The Worlds of Langston Hughes

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Published by Cornell University Press

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The Worlds of Langston Hughes: Modernism and Translation in the Americas.


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In Others’ Words

Translation and Survival

A text lives only if it lives on \([\text{sur-vit}]\), and it lives on only if it is at once translatable and untranslatable.

—Jacques Derrida, “Living on / Border Lines”

Home’s just around
the corner
there—
but not really
anywhere.

—Langston Hughes, “Kids in the Park”

Langston Hughes is inextricably woven into the fabric of contemporary culture. Most people in the Americas and in Europe recognize his name. Maybe they have read a poem or two in an anthology. In the United States of America, more than half a century after his death in 1967, Hughes has a firm hold on the popular imagination, so much so that even the occasional politician resorts to lines from his poems. His handsome face adorns books, greeting cards, and a commemorative thirty-four-cent postage stamp. On satellite radio’s Real Jazz station, we can listen to Gary Bartz’s version of “I’ve Known Rivers” from the 1973 Montreux Jazz Festival. For anyone who prefers lighter fare than Isaac Julien’s Looking for Langston (1989), there is The Great Debaters (2007). In this Oprah-produced biopic, the labor activist and teacher Melvin B. Tolson, played by a Denzel Washington intent on upstaging Robin Williams, fervently recites lines from “I, Too” to his rapt students at Wiley College. In 1959, LeRoi Jones admitted, “I suppose, by now, Langston Hughes’s name is synonymous with ‘Negro literature.’”¹ Even today, in an age when we hear much about the end of the book as we know it, almost all of Hughes’s books are in print, many of them in new editions.²

Yet what do we really know about Langston Hughes? Thanks to the good offices of his biographers, notably Faith Berry and Arnold Rampersad, we have much information about Hughes’s life, even though, as I show in the pages that follow, the record is not altogether complete.³ What we
understand less well is exactly how certain aspects of Hughes’s lived experiences relate to his writing. Hughes’s poems and his two autobiographies, The Big Sea (1940) and I Wonder As I Wander (1956), present themselves to us in plain language as if they were wholly transparent and self-explanatory. The more we read Hughes, however, the more it becomes apparent that they are not. In my case, the growing sense that those of us who write about literature for a living have not yet given Hughes his due became the starting point for this book.

As my title suggests, Langston Hughes moved in different worlds and, I argue, had not one life but many. What I mean by this is that Hughes lived and wrote in more than one idiom and that his writings have enjoyed active lives in others’ words, that is, in languages other than English. Although we think of Hughes as writing in English, I show that his poetics are plurilingual. Because his autobiographies and his verse, to which I largely limit myself here, weave in and out of a host of cultural geographies and languages, translation quickly emerges as vital to all of Hughes’s literary pursuits.

**Translation as Metaphor and Literary Practice**

A passionate traveler for most of his life, Hughes spent time in Mexico, the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, central Asia, and the Far East. Almost always, he carried in his luggage copies of his books to give away to those he met along the way. And if he did not carry them himself, he sent them by mail in numbers large enough to consume much of his royalties. Such generosity contributed in no small measure to the worldwide circulation that his writings enjoyed during his lifetime and well beyond. Hughes’s poems, novels, short stories, and autobiographies also traveled by other means. Having survived their author and taken on lives of their own, many of Hughes’s texts live on in French, German, Italian, Hebrew, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Uzbek, and Yiddish. It is their journeys into other tongues, most notably Spanish, that I track in this book, along with the routes of literary works whose afterlives Hughes himself similarly ensured. I demonstrate that reading the Spanish versions of his poems and autobiographies alongside his English texts gives us access to layers of meaning we may otherwise overlook. By the same token, Hughes’s own translations from Spanish into English are always in conversation with his other writings. They also grant us valuable insights into his work as editor, anthologizer, and marketer.

