work. According to Sandra Pouchet Paquet, *My Green Hills of Jamaica* reveals McKay's "inspiration and foundation of self and art" rooted in Jamaica (87). Winston James agrees with her in his discussion of McKay's intellectual, cultural, and political formation on the island and the writer's formation of "lifelong concern with racism, color, class, justice and injustice, oppression and revolt" (29). As his Jamaican volumes of poetry demonstrate, McKay is ahead of most other Anglophone Caribbean authors of that time. Written at the beginning of the twentieth century, they deal with such concepts as West Indian society, self-discovery, and self-definition, Caribbean themes that only later became the primary focus of Caribbean literature.

The writer's search for justice and equality started in Jamaica and continued in the United States. When the poet landed in Charleston, South Carolina in the late summer of 1912, he was not prepared to encounter a racial segregation system that "effectively denied blacks any social or civil intercourse with the white majority except as menials or supplicants." [1] He describes his surprise, horror and defiance of North American racial prejudice in the following way:

I had heard of prejudice in America but never dreamed of it being so intensely bitter; for at home there is also prejudice of the English sort, subtle and dignified, rooted in class distinction—color and race being hardly taken into account.... At first, I was horrified, my spirit revolted against the ignoble cruelty and blindness of it all. Then I soon found myself hating in return but this feeling couldn't last for to hate is to be miserable. (McKay, "Negro Poet" 275–76)

In the United States, McKay turned to reading and writing as forms of protest against the injustices he witnessed. During that time he also realized his desire to analyze the problems of the black diaspora from an international perspective. Even though completing his education had been his original intention for going to the United States, after a few years of study at Kansas State College, he became possessed by an urge to travel:

The spirit of the vagabond, the daemon of some poets, had got hold of me. I quit college. I had no desire to return home. What I had previously done was done. But I still cherished the urge to creative expression. I desired to achieve something new, something in the spirit and accent of America. And so I became a vagabond—but a vagabond with a purpose. I was determined to find expression in writing. [2]

In a conversation with Frank Harris, an editor of *Pearson's* magazine, McKay admitted that "the dominant desire to find a bigger audience" had been on his mind when he went to the United States because he felt that in Jamaica he was "isolated, cut off from the great currents of life" (LW 20). Even though he never mentioned a racial motive for leaving, it is possible that McKay's

professional future would have been limited there since “doors which would have been shut to an equally talented Negro were open to the white-skinned de Lisser” (Ramchand 56).

McKay’s inclination to rebel against injustices, already manifest in *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, increased in the United States. In 1917, he turned to Africa in search of an African American identity as well as his own. By the spring of 1919, he was ready to proclaim his revolutionary politics in his literary work. This he did by publishing his poems in *The Liberator*, a magazine in which he could both promote the cause of social justice and find himself as a writer and artist. His famous poem “If We Must Die” became a call to African Americans to stand brave before their white oppressors, and it came at a time when they needed this message most. With the appearance of “If We Must Die,” black people unanimously declared McKay a poet (LW 31). The poem “forced its way” into African American pulpits, clubs, schools, and mass meetings (LW 227). At the moment of writing, McKay was not aware that he “was transformed into a medium to express a mass sentiment” (LW 228), but he soon became known in New York as a militant black poet.

After the publication of his poems in *The Liberator*, McKay continued his world travels. He spent seven years in America and arrived in England in the fall of 1919. England became another site of political and professional growth. It provided McKay with an opportunity to publish *Spring in New Hampshire*, the book of poetry in which he expresses nostalgia for Jamaica, his homeland. While living in London in 1920, McKay wrote “I Shall Return,” a poem that shows Jamaica’s special place in his heart and mind that none of the other new and interesting places could fill:

I shall return to loiter by the streams
That bathe the brown blades of the bending grasses,
And realize once more my thousand dreams
Of waters rushing down the mountain passes.
I shall return to hear the fiddle and fife
Of village dances, dear delicious tunes
That stir the hidden depth of native life,
Stray melodies of dim remembered runes.
I shall return. I shall return again,
To ease my mind of long, long years of pain. [3]

After several years of separation from Jamaica, McKay remembers it fondly and hopes to return one day to a country that could cure his emptiness and hurt. The poem shows love, longing, and patriotism for Jamaica that is devoid of imperial sentiments.

