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Latining America

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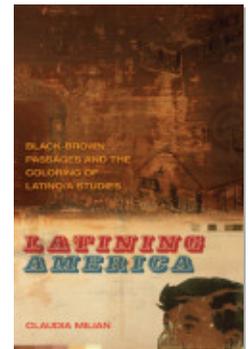
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CHAPTER TWO

PASSING LATINITIES

My, my. A body does get around.

— WILLIAM FAULKNER (1990: 30)

If the reader has accompanied me through chapter 1, it should by now become apparent that this project is observant of cross-cultural, passing acquaintances. My topic of study pursues altering scripts of working ambiguities that involve coming to, getting to, or turning to a new appreciation for quotidian attributes of arriving at Latinities from conflicting geographies and alternative entryways. I inquire into “Passing Latinities” through what William Anthony Nericcio has devised as “‘miscegenated’ semantic oddities” that codify not just brown folk but black folk too (2007: 16). This black-brown point of intersection reorients black-white passages beyond this dual-directional schema and focuses on how Latinities permeate these blurred encounters. Mary Bucholtz’s take on passing identifies it as “*the active construction of how the self is perceived when one’s ethnicity is ambiguous to others.*” She adds, “an individual may in certain contexts pass as a member of her ‘own’ biographical ethnic group by insisting on an identity that others may deny her. Furthermore, passing of this kind is not passive. Individuals of ambiguous ethnicity patrol their own borders, using the tools of language and self-representation to determine how the boundaries of ethnic categories are drawn upon their own bodies” (1995: 352–53).¹ Passing Latinities, however, do not depend on ambiguity alone to tinge an individual with an other’s ethnoracial signifiers. Such Latinities tackle ideas of an authenticating essential core used as a baseline assumption to visually produce and hermetically seal a particular group’s semiotics. The tools of language and self-representation in

these passing but cohabiting Latinities speak to the incoherence underlying other Latin constructs that interrupt the eyes and inaugurate new biographical knowledge formation as well as conceptual cultural terms.

As I seek to broaden the premises of border cultures and cultural communication, my principal aim is to intervene in this horizon to make room for two crucial figures of the Harlem Renaissance: James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) and Langston Hughes (1902–67). I steer toward this interpretive nexus, because as foundational approaches to the black diaspora have demonstrated, U.S. black literary and theoretical accounts seemingly impart a transcontinental cultural turn mainly encompassing Europe, the United States, Africa, and the Anglo- and Francophone Caribbean (see, e.g., Edwards, 2003; and Gilroy, 2003). The Hispanophone Americas and U.S. Latino/a studies are rarely configured in these mappings of diasporic blackness.²

Taking the roles of Johnson and Hughes as points of orientation, I begin by centering on how these eminent literary figures have traversed Latin-American borders, consciously mindful of the ways that “other” Souths informed their multifaceted literary and political work. Knowledgeable of Spanish, both Johnson and Hughes were preoccupied with the formation of black aesthetics exceeding U.S. boundaries. Analytically attentive to questions of blackness in global dimensions, they assumed a stance that is of paramount significance for my investigation of the Global South. Such sharp interests allowed these cultural producers to understand that the hemispheric imaginings of blackness constituted a variable spectrum “of color” that worked alongside and often in stark contrast to U.S. African Americanness. Turning to other understandings of race outside the United States, one enduring concern is how both Johnson and Hughes were mindful of these southern Latinities in U.S. and Latin-American terrains. My primary intention also considers the manner in which their U.S. ethnoracial markers stand in relation to national landscapes as well as the traveling and exchanging meanings of Latin-Americanness: how their subjectivities and bodies move, act, become known, evade, or “get around,” as Faulkner’s epigraph to this chapter suggests. My work examines the semiotic burden and the interdependency of blackness and brownness within conceptions and deployments of Latinidad and U.S. African Americanness.

Given this scope, I study how Johnson’s and Hughes’s bodies “spoke” their blackness-cum-brownness in the Latin topographies of Mexico and Cuba, in

Hughes's case, and Nicaragua in Johnson's. Their blackness-cum-brownness is not reducible to brownness-*not*-blackness. Blackness and brownness are mutually encoded and in close company with each other. Johnson and Hughes dared to enter these nations in the Americas and point to processes of becoming that are not strictly black or brown. They actualized, in this manner, a passing Latinity. But these black-brown passages do not equate a process of deracialization. Through their overlaps, we see how the firm grip of blackness and brownness is loosened and muddled. Blackness enables a continuum of Latin interventions and acquires a Latinity that ceases to be durably brown in the U.S. Latinidad sense that entraps the fixity of the Latino and Latina body. Johnson's and Hughes's moving bodies jettison the essence of Latino and Latina brownness, altering Latin spaces. Latinness is perpetuated differently, and newly emergent Latinities — that is, passing Latinities — are revised through polymorphic passages, turns, and interactions. The disorder and interplay of blackness-cum-brownness widen the Latin imaginary and put this touchstone into useful practice: why can't black and blackness also be bearers of Latin?

The previous chapter inspected other axes of blackness that are not anchored in unidirectional Latinness, Latinaness, and African Americanness. The present one interrogates how U.S. black bodies have crossed and commingled with Latin-America's color lines. Such an investigation raises a critical but as of yet unasked question: what are the national implications of U.S. Latinness and Latinaness when that ethnoracial group's markers have been passed through by U.S. African Americans? I bring this question to other aspects of the South not simply as an analogous correlation between first and third world peripheries but as a maneuver that undoes what has passed as static and monolithic for far too long: the meanings of Latino, Latina, and Latin as devoid of blackness. If, as Arlene Dávila has contended, U.S. "ethnic group after ethnic group has been pressed to distance itself from African Americans, or else has been distanced from 'blackness' by others," the goal is not just to disentangle the distancing and disassociation between Africana blackness and Latin blackness—dark brownness (2008: 7). My parameters of inquiry set in motion their potential through the reexamination of the disparate locations of Latinness and its unleashing vis-à-vis broader cultural sites and social actors installing Latinities as a different formation.

My research interests derived from perceived moments of literary discretion by both Johnson and Hughes that suggested far more about the marginal renditions of Latin life than what I was reading in perfect bound form. In the introduction to Hughes's *The Big Sea* (1940), for example, biographer and literary critic Arnold Rampersad writes that the poet was a "reluctant autobiographer," who resisted such a project, granting that he hated "to think backwards" (1993: xiii). Hughes's Mexican intervals are marked with inertia — notwithstanding the fact that Rampersad paradoxically interprets Hughes's pages on that nation as animated purveyors of "Mexican Technicolor" (xvii).³ His appraisal is based on an instance that amounts to textual lethargy, wherein Hughes confessed, "I didn't do much that summer but read books, ride my horse Tito, eat [. . .] apple cake, feel lonesome, and write poems when I felt most lonesome" (1993: 58). Hughes's public self-summarization retains a matter-of-fact tone, an oscitancy that turns Mexico into a happenstance of a cursory forty pages (39–79). But Hughes's trove of private papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, as I soon explore, indicate far more precious insight.

Johnson's writerly voice in *Along This Way* (1933) also inspires. It has the proclivity to be a formal narrative of social triumph modeled for the black race as much as for the consumption and normative acceptance of black success.⁴ Divided into four parts, *Along This Way* appears as a linear yet passing explanation of achievement. The book centers on Johnson's interwoven geographies (Haiti, Bahamas, Africa, and the United States), growing up in Jacksonville, Florida, and attending Atlanta University. Johnson's life also motions toward a series of distinguished posts such as educator and administrator, U.S. consul in South and Central America, literary figure, as well as NAACP field secretary in 1916 and, latterly, executive secretary in 1920. Johnson's and Hughes's documents provided extraordinary perspicacity into other facets of their lives, to less guarded but still poignantly observant moments where these writers were sharply aware of Latin geographies. My examination of once-private pages demonstrated a series of interior monologues and critical reflections that expand our frames of reference: how we situate, study, and bring together the Africana diaspora and a Latinidad that because it has yet to be theorized from the flowing encounters and responses beyond brown and white, must be "deLatinized" from the normative entanglements that underlie U.S. Latinoness and Latinaness.

