

## A Continent of Color: Langston Hughes and Spanish America<sup>1</sup>

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In the preface to his seminal anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), the first collection of black 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.<sup>2</sup> He emphasizes that alongside such luminaries of black U.S. American 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; cf. Chrisman 807; Edwards 48; Mills 119), and the collection itself, although focusing largely on U.S. American writing, adequately includes a few poems by black anglo- and hispanophone Caribbean writers.<sup>3</sup> Three years later, *The New Negro*, a collection of black writing and thought, 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 (Nwankwo 598 n.10). In his foreword, Locke cites the U.S. American “Negro Renaissance” 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.”<sup>4</sup> Locke was probably also familiar with an earlier

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson, “Creative” 37-40; cf. Edwards 48. 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), and in 2007 Agustín Lao-Montes calls for a notion of “Afroamerica” that covers the black experience throughout the Americas (323-24). Neither Le Riverend nor Lao-Montes mentions Johnson’s earlier formulation of this concept, though.

<sup>3</sup> Edwards 47, 50; Chrisman 807. Already in his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), Johnson depicts the interactions among black (or mulatto) U.S. Americans and Cuban migrant workers in Florida (Johnson, *Autobiography*; Chrisman 807).

<sup>4</sup> Locke xxvii; also qtd. in Luis-Brown 147. Ifeoma C.K. Nwankwo points out that “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).

issue of *Survey Graphic* entitled *Mexico: A Promise* (1924). The contributors to that volume included, among others, the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos—who would gain fame for his conceptualization of a “cosmic” mestizo race in his 1925 study *La raza cósmica* (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 contributed significantly to the Harlem Renaissance (Porter; Mehring 237-39; Luis-Brown 147).

As these examples indicate, the Harlem Renaissance always had a transnational dimension, a dimension to which black Caribbean immigration to Harlem contributed as well as black U.S. American travels and *travaux* abroad or the interactions among black(-concerned) artists and intellectuals of different nations and their affiliation with the poor and ethnically/racially oppressed within and beyond their national borders (Edwards; Guridy 120; Luis-Brown 148; Mills 112, 114, 118-20). Latin American (including franco- and hispanophone Caribbean) 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; cf. Chrisman 813; Guridy 127). That Latin Americans were critically aware of the differences that would remain between black U.S. and (Afro-)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 U.S.-style racial segregation and black ghettoization, despite the merits of Harlem for transnational black culture.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, as one result of these multiple exchanges among the different black movements—the New Negro movement in the United States, the different *negrismo* movements in hispano- and lusophone Latin America, and the French Caribbean *négritude* (Guridy 118-19; Jackson 86, 92, 171; Kaup 102; Lao-Montes 318; Leary 147-55)—, a black diasporic<sup>6</sup> consciousness emerged that “enabled black people to ‘feel’ part of the same ‘gente’ ... irrespective of their cultural and linguistic background.”<sup>7</sup>

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was not only one of the most outstanding artists of the Harlem Renaissance but also the one most closely engaging with Latin America. According to Vera Kutzinski, he is widely regarded as one of “the best-known and most admired US poet[s] in Latin America” and as one of “the most important ‘Negro

<sup>5</sup> Guillén, “Camino” 6; cf. Jackson 94, 114; Kaup 97-100; for this and similar critiques by Guillén and other (black) Cuban artists and intellectuals, cf. Leary 136, 140-41, 144-55.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed definition of the term “diaspora” and its particular meaning with regard to the Black Diaspora, cf. Edwards 11-15; Lao-Montes 309-18.

<sup>7</sup> 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, cf. Lao-Montes 318-23.

poet[s]' of the 1920s in many parts of the Hispanic world,"<sup>8</sup> whereas in the United States his work met with hostility for a long time (Mullen, "Literary" 11, 15; Scott 46-47, 51). In his autobiography, he confesses, "I have an affinity for Latin Americans, and the Spanish language I have always loved" (*I Wonder* 291; cf. 288), and he compares the thrill of his first New York metro ride to Harlem to the excitement of the bullfights he had previously seen in Mexico City (*Big Sea* 81). Various of his literary works appeared in Spanish or Portuguese translations as well as were reviewed in Latin American periodicals, and Hughes himself also translated black Spanish American and French Caribbean literature and promoted it in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Scholars largely agree that his writing both informed (black) Latin American poets (Jackson 83-94) and was itself influenced by Latin American cultures.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than dealing with Hughes's translations, his reception in, influence on, or his being informed by Latin American literatures and cultures, this essay examines his thematic dealing with Spanish America,<sup>11</sup> in particular Mexico and Cuba, in his essays, fiction, poetry, and two volumes of autobiography. A particular focus will be on Hughes's depiction of the continent's black experiences and the way his writings articulate a vision of an Afro-diasporic as well as a leftist political consciousness. I will argue that and how Latin America emerges from these texts as a "continent of color," a hemisphere especially shaped by the experiences of non-European populations that forms part of the writer's larger vision of a global "world of color" he sets against the Eurocentrism of European and white U.S. American thought.