Despite the nostalgic feelings for Jamaica that “I Shall Return” reveals, McKay did not go back to his homeland after his sojourn in England. Disappointed with England, he returned to the United

States in 1921. There he resumed his association with *The Liberator* and continued to contribute articles, book reviews, and poems to one of the most radical magazines in the United States. During these years, he composed poetry that represented his understanding of the black dilemma in Western culture. The anger and alienation that McKay felt in an unfair world dominated by whites, the world in which the black race was denied humanity, justice, and equality, found an expression in *Harlem Shadows*, the book he published in the United States.

After the publication of *Harlem Shadows*, McKay decided to visit the Soviet Union and to see the results of the 1917 revolution for himself. Russia “signaled” and he responded with the search for new understanding and knowledge. In 1922, McKay left for Russia in the hope that he would find evidence that equality and justice were actually taking place under socialism. Even though he was not a member of any official Communist Party delegation that traveled to Moscow, he shared a belief in international communism and an enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution. Once there, he had to obtain permission from Comintern authorities to attend the Fourth World Congress of the Third Communist International as “an unofficial delegate-observer” (CM 173).

Despite the efforts of American communists to prevent McKay from attending the congress, the poet won the right of “a special delegate” (CM 174). His vindication resulted from two sources. First, Sen Katayama, the leading Japanese communist, confirmed McKay’s knowledge of the black working class and convinced Comintern officials that the poet could speak authoritatively about the potential role of blacks in the international communist movement. Second, the Russian people on the streets found his color, height, smile, and laughter to be attractive (CM 174). As McKay writes,

never before had I experienced such an instinctive sentiment of affectionate feeling compelling me to the bosom of any people, white or colored. And I am certain I never will again. My response was as sincere as the mass feeling was spontaneous. That miraculous experience was so extraordinary that I have never been able to understand it. (LW 167)

As “the first Negro to arrive in Russia since the revolution,” he considered himself to be a “black icon” and “an omen of good luck” (LW 168). “Never in my life,” he admits, “did I feel prouder of being an African, a black....From Moscow to Petrograd and from Petrograd to Moscow I went triumphantly from surprise to surprise” (LW 168). Even bourgeois readers were interested in his poetry. As a token of appreciation for him as a poet, an anti-Bolshevik Russian professor who worshiped Pushkin’s books gave McKay a photograph of the Russian poet as a young boy with clearly visible African features. Throughout his life McKay thought of this portrait as one of his few most precious treasures. [4]

Even though McKay enjoyed a warm personal acceptance and appreciation by the Russians, he never totally committed himself to Soviet ideology. As he wrote James Weldon Johnson in a letter dated May 8, 1935, he went to Russia as “a writer and a free spirit” and he left the same. [5] When he left Russia, he was determined to become a writer and a spokesman for his people:

I left Russia with one determination and one objective: to write. I was not received in Russia as a politician, but primarily as a Negro poet. And the tremendous reception was a great inspiration and urge to write more. I often felt in Russia that I was honored as a poet altogether out of proportion to my actual performance. And thus I was fired with the desire to accomplish the utmost (LW 226).

McKay’s warm, affirmative reception during the period of the Third International influenced his political and literary development. This experience facilitated his awareness of himself as a representative of the black race who stood not only for African Americans, but also for the black diaspora of European imperialism in Africa and the Caribbean islands. The visit provided inspiration for creating a new, liberating kind of art in the writings that followed.