The sense in which I use translation combines the act of moving oneself (translatio) with that of leading or carrying someone or something across some sort of divide (traductio). Neither sense is reducible to bridging distances between diverse linguistic spaces by finding equivalents for foreign words and sentences in one’s own native idiom. In fact, the metaphor of
the bridge, one of the key metaphors for translation, is highly suspect. The problem is that translation’s expected respect for differences among cultural codes obscures the fact that it posits, and relies on, the very separation of what it purports to bridge. As a result, an understanding of translation as an act of bridging linguistic and cultural differences may well end up solidifying those very differences. Steven Ungar’s remarks on the work of the Maghrebian writer Abdelkebir Khatibi point to an alternative. Translation, as he has described it, is less “a process leading to transparency in the target language than…a confrontation in which multiple languages square off against each other and meet without merging…without a reconciling osmosis or synthesis.” Translation need not, however, be confrontation; it can be, and often is, respectful, noncompetitive play. What I am after are more precise ways of talking about such mergings and more nuanced metaphors to articulate an idea and a practice of translation that is at once performative and transformative.

Studying translation requires exceedingly close readings, a courtesy that has not always been extended to Hughes. It is inattentiveness to detail that has bedeviled Hughes’s legacy at the hands of those who have dismissed his writings as “simple,” even “shallow.” This is a trend in Hughes scholarship that I vigorously contest throughout. Even though academic readers are now increasingly highlighting his “portentous ambiguities made out of simple language” and his “expert manipulation of colloquial or ‘plain’ language,” I agree with Jeff Westover that Langston Hughes remains “easily the most critically neglected of all major modern American poets.” With this book, I hope to contribute my share to remedying this situation.

Hughes and/in Translation

In no small measure, the Spanish translations of his work made Hughes the best-known USAmerican poet in the Hispanic Americas since Whitman and Longfellow. Given Hughes’s many personal connections to Mexico and Cuba, it is perhaps predictable that Spanish would be the one language into which his writings have been translated the most since the late 1920s. While some of those translations have appeared in Spain, the vast majority of them were published in the Hispanic Americas, particularly, and perhaps oddly, in Argentina in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. I say “oddly” because Argentina is not a country known for its population of African descent in the way that, say, Brazil is. This substantial archive of literary translations consists not only of Hughes’s poems but also of his autobiographies, short stories, and novels. Neglected, this archive is part of a historical geography defined by artistic innovation, political conflict, and ideological contestation: the early-to-mid-twentieth-century Americas. The African diaspora, black internationalism, and modernism are three popular abstractions created to
represent the cultural work of mainly transient intellectual and artistic communities during that period. My goal is to render these abstractions more tangible by showing how Hughes connects these groups, through travel and personal contacts and by way of translation.

Why were certain Hughes poems translated and not others? How were they translated? What images of Hughes did different translators construct for their readers? Since it is impossible to analyze all Spanish translations in the space of a single book, I limit myself to a series of case studies that focus mainly on two settings, Cuba and Argentina, with detours to Mexico, Uruguay, Chile, Colombia, and Spain. The basis for my discussion in chapters 2 to 4 is a systematic inventory of the poems that were translated into Spanish between 1928 and 2004 (see appendix). During that time, more than three hundred translations were printed and reprinted in journals, newspapers, anthologies, and poetry collections, as well as in the Spanish versions of Hughes’s two autobiographies on which I comment in the first chapter—Luisa Rivaud’s *El inmenso mar* (1944), her translation of *The Big Sea*, and Julio Gáler’s *Yo viajo por un mundo encantado* (1959), his Spanish version of *I Wonder As I Wander*.