Though Johnson primordially served in this same capacity in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, in 1906, I emphasize his diplomatic career as U.S. consul to Corinto, Nicaragua (1909–14), since my key preoccupation is his appointment as that city’s inaugural consul during the Theodore Roosevelt administration. Johnson’s years in Central America raise, for me, a host of issues about U.S. processes of Americanization and ethnoracialization from the Latin American experience of lived brownness, or *mestizaje*.⁵ Taking the upper-class affiliation that his post afforded him because of his U.S. consul status, my analytic lens is focused on the kinds of foresight that Johnson’s account on ethnoracial interactions, economic stratification, and American ideology at home and abroad furnish for the Hispanophone Americas in the diaspora. I pay attention to how his diplomatic skills contribute to his navigation of Nicaraguan-American color divides and shifting borders. Johnson’s profession in the realm of international relations further prompts self-reflection on his black Americanness as well as his brown Americanness. His prominent role stands out as much today, perhaps, as it did then. Try catching sight of this unfathomable scene in U.S. foreign relations, during Jim Crow segregation, recalled by Johnson himself: “a white man (the Vice-Consul) [is] seated at a long table just to the right of the entrance. And, up center of the room, a Negro (myself) seated at a desk, just back of which an American flag draped the wall” (2000: 259).⁶

At the time, President Roosevelt believed that “America’s greatness was being threatened not only by rampant poverty but also its cozy affluence.” Whereupon Roosevelt submitted the idea that “some day we will realize that the prime duty, the inescapable duty, of the *good* citizen of the right type is to leave his or her blood behind him in the world; and that we have no business to permit the perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type” (quoted in Bruinius, 2007: 6). Johnson’s consular tasks set aside doubts on his being “of the wrong type” in a historical moment of segregation, eugenics, and American empire.⁷ He had a decisive role in protecting U.S. interests during the 1912 Nicaraguan revolution — engaging in what was also known as “Dollar Diplomacy” — where a force of 2,700 U.S. Marines landed in Corinto and the Bluefields.⁸ The United States maintained an occurring presence in Nicaragua until 1933, when the anti-imperialist campaign led by Augusto César Sandino (1895–1934) served to remove forces from that nation.⁹

Johnson proves important in these pages, for he was fostering a literary

trajectory alongside his consular job. While in Nicaragua, Johnson learned that his novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, was going to be published by the Boston-based Sherman, French and Company in 1912.¹⁰ The prevailing view among literary critics of passing literature during the Harlem Renaissance has been to situate the mixed, black and white American subject as one who uninterruptedly moves into whiteness (see, e.g., Kawash, 1996). Yet Johnson demonstrated that passers are not only tapping into whiteness but to other Latinings too. Johnson implicitly introduced the notion in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* that shades of U.S. African American blackness can be read as forms of U.S. Latino and Latina brownness. Johnson's literary intent, as conveyed to his publishers, could fall under this explanatory aegis spreading and "re-Latinizing" the boundaries of Latinidad. His advance notice to the Sherman, French and Company read, "Not yet has a composite and proportionate presentation of the entire race, embracing all of its various groups, showing their relations with each other and to the whites have been made; this I have endeavored to do" (1912b: 17 Feb.). The proposed anonymity of Johnson's hero, as it appears, develops into a flowering of anonymities, since the unnamed protagonist surpassed reductive misreadings by the dominant gaze.¹¹ Because he had a fluent command of the Spanish language, he educated Cuban cigar workers in the "one trade in which the colour line is not drawn" (1989: 67). This interpretive disposition becomes a Latinity, a spoken act and linguistic performance of brownness that is enacted by a black, Latined subject.¹²

As in Johnson, my comparative exercise also takes me to Hughes's 1920 chronicling, as an eighteen-year-old, of his first trip southward, spanning Jim Crow Texas, Nuevo Laredo, Saltillo, Vanegas, San Luis Potosí, and Mexico City. This border crossing is highly significant and bears considering. What these types of passings mean in the theorization of race and culture within the fields of Chicano/a, Latino/a, and African American studies inform my analysis of "new" Souths. They pose larger emphasis on the necessity to rethink what it means to become a Latino from the specter of U.S. African American blackness. My points of discussion and findings, then, are provoked by questions such as these: What is involved for these bodies as they look for and study, as Du Bois put it, the "North American Negro" and the Latin American *negro* in Latined spaces (1998: 205)? Where do their own personal archives — their probing archaeology of blackness and Latinness in

North, Central, and South America — focusing on interdependent Negro/*negro* elements take us? What becomes of brownness as an unalloyed Latinidad ceases to continue as we know it and shifts toward an ongoing, open Latinity marked and passed by different agents?

Hughes's Mexican journey primarily stands out because the reader is able to assess the arduous labor he undertook in learning Spanish and conversing, depending on the national context, like a native. Moving between and across blackness and brownness, Hughes proceeded to ask himself, during his 1930 trip to Havana, "What constitutes Negro blood?" (1930). These southern migrations furnish us with rare glimpses — comparable to a stream of consciousness — that, journalistically speaking, are involved with the world as events immediately unfold. The then and thereness of these encounters thrusts us into the intersectional value of the here and now as an antidote to homogenizing U.S. African American or Latino/a thought. They instruct us to update the semiotics of the peoples we come to believe and know as Latino, Latina, and black, no less significantly because the people we also come to believe and know as Americans continue to evolve.

Although politically engaged, Johnson and Hughes press us to think about their ruminations from a literary standpoint.¹³ The authors transport us to a Latin American narrative style known as the *crónica*, or chronicle. The *crónica* is an interdisciplinary, investigative medium combining literature, anthropology, cultural reporting, and criticism. It is a writing form that disrupts aesthetic boundaries, generally combining memories, travel notes, interviews, testimonials, documentary narrative, fiction, and essays. Mónica Bernabé (2006) has postulated that the *crónica* can be considered as a space where literature emblemizes an encounter broadening the realm of other discourses. The value of the *crónica* was intensified from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, when Latin American writers like José Martí (1853–95), Rubén Darío (1867–1916), and César Vallejo (1892–1938) set out to decipher the meanings of modern city life, or as more properly worded by Julio Ramos, "the different ways of representing the fin de siècle city" (2001: 126). The teasing out of the city as a concept becomes, under Ramos's elucidative structure, "an archive of the 'dangers' implicit in the new urban experience; an ordering of daily life as yet unclassified by instituted forms of knowledge" (113). These urban segments translate to what Ramos also deemed as *la retórica del paseo*, the rhetoric of taking a stroll. Such

strollings merge with the *crónica* through the act of taking a literary or poetic stroll — or, simply, any stroll of investigation and exchange — which, for our purposes, becomes, as Frank Andre Guriy has it, a “cross-border, transnational” Latin-American zone (2010: 7).¹⁴

As critical thoughts that pass through subjects in geographies from which they are weeded out, the *crónicas* that Johnson and Hughes offer — in their efforts to transform Latin metropolises into a personal, or as Johnson shows, an unusual space — interlock U.S. Latino/a and African American writing. The *crónica* fits Johnson’s and Hughes’s arrangement of Nicaraguan and Mexican political and sociocultural matters, while also lending an open-endedness that defies simple subject, writer, and genre recognition. Hayden White has pointed out in a different context bearing relevance here that chronicles “have no *inaugurations*; they simply ‘begin’ when the chronicler starts recording events. And they have no culminations or resolutions; they can go on indefinitely” (1975: 6). The indeterminateness of Johnson’s and Hughes’s *crónicas* depends and takes shape next to their passing Latinities, which are reentered and discharged differently on each occasion. Their autobiographical moments challenge, break, and modify the story of blackness and brownness. At the same time, it needs to be duly noted that this study is not intended as a biographical attempt on Johnson’s or Hughes’s life.¹⁵ My analytic sketch endeavors to unravel how Latin imaginations are summoned in these literary workers’ genealogies to produce U.S. black cultural and intellectual thought. In this sense, I concur with Gregson Davis, who qualifies and employs the term “biographical” as constitutive of “the life of the mind — the intellectual and aesthetic evolution” of the writer, an instructive point from which I base this critical platform (1997: ix).

This chapter moves to discuss Johnson’s Nicaraguan *crónicas* at a time of political crisis. His firsthand exposition of Central America operates as a barometer of irreconcilable contradictions mediated by U.S. diplomacy. Under this art of managing negotiations between nations, Johnson directly accounts for his Americanness but tacitly articulates his Negro Americanness. While his musings appear reconcilable by virtue of his distinctive title of U.S. consul, they also stand for the limits of his un-Americanness. In his letters, Johnson confers primacy to the “realness” of his consular Americanness and how it may transfer to the United States after the successful completion of his assignment. Johnson brings out an important line of inquiry and

its relation to the Latined constitution of his “ex-coloured man”: the alienating absurdity of Nicaraguan/Latinness coupled with ideological forms of American modernity. Johnson, literarily speaking, transnationally keeps his American selfhood, while Nicaragua retains its inherent Nicaraguanness. This Latinness, far from coherent, is managed for creative purposes in American letters and black-white tensions and representations. Johnson shows that the schismatic passing figure from *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, who acquired narrative form in Central America, consists of unrestricted passages and corresponds to more places in the world than the United States.

Hughes’s Mexican and Cuban travel notes follow. His first southern passage leads to cultural processes of “Becoming Mexican,” as Hughes calls them, from a Negro, black, and Latined perspective. George J. Sánchez has written that Mexican Americanness has been historically treated as “a tenuous site of cultural exchange, always a prelude to the attractions of a ‘purely’ Mexican or a ‘purely’ American stance” (1993: 8). But Mexican Americanness has actively worked against the assumed stasis of Mexican, American, or Chicano. It has highlighted continuous “movement between Mexican and American cultures,” creating “a place of opportunity and innovation” for what has been scholarly framed as a Mexican and American border culture (9). The depth of Hughes’s reflections evidences irregularities in the production of such a fixed Mexican and American characterization. His interpretations of and evolving access into Mexicanness cannot be bypassed, as we indisputably become intimate guests to his Latined milieu.