After Russia and a brief visit to Germany in the fall of 1923, McKay journeyed to Paris, an emerging site of African American intellectual life of that time. Living abroad and seeing from that perspective how the black intelligentsia wanted to please the whites rather than serve their own people provided him with an opportunity to express his opinion in a different way:

For my part I was deeply stirred by the idea of a real Negro renaissance.... The Russian literary renaissance and also the Irish had absorbed my interest. My idea of renaissance was one of talented persons of an ethnic or national group working individually or collectively in a common purpose and creating things that would be typical of their group. (LW 321)

Being free from the attitude of the black elite, McKay was able to compose *Home to Harlem*, a novel in which he describes the life of common black people of Harlem. In a letter to James Weldon Johnson dated April 30, 1928 he states,

In writing *Home to Harlem* I have not deviated in any way from my intellectual and artistic ideas of life. I consider the book a real proletarian novel, but I don’t expect the nice radicals to see that it is, because they know very little about proletarian life and what they want of proletarian art is not proletarian life, truthfully, realistically, and artistically portrayed, but their own false, soft-headed and wine-watered notions of the proletariat. With the Negro intelligentsia it is a different matter, but between the devil of Cracker prejudice and the deep sea of respectable white condescension I can certainly sympathize, though I cannot agree, with their dislike of the artistic exploitation of low-class Negro life. We must leave the real appreciation of what we are doing to the emancipated Negro intelligentsia of the future. (CMPJ 13-38)

In *A Long Way from Home*, he further elaborates on the reason for “so much genteel-Negro hostility” against *Home to Harlem* and Langston Hughes’s “primitive Negro poems” and criticizes the black intelligentsia he met in Paris who were “Harlem-conscious” not because they understood “Harlem’s intrinsic values as a unique and popular Negro quarter,” but because “white folks had discovered black magic there” (LW 322).

Rather than associating with white French people, the writer found a communal sense of kinship among ordinary Africans, West Indians, and African Americans he met in Marseilles. In one of his letters to Langston Hughes written in France, he expresses his fascination with this French city:

Marseilles I really love more than any place in France. It is the most vivid port I ever touched. Wonderful, dirty, unbeautiful, rolling in slime and color and hourly interest. There all the scum of the sea seems to drift on to natural soil. I love it more than any of the English, American or German ports. [6]

There McKay had a chance to live among the African diaspora and to spend time with dockers and sailors from Dahomey, Senegal, and Algeria (LW 277). In the Vieux Port, an exciting place where he rented a room, he met the poet and later politician Léopold Sédar Senghor, a “Negro leader among the Communists” and “a tall, lean intelligent Senegalese” to whom he promised to write the truth about the Negroes in Marseilles (LW 278).

While the greatest part of *Banjo* was written in Marseilles, by the spring of 1928 McKay had to escape the French city in order to finish it. Barcelona, a place that took his breath away, became his next abode. In the letters he wrote to James Weldon Johnson between 1928 and 1931, he states,

Perhaps you know Barcelona—a beautiful city and it is a happy change after France and more to my fancy, but I am working so hard I haven’t had a chance to enjoy anything yet.

If you ever come to Europe soon, you must be sure to visit Spain. I am sure that both you and Mrs. Johnson will be charmed by it. It is the only European country that touches me emotionally.

Barcelona was to me the most inviting town and it has lovely suburbs. And all along the Catalunian coast down to Valencia are the most beautiful port towns and villages of brown-gray and soft creamy color that I have ever seen anywhere. (CMPJ 13-38)

While he intended to spend just three days in Barcelona when he went there with a Senegalese boxer early in the summer of 1928, he ended up staying in Spain for three months (LW 295–296).

Home to Harlem and *Banjo* are authentic writings significant in African American and Caribbean contexts. McKay’s first novel is not about the black elite that strives to become like whites in their

way of life and thinking. Instead it is a story of the serving class—longshoremen, housemaids, porters, waiters, cooks, and washroom attendants. His second novel is a realistic depiction of a difficult life of seamen and drifters of all races and nations who come in contact with each other in Marseilles. While in *Home to Harlem*, McKay makes an effort to come closer to common African American people and their backgrounds, in *Banjo* he describes the difficult life of the African diaspora in Marseilles and creates a sense of their collective identity.