## 1. Mexico

Langston Hughes stayed in Mexico four times during different periods of his life: As a small child, he briefly lived with his family in Mexico City but returned to the United States with his mother shortly after the great earthquake of April 1905. After his pen-

<sup>8</sup> Kutzinski, "Yo también" 550; cf. Jackson 82, 85-90, 93-94; Mullen, "Literary" 15. Marilyn Miller ("Gypsy" 324) points out the uncertainty of this assessment.

<sup>9</sup> *I Wonder* 8, 291; cf. Jackson 4, 82, 85-86; Kaup 93-96, 100-01; Kutzinski, "Fearful;" Kutzinski, "Yo también;" Mullen, "Literary" 16, 19-25, 30; Rampersad, *I, Too* 47-48, 178, 202-03; Rampersad, *I Dream* 106, 113, 154-55, 159, 180, 204-05, 264, 270, 273, 281-82.

<sup>10</sup> Guridy; Kutzinski, "Fearful" 114; Kutzinski, "Yo también" 568. Many Americanists attribute a unidirectional direct influence of Hughes on Guillén (e.g. Jackson 7, 83-85; Kaup 92; Mullen, "Langston" 26-27; Rampersad, *I, Too* 181), whereas Latin American scholars tend(ed) to consider Guillén as an influence on Hughes (Miller, "Gypsy" 328). Recent research suggests a mutual influence of the two poets, who first met and became personal friends during Hughes's 1930 visit to Cuba (e.g. Chrisman; Ellis 129-37, 147, 155; Kutzinski, "Fearful" 115; Kutzinski, "Yo también" 566-67; Leary 134-35; Miller, "Gypsy" 324-25, 328).

<sup>11</sup> Among Latin American countries besides Mexico and Cuba, Hughes had a particular relation to and wrote at length about Haiti, a subject which has already been the subject of ample research, though (e.g. Berry and Lubin; Gardullo; Mullen, "Literary" 33-34).

ultimate year of high school, Hughes spent the summer with his father, a businessman who had moved permanently to Mexico during the poet's early childhood, in the central Mexican city of Toluca. Even though he later described that visit as a rather unhappy experience, Hughes, hoping to convince his father to pay for his college education in the United States, would return to Toluca the following summer. He remained there for more than a year, working as an English teacher for local language schools. On weekend trips to Mexico City he further encountered several Mexican writers affiliated with the aesthetically vanguard periodical *Contemporáneos*, contacts that would last through the 1930s. Hughes revisited Mexico during the winter of 1933-34 after his father's death. This time, he stayed in the capital, where he widely moved among artistic circles, especially those vanguard artists affiliated with the Mexican *indigenismo* movement of the 1920s and '30s (on this movement, cf. Chrisman 810; Gunn 79-81; Luis-Brown 6-7, 31, 137, 148, 180-81). His ensuing association with the leftist *Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios* would inform his lasting popularity in Latin America.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout his career, Hughes wrote various pieces on Mexico and his personal experiences there. In fact, some of these are among his very first publications: during his second stay in Toluca in 1921, he published not only his renowned poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"—penned down on his journey to Mexico (*Big Sea* 54-56; cf. Mullen, "Langston" 24; Mullen, "Literary" 17; Rampersad, *I, Too* 39-40)—in the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine but also a series of contributions about life in Mexico for *The Brownies' Book*, a periodical for black children edited by Jessie Fauset and W.E.B. Du Bois (*Big Sea* 72; cf. Johnson, "Introduction" 1-2; Mullen, "Langston" 25; Rampersad, *I, Too* 45-46, 48). All of these—the collection of "Mexican Games," an essay about a market day in Toluca, "In a Mexican City," and a travelogue about an excursion Hughes undertook with a group of Toluca students, "Up to the Crater of an Old Volcano"—can be regarded as "pieces of ethnographical writing" (Johnson, "Introduction" 2). Even though they stake a claim for positively valuing cultural difference, their "tourist view" (Mullen, "Literary" 19; cf. Gunn 84), with their focus on the picturesque sights of Mexican towns, landscapes, and local customs, stress the country's otherness from the United States ("Mexican City"; "Mexican Games"; "Up to the Crater"; cf. Gunn 84). Dealing with the friendship between a Native Mexican and a U.S. American boy, the novella for children *The Pasteboard Bandit* (1935), co-written with Arna Bontemps but never published during Hughes's lifetime, offers a more balanced representation. Here, images of cultural difference such as typically Mexican cuisine or holiday traditions are integrated into a narrative that foregrounds similarities—both boys, for instance, are from artisan or artist families—as well as the importance of U.S. Americans meeting Mexicans as their peers and looking toward their culture with respect (*Pasteboard Bandit*).

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<sup>12</sup> *Big Sea* 15-16, 34-49, 53-80; *I Wonder* 286-300; cf. Mullen, "Langston" 24-25; Mullen, "Literary" 17-25; Rampersad, *I, Too* 11, 32-35, 40-49, 300-05. Hughes further paid a one-day trip to Ciudad Juárez in 1953 (Gunn 84-85; Rampersad, *I, Too* 227). Mexican sources also suggest a possible final visit to the country in 1962 (Mullen, "Literary" 25).