I now put into cultural and formative relation Johnson’s and Hughes’s varying worlds of creative writing and affinities with creative Latined living.

A Voice from Another South:
James Weldon Johnson’s Nicaraguan Literary “I”

I was eager and curious over the new
experience I was about to enter.

— JOHNSON (1989: 70)

In a rather depreciatory note, dated 2 August 1929, Langston Hughes opined that “No one needs to know me — everything I have to offer worth the offering is in my work; the rest is slag and waste.” There is dissimilarity with

Johnson in that numerous individuals knew the polymathic Floridian in different and prominent competencies outside literary arenas. Johnson's laudable trajectory appears as a prudent voice of precisionist professionalism. No spontaneous and lasting journalistic notes or magnificently revelatory observations and reports exist by the author during his formative and professional years. The Beinecke Library explains that Johnson's written communication "was not systematically preserved throughout his career and the amount of extant material varies for different periods of his life. There is no correspondence for the period before 1904, and between 1906 and 1920 Johnson saved only those letters that he felt were important" (Cunningham, 1973).

I thus elected to research a constant and dependable source of interlocution in Johnson's life during his tenure in Nicaragua. I perused his epistolary interaction with his wife, Grace Nail Johnson, or la niña Graciela, as Corinto residents knew her during the nearly two years she lived there with her husband.¹⁶ Third parties were not intended as beholders of their exchanges. Skimming through Johnson's private dispatches, it is likely that the couple's terms of endearment and longing might make some researchers blush, as archivists strive to examine pressing matters in the Western Hemisphere. In addition to general archival material, I consulted intermittent periods in Johnson's correspondence. They conveyed supplementary information about significant anecdotal moments relating to Latinities, both in the United States and abroad, that fashioned Johnson's view of, to reference the diction of the time, the colored race.

Literary critic Harilaos Stecopoulos has contended that for Johnson "the black-white divide could never completely encapsulate the U.S. South" (2007: 39). This claim is important for understanding Johnson's body of work, which is in line with the types of Latin knowledge he possessed, assisting him as a U.S. government official in Latin America. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and *Along This Way* are two literary models from different genres that are demonstrative of Johnson's crossings into continental adaptations of informative Latinities. There is, to be sure, the influence of bilingualism from a young age through his father, James Johnson, an autodidact who was born a freeman in Richmond, Virginia. The Johnson patriarch had gained "a working knowledge of the Spanish language [. . .] to increase his value as a hotel employee" (Johnson, 2000: 17). Thereafter, Mr. Johnson taught Spanish to his two sons, James and Rosamond. The learning process entailed, as Johnson

recalled, sitting “for an hour at a time while he drilled us.” The utility of these Spanish lessons was confirmed when the Johnson family hosted a Cuban boy with a “light bronze complexion” named Ricardo Rodriguez Ponce. The family helped familiarize the visitor with the United States as well as gain English-language proficiency. With the three boys soon “carrying a bi-lingual conversation,” Johnson noted, “meals were little less than exciting” (59). This Latin environment conferred on Johnson a certain cachet, and he intuited, as a college student, its social value. “I possessed a prestige entirely out of proportion to my age and class,” he inferred at Atlanta University. “Among the factors to which this could be attributed were: my prowess as a baseball pitcher, my ability to speak a foreign language, and the presumable superiority in worldly wisdom that having lived in New York gave me” (75).¹⁷

Rodriguez Ponce’s brownness, as subsequently evinced, provided an entry for Johnson into the sinuous gradation of the colors of Latinity. This access and excitement, as the epigraph for this section suggests, was couched in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* through the nameless protagonist’s immersion in the Latin world, which meant, in those pages, the “artistic skill of cigar-making by Cubans” (Johnson, 1989: 70). The character went on to “not only make cigars, but also to smoke, to swear, and to speak Spanish.” He elaborated, “The rapidity and ease with which I acquired Spanish astonished my associates. [. . .] In fact, it was my pride that I spoke better Spanish than the many of the Cuban workmen at the factory” (72–73).¹⁸ This passing Latinity attests to a fascinating dynamic: that those who have crossed are better with the identity they possess at the moment than the “original.” But it is not just Johnson’s hero alone who crossed the U.S.-Cuban divide. Cuban exiles spoke “English excellently” and frequently surprised Johnson’s storyteller “by using words one would hardly expect from a foreigner” (71).¹⁹

This characterization differed from the unassimilability attributed to the puerile Rodriguez Ponce in *Along This Way*. “He was something of a puzzle,” Johnson declared in referencing the young Cuban with the unmistakably un-American pitch (2000: 66). At that time, students who enrolled at Atlanta University signed a pledge akin to the politics of respectability, where they had “to abstain from alcoholic drinks, tobacco, and profanity” (71). Rodriguez Ponce could not desist from smoking. He told the school’s disciplinary authority, as Johnson phonetically mimicked it years prior to the 1953 debut of “the fastest mouse in all Mexico,” Speedy Gonzalez: “that education or no ed-

ucation, he couldn't get along without smoking. [Ricardo] clinched his statement by saying, 'Meester Francis, I wass born weet de cigarette in de mout'" (73).²⁰ Decidedly divergent in this portrayal is Cuban uncrossability into the institutional and cultural Americanness of which Johnson forms a part. It is as though Rodriguez Ponce has been shut in or denied his "passability." Johnson, by contrast, had the ability to audibly tap into degrees of Latinities through his proficiency in Spanish, which administered a cryptic blackness. Boarding a first-class train car, Johnson once headed to Atlanta University with Rodriguez Ponce. The conductor notified the men of color that they had to change cars. But upon hearing Johnson translate for Rodriguez Ponce in Spanish, "his attitude changed." Johnson noted that the railroad official "punched our tickets and gave them back, and treated us just as he did the other passengers in the car" (2000: 65).²¹

This linguistic and ethnoracial mix up led Johnson to the conclusion that "in such situations any kind of a Negro will do; provided he is not one who is an American citizen" (2000: 65). This viewpoint may communicate, as Stecopoulos interprets, that Johnson "makes clear that 'Negroes' who seem Latin American 'will do' far better than any others in the Jim Crow South" (2007: 41).²² But it is not that other kinds of *negros* (note the slight modification here to U.S. orthography and pronunciation of the term Negro by shifting, in italicized form, to its Latin counterpart, *negro*) will fare better in the segregated South. Instead, this episode — or to recycle a common expression, this train of thought — urges the possibility that for a *negro* to become an acceptable kind of Negro, he or she must have an interpreter, as was the case with Rodriguez Ponce. He counted on Johnson as more than an English speaker but as someone who, in this act of translation, exalts his Latin@ness: Latin-*at*-ness.²³ Something is "lost," not gained, for a Latino or Latina, since his or her Latinness has no place within the long continuance of black-and-white matters. The Latin matter, as a problem that belongs somewhere else, is postponed for another time and, undeniably, another place. It is not that these passing Latinities "will do" or that they promptly move into whiteness. Johnson's Latinity is more like a trespassing, as he brings in and redraws different equations to the rigid color line. Not merely a notional "fine line," as in a clearly arranged and limiting straight line, this demarcation is not simply black-and-white. It is a coloring line where one thinks along similar lines.²⁴

Johnson's autobiography attests that this cultural agent was increasingly

absorbed by efforts that decode the colors and meanings of blackness. A meticulous inspection leaves the impression that he lived — given the recurrence of the qualifier “brown” — in a brown world of difference. His father’s aspect was described as “light bronze, a number of shades darker than that of my mother” (2000: 18). His grandfather’s disposition was recorded as “dark brown” (20). The coloring of his maternal grandmother’s side of the family was pictured as “lighter in complexion” and “light brown” (46–47). Certain neighbors were also perceived as “brown.” Others “looked white but were not” (32–33). Upon arriving at Atlanta University, Johnson spotted the tertiary color now appended to U.S. Latinas and Latinos. “The bulk” of his classmates, his synopsis affirmed, “ran the full gamut of all the shades and nuances of brown” (75).