McKay's search for a particular African American and Caribbean identity that started on the pages of *Home to Harlem* and continued in *Banjo* can be perceived as his coherent attempt to articulate the personal problems of the black intellectual and create a type of writing rooted in African culture and traditions. Similar to Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy, who strove to portray the Russian people of the nineteenth century truthfully, he worked towards a unique and distinctive depiction of the Caribbean and African American masses of the twentieth century. A return to the "native soil" and respect for his own people and culture are some of the tendencies that he shares with them. The "penitent nobleman" desires to come close to the masses and becomes creatively active in the Russian literature of the nineteenth century. Ray in *Home to Harlem* similarly gains strength through contact with the cultural treasure of Africa and with ordinary black people.

McKay's search for justice and equality was not just geographical. While he spent time in the Soviet Union, France, and Spain and learned a lot from these "logical steps" (letter to James Weldon Johnson, May 8, 1935, *CMPJ* 4-419) of his pilgrimage, in Morocco he turned to Islam in his spiritual search for equality between blacks and whites. In another letter to James Weldon Johnson dated May 25, 1931, he adds, "I am seriously contemplating becoming a Moslem. The social side of the life that is blind to racial and color prejudices appeals to me greatly and as the religion is mostly great poetry, I can conscientiously subscribe to it, as a poet" (*CMPJ* 13-38).

McKay felt as color-conscious as he had felt twenty years earlier when he wrote his "bitter poems on race questions" (*CMPJ* 15-455). Unlike the United States, Morocco gave him "something he had not found in his native West Indies, not in Harlem and not in France," for the Moslems of Morocco made him feel completely without color consciousness for the first time in his life (*CMPJ* 15-455). In a letter to Max Eastman, McKay wrote that no place had satisfied him as much as Morocco since he had left home, for there were "many things in the life of the natives, their customs and superstitions, reminiscent of Jamaica" (*CM* 271). In a letter to W.A. Bradley, he stated he was ready to write "the Jamaican book—dealing with the religious customs and social life of the peasants" for he was feeling "very religious" among the Moslems (*CM* 271).

The community solidarity and sovereignty that McKay found in Africa inspired him to depict the beauty of the Jamaican countryside in the prose he wrote there. The African setting encouraged him to return fictionally to a Jamaican community not only in *Banana Bottom*, but also in *Gingertown* and *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, books in which he included “Truant,” “The Agricultural Show,” “Crazy Mary,” “When I Pounded the Pavement,” and “The Strange Burial of Sue.” All of these stories are somewhat reminiscent of the writer’s experience in his homeland. Even though the setting of “Truant” is New York, in *My Green Hills of Jamaica* McKay still places it under the title “Jamaican Short Stories.” Barclay, its main character, is a West Indian peasant boy who feels like a prisoner within “the huge granite-gray walls of New York.” [7] He nostalgically remembers his native home, as he is trapped in the intricate life of this city:

Dreaming of tawny tasseled fields of sugar-cane, and silver-gray John-tuhits among clusters of green and glossy-blue berries of pimento. The husbands and fathers of his village were not mechanically-driven servant boys. They were hardy, independent tillers of the soil or struggling artisans.

What enchantment had lured him away from the green intimate life that clustered round his village—the simple African-transplanted life of the West Indian hills? Why had he hankered for the hard-slabbed streets, the vertical towns, the gray complex life of this steel-tempered city? Stone and steel! Steel and stone! Mounting in heaven-pursuing magnificence. Feet piled upon feet, miles circling miles, of steel and stone. (G 152)

Barclay feels that he is a slave to New York. Only in moments when he is “lost in the past” can he remember the sense of freedom that he experienced as a West Indian peasant. City life intensifies in him the fond memories of his village:

Yellow-eyed and white-lidden Spanish needles coloring the grassy hillsides, barefooted black girls, straight like young sweet-woods, tramping to market with baskets of mangoes or star-apples poised unsupported on their heads. The native cockish liquor juice of the sugar-cane, fermented in bamboo joints for all-night carousal at wakes and tea-meetings. (G 159–60).

