MULTIPLE PASSINGS AND THE DOUBLE DEATH OF LANGSTON HUGHES

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Desire to us
Was like a double death,
Swift dying
Of our mingled breath,
Evaporation
Of an unknown strange perfume
Between us quickly
In a naked
Room.

Langston Hughes, "Desire"

At the very beginning of his career and throughout most of his forty years of writing, Langston Hughes repeatedly returned to the theme of racial passing, exploring the subject in two autobiographies, several poems and short stories, a brief scene in his first novel, and at least one play. More than those writers who could easily pass for white—Jean Toomer and Walter White—and more than those writers who have become central to the growing study of passing literature—Nella Larsen and William Faulkner—Langston Hughes examines this figure through all the major genres, and more importantly, with an incredible range and inventiveness. In surveying the work, however, it becomes apparent that Hughes began to abandon the theme of racial passing just as he was beginning to explore the interrelated themes of homosexuality and homophobia. As Hughes moves to this "new" material, he can be found structuring it, perhaps as many authors do, upon his early work, with the more familiar drama of racial passing informing his approach to homosexuality. Perhaps less obvious are the ways that the early

The poems "Cafe: 3 a.m.," "Curious," and "Desire" are from COLLECTED POEMS by Langston Hughes. Copyright © 1994 by the Estate of Langston Hughes. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a Division of Random House, Inc.

Biography 23.4 (Fall 2000) © Biographical Research Center

representations of racial passing, including autobiographical accounts, may be read as "queer," or structured upon the concept of the closet.

This essay argues that Hughes's work on racial passing productively mediates and complicates current debates over Hughes's sexuality at the same time that it provokes a reconsideration of the prevailing notion of Hughes as an unsophisticated poet. These debates, which turn on simple choices of heterosexual/homosexual and good/bad, are surprisingly entwined. New Criticism's stricture to read the text without consideration of authorship or other "extrinsic" information has been exposed as ethnocentric—neither value free nor universal. The complexity of Hughes's work, for example, cannot be understood outside the context of jazz, Jim Crow laws, and homophobia. Similarly, Hughes's sexuality is just as important to the poetry as is the supposedly internal, "untainted" concern for irony. Unfortunately, biographers and scholars of Hughes have presented little more than a "distant," "childlike," "asexual," and "enigmatic" Hughes, who seems bereft of real passions, and unhelpful in providing context for the "queer" texts.[1]

In searching for a way into Hughes's closet, I have turned to the poet's passing narratives, asking them to serve as models of reading. Resist closure, they tell us; definition is a fluid and provisional thing. Displaying a strikingly postmodern sensibility, these narratives speak directly to the concerns and anxieties of our times, employing various strategies for deconstructing simplistic notions of truth, knowledge, and identity. But these same passing narratives also argue that identity, despite its unstable and slippery nature, matters. It is this tension between the desire to fix and also the inclination to destabilize identity that finally provides the key to understanding the poet and his work.

Langston Hughes explored racial passing at a time when other authors, both black and white, were drawn to the subject.[2] Nella Larsen announced her interest directly in her first novel, *Passing;* Jessie Fauset could think of writing about little else; and Faulkner returned to the theme three times, in *Light in August, Absalom, Absalom!,* and *Go Down Moses.* Walter White, Fannie Hurst, Jean Toomer, Edna Ferber, George Schuyler, and Sinclair Lewis are just a few of the writers who made use of the passing theme, and many of them are featured prominently in current studies of racial passing.[3] Yet Hughes's passing literature remains surprisingly underexamined. With both a poem and a story entitled "Passing," and another story entitled "Who's Passing for Who?," his interest in this theme is far from hidden or buried. But Hughes appears mainly in the footnotes to Werner Sollors's

comprehensive *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both,* and none of the contributors to Elaine Ginsberg's *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* seems to have been inspired by Hughes. Those scholars who have addressed his representations of racial passing, primarily in "Who's Passing for Who?," "Cross," and *The Big Sea,* have not only read these works almost entirely without reference to other passing narratives, but also, and rather surprisingly, without reference to Hughes's own thematically related work. Although Arnold Rampersad discusses all the essential texts concerned with passing in his comprehensive, two-volume biography, *The Life of Langston Hughes,* the texts are hardly connected.[4] This essay, for the first time, places these works into conversation with each other.

Hughes's passing literature also deserves to be placed next to the writing of his contemporaries. When the protagonist of "Passing" (1933), for example, writes to his mother, "Tell them not to queer me" (54), he sounds very much like the narrator of Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). Although the word "queer," as Judith Butler reminds us, was not a synonym for homosexual at this time, "it did encompass an array of meanings associated with the deviation from normalcy which might well include sexual" (176). Even more importantly, Butler goes on to explore relationships between "spheres of power," and specifically the relationship of the closet to the theme of racial passing: "As a term for betraying what ought to remain concealed, 'queering' works as the exposure within language—an exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language—of both sexuality and race" (176). Much like Larsen, Hughes disrupts language, "queering" the text by speaking through the silences—and not simply through coded language, but through narrative and theme. Both authors question what is normal, and destabilize heterosexuality. Unlike Larsen, though, Hughes resists killing his transgressive characters and delights in the act of transgression, rewarding what others punish. It is the constant questioning of a stable and normalized identity that finally argues for Hughes's queer sensibility and postmodern sophistication.[5]

This essay begins with Hughes's first autobiography, which establishes the author's personal interests in the theme of racial passing, and then considers the poetry and fiction, which frequently assume an autobiographical tone. In the second section, I examine Hughes's overt handling of the theme of homosexuality, and ask how this work resembles the earlier passing literature. Finally, the third section of this essay considers what implications these readings have for our understanding of the poet and his oeuvre, specifically addressing the entwined debates over his sexuality and his reception as an unsophisticated poet.