An emphasis on cultural difference between Mexico and the United States also characterizes several of Hughes's non-juvenile essays and short stories on Mexican themes. His first essay publication in *The Crisis*, "The Virgin of Guadalupe" (1921), retells the eponymous 16th-century legend (Gunn 84). While it mentions that the Virgin Mary appeared to a poor native boy (rather than a Spaniard), this essay misses the occasion to emphasize the second factor that renders this legend crucial to Mexican culture—and would have befitted Hughes's own socio-cultural agenda, as well—: that the image of the Virgin preserved on the boy's overcoat, in deviation from European depictions, has brown skin and Amerindian features ("The Virgin"). Christopher De Santis praises Hughes's prize-winning essay "The Fascination of Cities" (1926) for its "impressionistic" style that "beautifully evokes the childlike wonder of discovery ..., softening the harsher aspects of city life behind the veil of grandeur" but also addresses "brutal instances of racial injustice" (3). However, by representing Mexico City exclusively through the depiction of a bullfight and its aftermath, the text reduces modern life in the Mexican capital to an exotic traditional spectacle ("The Fascination" 28-30). The essay "Love in Mexico," published in *Opportunity* magazine in 1940 and integrated in Hughes's autobiography *The Big Sea* (63-65, 67-69) of the same year, as well as the short story "Tragedy at the Baths" (1952) provide keen observations of the double standard characterizing Mexican intersecting class and gender roles in an ethnographic manner that stresses the differences between Catholic Latin American and Protestant United States cultures ("Love in Mexico"; "Tragedy"). These depictions of Mexico contrast with the unpublished essay "Memories of Christmas" (1946), which places Mexican customs alongside U.S. American Christmas traditions to underline the shared cultural—rather than religious—importance of this holiday for different societies ("Memories").

In his writing, Hughes time and again foregrounds Mexico's role as an ethnically mixed society that offers similar, if not equal, opportunities to all ethnic groups. A diary entry from his journey to Toluca in July 1920 registers that in Mexico "nothing is barred from me. I am among my own people, for ... Mexico is a brown man's country. Do you blame them for fearing a 'gringo' invasion with its attendant horror of color hatred?" (qtd. in Rampersad, *I, Too* 40). "Up to the Crater of an Old Volcano" stresses the similarities of Mexico's Native and mestizo children to his black U.S. American readers, as Hughes writes here: "These dark faced, friendly school boys were about like other dark skinned boys of my own race whom I had known in the United States" (32; cf. Johnson, "Introduction" 2-3). "In a Mexican City" points out the ethnic and class mixing on the weekly market in Toluca, where rich *señoritas*, Native women, poor mestizo boys, and disabled beggars form a "crowd which is so thick that nobody can hurry" (24).

At the same time as he praises post-revolutionary Mexico's ideology of *mestizaje* (on that ideology, cf. Luis-Brown 15-16), Hughes critically notes the country's often ethnicized social class stratification and conflicts. As early as 1920 he observes in his diary that "the revolutions have made so many [people] poor, broken on the wheel of the

freedom they are seeking” (qtd. in Rampersad, *I, Too* 40). “In a Mexican City” articulates the social inequality of Mexican society by pointing at the poverty that forces people to go barefoot even in cold weather and the scarcity of furniture in their homes (22-23; cf. Johnson, “Introduction” 2-3). Depicting how a couple’s donation of money helps a poor woman in dire need, the short play “The Gold Piece” (1921) not only addresses the impact of poverty but also shows a way out. As a work for children, the piece’s fairy-tale style and moral emphasize individual generosity (Johnson, “Introduction” 4) rather than call for structural social change, as Hughes would call for in his non-juvenile writing. Hughes’s only poem with a Mexican theme (Rampersad, *I, Too* 56-57), “Mexican Market Woman” (1922), points to the intersection of racial and social class inequalities, as it depicts the harsh life of an old “brown”-skinned Native retailer who “sits upon the ground/Selling her scanty wares/Day in, day round” (54; cf. Gunn 83-84; Luis-Brown 163).

In his two volumes of autobiography, Hughes paints a more complex picture of his encounters with Mexico between 1919 and 1934. Before his first contact with the country, he had a romanticized vision of it that was deeply informed by his own, lower-class black U.S. American experience: “a land where there were no white folks to draw the color line, and no tenements with rent always due—just mountains and sun and cacti” (*Big Sea* 36). His description of his first stay in Toluca is dominated by growing conflicts with his father that ultimately caused him to have a breakdown (39-49), whereas his accounts of his following visits to Mexico in 1920-21 and 1934 second stay largely offer a picturesque, almost ethnographic portrait of everyday and extraordinary events in Toluca as well as of bohemian life and bullfights in Mexico City (63-77; *I Wonder* 291-300).