Whether in New York or Kingston, the city destroys a sense of individuality and personal freedom. Like Barclay, who feels a prisoner of New York, the narrator of “When I Pounded the Pavement” is “the son of peasants” who had grown up in an environment of “individual reserve and initiative” (G 208). In Jamaica’s capital, he is “thrown among a big depot of men of different character from bush and small town to mix in a common life with them” (G 208). When the narrator becomes a city constable, he is not happy with this profession because he inherits “the peasant’s instinctive hostility for police people” (G 211). Contrary to the city, McKay’s rural Jamaican village, with its own rights and regulations, is a much happier place where one can find a sense of community. The

writer's retrospective view of a unified, agrarian, and harmonious Jamaican way of life becomes an inspirational setting.

In *Banana Bottom*, his last novel, McKay develops the ideas first initiated in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* even further. Bitá Plant, the protagonist of the third novel, continues the search for a particular Afro-Caribbean identity started by Ray within North American and French settings and completes it in an authentic Jamaican environment. If in the first two novels, Ray's engagement in a surrogate dialogue with Russian writers simply leads to a discussion of the importance of African heritage within a Caribbean identity, in *Banana Bottom* there is an action, an actual integration of an educated colonial into common Jamaican society and the Afro-Jamaican culture it represents. The heroine's uprooting from the nurturing Afro-Jamaican soil leads to her fervent attachment to its cultural and spiritual values. In his last novel, McKay actually applies the example of the Russian authors to an Anglophone Caribbean context and resolves the psychological dilemma of his previous novels.

The writer's international travels and experiences illuminated his understanding of the importance of black consciousness and convinced him that African Americans had to unite and learn how to rely upon themselves in order to achieve their goals. In a letter to James Weldon Johnson dated April 15, 1935, he writes,

I learned very much abroad, especially in Africa. And I am certain that Negroes will have to realize themselves as an organized group to get anything. Wherever I traveled I observed that the people who were getting anywhere and anything were those who could realize the strength of their cultural groups, their political demands were considered and determined by the force of their cultural grouping: it was the same underlying principle in Communist Russia as in Fascist Spain and democratic France and England and in "protected" Africa. (*CMPJ* 13-38)

In an earlier letter to Max Eastman dated September 1, 1932, he states, "My attachment to Tangier is sort of spiritual looking backwards." [8] His African experience provided "the kind of deep-seated, traditional community self-sufficiency that he had known as a child in the hills of Jamaica" (*CM* 272). He returned to the United States in January of 1934 convinced that American blacks could learn a lot from the minority groups in Europe and North Africa: "In [McKay's] opinion, international communism had failed, and blacks should concentrate on strengthening their collective group life and promoting democratic government at home in order to be in a position to meet all eventualities" (*CM* 306).

As a result of these experiences, especially his stay in Morocco, McKay understood the importance of black peoples' self-realization as an organized, self-sufficient, and self-reliable cultural group. In

a letter to James Weldon Johnson dated April 3, 1937, he stated that the three years of living in Africa were like “studying three hundred years of life there” (*CMPJ* 13-309). In the same letter, he also criticized the tactics of orthodox communists for their “aim to suppress independent thinking and opposition opinion”; as “a member of a minority group which was the age-long victim of intolerance,” he refused to embrace communist intolerance (*CMPJ* 13-309).

McKay’s interest in Islam as a way to find unity and equality among different racial groups was similar to his attraction to Catholicism, the religion he turned to by the fall of 1944. In “Right Turn to Catholicism” he writes,

Jesus Christ rejected the idea of any special, peculiar or chosen race or nation, when he charged his apostles: Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel. Not the gospel of Imperialism, Feudalism or Capitalism, or Socialism, Communism or a National Church... I find in the Catholic Church that which doesn’t exist in Capitalism, Socialism or Communism—the one true International of Peace and Good Will on earth to all men. (*CMPJ* 9-298)

In another article “Why I Became a Catholic,” he explains the role of color and race in his decision to become a Catholic:

Like the Mohammedan religion today, there never was any race and color prejudice in the Roman Catholic Church from its beginning up until the Reformation.