PART I: RACIAL IDENTITY AND THE PASSING FIGURE

Hughes's first autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), violates chronology by beginning not with his birth or a review of his ancestry, but dramatically, with a scene representing maturation. The privileged moment is an Emersonian gesture of independence from the past: as he leaves America for Africa, Hughes tosses all his books overboard. But since Africa represents his ancestry, the romantic poet may be seen as returning to his greater past even as he quite melodramatically drowns his more immediate past (family, books, America). This paradoxical movement away from and toward the past inevitably leads to a crisis of identity. Though Hughes ends the first section of part one, "Beyond Sandy Hook," with a landing on the "great Africa of my dreams!" (11), this dream unfortunately turns upside down when Hughes discovers that the "Africans looked at me and would not believe I was Negro." His effort to connect with a dark past has erased his "blackness." The Africans cannot see the thing that most defines him in the States—his color.

After registering the shock at this unanticipated homecoming, Hughes then traces his lineage with sadness:

> You see, unfortunately, I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word "Negro" is used to mean anyone who has *any* Negro Blood at all in his veins. In Africa, the word is more pure. It means *all* Negro, therefore *black*. (11)

The emphasis that this first autobiography gives to Hughes's ambiguous racial identity may begin to suggest why the author returned to the passing figure throughout his career. At a time when Jim Crow ruled the South and much of the North, enforcing its one-drop rule mercilessly, and at a point when the Negro was in vogue but expected to be an exotic performer of the primitive, Hughes must have found it confusing to be considered a white man in Africa. He returns to this same scene of passing in a later section of *The Big Sea:* "I am a Negro, too," Hughes tells the Africans, pressing his argument by comparing oppressions: "Our problems in America are very much like yours." But the Africans "only laughed at me and shook their heads and said: 'You, white man! You, white man!'" (102–103).[6]

In his early poems, Hughes affirmed what the Africans could not recognize in him:

> I am a Negro:
> Black as the night is black,
> Black like the depths of my Africa.
> ("Negro," *Collected Poems* 24)

This strong affirmation, found in many other poems like "Negro," counterpoints the autobiographer's anxiety over his mixed and complex ancestry. In "Nightmare Boogie," for example, the persona identifies with "a million faces / black as me!," but black affirmation gives way to a hallucination when "*Quicker than light / All them faces / Turned dead white!*" (*Collected Poems* 418). As in *The Big Sea*, this poem envisions race as something that can be quickly erased. But although the Africans can deny Hughes his blackness, forcing him to identify with the passing figure, the nightmare of racial instability can be exorcised through poetry, allowing black affirmation to prevail. "Nightmare Boogie" ends not with the violent image of black faces turning white, but with the sounds of jazz: "Boogie-woogie, / Rolling bass, / Whirling treble / of cat-gut lace." This surreal version of passing, which references the black to white conversion as well as death, uses black music and vernacular to reestablish the tenacity of blackness.[7]

The theme of racial passing, which is about transgression and/or disruption, lends itself to these melodramatic renderings. Later in his career, Hughes would envision homosexuality with similar dramatic intensity. Charles I. Nero, however, considers an earlier silence lying beneath what Hughes described in *The Big Sea* as his melodramatic act of tossing books into the water. In the manuscript version of this scene, Hughes reveals that he held onto Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Although Rampersad argues that by keeping this one book Hughes "kept the symbol of his best self, and of what he hoped to be" (1: 72), Nero sees signs of Hughes's closet: "Rampersad does not consider the possibility that the reference to Whitman and particularly the line 'the bewilderment of no one to talk to about things that trouble you' might be a coding for homosexuality" (194). But Nero does not link this scene of the closet, complete with coded language and suppressed confessions, with the chapter's later fascination with racial passing.

Hughes, who only became racially ambiguous when he left the U.S., has a sense of humor about his own occasional, or situational, ability to pass. In a short, two-page chapter called "Back Home," Hughes describes an "amusing thing" that happened when he was traveling from Mexico to the U.S. None of the anxiety experienced in Africa is conveyed in this scene, nor does Hughes depict himself as a victim of a mixed and complex ancestry:

> During the trip to the border, several American whites on the train mistook me for a Mexican, and some of them even spoke to me in Spanish, since I am of a copper-brown complexion, with black hair that can be made quite slick and shiny if it has enough pomade on it in the Mexican fashion. But I made no pretense of passing for a Mexican, or anything else. . . . (50)

Hughes begins by representing himself as a passive participant in this scene of racial passing; as in Africa, he is an object to be read by others. When the need arises, however, he abandons this strategy—in this case when "changing trains at San Antonio in Texas, where colored people had to use Jim Crow waiting rooms, and could not purchase a Pullman berth. There," Hughes explains, "I simply went in the main waiting room, as any Mexican would do, and made my sleeping-car reservations in Spanish" (50). As Hughes points out in this passage, passing is something that can be made to happen, but it is also something that can simply happen to light-skinned black people without their consent or encouragement. A survey of passing literature might therefore include all racially ambiguous figures, whether they are actively trying to pass or not, or even when the author is not making this theme explicit.

In the poem "Cross," for example, Hughes does not announce the theme of passing, although the title suggests a variety of multivalent possibilities: the intersection of black and white, the Christian sign of martyrdom, the *crossing* of the color line, and the threat of negation—of being crossed out and annihilated. In *The Big Sea,* Hughes explains that this poem was written about "those so-called 'Negroes' of immediate white-and-black blood, whether they were light enough to pass for white or not" (262–63). By describing his subject as "so-called 'Negroes,'" Hughes doubles the erasure by placing "Negro" in scare quotes and by affixing the dismissive modifier "so-called." Hughes, perhaps unconsciously, thus suggests the power of words to "cross out" and erase.