Especially prior to the early 1990s, USAmerican academics have tended to divide Hughes’s verse into two groups: black “folk” poetry, which generally covers the blues poems, and “social protest,” or “revolutionary,” verse. While Hughes’s early poetry on racial topics was usually embraced as culturally “authentic” in the USA, the so-called protest poetry, written mainly in the 1930s, has generally been deemed an aberration. A third grouping that has more recently emerged is that of Hughes’s “modernist” verse, mainly around *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) and *ASK YOUR MAMA: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961). Both folk and protest labels subordinate the formal aesthetics of Hughes’s poems either to ethnographic or to ideological criteria, and the creation of a separate modernist category around his later poems implicitly confirms the validity of those criteria. Many of Hughes’s translators from the Hispanic Americas seem to have made similar distinctions. Surprisingly perhaps, the majority of them, like many of Hughes’s readers in the USA, turned away from his radical verse, despite the fact that his socialist politics formed a significant part of his reputation in the Spanish-speaking world. Contrary to what one might expect, Hughes’s Hispanic American translators also rarely touched his vernacular verse, including the widely admired blues poems. I reflect on why this might have been so by exploring differences among the literary avant-gardes in the Americas.

Another key concern of this book is how well, or poorly, racialized identities anchored in the history of the USA traveled from Harlem south to other parts of the Americas and vice versa. Is a Cuban or Uruguayan negro the same as a Negro in the USA in the early twentieth century? I think of them as false cognates along the lines of “America” and “América,” homonyms that signify differently in their respective languages. English-language
translations, especially of literary vernaculars such as Afro-Cuban, have tended to reproduce the effects of the same racially based cultural homogeneity that academic diasporic theories have typically championed. In addressing this effect of sameness and related identity issues, I scrutinize some of the theoretical and ideological expectations in African diaspora studies by contrasting them with what the actual translations manifest. Many scholars who have written about the literary discourses of blackness in the Hispanic Americas have put too little pressure on the assumption that these discourses are culturally rooted and ideologically unified, both within themselves and across languages. More recent work on the francophone and transatlantic “stirrings of black internationalism” by Brent Edwards, Anita Patterson, and others offers welcome alternatives to the usual commonplaces about “the African American literary experience” and “black diaspora.” I happily build on their insights.

Analyzing how Hispanic American writers engaged with Langston Hughes’s texts and tracing the trajectories of their translations open an important window onto Hughes’s own work as a translator. As Brent Edwards points out, “Hughes is the most prolific black poet-translator of the twentieth century ... and at the same time a prodigious and groundbreaking anthologist in his own right.” He translated the work of other writers, chiefly from Africa and the Americas, whose work, he felt strongly, should be accessible to English-speaking readers in the USA and elsewhere. Although the fact that some of Hughes’s poems and essays survive only in languages other than English has rekindled some scholarly interest in his literary translations, little has been written about linguistic migrancy, or nomadism, in relation to Hughes’s poetics. That Hughes himself rarely talked about translations, including those of his own writings, probably has not helped matters.

Hughes’s career as a book-length literary translator began in 1938 with Federico García Lorca’s play Blood Wedding (Bodas de Sangre, 1933), followed by Jacques Roumain’s novel Masters of the Dew (Gouverneurs de la rosée, 1944) in 1947, Cuba Libre: Poems by Nicolás Guillén a year later, García Lorca’s Gypsy Ballads in 1951 (Romancero gitano, 1928), and Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral in 1957. Although the translations of García Lorca and Guillén have seen some critical attention in recent years, there has on the whole been little scholarly engagement with Hughes’s own translation aesthetics. I show in chapters 3 and 4 how one can reconstruct important facets of that process by examining archival material, including corrected drafts of translations and correspondence. These materials also provide evidence of the aesthetic and political concerns that motivated decisions about what material to translate and how. The choices Hughes made—whether to translate one vernacular idiom, say, Afro-Cuban, either into another, supposedly parallel, register, such as so-called Negro dialect or Black English, or into a more standardized version of USAmerican
English—tell us much about how perceived cultural similarities and differences are linguistically encoded. All these translations of and by Langston Hughes raise the question of whether and how modes of translation found their way into his literary practice more broadly. Shifts in location, be they from one textual genre to another or from one linguistic, cultural, or historical space to another, change how we perceive and read any text. For example, a Hughes poem in the pages of New Masses or Opportunity accrues meanings quite different from what the same poem might mean to readers who encounter it either as part of The Weary Blues in 1926 or in the chronologically organized Collected Poems of Langston Hughes in 1994. Additional interpretive possibilities come into play when a given Hughes poem is rendered in Spanish and printed in the conservative Diario de la Marina in Havana, in the avant-garde literary journal Sur in Buenos Aires, or in the radical El Mono Azul in Madrid. Hughes himself was well aware that relocating a text—his own or that of another writer—from one cultural space to another would alter it in important ways. For Hughes and his colleagues, certain textual repositionings also had financial benefits: being translated was a way of earning royalties or other fees from multiple sources. For literary scholars, they have intriguing historical and theoretical implications, especially with respect to ideas about cultural and political identity.