Hughes’s father appears especially in the first volume of autobiography, *The Big Sea*, as epitome of the stereotypically thrifty, money-driven U.S. American, who displays a strict Protestant work ethic and mingles almost exclusively with Europeans and a few upper-class Mexicans (39-46, 57, 59). Despite being a black U.S. citizen himself, James Hughes—as depicted by his son—has internalized a deep contempt for black people, whom he considers to be indolent and unable to deal with money. He hates the United States for its color line that denies career opportunities to blacks, praises Mexico for its absence, and is treated in a better way in post-revolutionary Mexico than white U.S. Americans. Yet, he holds a similar contempt for Mexicans, especially the poor and the indigenous population, as for people of color in the United States, regarding them as ungrateful and prone to stealing and banditry, as “ignorant, backward, and lazy” (*Big Sea* 40; cf. 39-44; *I Wonder* 294; Gunn 83; Luis-Brown 161-62). Young Langston of *The Big Sea*, in contrast, shows “sensitivity and humanity” (Miller, *Art* 22) in rejecting and falsifying his father’s beliefs about Mexican Natives, as he shares a bed and cigarettes with his father’s Amerindian servant and is taught useful practical skills in return (*Big Sea* 42-44; cf. Miller, *Art* 22). During his second stay in Toluca, he stands up against his father and openly sympathizes with the Mexican Revolution, defending Emiliano Zapata’s movement as poor people fighting for

land reform (*Big Sea* 59-60). The confrontations with his father further appear in the autobiography as having crucially informed Hughes's decision to become a writer and work among and for the black people he loved rather than study engineering and settle in Mexico, as James Hughes wished (61-63; cf. Jackson 43).

In his memoir, as in some of his Mexico-themed poetry and fiction, Hughes establishes a series of links between the—especially indigenous—Mexican experience, on the one hand, and black U.S. American life and culture, on the other. In *The Big Sea*, he repeatedly mentions the “brown” skin color that made both him and his father look like Mexicans (40, 78) and even enabled him to pass for Mexican to reserve a Pullman berth in Texas on his journey home (50; cf. Luis-Brown 163). Looking back at the racialized class structure that characterized Toluca society in 1920, he further writes: “few Indian families [were] considered ‘aristocracy’ in Toluca, where Spanish blood still prevailed in the best circles and the exaltation of things Indian had not yet triumphed—for Diego Rivera was yet in Paris” (67). The reference to this Mexican painter and major representative of the Mexican *indigenismo* movement establishes a connection between this aesthetic-political endeavor to validate Mexico's indigenous heritage and the parallelly developing New Negro movement in the United States. This link becomes more evident in Hughes's description of Rivera in his second volume of autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*. Here, he calls the painter “that mountain of a man, darker than I am in complexion. When I told Diego he looked more like an American Negro than a Mexican Indian, Rivera said: ‘One of my grandmothers was a Negro’” (294). Later, it is Rivera who, along with Miguel Covarrubias, whom Hughes knew from his early Harlem years, informs Hughes about the black presence in Mexico and its historical contribution to a “brown” ethn racial identity (294) that, in Hughes's eyes, clearly represents a source of ethnic pride. This romanticizing subsuming black U.S. American and Native Mexican cultures under a single rubric of “brown” offers a transnational identity political potential that has been largely ignored in scholarship on either the Harlem or the Mexican Renaissance. However, what remains problematic about this conflation is that it disregards the at times crucial (historical) differences between distinct peoples as well as somewhat naively assumes that “color” alone already functions as an “emancipatory signifier” (Gayatri Spivak, qtd. in Luis-Brown 163; cf. 164, 170).

## 2. Cuba

In contrast to his stays in Mexico, Langston Hughes never lived in Cuba for an extended period of time. Yet, the island was probably on his mind since his youth, as his father had moved there shortly after Langston's birth (*Big Sea* 16; cf. Guridy 125). In a letter composed to his New York patron, Charlotte Mason, during his first, brief visit to Havana in 1927, he writes: “So here I am at [Hotel] ‘Las Villas,’ Avenida Bélgica 20—which is certainly native enough. ... I don't suppose another American has ever stopped here (unless it was my father 25 years ago)” (qtd. in Guridy 125). Hughes

returned to Cuba twice, in 1930 and 1931, for a two-week stay each time. In both instances, the Cuban press received him well and noted the relationship between his writing and black Caribbean literature. Hughes was introduced to and made friends with various Cuban artists and intellectuals, especially those affiliated with the *afro-cubanismo* movement of the 1920s and '30s (on this movement, cf. Guridy 118-19; Leary 147-55; Kaup 102). During his 1930 visit, he further attempted—in vain—to find a black Cuban composer to collaborate on an opera project commissioned by his patron. Both in 1930 and 1931, he also sought to experience black life and popular culture on the island (*I Wonder* 6-15, 34-37; cf. Guridy 124-35; Mullen, “Langston” 25-27; Mullen, “Literary” 25-31; Rampersad, *I, Too* 150, 176-81, 201-04).