I include this poem in a study of Hughes's passing literature not only because it suggests the range of approaches to racial passing, but also because it resists the tragic mulatto myth. Although Arnold Rampersad begins his biography by emphasizing how Hughes greatly "identified" with the "doomed" tragic mulatto, his writings suggest a more complicated relationship to that myth. "Cross," for example, replaces the clichéd tragic ending with an open question about destiny—a question that pervades both autobiographies.

Like many of Hughes's poems, "Cross" is written in the first person and adopts an autobiographical tone. But this poem further establishes its

association with autobiography by beginning with an account of the persona's lineage:

> My old man's a white old man
> And my old mother's black.
> (*Collected Poems* 58)

This poem's structure, which could be compared to *The Big Sea* itself, and the poem's interest in moving beyond the past—free from parents and free from anger—recalls Hughes's symbolic act of release that begins the autobiography.

When read alongside the work of his contemporaries, this early poem, one of the first to be published by Hughes, clearly announces its resistance to the prevailing script for the tragic mulatto. The riddle that begins the poem, for example, questions the teleology of the tragic mulatto myth, which always ends with failure and even death.[8] Using the house as a metaphor for fate, this poem plays with the convention while challenging it:

> My old man died in a fine big house.
> My ma died in a shack.
> I wonder where I'm gonna die,
> Being neither white nor black? (59)

To understand the implications of this artful dodge, it might be useful to compare "Cross" to two of Countee Cullen's poems about passing that reinforce the tragic mulatto myth.

In "Two Who Crossed a Line (She Crosses)" and "Two Who Crossed a Line (He Crosses)," Cullen tells the story of a man and a woman who crossed the color line for personal gain only to return to the black community—she with "trouble sucking at her breast," and he with reluctance and an "anodyne" (88–89). There are no secrets in these poems. The erasure of identity is only temporary. They fully participate in the stereotypical rendering of the tragic mulatto by making the racial transgression temporary, and by punishing those who have dared to cross. In contrast, Hughes's poem, with its open question concerning the narrator's fate, resists providing easy or predictable answers.[9]

Hughes's most discussed passing narrative, "Who's Passing for Who?," is not only free of the tragic mulatto's angst, but keeps race ambiguous so that we can never be sure if there is an actual mulatto character. The story is set in a Harlem speakeasy, and the two ambiguous figures who have been assumed to be white, later confess to being black. But then, in the story's

final moments, the wife again claims to be white. Perplexed, the narrator watches the Iowans disappear into the night, and then comments on his own confusion: "Whatever race they were, they had had too much fun at our expense—even if they did pay for the drinks" (*Short Stories* 174). Readers, who usually want their characters fixed, are placed in the same position of not-knowing as the story's narrator. The move from ignorance to knowledge is of course the trajectory of the tragic mulatto narrative. But Hughes replaces the move toward fixing knowledge with a move toward revised claims about racial identity and further confusion and instability.

With a sense of the interplay between voyeur and object, homophobe and homosexual, inside and outside, "Who's Passing for Who?" interweaves the explicit theme of racial passing with the buried theme of the closet. The voice of the narrator is the key to discovering this buried, or closety, theme. Although critics have been surprisingly silent about the narrator's various and potential passings, there are several reasons for reading his character as false or at least layered. He admits, for example, to at least one performance when he states that "we dropped our professionally self-conscious 'Negro' manners . . . and kidded freely like colored folks do when there are no white folks around" (173). Although Langston Hughes is working within an African American tradition that has often explored the nature of performance as it relates to racial difference and insider/outsider communities, this story further layers that dynamic with other marks of difference.

Before the action begins, the prolix and witty narrator introduces his friends and himself as "too broad-minded to be bothered with questions of color." This statement sets up the dramatic irony that positions the narrator for his ultimate blunder: being fooled by the white Iowans. Although the narrator's bohemian world is meant to stand in contrast to the boring white folks from Iowa, Hughes eventually reverses the roles. The Iowans prove to be the tricksters, and the narrator must confront his own naiveté. That the narrator could not see through the Iowans' dissimulation is funny, ironic, interesting—but in the end, not entirely believable.

What happens, though, if we read the narrator's bohemian world as a homosocial world? When we divide the entire cast of characters into single men and heterosexual couples, we discover that racial passing only occurs within the heterosexual realm. Not only does the Iowan couple pass, but so too does the only other woman, half of the only other heterosexual couple in the story. We might then see these racial passings as deflecting attention from the narrator and his friends, who become boring and unremarkable

despite the initial flair with which they are introduced. Racial passing becomes a decoy, distracting our attention from the performances of the bohemian bachelors.

Before Hughes initiates the drama of racial passing, he comes dangerously close to revealing the "perverse" nature of the narrator and his bachelor friends:[10]

> You see, Caleb and his white friends, too, were all bores. Or so we, who lived in Harlem's literary bohemia during the "Negro Renaissance," thought. We literary ones considered ourselves too broad-minded to be bothered with questions of color. We liked people of any race who smoked incessantly, drank liberally, wore complexion and morality as loose garments, and made fun of anyone who didn't do likewise. We snubbed and high-hatted any Negro or white luckless enough not to understand Gertrude Stein. . . . (170)

Although the narrator assumes this affected tone, his dandified attitude and the passing reference to Gertrude Stein hardly mark him fully and definitively as a homosexual. Nevertheless, the title, with its bad grammar calling attention to itself, encourages speculation. Who is passing for whom? Surely the author would have planted more and trickier trickster figures than the Iowans to fully justify his title. Furthermore, the narrative has already schooled us in the surprising fluidity of identity, and so readers are encouraged to suspect more revelations and exposures.