Johnson was consequently admitted as señor consul with a keen knowledge of the various ways in which blackness and Latinities are crossing lines that disquiet the insidious inactivity of the color line. Stecopoulos’s adroit analysis constructs Johnson as a figure who is “eager to link the federal administration of the domestic South with U.S. intervention abroad” (2007: 35). He adds that “while critics have read the novel in light of myriad issues — publication history, the unreliable narrator, African American music, the representation of male sexuality, and, of course, the vexed question of racial passing — they have never considered how the *Autobiography* might speak to the contemporary question of empire” (38). Fair enough. One point I posit is that Johnson is more than an agent of empire. How his experience looks from the context of diplomacy is equally salient. I wish to decipher, for instance, how Latinness is looked at from a diplomatic space and from a racial vocabulary that insists, as Johnson notified his publisher, on the capitalization of the term “Negro.” “My dear Sirs,” Johnson advised the Sherman, French and Company, “I also wish to request that the word ‘Negro’ be capitalized throughout the book” (1912b: 23 Jan.). Not simply a stylistic convention, the formalized name emphasizes the “arrival” of the Negro at a U.S. workforce that develops intellectual labor. Quite the opposite, lo negro, the Negro’s lowercase counterpart in the Americas, remains locked in undistinguishable typescript. Johnson’s consular location in Nicaragua may be regarded as a literary agent that advances the Negro race as it coevally forges and cements the creation of a literary canon. Johnson acknowledged this striving in *Along This Way*. “When I had no official duties to perform,” he said,

“I made it my business to use that period in getting ahead with my writing, to do which had been one of my chief reasons for entering the Consular Service” (2000: 237).²⁵

Through his literary vocation, Johnson could make a lasting imprint, thereby exceeding his work as a foreign service officer. While in Nicaragua, “a great idea” occurred to him about selling his recently published *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* to American military figures there. But the thought came “too late.” He lamented that “I should have had 2 or 3 dozen copies of the book sent here to me while the big fleet was here. I could have sold a number of copies, but better still, it would have been a splendid ‘ad’ to have given autographed (initials) copies to the Admiral and other high officers” (1912a: 16 Nov.). Johnson wanted as much recognition for himself, as an American consul, as for his American novel. Lacking determinative responses to Johnson’s hunger for military readership, I remain, nonetheless, overpowered by these queries: What might this type of audience intimate about the intellectual ascendance of the “race narrative” within U.S. military personnel? Just as individuals were speculating whether or not *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* was “real,” what would such a novel imply not only in reference to how (and when) one passes, but whether such infiltrations — that is, the ethnoracial equivalent of “don’t ask, don’t tell” — are also happening within the U.S. armed forces? Would the fallacy of the production of race turn the U.S. Army’s gaze inward and help the Negro at home?

Johnson was satisfied with his technical skills in writing a fictional story that was to be read as nonfiction. He was emphatic in retaining the author’s anonymity for *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and instructed his wife that she, with his father and brother, could do “a great deal” to help the book. He persuaded, “Ask friends and acquaintances — in a casual way, ‘Have you read The A of an Ex-Col Man? If not be sure to read it.’ You can write to friends in the same way. If Rosie [J. Rosamond Johnson, his brother, 1873–1954] goes out on the road he can do an enormous amount of advertising. But in it all, the absolute secrecy of the authorship must be maintained” (1912a: 26 May). Almost two decades after this book’s initial publication, Johnson continued to garner a larger audience for his novel. He had become, by 1930, the Adam K. Spence Professor of Creative Literature and Writing at Fisk University. Exchanging a few words with the Head Office of the Fox

Film Corporation in New York on 27 April 1931, he followed-up on the “possibilities of making *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* into a picture” (1931a).²⁶

Two years down the line, and while promoting another narrative, his own autobiography, Johnson drafted a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, petitioning the First Lady to deliver on his behalf a copy of *Along This Way* to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. His missive began rather modestly, introductorily declaring, “It is hardly probable that you would recall me.” But, he interjected and pushed on, “I remember with distinct pleasure that at a dinner given by Edward Bok some years ago in New York [. . .] I had the privilege of sitting at your right.” The immediate connection to Bok (1863–1930), the Dutch-born editor of the *Ladies Home Journal* and Pulitzer Prize winner, situates Johnson among an influential group of individuals with parallel literary affinities and American achievements. This reference’s importance also puts forward the merits of Johnson’s own life story. Bok was awarded the Pulitzer in 1921 for *The Americanization of Edward Bok: The Autobiography of a Dutch Boy Fifty Years After*, published by Charles Scribner’s Sons.²⁷ In it, Bok mentions one case in point that cues us in on Johnson’s perceived value of U.S. presidential readership. Bok acknowledges seeking “a noteworthy list” of contributors for “each number” of his publication, the *Brooklyn Magazine*, which he conceived as “an organ of the society.” Among the notable voices included in the magazine’s premiere issue was that of the nineteenth U.S. president, Rutherford B. Hayes. His offering “astonished” Bok’s patrons, “since up to that time the unwritten rule that a President’s writings were confined to official pronouncements had scarcely been broken” (1927: 65–66). Not dissimilar to Bok, Johnson formally pursued his wish to include the thirty-second U.S. president as a reader of his oeuvre. He wrote “with the hope” that the First Lady would “be good enough to bring it to his attention, and with the hope also that you with him may be able to find the time to read the book” (Johnson, 1933b). Nine days later, on 15 November 1933, Mrs. Roosevelt responded to Johnson’s request, assuring him that “I shall be very glad to give it to the President and hope to find the time to read it myself” (1933a).

Johnson’s quest for an audience affiliated with the executive branch of the U.S. government intimates a search for a kind of American citizenship validation that unites the literary with the nation. There may be an ulterior political motive at work, as Johnson coveted FDR’s literary eye. By and large, though,

Johnson seemed partial to presidential blurbs. In 1917, a few years after the *New York Times* publication of “Fifty Years,” the Cornhill Company published this titular verse collection.²⁸ A publicity announcement from this publisher included a succinct, yet peculiar paean by President Theodore Roosevelt, who conspicuously turned Johnson’s enterprise into an inanimate object with the phrase: “It is a striking thing” (Johnson, 1915).²⁹ The reader is forced to speculate on Johnson’s private reaction to such tepid acclaim for his first book of poems. Johnson, after all, had confidently divulged this expectation to his wife: “If I get my poems properly launched, I believe they will make a reputation for me, the kind of reputation that I really want, the reputation of a writer and a thinker. Don’t doubt — I’ll win it — It’s hard, slow work, but I know I’ll succeed” (1912a: 26 June).

Johnson’s Central American years substantiate an urgency to write, despite living in a torrid zone. Worthy of comparison to Johnson’s guarding of U.S. national interests is the type of optic he applied to Nicaragua. “My first view of Corinto,” he divulged in *Along This Way*, “sent my heart down like a plummet. What I saw was not a city or a town, but a straggling, tropical village” (2000: 255). He appeared to live in a world with a recursive assembly line of assistants named Pancho, telling his wife, “I have a new office boy, another Pancho by name. I expect to get Julia to clean up after me.”³⁰ Safety proved a concern. “I am alone in the house at nights,” he said, “but I don’t mind much. I have a good revolver” (1912a: 4 Apr.). His attendance at Nicaraguan social gatherings signaled a North American–Central American line of difference, which was quite an arresting disengagement, since Johnson spoke Spanish and had, during his service as principal of the Stanton School in Florida, introduced Spanish as a modern language in courses (2000: 129). He recalled this occasion, using the first-person plural, thus: “We English speakers kept to one side of the corridor pretty much of the time and danced away ourselves almost entirely — It’s so much less trouble — I danced with one native girl” (1912a: 8 May).³¹

One wonders what “native” constituted in this instant of rhythmic diplomacy highlighting U.S.–Nicaraguan linguistic — and no doubt political — tensions. Women appear, in Johnson’s world, as intermediaries of culture, arguably evoking La Malinche, who translated for Hernán Cortés during the Spanish conquest of Mexico. This representation was also present in Johnson’s account of how his wife learned Spanish, which attributed a

passing-like quality for the Anglophone subject. Johnson wrote, “Her absorption in acquiring the language went far toward making many of the discomforts of life in Corinto less apparent. She enjoyed the trips we made to León and Managua, and meeting people there; to be able to talk with them better on each succeeding visit became an interesting game” (2000: 268–69). Under Johnson’s watchful eye, Nicaraguan women are clearly differentiated. They stand in opposition to the continuous “sameness” reproduced in Nicaraguan men through the name Pancho.

Johnson declared that “in the tropics, ‘Do not do today what *can* be put off till tomorrow,” circulating, for his audience, the “maxim that contains many grains of wisdom” (2000: 237). Notes to his wife, who also spoke Spanish, bemoaned the tropical sultriness and humidity.³² “My but this is going to be a scorcher,” he protested, while ascertaining that the visibility of his body, as a race man, was deemed presentable and dignified.³³ Johnson seemed pleased with himself when he remembered, “It’s a good thing I got the full dozen of those undershirts, for I take two shower baths and change from head to foot every day; it’s the only way to keep feeling half decent. Helps in looks too” (1912a: 26 May). Discontentment with the pesky weather persisted four months down the road. He told Mrs. Johnson, “My it’s hot today. I remember how you used to suffer from this heat” (11 Sept.). Likewise, Johnson reminded *Along This Way* readers that Nicaragua was no place for la niña Graciela, who “was dazed with disappointment” upon seeing Corinto for the first time. Johnson added that he “knew that no woman from a northern climate ought to stay longer than two years at a time in the tropics” (2000: 273).