Already before his first visit to the island, Hughes published a Cuban-themed poem in his first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues* (1926). Tellingly entitled “Soledad: A Cuban Portrait,”—the Spanish woman’s name “Soledad” meaning “solitude”—, the poem depicts the worn-out body and “deeply scarred” soul of a woman whose life has been “full of pain and passion/... full of lies” (53). While there is nothing specifically Cuban about this woman, this portrait in some way prefigures the silent encounters of Hughes’s traveling companions during his first visit to Cuba, a group of Chinese ship’s cooks, with Havana prostitutes the poet describes in his first autobiography (*Big Sea* 292-93). A completely different, though equally “tourist” vista on Cuba appears in the poem “Havana Dreams,” published in *Opportunity* magazine in 1933. This “somewhat stylized reflection on Cuban high life” (Mullen, “Literary” 31), lists popular stereotypes of desirable, “consumable” Cuban items—exotic cocktails, countryside trips, beautiful women, or exquisite goods—but interrogates them at the same time (“Havana Dreams”; for a different reading, cf. Rampersad, *I, Too* 204).

While he engaged to a certain extent with Spanish and Amerindian, but not with black cultures in Mexico—despite a long history of African presence in the country (Andrews 13, 17, 20)—, Hughes “viewed the Caribbean, like the U.S. South, as a repository of authentic afro-diasporic cultural forms” (Guridy 124). As Nicolás Guillén noted in an interview with Hughes, “black Cuba is ... his constant preoccupation. Wherever he goes, he inquires about blacks. ... I took him to a black dance hall. From the very minute he enters, the poet acts like he’s possessed with the spirit of our people. ‘My people!’ he exclaims” (“Conversación” 175, my translation; cf. Guridy 134-35; Rampersad, *I, Too* 180). Hughes was surely conscious that, being considered a mulatto in the phenotype-based racial taxonomy of Cuba,<sup>13</sup> he enjoyed a privileged

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<sup>13</sup> On Cuba’s racial taxonomy, cf. Kutzinski, “Yo también” 565-66; Miller, *Rise* 59-60. In his interview with Hughes, Guillén states that the poet looks like a Cuban “mulatico” (“Conversación” 172; cf. Leary 142), and in his memoir he explicitly calls Hughes a “mulato” (*Páginas* 105). For Guillén’s own poetic-political concern with *mulatez*, cf. Chrisman 812, 817-18; Miller, *Rise* 47-49, 55-60. Hughes’s awareness of other concepts of racial difference than the U.S. American one shows prominently in *The Big Sea*: here he writes how during his first visit to Africa “the Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro,” because “I am not black. ... I am brown” (11; cf. Mayer 94).

position unavailable to him in the United States with its strict white/black color line (Scott 49-51). As Guillén notes, “while he watches the ‘black-as-the-night’ bongo player, ... [Hughes] exclaims with a sigh of dissatisfied anxiety: ‘I’d like to be black. Really black. Truly black!’” (“Conversación” 175, my translation; cf. Leary 143; Mullen, “Literary” 29; Rampersad, *I, Too* 180; Scott 35-36, 45).

Hughes’s writing about Cuba and Cuban culture is, not surprisingly, strongly informed by his concern with black culture (Mullen, “Literary” 32), which he closely associated with the working-class experience (Scott 35-36). The—often lower-class—Afro-Cuban experience is at the center of a portrait Hughes published about the black Cuban vanguard sculptor Teodoro Ramos Blanco in 1930 (“Cuban Sculptor”; cf. Mullen, “Langston” 27; Mullen, “Literary” 31) and an unpublished 1948 note on his friend Nicolás Guillén (“Concerning Nicolás Guillén”). He praises the latter for the aesthetic and political value of his verses: using popular (Afro-)Cuban rhythms and idioms to address “the problems, poverty, and folk-ways of his native Cuba” (485) and successfully reaching both lower-class readers and fellow poets throughout the Caribbean and South America (485). Hughes similarly notes Ramos Blanco for his “monumental statue to heroic black motherhood, *Maternal Heroism*” (“Cuban Sculptor” 45; cf. Leary 150), a monument to Mariana Granjales, an icon of the 19th-century Cuban women’s, anti-slavery, and independence struggles. Hughes fails to address the significance that Ramos Blanco carried out this work in white Italian marble, which might be seen as an attempt to symbolically “whiten” Granjales or to “ennoble” both her and the black sculptor through the choice of such a precious, prestigious, and difficult material. Yet, the poet emphasizes the relevance of this sculpture for black U.S. Americans, whom he invokes as “we who have so few memorials to our own racial heroes in [the United States], so few monuments to Sojourner Truth or Frederick Douglass or Booker Washington or any of the great figures in our own perilous history” (“Cuban Sculptor” 45; cf. Leary 150).

Paralleling his concern with social class issues in his Mexican-themed writing, Hughes scrutinizes social inequality and imperialism in Cuba in his work. His poem “To the Little Fort of San Lazaro, on the Ocean Front, Havana,” tellingly published in the Marxist periodical *New Masses* in 1931, scrutinizes the impact of United States economic imperialism on Cuba by likening it to piracy. The text compares the glorious past of the titular building as a bulwark against English and Spanish buccaneers with its powerlessness in the present “against a pirate called/THE NATIONAL CITY BANK” (“Little Fort” 205, capitalization in the original; cf. Ellis 141; Leary 139-40; Mullen, “Langston” 27; Mullen, “Literary” 32; Rampersad, *I, Too* 203-04). Using the case of a Cuban sailor’s political awakening, the short story “The Sailor and the Steward” (1932) calls for workers’ organized labor activism to effectively gain their rights (“The Sailor”).