To those who would argue that the subject of passing lends itself to this kind of wild and speculative reading—after all, everything is performance, and everybody passes—I heartily agree. I am finally arguing that in his autobiographies, poetry, fiction, and drama, Hughes returned to the subject of passing throughout his career because he was fascinated with identity as something unstable and "queer." With their emphasis on compensation rather than loss, questions rather than answers, the unknown rather than the known, and curiosity rather than punishment, Hughes's writings on sexual identity invite comparison to his exploration of racial passing. In contrast to James Baldwin's psycho-sexual explorations of homosexuality in *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country,* and in contrast to Gore Vidal's exploration of a subculture in *The City and the Pillar,* Hughes's examinations of sexuality seem to borrow distinctly from the dynamics of racial passing. Each of his renderings of the homosexual relies on the same play of ambiguity, and each withholds punishment and moralizing.

Ben Ellison in a scene from *Looking for Langston*, directed by Isaac Julien. With much of the past unavailable to him, the director artfully solves the biographer's problem of accuracy by locating Langston in our desire to find him (*Looking for Langston*, dir. Isaac Julien, Sankofa Films and Video, 1989; photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive).

PART II: SEXUAL IDENTITY AND THE CLOSET

Hughes wrote "Café: 3 a.m.," his first poem to deal explicitly with homosexuality, in the 1950s. Like the poem "Passing," this short poem is part of the larger, book-length poem *Montage of a Dream Deferred.* If Hughes's jazz rendition of Harlem was to give voice to all of Harlem, it makes sense that homosexuals should be included. Upon moving to Harlem in the 1920s, Hughes had the opportunity to befriend many gay men—married ones like Countee Cullen and Carl Van Vechten, and bohemian bachelors like Wallace Thurman and Bruce Nugent. Homosexuality was in the music of Bessie Smith and Gladys Bentley, in the house parties and drag balls, at the Savoy Ballroom and the Rockland Palace, in the Mafia and Greenwich Village, and certainly in a major part of the Negro literati and Harlem.[11] Although Hughes had briefly broached the subject in his first novel, as well as in his first autobiography, "Café: 3 a.m." stands apart for its explicitness, and for its direct plea for acceptance and understanding.

In a classic Hughes move, the poem advocates acceptance by exploring the ambiguity of sexuality and the unreliability of the visible. The poem

begins with detectives entering a "café"—a strange café indeed, open late into the night, making us realize that the title signals something unusual, part of a homosexual subculture. Incapable of forming a complete sentence, an initial voice circulates about the vice squad, which begins "spotting fairies":[12]

> Detectives from the vice squad
> with weary sadistic eyes
> spotting fairies.
> *Degenerates,*
> some folks say.
>
> But God, Nature,
> or somebody
> made them that way.
>
> Police lady or Lesbian
> over there?
> *Where?*
>
> (*Collected Poems* 406)

In this short poem, the café is transformed into a bar, day becomes night, and reality gives way to the unreal, as the act of uncovering vice (or perhaps even determining what it is) is carried out by a vice squad tainted with "weary sadistic eyes"—neither clear nor unbiased. Since, however, sexual identity is tainted by the systems of power that try to fix and control it, the poem has cleverly extended its purview, adding other points-of-view. In examining these systems of control, common people also become implicated in their operation: "*Degenerates,* / some folks say." But these sentiments of "some folks" are hard to distinguish from the homophobia of the vice squad. The point of view thus blurs more than shifts in this poem. The one voice countering the forces of homophobia speaks a folk wisdom of a different sort: "But God, Nature, / or somebody / made them that way." Offered in the middle of the poem as a faceless voice of reason responding to those who would shout "*Degenerates,*" this folksy truism does not offer answers so much as possibilities. By listing a number of possible causes of homosexuality ("God, Nature, or somebody"), this voice supports the poem's larger intent to confuse, to offer no answers, to leave us with only questions—with two questions, in fact, which is exactly how the poem ends.

The first question is as ironic as anything found in the Hughes canon of passing literature: "Police lady or Lesbian / over there?" This later voice seems as tainted as the vice squad's perception. Why are police officer and homosexual indistinguishable? How does gender add to the confusion? Is the confusion sincere or risible? And who asks this question? While it might

be easy to follow the sexist logic that perceives policewomen and lesbians as indistinguishable because both have adopted male roles, does the poem participate in or challenge the sexist stereotypes? In exploring how systems of power work, then, "Café: 3 a.m.," by resisting the impulse to clarify who is speaking, therefore also resists extricating itself—words, author, and narrator—from the complex system of control.

The final question—"*Where?*"—although titillating, implicates those of us who want homosexuality defined—named and unambiguous. By blurring the final voices, the poem further confuses the various heterosexual participants. Who asks *where* the police lady/lesbian is? And why? To "spot" more degenerates? To draw, unwittingly, toward homosexual panic? To enter the perversely pleasurable space of the unknown, the ambiguous? To challenge ambiguity, eradicate the unknown, and rush toward a fixing of identities? As with his racial passing narratives, Hughes does not assure us that order will be reestablished or that identities will be fixed. Instead, he delights in blurring the boundaries. But "Café: 3 a.m." not only blurs homosexuality with heterosexuality, it also blurs homosexuality with homophobia. The shifting voices, unclear tone, and rhetorical questions all force us to examine our need to know, to have meaning and identity fixed.

The interrelatedness of homosexuality and homophobia is also the subject of "Blessed Assurance" (1963). In this story, Hughes presents Delmar, a stereotypical gay man. But Delmar's unproblematic sexuality functions merely as a foil for his virulently homophobic father, whose point of view begins the story: "Unfortunately (and to John's distrust of God) it seemed his son was turning out to be a queer" (*Short Stories* 231). Much like the shifting point of view in "Café: 3 a.m.," "Blessed Assurance" also moves away from the homophobic point of view—the word "queer" is repeated three times in the opening of the story—to a community of voices. The conflict between anti- and pro-gay forces is enacted through this structuring of "Blessed Assurance." The opening interior monologue, clearly situated within John's homophobic point of view, gives way finally to a more objective dialogue. Another shift occurs at the end of the story, when the dialogue, which has decentered John's homophobia, is interlaced with the voices of pastor, congregation, and choir. This artful ending situates the story of Delmar and John, homosexual and homophobe, within the expansive, or perhaps dispersed point of view of the larger community, making this story, much like "Café: 3 a.m.," a study in systems of control. Where, Hughes seems to ask, are the homosexual and the homophobe located? But again, Hughes resists answers, and instead delights in the indeterminacy of identity and other forms of passing.