The Nicaraguan post, in sum, was an assignment of utmost displeasure. At one point Johnson flatly declared, “Well, Corinto is the same, and I’ve told almost everything tolerable” (1912a: 8 May). Central America and its monotony did not fare with the rest of the world, especially Europe. Aboard a Pacific mail steamer one day, he sailed through Costa Rica and decided that “the change from Nicaragua to Costa Rica was comparable to a change from Costa Rica to France” (2000: 265). But what stood out the most in La Pequeña Suiza — or the Little Switzerland, as Costa Rica is dubbed — was finding “a jet-black Negro,” who proved to be “the most curious sight [. . .] in Catholic San José” (275). Ever observant of black bodies — each time he found Negroes in the region he referred to them as a “sight” — Johnson was

impressed that *negros* in Panama were not just “working as janitors or laborers, but doing clerical work” (254). He concluded that Nicaragua’s wealth, “as in each of the Central American republics,” was located “on the Pacific rather than the Atlantic side,” which has a predominant Caribbean presence (260). Johnson’s pages on Central America refrain from descriptive varieties on brownness, and what produced inquisitiveness, for the señor consul, was when he detected perceptible jet-black *negros*.

Nonetheless, it was in Nicaragua where Johnson could pace and display his spectacular Americanness. He devoted the third section of *Along This Way* to his consular duties abroad. He disclosed a fair amount of official details about the 1912 revolution in which the United States intervened to support the conservative president Adolfo Díaz. Johnson’s correspondence with his spouse, however, revealed his other qualities and impulses during that tumultuous affair, given that he also had to protect “American lives and property” (1912a: 4 Aug.).³⁴ The first letter to Grace Nail Johnson on the topic of revolution was dated on 1 August 1912. Updating her from the five-hundred-ton armed warship *Annapolis*, Johnson began with the already expected. “Well, here it is again,” he confided. “But this time it looks like something serious, not play. I’ve been on the wire three times today with the capital. Things look rather bad. Never saw the same amount of intense excitement as there is here tonight. The Com. was hiding at my place for a whole day. Don’t worry though, I’m all right.” Things continued to be, in his words from 4 August, “shaky.” Johnson was advised that “in case of extreme danger,” he should “take the custom house under [his] wing.” Almost two weeks into the conflict, Johnson recapitulated Nicaragua’s military attack in this way: “Well, there’s no ‘comic opera’ about it. The bombardment of Nicaragua was terrible, people left the city by the thousands. All of the American refugees are here in Corinto” (17 Aug.). His account captured the event’s severity:

The Consulate was open day and night and was full of American refugees from Managua and those seeking safety in Corinto. The women and children were placed aboard the ships each night. We slept by turns for an hour or so each, and then we slept on our arms. But, in spite of it all, the strain, irregular meals, and lack of sleep, I feel splendid, my nerves are a bit on edge, but I’m all right, now with our troops here and the great weight of responsibility which I carried being lightened I’ll be back to my old standard in a day or two. The Consulate

is still an armed camp, a detachment of Marines with a machine gun is here day and night.

But Johnson was also reserved about the political intricacies involved during the delicate situation, even with his wife. "I'll not attempt to write you about it," he remarked. "I can only tell you when we meet." Just before ending this letter, however, Johnson was decorous in his estimation of Adm. W. H. H. Southerland, the commander-in-chief of the Pacific fleet who did not treat him merely "as a very nice *colored* man." He had recognized Johnson "in the fullest degree as a man and officer." Johnson stated that he had been "called into every consultation" with the general, who had taken "no important step or action without asking [his] opinion and advice." Johnson's highest point was when Southerland had "issued a general order to all the American forces occupying Corinto, and in that order he commanded that the Consul was to receive the same naval honors as those accorded to the officers of the fleet; so whenever I pass the men on duty come to 'present arms' and I salute. A little thing, but it means a great deal." Johnson, the American authority on Nicaragua, uses the possessive pronoun when referring to "our government." He boasted to his companion, "I *know* this revolution from A to Z, and I've studied it out to my fullest ability—from the point of conditions, of international law and the policy of our government" (31 Aug.).

Nicaragua's historical "encounters with the 'northern' colossus" suggest that U.S.-Nicaragua experiences, like the black-white color line, bear parallels with a tense locus of Americanization processes in tandem with the un-Americanization of ideologically differentiated bodies and geographies (Gobat, 2005: 5). Just as Johnson symbolically stood as an American abroad, his un-Americanness "at home" coincided with Nicaragua's military, economic, political, and cultural negotiation of U.S. imperial rule. These complex appropriations of Americanness, Michel Gobat has pointed out, demonstrate Nicaragua's "competing forms of pro- and anti-Americanism" (2005: 5). Nicaragua's "variegated experiences with U.S. intervention" date as early as 1788, when Thomas Jefferson "proclaimed his country's interest in using the San Juan River and Lake Nicaragua to build a canal that would link the Atlantic and Pacific oceans" (1). The 1849 California gold rush exacerbated Central America's importance, as the isthmus became "a major transit for westbound fortune hunters." U.S. expansionism was strengthened through

the 1846–48 U.S.-Mexican War, with Latin America becoming “the new ‘frontier.’” Filibusters initiated private military expeditions during that period. This era’s most notorious apostle of Manifest Destiny, the Tennessee-born William Walker, attempted, between 1855 and 1857, to Americanize Nicaragua “by replacing the native populace with U.S. colonists and implanting U.S. institutions such as slavery” (2).

By the start of the twentieth century, the interoceanic American route projected for Nicaragua was ultimately built, in 1914, by the United States in Panama. Political and strategic interests in Nicaragua led to that country’s U.S. occupation from 1912 to 1933. The takeover staged “the greatest U.S. effort to turn Nicaragua into ‘a little United States’” (Gobat, 2005: 3). This intervention brought, as Gobat has surveyed, “a U.S.-orchestrated regime change that blocked Nicaragua’s incipient democratic opening; a U.S. invasion and subsequent military occupation; the takeover of Nicaraguan public finances by U.S. dollar diplomats; the spread of U.S. missionary activities and culture industries, especially Hollywood; a second full-scale U.S. invasion; the U.S. military’s campaign to promote democracy; and a six-year guerrilla war” (10). Responses to U.S. influence and intervention differed and shifted. There was, for instance, the “elite Nicaraguans’ infatuation with the U.S. road to modernity” (5). But this “Americanization from within” Nicaragua “did not simply adapt U.S. consumption and leisure patterns—the typical contemporary definition of Americanization” (7). Nicaraguans, rather, modified economic and cultural anti-Americanisms by being partial to U.S. “liberal institutions and practices that, in their view, had allowed the United States to become so prosperous and modern” (7–8). In this sense, we come across Nicaragua, the largest Central American nation, and Johnson, the plenipotentiary U.S. consul, as they both struggle for an incomplete American ideal outside U.S. boundaries.

Focusing on Nicaragua from Johnson’s conflicting perspectives warrants a look at the ways that certain occupations facilitate processes of mainstreaming—*passing*—into ceremonial whiteness. But does Johnson truly pass when he has to account for an “exotic” locale as the space in which he accessed a particular kind of Americanness? Previous scholarly contributions such as Ileana Rodríguez’s sustained work, *Transatlantic Topographies: Islands, Highlands, Jungles* (2004) and Stephen Benz’s anthologized essay in *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (1997) have exam-

ined how the idea of Central America has been disseminated by imperial projects launched by the United States and Europe. Johnson may be perceived as having advanced such an agenda, but his time in Nicaragua is an unwitting link to his writing. Despite its tropics, underdevelopment, and second-rate Latinness, Nicaragua is an annex to Johnson's "American" literary geography. That republic impelled Johnson's carving out of new writerly lines. And while Nicaragua continued, for Johnson, as an unchanging backwater, a geography of ugly duckling proportions, that Latin space allowed him to slightly adjust his paradoxical standing of un-Americanized Americanness. Nicaragua functioned as an unpassable Latinity, as a witness to Johnson's awkward Americanness and to having lived a rendition of Americanness elsewhere. Johnson did not properly shed the other signifiers blocking his entrance into the type of Americanness practiced in the United States. But then again his passing Latinity was novelistically mediated through *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.

Given the austerity to which he had been subjected in the isthmus, Johnson had rigorous American standards and claimed from "our government" his due share of the American Dream. "I feel that something good is coming of it all. We just simply can't lose out; we've worked too hard, and played the game too straight to lose," he emphasized meritocratically (1912a: 11 Sept.). Johnson confirmed that he "set out to do a certain thing" and that he felt "satisfied with the way I've done it." Referencing his duty as a "game," he noted that "it's finished now, and I either win or lose—but I believe I've won" (16 Nov.). A winning factor was Johnson's victorious representation of his nation. This "win" allowed him to pass as a full U.S. citizen abroad. Yet Johnson's cultural representations pass into the realm of U.S. Latinities, as he illustrated in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.

But if "ours is the era of the passing of *passing* as a politically viable response to oppression," as Carole-Anne Tyler asserts, Johnson proves otherwise in *Along This Way* (1994: 212). Nicaragua's Latinities remained what was professionally unpassable for Johnson. That country was a reminder that within consular hierarchies, Johnson had reached his zenith, notably after President William Howard Taft was not reelected in 1912. Facing the politically inevitable, he acknowledged after realizing that he had not received his coveted posts—Bordeaux, Reims, Nantes, and Calais, in that order (1912a: 4 Apr.)—that "I have seen the list of promotions, and to say that I was bitterly

disappointed would be putting it very mildly.” Although such was the case, Johnson’s consolation was Americanness itself, as it continued to be stamped by Admiral Southerland. Johnson told his spouse that the naval officer had “increased my authority and official dignity 100 per cent. You ought to see these soldiers and blue jackets come to a ‘present arms’ when your old son goes by. The whole of Nicaragua knows that *I* am the American Consul” (10 Sept.).