Such textual relocations are also forms of translation. I apply this logic to the poems that appear in the official records of the hearings of Joseph McCarthy's infamous Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, at which Hughes testified in the early spring of 1953—not once, as is commonly believed, but twice (see chapter 5). The publicly broadcasted hearing made Hughes out to be a witness who was far too cooperative, renouncing his political radicalism far too readily. His public appearance, however, did not reveal the whole story. The transcript of the secret, or “executive,” hearing, released in 2003, shows how expertly Hughes refused to be translated into someone else’s terms.

Translation and Modernism’s Loose Ends

It is neither inevitable nor logical that movement in literature and of literary texts would occur only between cultural centers and their peripheries. There is a great deal of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural traffic that connects the world’s peripheries with each other. One case in point is Changó el Gran Putas (1983, 1985) (Changó, the Biggest Badass [2010]), an epic novel by the Colombian Manuel Zapata Olivella. Changó includes a rather remarkable homage to Hughes that I analyze in more detail at the end of chapter 1. While there are many who dedicated poems to Hughes—I have used some of these tributes as epigraphs—Zapata Olivella went so far as to make his
friend a minor character in a novel. My point is that in fictionalizing Langston Hughes, Zapata Olivella renders the very idea of a literary afterlife in translation quite literal.

Such movements across cultures and languages notwithstanding, translation theories, including more recent ones, are almost invariably based on situations where foreign texts are ferried to politically dominant linguistic and cultural settings either in Europe or in the USA. This scenario applies, at least in part, to Hughes’s own translations. Special caution is in order, however, when examining the Hispanic American translations of his work.

Acts of “domestication” occur in all literary translations, regardless of the direction in which a text travels, which makes all translations treacherous terrain. Yet it is quite unjustified to speak of “appropriation” when texts travel from south to north—in this case from Spanish into English—and of literary “influence” when the direction is reversed. Translation has historically meant something quite different in the literatures that have been placed at the margins of Europe and the USA. Postcolonial literatures—including those in the Americas—have done much to unsettle assumptions about the convergence of language and culture in the figure of the nation. Analyzing these literatures opens myriad possibilities for breathing new life into the worn idea of “world literature”—Erich Auerbach’s Weltliteratur—in the context of the past and present migrations that have largely unloosed the idea of human community from its nineteenth-century linguistic and ideological moorings. I especially stress that cross-linguistic literary traffic occurs not just between center and periphery but also—and this is particularly significant in the context of the Americas—between different local and global peripheries, however they may be defined. The conceptual opposition between the local and the global obscures three important dynamics: one, that center-periphery relations are historical phenomena that exist in a given locale at a specific time; two, that cross-hatching exists between diverse manifestations of the local on a hemispheric and even global scale; and three, that peripheral alliances can develop independently of and bypass the centers of colonial and neocolonial power. Translational exchanges on the global fringes, as I think of them, are characterized by different dynamics than are those in a center-margin model. To track the movements of their multiple vectors requires far greater flexibility than most translation theories permit.