"Blessed Assurance" provides the codes for reading homosexuality. Although Delmar's homosexuality is stable from start to finish, hardly providing an interpretive challenge, other characters invite explication. Delmar is the catalyst for all that occurs. When he sings, young girls swoon—a perfectly heterosexual response—but Dr. Manley Jaxon, the Minister of Music, also faints. While Delmar's father cannot stand to hear his son's effeminate voice, Dr. Jaxon cannot remain standing: "Not only did Dr. Jaxon fall from the stool, but he rolled limply down the steps from the organ loft like a bag of meal and tumbled prone onto the rostrum, robes and all" (234). Although the first sentence of "Blessed Assurance" immediately casts Delmar and John as homosexual and homophobe, placing the Music Director within the story requires more work. For many readers, the clues accrue quickly. Dr. Jaxon takes Delmar to Greenwich Village, writes and dedicates an opera to him, casts the boy as the female lead, and then faints at the sound of his protégé's voice. Although reading Manley Jaxon as gay does not require much sophistication, it still gives us pleasure to see behind the mask, to know that we have cracked the code.

But "Blessed Assurance" holds at least as many surprises as "Who's Passing for Who?" When Dr. Jaxon faints, the pastor springs from his chair, trying "to think what to say under the unusual circumstances." But the only thing that comes to mind is "One down, one to go." More than any other, this line invites and resists explication. Although it is far from clear who the second victim of Delmar's voice might be, the logical choice is John, who eventually screams: "'Shut up, son! *Shut up,*' he cried. 'Shut up!'" What happens if we view Delmar's voice, unnatural and seductive, as threatening to both Jaxon and John? Functioning much like a choric voice, the pastor recognizes Delmar's dual threat to the homophilic and the homophobic members of his congregation. Will John fall? In a desperate measure not to be the second man to succumb to Delmar's voice, and in response to his daughter's naive revelation that young girls react to that voice by screaming while Dr. Jaxon reacted by fainting, John chooses to scream rather than to faint. But his overly desperate pleas for Delmar to "Shut up!" hardly extricate John from the spectacle of homosexuality, the spectacle of coming out, that has been initiated by Delmar's "soaring voice" and Jaxon's swoon.

In fact, the spectacle is created as much by John, who not only yells "Shut up!" in church, but also screams "God damn it!" His actions are as subtly linked. But John's inappropriate response to Delmar will not be read as a sign of repressed homosexuality unless his extreme homophobia alone carries the burden of signification. Hughes provides little else to mark John as gay, but he also does nothing to explain John's extreme actions. Just as

Hughes resists fixing the identity of his passers in "Who's Passing for Who?," so too does he write mystery into "Blessed Assurance" and "Café: 3 a.m."[13]

Perhaps it would be safer to argue that "Blessed Assurance" presents one unproblematic "queer" in Delmar, one clearly coded homosexual in Jaxon, and two other characters who may be thought of as "tainted." But John and Reverend Dr. Greene become suspect, not simply because the one is rabidly homophobic and the other is sympathetic and provocatively cast as knowing everything, but because the story, in moving between what is overt and what is covert, what is known and what is unknown, encourages a search for signifiers, an examination of closets. In both "Café: 3 a.m." and "Blessed Assurance," Hughes counterpoints the easily "spotted" homosexual against a second, less-readable figure: the obvious fairies against the lesbian/police lady; and Delmar against Dr. Jaxon, and possibly against John and Reverend Greene.

This same counterpointing occurs in Hughes's first novel, *Not Without Laughter,* which includes a brief scene that positions the protagonist, Sandy, against a homosexual predator. Like "Blessed Assurance," this early novel uses a "womanish" voice to signify sexual identity. But upon hearing the strange voice, Sandy requires more clues about this "yellow man": "He smelled of perfume, and his face looked as though it had been powdered with white talcum as he lit a tiny pocket-lighter" (284). We might first think of the white talcum in relation to passing for white, but it primarily functions here to reveal this man's unnaturalness—one of the many clues Sandy "was beginning to understand. . . . [H]e had heard the men talk about queer fellows" (285).

Although nothing in the two pages devoted to this stereotype indicates that we should read this man as anything but "queer," Sandy's sexual status is what ultimately gets called into question:

> "He thinks I'm dumb," thought Sandy, "but I'm wise to him!" Yet he wondered what such men did with the boys who accompanied them. Curious, he'd like to find out—but he was afraid. . . . (285)

Hughes's own curiosity about "such men" seems to have been satisfied at least once in his youth, as he indicates in a "hastily compiled" note that describes a brief sexual tryst:

> "Won't it hurt you," I said.
> "Not unless it's square," he said. "Are you square?"
> "Could be," I said.
> "Let's see," he said. . . . (Rampersad 1: 77)

In this record, Hughes participates in the seduction by keeping his difference ("Are you square?") unknown and unanswered ("Could be"). Hughes plays the part of the cipher, encouraging curiosity. Here, there is a certain erotic component to the ambiguous and the unknown. For Hughes, the homosexual encounter becomes noteworthy as an exchange about not knowing. The homosexual, the poet seems to tell us in "Café: 3 a.m.," "Blessed Assurance," and the above autobiographical note, is always passing. Just as Dr. Jaxon, Dr. Reverend Greene, and Delmar's father become interesting in a way that Delmar does not because they are ambiguous and difficult to read, so too has Hughes left an oeuvre and biography that remains difficult to read. The question of his sexuality continues to be a subject of debate.

Looking for Langston, again locating him in our desire to find him (*Looking for Langston*, dir. Isaac Julien, Sankofa Films and Video, 1989; photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, Film Stills Archive).