The Americanness Johnson attempts to describe and fulfill is reduced to personal narrative, epistolary writings controlled by Johnson. Americanness becomes a part of his storytelling, whereas Nicaraguanness functions as an allegorical stage for how Johnson’s Americanness is induced and then dwarfed in domestic U.S. venues. What of his passing Latinities? The Latinities he knows and accesses have no place in his consular appointment and tasks, which include “promoting American trade, helping American shipping, protecting and often disciplining seamen, and assisting American citizens who fell into trouble in their consular districts” (Kennedy, 1990: vii). Johnson’s Americanness assumes the writerly form of a passable, autobiographical experience *in* Nicaragua, while Nicaragua’s inadmissible Latinness enters Johnson’s complex, fictive world of alteration and intercommunication. And yet Latinness, novelistically speaking, has been fictionally penned in opposition to Americanness and blackness—but not before readers have seen that Latinness is not on its own. Johnson, in other words, has been privy to—and has set up—Latined openings as they shift right across the black-brown boundary.

**Really Becoming Mexican/Becoming Mexican, Really:
Langston Hughes’s Latin Passages**

You see, unfortunately, I am not black.

—HUGHES (1993: 11)

Embarking on what would no doubt turn out to be an uncertain or unusual experience, Hughes began a 20 July 1920 journal entry with the hopeful title, “A diary of Mexican adventures (if there be any).” We now know, to briefly recall his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, that the main subject of this discussion was en route, via Cleveland-Mexico, to visit his father, James N. Hughes,

from whom he had heard only after an eleven-year absence. Years earlier, the Hughes progenitor had relocated to Mexico, where, in his son's words, "a colored man could get ahead and make money quicker" (1993: 15).³⁵ This move led the Hughes patriarch, "who had legal training in the [U.S.] South," to gain admission in the Mexican bar and practice law, acquiring, in this process of socioeconomic ascension, "property in Mexico City and a big ranch in the hills" (39). For the elder Hughes, his Mexican success — a transnational version, in the opposite direction, of the American Dream — pointed to a form of achievement and self-recreation that, in his estimation, other U.S. blacks should aspire to and emulate.³⁶ Hughes remarked that his father's "favorite expression," not unlike the obiter dictum time is money, "in Spanish or in English, [was] hurry up" — or, in Mexican vernacular, *ándale* — so that tasks could be executed quickly and efficiently (45–46).

Fast-tracking now to Hughes's 1920 train trip, which overlapped with the political instability of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), the young writer began this journey with a comment on the local scenery: "All day long I've been riding through Texas, heat and cotton fields, little forlorn villages with a large public well in the center of the main street" (1920).³⁷ Hughes's traveling thoughts soon turned to the ethnoracialized dynamics on the railroad, highlighting, "I am a Negro in the car. Of course being in Texas I am not allowed to forget my color." His blackness surely not forgotten, the supposed unyielding duality of the black-and-white color line promptly took another direction. A fellow passenger took note of a passing resemblance. He informed our chronicler that "he had known at once that I was a Mexican."³⁸ Hughes did not refute the designation, bringing to mind an incident of re-cognition and admitting, "I did not tell him otherwise."³⁹

Years later, in the wake of *The Big Sea's* publication, Hughes noted in this book's opening pages that when he first visited Africa, "the great Africa of my dreams," in 1923, "the Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro" (1993: 11). The multiple entries into Hughes's ethnoracial significations are striking. Not only do they suggest an elasticity of Latinness through a blackness that can pass for many things except a U.S.-situated whiteness, but also a "Negroness" that, prior to being questioned in Africa, was manifestly expressed as Mexican three years earlier. And so whether or not that train passenger — or, we, as readers — stand corrected is not the point. What concerns us here is the manner in which one becomes an "ethnic" as well as

the type of ethnic one can become. As Hughes's black body demonstrated, there are mutual implications to blackness and brownness and how they are understood in the shifting installments of everyday life. Indeed, as Hughes looked for a dwelling space further in Texas, he avowed, "We are nearing San Antonio. There I shall cover up my hair and really be Mexican or else they will not sell me a berth to Laredo and the trip is a long one. I know enough Spanish to ask for a 'cama en el tren.'" The process of "really becoming" Mexican in Texas and beyond is deeply provocative. On the one hand, Hughes seemed to speak to the contemporary types of South-South border passings on the way to the United States, where "distant" Latin American nationalities try to pass, along the two-thousand-mile U.S.-Mexico border, as Mexicans, or as is common now in the six-hundred-mile Mexico-Guatemala boundary, as Guatemalans.⁴⁰ Hughes's efforts at "really becoming" direct us to think about how he conceives Mexicanness and the kinds of markers that are appropriated and "indigenized" through his fluid blackness.

Unlike Hughes's short story "Passing" in *The Ways of White Folks* (1940), these black-Mexican crossings are far from tragic. In this account, Jack, a light-skinned narrator (in effect, Hughes's own version of "an ex-coloured man"), writes a letter to his dark-skinned mother. Mother and son pass each other in a downtown Chicago street but remain silent. A German American girl accompanies Jack, and under this circumstance his talking to a Negro may raise suspicions about the "purity" of Jack's new racial configuration (1990: 51). The reader learns that such crossings are never racially settled. Though appearing as strangers in the social world, Jack and his mother continue their communication at the epistolary level. They divulge their secrets, passing through the public sphere in ways that make the rigidity of such a world *passable*. What takes primacy is the realm of (written) communication, as it becomes part of an ongoing familial archive that retains the informal word for mother, *Ma*. Jack writes in one missive, "I will take a box at the Post Office for your mail. Anyhow, I'm glad there's nothing to stop letters from crossing the color-line. Even if we can't meet often, we can write, can't we, Ma?" (55). Jack's physical abandonment of his mother must occur in the interest of an emerging biographical self. The offspring recreates a ruptured "orphaned" state. Jack's protective affiliation ceases to be maternal: it is the social relations and political affiliations that now must reconstruct and vouch for the new subject's altering narrative of whiteness.

By 21 July 1920, Hughes found himself in Nuevo Laredo, at a hotel “that is not half bad according to Mexican standards. Of course it’s far from being the Ritz-Carlton, but then I couldn’t stop there anyhow for I am colored. But here nothing is [barred] from me. I am among my own people, for Nuevo Laredo is a dark skinned city and Mexico is a brown man’s country.” As Hughes “Mexicanized” himself, he morphed into a border subject, poetically conferring us with a variant of, to borrow from Walter Mignolo (2000), “border thinking.” Hughes’s contemplative note spoke of the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, exposing, to play on the misspelling, its “shams.” Hughes and the border are somehow spurious. Each blueprint for Mexican, black, and American is not squarely what is purported to be. Hughes juxtaposed the round-the-clock patrolling of the border with a heavenly constellation pointing to an experience beyond Uncle Sam’s guarded horizon. The Missouri-born poet and playwright elaborated:

A giant government hydroplane has been circling about all day, guarding Uncle Sam’s border. One can see the towers of the very powerful wireless that the army has erected at Laredo. It towers high above the flatness of the Texas city, even as the Eiffel towers above Paris. And Paris has nothing on the two Laredos when it comes to stars, for tonight the sky with those lovely jewels which Evening wears upon her velvet gown. High above the Rio Grande, above the two cities, above the two countries they sparkle and glow, and one big star is winking and twinkling as if he were laughing at my littleness — at the little of all men with their *schams* [chasms] of hatred and war, and their eternal bickerings [emphasis added].

Politicians conceived of the Eiffel Tower as a “symbol of industrial civilization,” whose Frenchification was also illustrated through its explicit dependence on “French labor, materials, and technology” (Jonnes, 2009: 25–26). Gustave Eiffel’s project was initially dismissed in the City of Light as an anti-artistic endeavor in opposition to French genius. The tower, it was said, resembled “a lighthouse, a nail, [and] a chandelier.” It was seen as more “in character with America (where taste is not yet very developed) than Europe” (23). In time, Roland Barthes pointed to it as a Parisian statement: “*the Tower is there.*” That generic, everyday “there” can be linked to the Mexican image of the “other” side, the U.S. border. Like the Eiffel Tower, “Uncle Sam’s border” is a towering American statement of modernity, of communication and mis-

communication, and of “phallus [. . .] confronting the great itineraries of our dreams.” It is “incorporated into daily life” as an “incontestable” existence. Barthes claimed that the Eiffel Tower remains “friendly” through its presence for the entire world (1997: 3–4). The iron behemoth imparts “the huge and amazing” and what everyone desires, “the incredible” (Jonnes, 2009: 23).