Informed by Hughes’s feeling of being under government surveillance after a visit to Ramos Blanco’s studio during his Cuban trip in 1931, the “deliberately Hemingwayesque” (Rampersad, *I, Too* 204) short story “Little Old Spy” (1952) depicts the racism, classism, and political censorship of the right-winged Machado dictatorship on

the island (1925-33) as well as the Cuban population's will to revolt against the regime ("Little Old Spy"; cf. Mullen, "Langston" 27; Mullen, "Literary" 32; Rampersad, *I, Too* 204). The story further articulates a critique of the U.S. tourists who regard the poverty of the local population as exotic spectacle ("Little Old Spy" 255), and it repeatedly attests to the awakening political power of the working masses (256), especially among the black population. In one scene, the narrator muses:

The government of Cuba had grown suddenly terribly afraid of its Negro population, its black shine boys and cane field hands, its colored soldiers and sailors who make up most of the armed forces, its taxi drivers and street vendors. At last, after all the other elements of the island's population had openly revolted against the tyrant in power, the Negroes had begun to rise with the students and others to drive the dictator from Cuba. (257)

As much as their own black population, the Cuban regime, according to Hughes, seemed to fear the influence of African U.S. Americans on the "colored world." As the story continues:

For a strange New York Negro to come to Havana might mean ... that he had come to help stir them up—for the Negroes of Harlem were reputed in Cuba to be none too docile, and none too dumb. Had not Marcus Garvey come out of Harlem to arouse the whole black world to a consciousness to its political strength? (257)

As the spy who follows the narrator around Havana turns out to be an elderly former pimp who is easily outwitted, the story ridicules the Cuban government paranoia as well as criticizes the racism-cum-sexism of the island's socio-political order the old spy represents (258-61).

Describing his visits to Cuba in his two volumes of autobiography, Hughes, as in his remembrance of Mexico, on the one hand provides a somewhat ethnographic perspective, with a strong "tourist"-like focus on the picturesque elements of popular culture (*Big Sea* 292-93; *I Wonder* 6-15, 34-37). On the other hand, he is, once again, concerned with the color line and its role in the social stratification of a Latin American society. In line with his desire for partaking in the "truly" black Afro-Cuban culture he articulated toward Nicolás Guillén, Hughes of *I Wonder as I Wander* marvels at some dark-complexioned Afro-Cuban percussionists as those "who somehow have saved—out of all the centuries of slavery and all the miles and miles from Guinea—the heartbeat and songbeat of Africa" (7). According to Frank Guridy, "perhaps his own racialized position as a mulatto led [Hughes] to conclude that an encounter with music played by darker-skinned people of African descent in a foreign country would enable him to gain a momentary taste of 'true' blackness" (135). As a celebrated visitor to Havana, Hughes further became aware of Cuba's racialized gender order (on this order, cf. Guridy 129-30; Miller, *Rise* 50-52). Invited to a private rumba party, he not only observes in his memoir that the all-male guests are entertained by mulatto girlfriends and mistresses of their host—an "acceptable" entertainment for middle-class men—, but also notes that he, being the guest of honor, was explicitly asked to spend the night with the girl(s) of his choice (*I Wonder* 8-10; cf. Guridy 130).

In *I Wonder as I Wonder*, Hughes directs attention to the "triple color line" typical of Cuba that divides society into (nearer) whites, mulattos, and "pure-blooded"

(10) blacks, and, as in other Latin Caribbean countries, is drawn less strictly than in the Anglophone West Indies (10-11). This, he concludes, “is what misleads many visitors from the United States—particularly colored visitors who are looking anxiously for a country where they can say there is *no color line*” (11, italics in the original). He positively notes the absence of “Jim Crow cars” (11) and that Havana’s black population has its own social clubs, among them the luxurious upper-class Club Atenas: “I had been astonished and delighted with its taste and luxury, for colored people in the United States had no such club” (8), he writes. At the same time, however, he notes phenotype-based practices of racial discrimination in Cuba. In an unpublished manuscript, he remarks that many Havana dance halls—akin to what he earlier observed in the Cotton Club in Harlem (*Big Sea* 226)—feature a “black orchestra but no black dancers” (qtd. in Guridy 126), and in *I Wonder as I Wonder* he lists examples of racial exclusion in Cuban workplaces, politics, and social life, pointing out that “the darker a man is, the richer and more celebrated he has to be to crash those divisions” (11).