It is said that three of the early popes were Negroid. In the Schomburg library in New York there is the photograph of the nephew of a pope—duke—who is unmistakably Negro.... But, as I have said, there was no race or color prejudice in the world of the early church, and so it was not necessary or important to mention the color or race of any of its protagonists. (32)

McKay joined the Roman Catholic Church on October 11, 1944, despite pleas from Eastman to be faithful to his commitment to rationalism (Griffin 41). At the end of his life, he discovered “a humanism and spirituality” that gave him “inspiration and brotherhood” (Goldweber 13). Even though one may not agree with McKay’s assessment of Catholicism, one can “scarcely characterize his conversion as inconsistent with his life” (Hillyer 357). In a letter to Max Eastman dated June 30, 1944, he wrote, “by becoming a Catholic I would merely be giving Religion the proper place it had in my nature and in man’s nature” (*CM* 360). In the Catholic Church, the writer found “that sense of wholeness very important to him” without a compromise of his individuality (Hillyer 357).

McKay’s “Cycle Manuscript,” a collection of poems that has been published in his *Complete Poems* (2004), is an important document that sheds light on the poet’s reflections at the end of his

life. Once again these poems show McKay's feelings of alienation and inner conflict. In "Cycle 1," he explains how his function as a black poet is similar to that of the crucified Christ:

These poems distilled from my experience,
Exactly tell my feelings of today,
The cruel and the vicious and the tense
Conditions which have hedged my bitter way
Of life. But though I suffered much I bore
My cross and lived to put my trouble in song
I stripped down harshly to the naked core
Of hatred based on the essential wrong! (CP 241)

Even though McKay encountered prejudice and discrimination as a black writer, these sufferings did not break his spirit. Instead, he condemned these injustices in his poems, novels, short stories, autobiographies, and articles. Once again, this poem shows him as a free spirit who can "soar with unclipped wing, / From earth to heaven, while chanting of all things" regardless of what any "white or black" critic might say about him (CP 241). No one can stop him from telling the world exactly what he wants to say. When he states that he never "cared a damn / For being on the wrong side of the fence," he unquestionably refers to the Negro elite (Griffin 45). As this poem reveals, McKay did not relate to the black intelligentsia; rather he associated himself with the black masses:

Even though I was as naked as a lamb,
And thought by many to be just as dense
For being black and poor, I always feel
That all I have and hold is my own mind,
And need not barter for mess of any kind. (CP 241)

While the black people of Jamaica, the United States, Europe, and Africa encouraged him to take pride in his African heritage, until the end of his life he remained suspicious of the Harlem Renaissance elite. His idea of cultural or literary renaissance as that of "talented persons of an ethnic or national group working individually or collectively" to achieve a common purpose and to create "things that would be typical of their group" differed significantly from that of other writers and intellectuals who regarded the Harlem Renaissance as "an uplift organization and a vehicle to accelerate the pace and progress of smart Negro society" (LW 321). In "Cycle 41," McKay explains why the black elite and politicians would not praise him:

No lady of the land will praise my book.
It would not even be brought to her attention,
By those advising where and how to look
For items which make favorable mention
Because my writings are not party stuff,
For those who follow the old trodden track.
There are nothing of the tricks—the whine and bluff,

Which make politicians jump to slap your back! (CP 263)

A politician would never admire McKay for his writing because in it he shows “the Negro stripped of tricks, / As classic as a piece of African art/ Without the frills and mask of politics” (CP 263). The poet cares much more about the realistic portrayal of the black masses than about his acceptance by the black elite. He further develops this theme in “Cycle 47,” where he stresses the importance of the black working class in the Harlem Renaissance:

They hate me, black and white, for I am never
Afraid to say exactly what I think,
They hate me because I think, and will forever,
Of the common Negro wallowing in the sink. (CP 266)

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He states that African Americans can only be saved as a “unit,” and “better Negroes cannot rise alone” (CP 266) without the masses. Once again he ridicules those blacks who were striving to become white:

They who imagine they can save their soul
By thinking white and hating black will find
That in the end they cannot attain their goal;
For though they see, yet they are really blind.
We will be lifted up with our own masses
Or be kept down as slaves by the white classes. (CP 266)

He fights for justice and equality on behalf of the black working class for he can relate to their sorrow and misery:

It is the Negro's tragedy I feel,
Binding me like a heavy iron chain,
It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal,
Because I know the keenness of the pain. (CP 260)

McKay did not come to know the masses of the African diaspora in an academic way. Instead, he intimately acquainted himself with them by “talking to black crowds at meetings, not in a bohemian way, by talking about them at cafés” (LW 228). His knowledge of their hardships and sufferings came from his personal experience: “I knew the unskilled Negro worker of the city by working with him as a porter and longshoreman and as a waiter on the railroad. I lived in the same quarters and we drank and caroused together in bars and at rent parties” (LW 228).

When he tried to cure their pain in his writings, he did not have to create his protagonists from “an outside view,” for he knew the inner lives of his characters from his own close everyday association with them (LW 228). Until the end of his life, he remained faithful to the belief that the African American community could not solve its problems without the working class. He became “the first

intellectual to link the frailty of the Negro Renaissance to the failure of those in the forefront to forge a synthesis between a community collective soul and loftier social and political goals” (Griffin 49–50). In his poems as well as his novels, short stories, articles, and autobiographies, he creates his black characters without “sandpaper and varnish” and articulates the bonds of kinship that he feels with them (*LW* 228).

McKay’s autobiographies disclose two sources of the writer’s formation. One is that of his connectedness to Jamaica, its culture, and its community, and the other is that of his international inspiration. Even though he considered himself to be a “poet without country,” someone with an “international mind” (letter to Langston Hughes, *LHPJ* 109-2042), who was “always obsessed with the idea of universality of life under the different patterns and colors and felt it was altogether too grand to be distorted creatively in the interest of any one group” (letter to James Weldon Johnson, *CMPJ* 13-30), his deep sense of belonging to the Jamaican community is evident in his narratives. As Wayne Cooper correctly states, in *Banana Bottom*, McKay’s final novel written in Morocco, the search for the psychic unity and stability that began in *Home to Harlem* “came full circle to rest again in the lost paradise of his pastoral childhood” (*CM* 282). The writer’s pioneering articulation of the problem of Jamaican identity found expression in his writings. While his long travels abroad enabled him to see the black diaspora in a wider perspective, he was to express particular Jamaican issues and concerns in his poetry and prose. His life abroad provided not only material for his literary work, but also exposed him to the major political and social issues of the 1920s and 1930s. As McKay’s international consciousness grew as a result of his travels in the United States, England, Russia, Germany, France, Spain, and Morocco, his national Jamaican consciousness also increased.

End Notes

- [1] Cooper, *Claude McKay* 64 (thereafter cited as *CM*).
- [2] McKay, *Long Way* 4 (thereafter cited as *LW*).
- [3] McKay, *Complete Poems* 167-68 (thereafter cited as *CP*).
- [4] *LW* 169–70. I found this portrait in the James Weldon Johnson Collection of Negro Literature and Art, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, while doing my research there in the summer of 2004.
- [5] Claude McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection of Negro Literature and Art, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 4, folder 119 (thereafter cited as *CMPJ* and followed by the box and the folder numbers).
- [6] Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection of Negro Literature and Art, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 109, folder 2042 (thereafter cited as *LHPJ* and followed by the box and the folder numbers).
- [7] McKay, *Gingertown* 152 (thereafter cited as *G*).
- [8] Claude McKay's Letters to Max Eastman from 1928 to 1934, The Lilly Library, Indiana University.

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