On the other side of the Atlantic, the incredible becomes the extraordinary American Dream. But the fixed image of the U.S. border differs. In the U.S.-Mexico split contact and movement between nations and subjects are monitored, restricted, and criminalized, no less during the years following the Mexican Revolution. This tumultuous political struggle impacted the United States through immigration from north-central Mexico. Julie M. Weise writes, “North-central Mexico, most affected by the revolution, sent the majority of the era’s migrants to the United States. These poor, rural emigrants journeyed to all parts of the United States during the 1920s, from Arizona to Alaska, Michigan to California, and the U.S. South was no exception” (2009: 252). The “inevitable sign” of America, then, is not “to join” but to reinscribe the inadmissible (Barthes, 1997: 4).⁴¹ By 1925 the U.S. Congress had approved the creation of the border patrol in an effort to halt undocumented migrations and “to ‘secure the nation’s borders,’ especially those to the south” (LeMay, 2006: 23). Hughes’s triangulation of the United States, Mexico, and Paris proves ironic. The guarding of border crossings is ineffective as Hughes’s recalcitrant Latinities cross and recross U.S.-Mexico boundaries. His “diary of Mexican adventures” underscores the permeability of guarded borders and how “the spatiality of citizenship,” as Mary Pat Brady invitingly presents it, is lived out (2002: 86).⁴²

Hughes ultimately reached his destination on 23 July to “a pale white glow against the sky” — meaning, Mexico City’s lights. His entry may have ended at that incandescent point, but these *crónicas* provide stories that demand a familiarization within the identificatory standpoints of Mexican, Latino, and black. These “adventures” did not operate as mirthful, southern escapes, as Hughes’s crimson-colored, pocket-sized journal, dating from 1934 to 1937, made known afterward. There, Hughes methodologically wrote lines and lines of words in Spanish. The notebook is artlessly and pragmatically titled, “Spanish.” Each word and phrase was written in a single line in one-sided pages, often in alphabetical order. Amid lists of verb conjugations and the names and information of his social contacts, the reader finds ample evi-

dence that Hughes was not simply a linguistic abecedarian. He was clearly serious about his Spanish fluency. Hughes wanted to remember proverbs, *refranes* like “el que canta sus males espanta’ (‘He who sings dispels his fears’)” and “es como pedir peras al olmo’ — the same as asking for pears from an elm tree. Pedir que un niño tenga experiencia [Demanding experience from a child] es como pedir peras al olmo.” He wrote fairly straightforward notes to himself, such as “the truth of the matter is: estamos en pleno invierno, we are in the dead of winter.”

In like manner, Hughes included folkloric snapshots of Mexican life. These passages resonate, from our vantage point, with the kinds of Mexican and Chicano and Chicana popular cultures that such writers as Sandra Cisneros engage in their work.⁴³ Hughes, who was christened in 1931 as “El poeta Afro-Estadounidense” by the Mexican review *Cristol*, could just as well be denominated “El poeta fronterizo” (Rampersad, 2002: 302). Some of the Mexico City vignettes he recounted included these musings:

When the Latins mourn, they really mourn. Black dresses, black veils. Black suits, black hearts of crepe on the arm, black ties, black hats.

The Meat Market Jerusalem, next to the Palestine Grocery.

The lottery tickets everywhere — National, Queretaro, Toluca.

The pat, pat, pat of hands making tortillas.

The child vendors.

The lovers in the parks.

The Song Vendors with their guitars.

Chickens on the roofs.

Hughes progressed with two pages of what he called “Mexico Names of Shops.” Among the memorable store designations and pedestrian happenstance are

The Two Magicians United Furniture Shop.

The Christ Died to Save Us Candy Store.

The Strong Man of Chapultepec Saloon.

Messenger of the Gods Charcoal Stand.

Pictures of the dead and wounded on front pages of newspapers.

Knock on the door and a head pop out of an upper window.

And yet inserted between these quotidian scenarios were observations on the North's ever-present ethnoracial landscape. Thinking about white normativity while abroad, Hughes remarked in one *apunte*, or note, "Me And The White Race / No hate — not bitter / Many friends / White step-mother / Father lent money to whites / Prostitutes — Cleveland to Vicksburg / Race and bad manners / Race and economics / Race and ego / Race and religion — Y's."

The excavation of the race question by the black body eliciting Latinness exposes the miscellaneousness of racial assignments and the porous borders of brownness. Hughes itemized his 1930 "Expenses of [the] Havana Trip," which tabulated the amount of money spent on taxis, wires, postcards, stamps, meals, and tips. He also tallied an untitled list of racialized distinctions in Cuba. This type of delineation was absent from Hughes's notes on other international trips, although *The Big Sea* exhibits an acute ability to characterize bodies in ways that diverge from the type of colorings regularly attributed to blacks and Latins. The reader is introduced in that literary project to someone who might as well function as an individualized piece of candy, or as Hughes calls him, a "chocolate-covered Puerto Rican" (1993: 4). Hughes's expressive palette flexibly stretches to Mexico, underscored through the nuances he addressed in such a qualifier as brown (79).

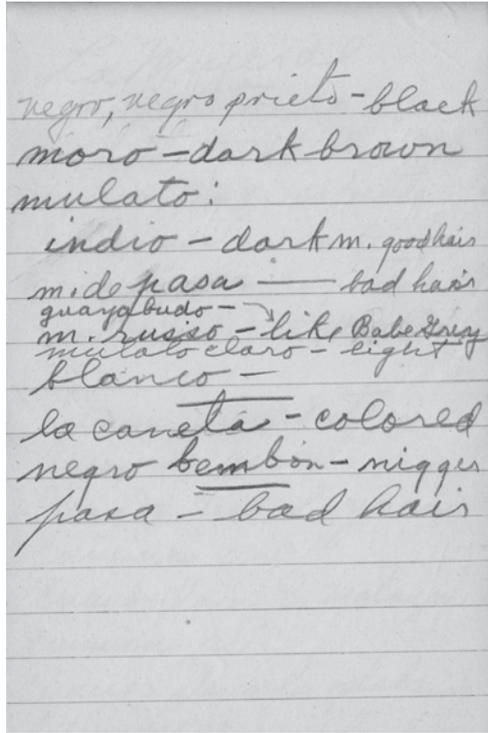
The persons Hughes encountered were typified through a wide array of shades that resonate with Cisneros's conception of the presumably deracialized term *caramelo*, as her novel bearing the same title shows. For Cisneros, the Mesoamerican color of caramel relates to embodied tones as "bright as a copper *veinte centavos* coin. [. . .] Smooth as peanut butter, deep as burnt-milk candy" (2002: 34). Under Hughes's verbal imagery of Mexico, his father's housekeeper was portrayed as having "a kind tan-brown face." The *mozo*, the attendant named Maximiliano, was depicted as a brown Indian, "a silent boy who spoke but little Spanish" (1993: 43–44). The amorphous colorings of caramel are indexed across socioeconomic class stratas. One of Hughes's language students was particularized as "ivory-tan," and Mexican children cumulatively became "cream-colored" (67–68). Hughes's directory of racial

specters diagnosed, much like Cisneros's caramelo, a Latin color line that associates with everything but blackness. But this does not mean that blackness is eliminated within those significations. On the contrary, these "caramel marks" are correlational to the extent that they explore the multicolored possibilities — or the multilayered and multidirectional "passabilities" — of blackness, brownness, and its substratum dark brownness.

While in Cuba, Hughes indexed a provocative racial stratum of how black bodies were registered and arranged in the sugar-producing island. Here, too, a caramel juncture surfaces in relation to the Caribbean. One may recall that the Cuban band La Sonora Matancera, founded in the 1920s, monumentalized a song, titled in plural form, "Caramelos." This hit song's verses, performed in 1960 by the late Celia Cruz, the "Queen of Salsa," take the listener to the varieties of flavored candies for sale: "coconut, pineapple (for little girls), lemon, and honey (for the old ladies)" (1997). These sugary, Latin chunks are moments to be savored — "sabrosos pa' tu boquita" (delicious for your little mouth) — in their pretty and bright coloration. They bring about questions on how one becomes a consumer of this wide world of sweets. The caramels render a gathering of bodies randomly exchanging pleasantries and calling out unlimited varieties that also come in "strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate." They force the listener to decide on what will finally pass through one's palate.

But Hughes's Cuban caramel marks are seemingly more pronounced than the ones presented under Cisneros's Mexican and Mexican American lens. They add another type of gazing into Frantz Fanon's "Look! A Negro!" exclamatory encounter, for these caramelos "lighten up" the conversation without the "heavy" burden of race (2008: 89–119).⁴⁴ This homage to one's love for sweetness is sprinkled with additional variations on the theme and location of blackness.⁴⁵ Hughes's oeuvre includes a contradictory set of explicitly racialized and deracialized abbreviated idiomatic terms like "m. de pasa," which may indicate "moreno de pasa" (or "mulato de pasa"). *M. de pasa* proves illegible, although the richness of *pasa* — which means, in Spanish, to come, to go, and to cross from one side to another — also denotes *raisin* in English. The latter simultaneously implies another caramelo ingredient within the economy of sweets that verbalizes Latin blackness. Ultimately, *m. de pasa* stands for having "bad hair." "Negro" and "negro prieto" connote "black," as does the disparaging classification "negro bembón" for "nigger."