What struck Hughes in particular, was the extension of the United States concept of the color line on the island Nicolás Guillén had criticized earlier in his “El camino de Harlem” (Guillén, “Camino” 6). Increasing U.S. American tourism—as well as economic and political influence—“brought its quota of Southern racial prejudice from the mainland” (*I Wonder* 11), as Hughes puts it. As a result, many facilities owned by or catering to white U.S. citizens exerted a stricter “whites only”-policy at the time Hughes visited Cuba. In his memoir, he gives a detailed report how he and a black U.S. American travel companion were barred from a U.S. owned beach in Havana that would admit Cuban “mulatto politicians and plutocrats,” but only as they “had enough political pull or social prestige to force the management to sell [them] a season ticket” (11-12; on the incidence in general, cf. Guillén, *Páginas* 106; Ellis 143; Rampersad, *I, Too* 203). Arrested by the police and brought before court upon false accusations on behalf of the corporate U.S. owner of the beach, Hughes and his friend nonetheless leave with a victory: “The judge, a kindly old mulatto gentleman—who might have been termed a Negro had he lived in the United States, but who was ‘white’ in Havana” (*I Wonder* 14) dismisses the charges, telling the accusers: “‘What you have done is against all the tenets of Cuban hospitality and against Cuban law, which recognizes no differences because of race or color’” (15).

### 3. Spanish America and the Larger World of Color

As Edward Mullen observes, “while Mexico and Cuba were important points of contact for Langston Hughes, they are only pieces of a larger literary mosaic” related to the American hemisphere “to which Hughes is linked” (“Langston” 27). Hughes’s writing on Spanish America also includes an introduction to the *Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral* (1957), a collection of works by the Chilean Nobel laureate Hughes had selected and translated himself, which highlights Mistral’s accomplishment as an educator and her service to her country in different government and diplomatic

positions as well as her poetic achievements (“Introduction”). More prominently, however, Hughes invokes the Caribbean, and its black cultures in particular, in his work. In his tellingly entitled reminiscence of his “Early Days in Harlem,” the poet acknowledges the presence of black Caribbeans there who contributed to turning this part of Manhattan into the capital of the black world: “West Indian Harlem—warm rambunctious, sassy remembering Marcus Garvey. Haitian Harlem, Cuban Harlem, little pockets of tropical dreams in alien tongues. Magnet Harlem, pulling an Arthur Schomburg from Puerto Rico” (“Early Days” 397; cf. Guridy 121). His short story “Spanish Blood” (1952) similarly pays tribute to Harlem’s Puerto Rican population but also addresses the at times problematic relations between black U.S. Americans and Afro-Caribbeans through the conflict between a black woman and her Spanish-identifying half-Puerto Rican son (“Spanish Blood”).

Shifting away from Caribbean contributions to black U.S. culture, Hughes dedicated one of six children’s books he wrote for the publisher Franklin Watts in the 1950s and ‘60s about the black world (Scott 191) to the Caribbean. *The First Book of the West Indies* (1956) “demonstrates his recognition of the importance of antillanité to the idea of negritude and American identity” (Miller, “Gypsy” 338). The text provides an introduction to the history, geography, cultures, and everyday life experiences on the Caribbean islands (327-58), once again with a certain emphasis on the intersected issues of race and class that might resonate especially with his target readers, U.S. children of color. In his introductory chapter, Hughes addresses European colonization and black Atlantic slavery as the causal origin for the present multiethnic/-racial identity of many Caribbean societies (328), to which he explicitly adds the Asian presence in the section on Jamaica (347). The chapter on Haiti specifically points to the relevance of the Haitian Revolution (333-34) that made “Haiti ... the first Negro Republic in the world, and the second country in the Western hemisphere [after the United States] to gain its independence” (333). Several times, Hughes emphasizes the widespread poverty on many Caribbean islands, manifest in people’s lack of adequate housing, clothes, and food (336, 340, 342), but especially in the fact that “most of the children of the Caribbean work as much as they play, if not more” (341; cf. 342), as their workforce is needed for the family income. In quite a different vein, Hughes’s poetry collection *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961) integrates words and phrases in Spanish (93, 111) and asks for an instrumental accompaniment that includes maracas, a native percussion instrument of Latin America, among others (92-93, 108-10). The texts of the poems establish connections between black life in the U.S. South and Afro-diasporic cultures in an ever-widening geographic area, moving from the Caribbean via the American hemisphere to the entire “Third World” (91, 93, 108-10, 114, 117), a link that is underlined by the accompanying blend of the musical forms of black U.S. gospel and the Cuban cha-cha-cha—especially in the poem “Gospel Cha-Cha” (108-10). Most importantly, the collection, without ever becoming as explicitly political as Hughes’s more radical poetry of the 1930s and ‘40s, validates black and leftist political agency against mainstream United States criticism by invoking various Afro-Caribbean leaders as well as Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro (91, 93, 108-10).