My main goal in piecing together the overlapping stories of Hughes’s travels, his translations, and his translators, has been to show how different modes of translation come together in a poetics that situates itself along the edges of the linguistic, cultural, social, and political geographies of what we know as “high modernism.” I argue that Hughes’s writings, notably his early poems and his two autobiographies, exemplify this poetics and that his translators added noteworthy local variations. In the work of his translators, for instance, Hughes’s Harlem joins similarly imaginative extensions
of actual places such as Buenos Aires, Bogotá, Madrid, Montevideo, and Mexico City. Despite the fact that these metropoles were cosmopolitan hubs for modernist writers from across the Americas and different parts of Europe, they have rarely been stops on academic grand tours of modernism in the English-speaking world. With a nod to Gayatri Spivak, Chana Kronfeld, Iain Chambers, and Beatriz Sarlo, whose work on the intersections of modernism and postcolonialism does take us to these and other neglected areas, I provisionally call this poetics “fringe modernism.”

The metaphor bears some consideration as a thought experiment, less so perhaps as yet another label. What I think of as the fringes of modernism as traditionally conceived are spaces worldwide in which we find avant-garde literary practices typically excluded from modernist studies for being too “transparent,” too “realistic,” too “ethnic,” or too “political”—or simply for using languages other than English. Although the concept of a fringe has the disadvantage of reviving narratives of marginalization, it also has the benefit of not tying modernist literary practices to a single language, country, or region, making them at once comparable and incomparable in their local specificity. Fringe also suggests the selvaged edges a fabric may have to keep it from fraying. Even if they do not make the entire fabric unravel, some selvages do fray, causing the threads to hang loose so that they can tangle, much like the decorative fringes on a scarf or sweater. It is the idea of loose ends and their entanglements that I find appealing about this metaphor, despite its seeming two-dimensionality and its potential for falling back into a center-margin model.

The kind of cloth I have in mind is heavily textured. It is created when loose ends from pieces of fabric with fibers of different lengths and thicknesses intertwine unevenly. The result is bumpy and far too asymmetrical to have a clear center, and it has rough edges that look and act like an irregular coastline in that their true dimensions are impossible to measure. I see the different garments that may be tailored from such material, to continue a thought inspired in part by Zora Neale Hurston’s “tight chemise” in her introduction to *Mules and Men* and the clothing metaphor in the journal title *El Mono Azul* (Overalls), as correspondingly crooked. But being uneven and jagged does not necessarily make them any less significant or beautiful. Wearing such unfamiliar garb may be a bit uncomfortable at first, but the hope is that it will allow for more freedom of movement.

**Translation and Migrancy**

If migrancy, real and imaginary, is the condition of taking up residence in multiple linguistic and cultural homes, Langston Hughes was a migrant in the truest sense of the word. He moved in and between various worlds and wrote at length about their relative distances and proximities. As an African
American who grew up during the early decades of the twentieth century, he was uncomfortably conscious of the racial chasm separating people in the USA. No less acute was his awareness of the class and color divides among peoples of African descent in the Americas. A polyglot and world traveler, Hughes felt deeply that more than geographical distances separated Africa from the USA, Europe from the USA and the other Americas, and the various countries in the Western Hemisphere from each other. Because of his brush with McCarthyism, the ideological enmities that pitted the USA against the Soviet Union before and during the Cold War became a painful reality for him.

Throughout his life, Hughes tried to understand these multidirectional tensions by carefully taking the measure of actual and perceived distances between people(s) and by imagining ways of inhabiting remoteness and strangeness both emotionally and intellectually. In the process, he fashioned often unexpected connections between an array of linguistic and cultural fields in the USA, the Americas, and indeed the world. In doing so, Hughes remapped home—“America”—by exposing to “lexical shock” all sorts of pieties and proprieties, whether they pertained to race, color, sexuality, or class.31