PART III: PASSING THROUGH THE CLOSET TO FIND LANGSTON HUGHES

As a life-long bachelor, a bohemian, a sailor, and a poet, Hughes had to work against prevailing stereotypes to pass as heterosexual. In many ways, his autobiographies do this work: presenting Hughes as a participant in a

heterosexual world of sex with prostitutes and love for women. But the sex often does not take place, and the love is unrequited. The autobiographies show Hughes in constant movement, running from love, sex, and women. These escapes may have given him a sense of being unmarked as a homosexual, for his flight from women could be understood in the context of his other identities: bohemian, poet, sailor. It was when he finally settled into a home in Harlem that the gossips found him.

Arnold Rampersad's biography conveys quite dramatically how much Hughes's sexuality was a subject of speculation in his later years. If he ever intentionally tried to pass as a heterosexual, he failed miserably. Lindsay Patterson, a young friend who wanted to become a writer, said that Hughes "knew he was being snickered at behind his back because of the young men about him" (Rampersad 2: 338).[14] But Hughes's later publications, those works already discussed that specifically address the subject of homosexuality and confront the related issues of rumor and innuendo, suggest that the poet was insufficiently worried about these associations, and would do nothing to alter the perceptions of his friends.

Hughes lived through a time that George Chauncey has described as transitional:

> Only in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s did the now-conventional division of men into "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals," based on the sex of their partners, replace the division of men into "fairies" and "normal men" on the basis of their imaginary gender status as the hegemonic way of understanding sexuality. (13)

When comparing the poet's many renderings of racial passing to the later and less numerous depictions of homosexuality, it is impossible to avoid entering the debate over Hughes's sexuality itself, a debate activated in part by the publication of Rampersad's biography and Isaac Julien's struggle with the Hughes estate for permission to use material for the movie *Looking for Langston*. Rampersad's study, because it seeks to define Hughes as *asexual* rather than homosexual, has recently been countered and balanced by gay readings of the poetry and the man. Isaac Julien's film, in contrast, leaves us with lasting questions about the limits of our knowledge and our responsibility to facts.[15] But it is Rampersad's authoritative biography, first published in 1986 and 1988, that has had the greater, and as I will argue, the more deleterious effect on Hughes scholarship.[16]

The Life of Langston Hughes continues to guide and caution scholars like Ann Douglas and Harold Bloom, who defer to Rampersad's asexual and childlike version of Hughes.[17] Bloom, for example, writes that "Rampersad

. . . shrewdly notes the mixture of will and passivity that combines in Hughes's art, and relates the passivity to Hughes's apparent asexuality." Bloom then uses these biographical "facts" to argue that "Rampersad's *Life* is simply a more vivid and valuable aesthetic and human experience than reading the rather faded verse and prose of Hughes himself" (1–2). This dismissive evaluation quite inappropriately introduces the Modern Critical Edition of *Langston Hughes,* and sadly, other critics have also found it easy to dismiss Harlem's poet laureate. In his 1959 review of *The Selected Poems,* James Baldwin argues that the poet is distant and fake, almost as if Baldwin, like Bloom, also felt that the poetry is a poor proxy for the man:

> There are the poems which almost succeed but which do not succeed, poems which take refuge, finally, in a fake simplicity in order to avoid the difficult simplicity of the experience! And one sometimes has the impression . . . that Hughes has had to hold the experience outside him in order to be able to write at all. (37)

But what happens when we read these qualities as indicative of the closet? Can we not only forgive Hughes for avoiding "the difficult simplicity of the experience," but also see that these evasions, the distancing and subterfuge, are part of the experience? In fact, does not the work become enriched, and quite frankly make sense, when read with an understanding of Langston Hughes's "closet" and his multiple passings?

My survey of the poet's "gay" texts has purposely ignored, or at least delayed, an examination of the work that is *not* explicitly about homosexuality. Although some recent scholarship has examined the homoerotic or homosocial moments in "Young Sailor," "Joy," "Desire," and "Trumpet Player," one poem, "Curious," has been overlooked.[18] On the surface, the poem doesn't seem to be about much more than an abstract idea—curiosity:

> I can see your house, babe,
> But I can't see you.
> I can see your house,
> But I can't see you.
> When you're in your house, baby
> Tell me, what do you do?
> (*Collected Poems* 226)

Hughes structures identity upon the metaphor of a house as a second skin—an unreadable, though structurally visible, shell. But to read this poem as simply about some vague concept, without considering the specific subject or object of curiosity, is to surrender to the poem's surface and to go no further, to expect no more.

I believe Hughes's reputation has suffered because poems like "Curious" are too quickly dismissed as "distant" and "passive."[19] Rarely commented upon, this poem gathers meaning when placed next to "Cross," which also questions identity through the structuring metonym of the house: "My old man died in a fine big house. / My ma died in a shack." The unknown fate of the narrator, and perhaps the mystery and key to his identity, is linked to the unknown location of his own death: "I wonder where I'm gonna die, / Being neither white nor black?" For the poet, houses represent the unknown, and secrets of racial and sexual identity pervade these structures.

Because "Cross" never makes passing for white its explicit theme, we might argue that it reproduces the dynamics of passing by allowing the more general mulatto figure to stand in for the passer. But as I have argued earlier, the multivalent title, with its allusion to "crossing out," and the intertextual relationship with Cullen's "Two Who Crossed" poems, allow "Cross" to be read as a passing narrative about crossing the color line. Furthermore, in structuring race upon the metonym of houses, "Cross" plays the same evading—distancing or closeting—game as "Curious." We are not permitted to see too much: no faces, no genders, and no fate.