A handwritten journal index by Langston Hughes on racial classifications from his 1930 trip to Havana, Cuba. James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of African American Arts and Letters, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn. Used by permission of Harold Ober Associates.



Interestingly, the term “mulato” is in want of an explanation, a distinction perhaps waiting to be filled later on by the writer. But its vacuity could also imply that an image of the mulato already existed in Hughes’s racial imagination and consequently needed no interpretation.⁴⁶

The only other time when an empty space is—to pun on a well-worn expression, in Spanish, *dejado en blanco*—left blank in this cluster of racial patterns occurs in the line allotted for the term “blanco.” To cite artist Kara Walker, these unmarked portions assume the form of blank spaces into which individuals project “their fantasies into something concrete.” Yet, as she also alludes, their blankness permits the possibility for the mulato and the blanco to “reflect those fantasies back into the projector’s unsuspecting eyes” (Sharpe, 2010: 153). Mulato and blanco hint at a complex malleability, where each state may slide back and forth. They are a “more nuanced spectrum of subtle differentiations, in a new global regime where First World and Third World are mutually imbricated. Notions of ontologically referential

identity metamorphose into a conjectural play of identifications. Purity gives way to ‘contamination.’ Rigid paradigms collapse into sliding metonymies” (Stam, 1999: 60).

Just as migrating to Mexico appeared to be a trying ground in 1920, Hughes’s 1930 voyage to Havana amounted to a rigmarole of bureaucracy. Prior to heading to Cuba on 22 February 1930, he was informed that “American citizens and tourists of any nationality are admissible with the exception of Chinese, Negroes, and Russians.” Henceforth, he underwent an arbitrary—but apparently routine and convoluted process—of governmental formalities to get to Cuba. Hughes was told that there were no tickets available for him. He proceeded to document the reasons that were given to him: “We cannot sell you passageway. There is space available Saturday, but our instructions are that colored people are not admitted.”

Undated sheets from Hughes’s journal, dating perhaps from mid-February 1930, outlined these setbacks. It should be stressed that Hughes was going to Cuba as a published writer, having released in 1926 his first book of poems, *The Weary Blues*. Just days before finally leaving to Havana, on 17 February 1930, Hughes had also just “turned in his [first] novel [*Not Without Laughter*] to Mrs. Knopf.” As he prepared to leave, he wrote, “Now I am free for something new and better.” He was not altogether free of the race question, and he poignantly detailed the fallacies that belied how race is understood in the United States. Most revealing from Hughes’s meditations on the matter is the way in which he sought to grasp who exactly comprised a Negro in the Global South and who exactly was “there,” at the other end, reading and categorizing the Negro/*negro* body. His set of questions solicited proof for the idea of Negro as much as for whiteness. He asked, “What constitutes Negro blood? Can a steamship company under N.Y. State law refuse passage on account of color? Is the American idea of [the] word ‘Negro,’ meaning anyone darker than white? What about a dark South American? What about Portuguese? Is the interpretation of the law up to the steamship co.? Make them prove that I am a Negro. If a Negro, what is their right of exclusion?”

Throughout this trip to the Caribbean, Hughes had access to the island’s literati, meeting figures like Conrado Massaguer “the leading Cuban editor, caricaturist, director of *Social*, *Havana*, and *Carteles*,” who presented him with his caricature of “a grand Josephine Baker,” poet Nicolás Guillén, and the “Negro-Chinese poet Regino Pedroso.”⁴⁷ He kept a busy schedule. Some en-

tries specifically named the cultural acquaintances he was meeting and the type of soiree he attended. Consider the evening of Thursday, 6 March, where Hughes was off “to the Plaza bar for Daiquiris. To La something, a famous Havana restaurant noted for seafood. [. . .] To the Valls exhibition on Negro drawings. To dinner [. . .] with [Gustavo] Urrutia and Guillén” (1930).⁴⁸ His small, daily register seemed to have what we would now think of as a Post-it note function. Hughes temporarily wrote checklists that form a part of our historical record. In one instance, he penciled a memo to himself about reading, or planning to read, Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969).⁴⁹ Hughes designated him as an “Author on Negroes” a decade before his remarkably influential *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1940) was published.

Loose journal notes from 1929 signal that Hughes was committed to the creation of a black American culture that indigenized blackness to the United States. Hughes’s caramelo-like encounters abroad with brownness, dark brownness, and lo negro molded his literary outlook. As historian Frank Andre Guridy has clarified in relation to U.S. black and Cuban exchanges, this cultural and literary reciprocity “made for seminal influences in the ways Cubans and North Americans of African descent came to view themselves both as citizens of their respective countries and as members of the colored race” (2003: 21). His craft, Hughes stated, sought “to create a Negro culture in America — a real, solid, sane, racial something growing out of the folk life, not copied from another, even though surrounding, race” (1929). Part of the creation of this Negro culture included American Negro and Latin-American *negro* exchanges, “linked organically to the historic shift by Mexican, Cuban, and other Latin American poets away from Europe in the depiction of their cultures” (Rampersad, 2002: 47). Hughes collaborated with Guillén on various literary projects, having translated, together with Ben Frederic Carruthers, Guillén’s poetic work.⁵⁰ Guillén, in turn, translated Hughes’s “I, Too, Sing America” into Spanish. Hughes also inspired Guillén, as Michael A. Chaney has pointed out, to “incorporate Afro-Cuban rhythms of the *son* into his first collection, *Motivos de Son* (1930), as Hughes had done with the blues in his own poetry” (2007: 45–46). Hughes “devoted himself to translating short stories by various young Mexican writers” when he returned to that country during his father’s death in 1934 (Rampersad, 1997: xviii).⁵¹ But there were various obstacles in this literary quest. Hughes’s attempts to place works, including productions by Cuban, Chilean, Haitian, and Spanish writers in

U.S. journals (2002: 48), “came to nothing: to his dismay, he discovered that a market for Latin American fiction did not exist in the United States” (1997: xviii).⁵²

Hughes gave much thought during his time in Cuba to how the construct of race surrounds the Negro abroad. He was interested in learning about the vocations that Negroes had, compiling another type of catalogue. “Occupations of Negroes,” he registered in Cuba, “Garbage wagons / On docks / Street cleaners / News boys / Boot-blacks.” Meanwhile, he noticed that as these jobs were being performed, “the Americans seem to clot in a dozen or so favorite places” (1930). When reading of Hughes’s leaving the island, the reader cannot help but draw parallels with his train ride a decade prior, where the color line was suspended through his “black” body. Boarding a ship back to the United States on 7 March 1930 and taking us to the colors of the Hispanophone Atlantic, Hughes wrote, “Once aboard (3rd class) I find myself in a sort of ‘glory hole’ with some 20 bunks in the same room, and about 15 fellows from Chile, Panama, etc. Several of them seamen returning at consular or company expense; a Jamaican and his two kids born in Panama, etc. We both eat and sleep in the same room.” Hughes’s traveling “glory hole” is an inglorious vessel storing an assembly of “etceteras.” These assortments are a cavities constellation of third-rate citizenships that discharge unfolding Latinities. They are recognized through assorted and ungrounded nationalities, not the ethnoracialized hues under which they will fall after arriving in the United States.

Hughes’s travels to intermixed Texas, Mexico, and Cuba point to my broader claim to account for the Hispanophone Americas, whose diasporic mappings highlight how other Souths are informed by Hughes’s magisterial work. Hughes, like Johnson, took up questions of blackness in a global and aesthetic geography with monumental implications. His vital “nuggets” of history continue to illuminate a conceptually rich literature that has tracked earlier plots of a Global South in the U.S. literary landscape.

In Plain Sight

The magnitude of Johnson’s and Hughes’s Latined crossings has been hidden in plain sight. And yet their passing lines are recurrent, as these Latinities have been invariably nearby, with access to and a knowledge of each side.

They extract from Juan Flores and George Yúdice's call for Latinoness and Latinaness as a social *movement*. "In order to vocalize the border," they contend, "traversing it is not enough; we must be positioned there, with ready and simultaneous access to both sides" (1990: 70). These black-brown, U.S.–Latin-American crossings are compatible with how current Latinoness and Latinaness can be framed: as an already constituted state of double living. Certainly these dual-directional forms of blackness and brownness echo the traveling bodies of the borderlands, where they "continually walk out of one culture / and into another" (Anzaldúa, 1999: 99). Indeed, what is at stake in these strolls that deliquesce brownness and blackness and exert re-cognition? What do we keep and claim, as Latino, Latina, and black are undone in these mobilities that encapsulate their oscillating togetherness?

Johnson's and Hughes's literary lives did not obey geopolitical demarcations of nations, cultures, languages, and identities. Their intermingling discourses gave way to a torrent of cultural exploration that did not stop at highly guarded borders. Nor did their passages hold back the tide of this living history: the force of a blackness and brownness traveling across moving lines or in the murky waters "of color" in the U.S. imaginary. Their passing lines and free relationships cut through the restrictive inadequacies of black and brown discourses oozing with the interstitial spaces of passing Latinities.