Hughes dwelt and traded in multiplicities, donning countless costumes and taking on many voices in his poetry and prose. Among these masks are the conventions of various literary and nonliterary genres that are liberally strewn throughout Hughes’s prose and poetry. His ventriloquizing ranges from the accents of the personae he creates in his autobiographies and characters such as the notorious Jesse B. Semple (from the Simple stories) to the nameless and ungendered figures that proliferate in his lyrics. Although these voices typically speak in more and less standardized versions of English, Hughes’s repertoire is not limited to those. It also includes a host of other languages, among them Spanish, French, German, and Russian, which he weaves into his writings with some frequency, at times translated, at others not. Hughes’s literary polyvocality is vital to his ability to take up residence in varied cultural and linguistic settings. Such dwelling, however temporary, is as inescapable a feature of Langston Hughes’s poetics as it was an inexorable reality throughout his life. I illustrate in this book how Hughes’s “translation sensibility”32—that is, positioning himself on the fringes of competing social and symbolic systems—led him to encode in his writings both lived and imagined truths that have frustrated many readers’ expectations of what a black USAmerican author should be and do.

**Translation as “World Consciousness”**

While it is important that “another language [French]…awakened him to his literary vocation,” moving between worlds, for Hughes, was never just a
matter of learning French, Spanish, German, and a smattering of other languages, including Russian and Cantonese. It was a matter of taking other languages and cultures into the fibers of his very being. Of multiracial heritage, he was a Negro who was not black, or not black enough, who looked and sounded like a Mexican to some and like a white man to others. He had relationships with women but seemed to have preferred the company of men. He was educated and wrote poetry but usually had little patience for the literary establishment and the New Negro elites, fraternizing instead with the working poor in word and in deed. Unwilling to share anyone’s values and beliefs unquestioningly, Hughes, it seems, was always pulled in several directions at once. Belonging to different races and classes and yet at the same time to no particular one completely complicated his desire for an emotional and intellectual home. Disconcertingly to him, America was, in many respects, as unhomely as faraway Africa. The feeling of being in perpetual exile, of being misrecognized no matter where he went, instilled in Hughes a profound sense of being “in-translation,” to use Emily Apter’s term—of being at home nowhere. At the same time Hughes also realized that he himself had to engage in intricate acts of translation to survive as a person and a writer. Clearly, in the terms of discourses on race, nationality, sexuality, and class that insist on fixed subject positions, Hughes’s multiple lived and imagined truths are neither possible nor intelligible. Discerning these truths and fully grasping their strategic slipperiness requires us to tune our scholarly tools to the ideological and historical frequencies of the languages and discourses in which we constitute our own senses of identity, place, and belonging.

Virtually all of Hughes’s writing encodes spatial and temporal displacements in tropes of travel and memory. “Rendering a ‘foreign’ language into a ‘native’ language,” Stephanos Stephanides avers, “finds its equivalent in our ‘translation’ of the past.” The connective filament here is repetition, a figure for memory in which restatement and recovery combine. While repetition is most visible in the formal devices through which Hughes’s poems, most obviously the blues- and jazz-based poems, situate themselves in relation to literary, vernacular, and musical traditions, it is no less evident in his prose, notably in his autobiographies. In both *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder As I Wander*, Hughes explicitly figures memory and self-writing as acts of “wandering” and “crossing,” and these movements always lead to scenes of translation. Whether he writes about Mexico, Senegal, France, Haiti, Russia, or Harlem, speaking in other—and others’—words is always an overriding concern. It is through actual and represented acts of translation that Hughes connects all these different sites into a global geography that extends well beyond early-twentieth-century pan-Africanism and even beyond more recent critical conceptualizations of the African diaspora. The transatlantic legs of this global geography—that is, Hughes’s ties to France, Spain, Russia, and central Asia—have received a good deal more
attention than the hemispheric spokes I map out in this book. Even though the hemispheric reach of Hughes’s work has elicited some scholarly commentary, much uncharted territory remains.41