If we at least know that "Cross" is about racial identity, can we say that "Curious" is about sexual identity? If fate is the concern of "Cross," the closet seems to be the subject of "Curious." The narrator reveals himself to be a voyeur, almost a peeping Tom, as he repeats the provocative statement, "I can see your house." But seeing the loved one's house is not enough; the narrator wants to see more. Since we have no sense of how the object of affection feels about the narrator's desire, "Curious" is finally a poem that views the closet from the outside, and not the inside. Perhaps this was the distance that Baldwin accused Hughes of writing from. Why are we not permitted more details? Why must identity be covered and closeted—displaced onto a house?[20]

"Curious" ends with a question not unlike the question at the end of "Café: 3 a.m." Both poems begin with the promise of knowing—"spotting fairies" and "I can see your house"—but both poems end with not knowing. The curiosity is not unlike the curiosity that the protagonist of *Not Without Laughter* has for "such men [who do things] with the boys who accompanied them" (285). It is perhaps even the same curiosity that John has as he watches his son "turning out to be a queer." It is the curiosity of the outsider, the homophobe and the innocent. But then Hughes, we must remember, always collapses outside with inside.

It is fitting that the man whose sexuality continues to be so hotly contested should leave us so many words about the ambiguity of identity and

the lack of satisfying answers. But I don't think the message of these many poems and stories is that it doesn't matter, or that identity should be a question and not an answer. Hughes's explicit handling of homosexuality in "Blessed Assurance" not only concerns itself with the instability of identities, but also encourages us to laugh at the "outing" of Dr. Jaxon. "Café: 3 a.m." begins with the spotting of fairies but titillates us by uncovering other identities—police lady and lesbian. Even the note that describes a sexual tryst, which Rampersad describes as reflecting a "first homosexual episode" and not a reflection of a homosexual identity, suggests that Hughes would not answer basic questions ("Are you square?") but instead would tease the questioner ("'Could be,' I said."). It is for this type of slippery and subversive sensibility that the word "queer" was coined.

Although Hughes resisted having his own sexuality read, his narratives convey that despite the impossibilities of fully knowing or wanting to be known, sexual identity does matter. This is the Hughes, writer and oeuvre, that I think it is important to emphasize. Although he may have fostered an image of himself as asexual or even childlike, we must read his evasions and silences as the language of survival, the language of a man caught between black and white worlds, and gay and straight sensibilities.

In his greatest testimony to the importance of silence, Hughes requested that Duke Ellington's "Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me" be the final song played at his funeral (Rampersad 2: 362–63). The Ellington song highlights the poet's concern with how his identity would later be read. The song begins talking about gossip—"Someone told someone and someone told you." The singer of this lyric, the smooth-talking lover, argues that his version of reality should be believed over everything else, including friends or even visible proof. But the line that supplies the title and refrain —"Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me"—is undercut by the song's final line, which states that the loved one never will hear from him, never hear anything to challenge their love. In the context of a funeral, and as the final message from Langston Hughes, this song takes on an added meaning. Is Hughes arguing for control from the grave over his image, his reputation? Although we need not force the parallels too much, the plea of Ellington's lover is for the loved one not to view him as inconstant or promiscuous, while the plea from Hughes may be to distrust the gossip, and do nothing until we hear from him—which of course we never will.

Although we are told to do nothing, or rather assume nothing, until further word is given, this advice from a dead man plays on the impossibility of knowing—a classic strategy from Hughes. But rather than read the final moment in Hughes's funeral as another gesture toward the unknowability

of identity, I would argue that it should be read as a further example of silence as meaningful. Let us read the silences and examine Langston Hughes's closet. Let us read all his work in the context of his closet narratives of racial and sexual passings. With characteristic genius, Hughes simultaneously hid and highlighted this silence. By asking that "Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me" be played as an instrumental, he leaves us with one final irony: listen for the words that are not sung, for they exist and resound in the mind even though they have not been articulated.

NOTES

1. In his 1959 review of Hughes's *Selected Poems,* James Baldwin characterizes the poet as distant and incapable of writing from "within the experience" (2). Harold Bloom, in 1989, is no less dismissive in *Langston Hughes: Modern Critical Views,* which describes the poetry as less interesting than the poet's life. It is interesting to note that Bloom's understanding of the poet's life comes directly from Arnold Rampersad's two-volume biography, published in 1986 and 1988. The above works will be discussed at some length below.
2. Perhaps these writers, all hoping to write the Great American Novel, recognized the possibilities of the trope. Passing, after all, is a uniquely American phenomenon. "Not only does the one-drop rule apply to no other group than American blacks," as the sociologist F. James Davis reminds us, "but apparently the rule is unique in that it is found only in the United States," making it "difficult to explain in other countries or to foreign students" (13). We might therefore argue that passing is not only a uniquely American phenomenon, but a quintessentially American theme, concerning as it does democratic ideals, the pursuit of the American dream, and assimilation.
3. Although most studies of racial passing focus on individual texts and resist pursuing larger historicizing narratives, a few publications are noteworthy for adding to our understanding of this history. See Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both;* F. James Davis, *Who Is Black?;* Joel Williamson, *New People;* Judith Berzon, *Neither White Nor Black;* Juda Bennett, *The Passing Figure;* and Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line.*
4. First published in 1986 and 1988, Rampersad's two-volume biography has invigorated Hughes scholarship, and remains an invaluable resource for students of the poet. I believe that the recent controversy surrounding this biography, and specifically its handling of Hughes's sexuality, will continue to move us toward a greater understanding of the man and his work.
5. George Chauncey's *Gay New York* provides the most complex history of how terms like "queer" and "gay" evolved.
6. Not only does the repetition create emphasis, but Hughes again places the scene of racial confusion within the first pages of Part II—a strange parallel to Part I. Arnold Rampersad has called Hughes's "extraordinary devotion to the race," juxtaposed against this scene of racial disjunction, "the central paradox of his life" (1: 378).
7. Significantly, this poem, with its nightmarish and unwelcomed race transfiguration, follows the poem "Passing," which describes a willed transgression and is therefore

more conventional. Found in the poetic sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred,* these poems, when read together, as they should be, build upon their interrelated themes.