Hughes's concern with the Americas, and in particular the black experience(s) there, formed part of his larger concern with social injustice, notably his critique of intersectional poverty, racism, and systems of colonialism and/or imperialism. Throughout his work he articulates what David Chioni Moore calls a notion of "local/global color" (54)—a strong sense of connection to "nonwhite" people around the world, on the one hand, and to those around the globe who suffer from poverty, discrimination, exploitation, and/or oppression, on the other hand.<sup>14</sup> A dominant strain of social protest against oppressive local/global color lines especially marked his writing of the 1930s (De Santis 6-14; Ellis 147-54). As R. Baxter Miller points out, "to [Hughes], writing becomes intellectual armament against colonialism throughout the world" (*Art* 67-68), and "in his literature, the pride of the contribution of all Blacks to world culture takes shape" (71). Several poems from this period link a Latin America threatened by United States imperialism to the wider nonwhite world and its struggle against U.S. American or European hegemony. First appearing in 1930 in *New Masses*, the poem "Merry Christmas," for instance, is a call for arms to the nations of the Caribbean (namely Cuba and Haiti), Africa, and Asia against "righteous Christian England" and "Yankee domination" (199) as well as their dubious "gifts" of war, rape, hunger, economic exploitation, and cultural oppression (199-200; cf. Ellis 148). A stronger focus on the economically motivated exploitation of the global urban and rural black masses in the Americas and Africa as well as a more explicit call for a socialist revolution characterizes "Always the Same," the similarly agitational poem of the same decade ("Always the Same"). The later "Broadcast to the West Indies" (1940s) takes on a softer tone. Warning Caribbeans against the anti-U.S. Propaganda of the axis powers in World War II, this poem critically acknowledges United States anti-black racist violence (239). Yet, it also points to the "Caribbeanness" of Harlem. The lines "Harlem/Little land, too/Bordered by the sea that washes and mingles/With all the waters in the world" (239) emphasize the similarities between Harlem and the West Indian islands. These similarities include not only "Suffering/Domination/Segregation" (240) but, in deviance from the strict black/white notion of the color line in the United States, the shared history of miscegenation, as the following lines argue: "HELLO WEST INDIES!/You are dark like me/Colored with many bloods like me/Verging ... from black to white like me."<sup>15</sup> Finally, the poem, this time undermining the ideology of United States superiority to Latin America, expresses admiration for and support of

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<sup>14</sup> Moore 54-56, 63-64. What remains problematic about this sense of affinity, however, is the way Hughes tends to view social class discrimination overwhelmingly in racial terms (ignoring the impact of other factors) and to frame these racial(ized) differences in a binary white/non-white pattern based on the U.S. concept of the color line (for an exemplary analysis of how he viewed Soviet Central Asia in this respect, cf. Haas 121-25, 130-31).

<sup>15</sup> 239; capitalization in the original; cf. Miller, "Gypsy" 337-38. Here and elsewhere Hughes explicitly emphasizes his own racially mixed identity of African, Amerindian, and European descent (*Big Sea* 11; "My America" 232; cf. Scott 80, 149) to counter the U.S. American ideology of a clear-cut black/white color line.

black West Indian cultures, as the lyrical I admits, “I like your people, your fruit .../Your strength, your sense/of right and wrong./We care for each other” (241).

#### 4. Conclusion

As Edward Mullen observes,

in the area of hemispheric literary interrelationships ..., [Hughes] remains a singular figure, one who was able to convey a sense of what it meant to be black in [U.S.] America to a white Hispanic audience while supplying a voice to Afro-Hispanic writers ... to articulate their own vision of black Hispanic culture. (“Langston” 27)

Moreover, in his large body of poetry, short stories, essays, and personal memoir dealing with Spanish America, Hughes captures crucial aspects of—especially black and Amerindian—life in the western hemisphere for U.S. American readers. Owing to his personal experiences, his Spanish American-themed writing focuses largely on post-revolutionary Mexico and pre-revolutionary Cuba, two countries that offer interesting comparisons: Both nations witnessed an aesthetic-political “renaissance” paralleling and interacting with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and early ‘30s, which proved fruitful for the cultural self-determination and social validation of Native, respectively Afro-diasporic cultures. Yet, owing to the specific conditions of his stays in the two countries, Hughes’s texts about Mexico describe the Amerindian experience in Mexico as largely marked by poverty and lack of opportunities, whereas he depicts black Cuba as socially more diverse and as more actively engaged in the identity political struggle. While he praises Mexico for the absence of an institutionalized color line, Hughes critiques racial discrimination in Cuba, especially the spread of the U.S. American color line to the island, as well as pinpoints social class differences within the Afro-Cuban community.

Both in reference to and reaching beyond these two countries, Hughes scrutinizes ethnicized/racialized practices of social class stratification in Spanish America and the West Indies—a heritage of colonialism—as well as the increasing United States imperialism in the region. As David Luis-Brown argues,

in chronicling such exploitation and oppression abroad, writers like Hughes ... allowed U.S. citizens to perceive the processes by which neocolonialism deprived Latin Americans of their citizenship rights. In so doing the [writers] devised discourses of hemispheric citizenship in which leftist U.S. intellectuals traveling to Latin America took responsibilities for the consequences of neocolonialism. (152; cf. 201)

By addressing in particular a black U.S. American audience and by suggesting parallels to Jim Crow policies in the United States, Hughes in his Spanish American-themed writing—as in his oeuvre in general—crucially urges his readers to feel concerned about injustice and exploitation in their neighbor countries and to reflect upon their own implication as United States citizens in these practices as well as seeks to inspire his audiences to work toward social change both at home and abroad.

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A Continent of Color: Langston Hughes and Spanish America