Langston Hughes spent much of his life trying to come to terms with the codes of other cultures—including those of the USA—and with what Walter Benjamin called “the foreignness of language” as a representational system.42 Contemplating layers of foreignness means running up against the limits of what is translatable, and therefore representable, in the first place. One possible definition of translation, then, is “expressing without representing” as a way of addressing, in William Scott’s words, “the incommensurability of language as such in relation to historical experience.” Another is hearing in the silences between words what Iain Chambers describes as “the potential murmur of a dialogue barely begun.”43 It is in the dialogue between different languages of an original and a translation that many significant details emerge, details that neither text by itself can articulate.44 Reading Hughes requires us to think of translation not as a set of exchangeable and reproducible meanings but epistemologically, “as a cognition and a recognition,” and hence as a function of the “diverse inhabitation” of the medium of language.45 To translate is “to set language against itself,” which, Chambers explains, “is to wrest from language itself the truth that it is always partial and partisan: it speaks for someone and from a specific place, it constructs a particular space, a habitat, a sense of belonging and being at home.”46 Because of this partiality, translation generates questions about where one belongs and what can and cannot be carried across linguistic and other cultural divides.

Such questions, many of them quandaries, seem never to have been far from Hughes’s mind, whether he contemplated the cultural relations between, say, Cuba, Mexico, Haiti, and the USA, or between Anglo, Jewish, and African America. In these contemplations, he was alert to what eludes representation but might still be felt and expressed otherwise. And “otherwise” for Hughes is always a mode of translation, of “assuming in the openness of our language other inscriptions, further sense.”47 Borrowing from another famous traveler, Alexander von Humboldt, I think of this openness to other meanings and perspectives as a form of “world-consciousness” (*Weltbewusstsein*), which is an awareness of translation writ large. Tracing how this sensibility shaped Hughes’s writings requires recourse to translation as a literary practice and a multilayered metaphoric system. For it is translation that helps bring into sharper focus overlapping movements across all sorts of political and conceptual borders.

Since linguistic multiplicity is inevitably part of all discourses that are truly transnational, research on the literary aspects of these discourses, no matter what their assigned social color, would do well to consider the practical and theoretical dimensions of translation. With some exceptions, however, processes of translation themselves have rarely moved to the forefront
of attention in scholarly work informed by (Black) Atlanticist paradigms. Yet translation’s metaphors proliferate in and animate those very academic discourses: we read about ideas that “carry over” more or less well, successful and unsuccessful “border crossings,” and all sorts of directional “routes” and “routings.” It is hardly a secret that translation is one of the necessary vehicles for globalization and has been for a long time. Ironically, its very ubiquity in our scholarly and quotidian lives seems to have made us almost entirely oblivious to its workings.

Literary translation, a form of cultural mediation that is not as easily consumable as most of the amalgamated information with which the popular media envelop us, has fared no better in this respect. I have attempted in this book to make a case for why translations and translators need to be more visible in scholarship on literature and in other cultural exchanges. Those engaged in translation studies have done that for some time now. More important, however, translation theorists have yet sufficiently to consider situations in which “foreign” texts are ferried to what is now known as “the global South,” that is, postcolonial settings and languages—despite the fact that this is the direction in which most translations travel. There is no question, for instance, that the work of translators is a fundamental part of the vast international networks we vaguely term modernist and that translation connects African American modernists from the USA with postcolonial writers in other parts of the world. Without analyzing in some detail when, where, and why translations came about and how they transformed both literary texts and writers’ reputations, we have only very limited access to the processes of literary history as they unfold across languages. Translation studies, reception history, and literary history have no choice but to work hand in glove.

**Translation and/as “World Literature”**

Where, then, does a text in translation belong? Like Hughes’s own translations, this body of literature has largely disappeared in the cracks between different literature and language departments and in the territorial gaps between various interdisciplines and area studies, such as African American, USA/North American, and Latin American studies. As is typically the fate of literary translations, the organization of academic specialties around the literatures and languages assigned to nations has made it difficult to figure out which field should claim responsibility for these texts and their “effective life as world literature,” as David Damrosch has it. Comparative literature has been of relatively little help because it, too, has tended at least implicitly to hold fast to the idea of national literatures by fetishizing original literary production. Working around the static opposition of national and world literatures to which even theories of “migration literature” still
tend to subscribe, I take seriously the idea that translation does not just produce world literature but in fact is world literature. It is world literature by being actively present in multiple literary systems at the same time. Important is not movement from one fixed place definable as a point of origin to another but movement among many changing locations—what might be called “translocation.”