8. The history of passing literature is entwined with the myth of the tragic mulatto. *The Oxford Dictionary of African American Literature* spends considerable time defining "mulatto," "new mulatto," "tragic mulatto," and "passing," though not in a way that necessarily distinguishes one from the other. Significantly, three of the six novels used as examples for the entry on "mulatto," and the single work used to exemplify "the tragic mulatto," are novels of passing, suggesting that passing is not only associated with the mulatto, but perhaps with the quintessential mulatto. Regardless of the slippage between terms, the conventional ending for these narratives is tragic.
9. In contrast to the long history of racial passing as negation, as an erasure of self and a denial of community, Hughes's passing figures often remain surprisingly whole and positive. "The Ballad of Walter White" tells the story of one man who by passing did not simply help himself but also his people. This tribute to the Civil Rights activist argues that passing may be pragmatic in the war against racism. Another example of passing left unpunished can be found in *The Mulatto.* In this play, Bertha and Sallie move North and pass for white. Unlike their brothers, who stay behind in the South, Bertha and Sallie find great success in their new lives. Hughes refuses to punish the passer by making him jump out of a window, marry a racist, or stumble upon a lynch mob. These melodramatic endings can be found respectively in Larsen's *Passing,* Schuyler's *Black No More,* and Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man.*
10. In *Epistemology of the Closet,* Eve Sedgwick describes Thackeray's bachelors to explain homosexual panic. As I'm sure would not surprise her, her list of attributes applies to the bachelors in "Who's Passing for Who?" They show a "preference of atomized male individualism to the nuclear family . . . a garrulous and visible refusal of anything that could be interpreted as genital sexuality, toward objects male or female; a corresponding emphasis on the pleasures of the other senses; and a well-defended social facility that freights with a good deal of magnetism its proneness to parody and to unpredictable sadism" (192).
11. Chauncey's *Gay New York* is particularly useful as a "map to the boundaries of the gay world under a sexual regime in which many homosexually active men did not identify themselves as part of it" (24). Although Chauncey only mentions Hughes twice, once referring to him as "possibly" gay identified, the author effectively conveys the complexity and various possibilities of identification. For a less academic but highly entertaining view into gay New York, see Steven Watson's *The Harlem Renaissance* (134–37).
12. Although he promoted "blackness" as a term of beauty, Hughes never wrestled with the language of homophobia ("fairy" or "queer") as much as he did with the concept. In *Gay New York,* Chauncey addresses the meaning of terms: "*Queer, fairy, trade, gay,* and other terms each had a specific connotation and signified specific subjectivities, and the ascendancy of *gay* as the preeminent term (for gay men among gay men) in the 1940s reflected a major reconceptualization of homosexual behavior and of 'homosexuals' and 'heterosexuals'" (14). The reference to "fairies" in "Café: 3 a.m." (1951) would have lost some of its inclusiveness and been more associated with "only men who dressed or behaved in . . . a flamboyantly effeminate manner" (16).

13. Because a correlation has long been drawn between homophobia and latent homosexuality, Adams, Wright, and Lohr decided to "investigate the role of homosexual arousal in exclusively heterosexual men who admitted negative affect toward homosexual individuals" (440). This fascinating study, which uses a penile plethsymograph to measure erectile responses in putatively heterosexual men, reveals that only the homophobic men were aroused by gay male pornography.
14. See for example Rampersad 2: 372–73, or 2: 442, where we learn that Sandy Bethune, upon hearing of her friend's hospitalization, says, "I don't know why, but I had assumed that Langston was gay, and I just imagined that he had been injured in some homosexual encounter, and that prostate trouble was a euphemism."
15. For a discussion of these controversies, see Hemphill, Nero, and Gates.
16. The index to Rampersad's biography is a challenge to scholars of gay and lesbian literature. Although Rampersad uses the word numerous times and explores the controversy over Hughes's homosexuality, as if to prove the author's point, neither of the volumes' indexes includes an entry on "homosexuality." Though the first volume's index does include an entry on sexuality, the second volume relocates this important entry as a sub-heading under "Langston Hughes." Why is it so difficult to research Hughes's sexuality?
17. Because Bloom uses Rampersad's biography to dismiss Hughes's poetry, I have addressed him in the body of this essay. Douglas, who is perhaps more representative of scholars who continue to think of Hughes as gay despite the Rampersad biography, is respectful to all parties and concerns. Though she unequivocally refers to Hughes as homosexual ("Most of the best-known black male writers on the New York scene were homosexual; Hughes, Cullen, Thurman . . ."), she also makes a gesture to Rampersad: "Cultivating what his finest biographer, Arnold Rampersad, has called a 'Peter Pan' style of guileful and erotic innocence, he obscured and shielded his sexual identity from clear scrutiny by anyone, probably including himself" (97).
18. I hope that this study will be read with the work of Gregory Woods and others who have focused on the homoerotic poems. All too often, this important work has been dismissed as "insensitive." Although Rampersad, for instance, argues that the poem "F. S." has been "sometimes taken insensitively as proof of [Hughes's] sexuality," Rampersad's dismissive and scolding tone is all too familiar to most scholars of gay and lesbian literature. For a wonderful discussion of the politics of queer studies, see Foster, Siegel, and Berry.
19. Other recent studies have recognized the tendency to read Hughes as simple. For a different approach, see *Not So Simple: The 'Simple' Stories by Langston Hughes*, by Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper.
20. Lee Edelman's *Homographesis* asks how identities—sexual and racial—deploy various tropes. "Just as the superimposition of an allegedly stable metaphoric significance upon the metonymic category of desire *makes possible* conventional figurations of the legibility of a distinctive homosexual 'morphology,' so it produces the *need* to construe such an emblem of homosexual difference that will securely situate that difference within the register of visibility" (11).

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