The movement and direction of translations help us recognize the work of individual writers as something that is constituted at the intersection of worldwide intellectual and artistic trajectories, or vectors. As David Johnston has noted: “The existence of a text is not a bounded site, but rather an itinerary between there and here, then and now, and that itinerary is configured by a series of translations that take place in and across the various temporal and cultural engagements....[Translation] is a way of thinking about time and space that privileges movement rather than stasis, transformation rather than belonging.” The very existence of translations has fundamentally shifted the national or ethnic borders within which writers such as Langston Hughes have traditionally been enclosed. Such shifts suggest that it is more fruitful to regard Hughes as a nexus than as a solitary author who wrote in a single language identified with a particular nation. By reading Hughes’s life and texts as moving parts of a global network, I eschew the conventions of the single-author study in favor of writing comparative literary and cultural history. My model is Langston Hughes himself. To be able to dwell in transnational residences, Hughes broke the established rules of autobiography and lyric poetry alike. Following his lead, I work against the pronounced trend in New Americanist inquiry to privilege a specific genre (usually the novel), a single geocultural location (usually the USA), and a language seen as somehow unified (usually USAmerican English). I focus instead on the irregular historical imbrication of autobiography, poetry, literary translations, and oral testimony to reconstruct important chapters in the story of literary modernism as an international formation.

At issue in this book, then, is not literary influence as a formalist textual phenomenon but the human dimensions of literary history and the material circumstances in which acts of writing and reading are always embedded. I want to know how avant-garde writers interacted with each other and what transient artistic, intellectual, and political communities formed at certain historical moments at certain crossroads. As Hughes creates shifting, and shifty, autobiographical and lyrical personae to pry apart the discursive manifestations of ideologies that would have either assailed or altogether denied his existence as a writer and a nonheterosexual male, he often foregrounds situations in which the process of translation either falters or breaks down altogether to strip away the veneer of shared assumptions about racial and sexual identity and national community. Rejecting the simple appearance of shared cultural and political values, he portrays himself as a migrant whose desire for belonging leads him to create provisional communities.
I think of them as open communities that are fundamentally, and perhaps paradoxically, based on accretion, not exclusion. For Hughes, these mobile spaces are intellectual and emotional alternatives to the home he did not feel he had in the USA. The communities I construct as I retrace Hughes’s own itineraries and those of his texts in translation also and not infrequently lead us to places he himself never visited in person.

The “geography of crossing points” in which I am most interested here is located in Harlem, Havana, Madrid, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires, not the well-explored modernist hubs of London and Paris. These intellectual way stations or crossroads are (on) the fringes of modernism as we know it in the English-speaking world, geographically, linguistically, and aesthetically. That neither Spanish nor Portuguese is typically considered a major language of modernism shows just how sharply the history of modernists’ intellectual and artistic exchanges diverges from their marginalization in relation to assumed European and Anglo-American centers. The linguistic dimensions that these sites, and the itineraries that connect them, add to Atlanticist inquiry skews more familiar triangles into jagged polyhedrons. The irregular shape of these sites is all the more precarious for incorporating “the cuts in and interruptions of the existing modalities of historical knowledge” that postcolonial studies have brought into view during most of the twentieth century.

Hughes’s hemispheric networks, then, do not exist in isolation from larger global currents. Whatever impact Hughes may have had on other writers in the Americas and elsewhere, “influence” does not begin to describe the reciprocity and multidirectionality that characterize the literary affinities that make up global modernism. That postcolonial writers from different parts of the planet continue to pick up loose ends that lead back to marginalized modernists may well account for the long afterlife Hughes’s writings continue to enjoy in other worlds and in others’ words.