The Worlds of Langston Hughes

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CHAPTER ONE

NOMAD HEART

Heterolingual Autobiography

Tu as promené ton cœur nomade, comme un Baedeker, de Harlem à Dakar
La mer a prêté à tes chants un rythme doux et rauque, et ses fleurs d’amertume de écume.

[You carried your nomad heart, like a Baedeker, from / Harlem to Dakar / The sea gave your songs a sweet, rasping rhythm, and / its bitter flowers opened up in the spume.]

—Jacques Roumain, “Langston Hughes”

How does a person such as Langston Hughes, who lived in and between worlds, write an autobiography in the first place? How does one write a self when that self is perpetually displaced, put at risk, and not just by actual travel? Autobiography is an exceedingly vexed literary genre with ill-defined boundaries that tends to raise a host of expectations about what subjectivity is and how it is to be represented. Autobiographies that stray into fiction by blurring the line between imagined and lived experience create problems for most readers. These days, they are readily deemed fraudulent and censored publicly. Add to this the fact that readers’ requirements for black autobiography have historically been quite specific and inflexible. Writing almost a hundred years after Frederick Douglass penned his paradigmatic 1845 Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Hughes had considerably more freedom to reshape autobiographical convention. What it meant to him to “tell a free story” was unlike what it had meant to Douglass even in his later autobiographical writing, for what Hughes had to contend with in the 1940s and 1950s were different politics and strictures. There were substantial pressures on a black autobiographer in the USA to construct himself as a subject that would represent African Americans in just the right ways: as valued citizens and loyal patriots. Hughes faced this issue not just in one but in two autobiographies, The Big Sea (1940) and I Wonder As I Wander (1956). The second one was, for the most part, written after his testimonies before the McCarthy Committee, whose members subjected Hughes to their own autobiographical misreadings. I analyze those hearings at length in chapter 5. In this chapter I lay the groundwork for extending
to Hughes’s writings, which I consider intercultural by definition, Japanese comparatist Naoki Sakai’s notion of “heterolingual address.” My path is not a straight one but a weaving together of texts and a host of intertexts, including the Spanish translations of Hughes’s autobiographies, around scenes of translation.

**NOT IN KANSAS ANymore**

When Langston Hughes arrived in Moscow in 1930 to write the dialogue for a Meshrabpom movie about Negro workers in Birmingham, Alabama, he encountered some unforeseen stumbling blocks. For one, the German director, “especially imported from abroad for this film,” spoke neither Russian nor English or French well. For another, and to make matters worse, everything was written in Russian. As Hughes relates in *I Wonder As I Wander*,

> The script of the film we were to make consisted of an enormous number of pages when I first saw it—entirely in Russian! Just like my contract, it had to be translated. This took two or three weeks…. At first I was astonished at what I read. Then I laughed until I cried. And I wasn’t crying really because the script was in places so mistaken and so funny. I was crying because the writer meant well, but knew so little about his subject and the result was a pathetic hodgepodge of good intentions and faulty facts. With his heart in the right place, the writer’s concern for racial freedom and decency had tripped so completely on the stumps of ignorance that his work had fallen as flat as did Don Quixote’s valor when good intentions led that slightly demented knight to do battle with he-knew-not-what. (*IW*, 76)

Hughes leaves us with the impression that the ill-fated feature, “a kind of trade-union version of the Civil War all over again” (*IW*, 79), might have been a fascinating part of film history. At the time, however, the various mishaps surrounding its production were sources of seemingly endless frustration for the cast and, for Hughes, the stuff of hilarious anecdotes. But the “pathetic hodgepodge” of misunderstandings and mistranslations does much more literary work for Hughes here. Although the writing seems wholly monolingual, Hughes plays with several layers of significance that revolve around the acts of (failed) translation he thematizes. In this way, he makes his readers aware that the premises of his own writing are heterolingual and heterocultural. For instance, the film script Hughes might have written but did not in the end would have been an American translation of the English translation from the initial Russian, and the distance between these three texts would not just have been marked by time. Doing such literary work in the first place also depended on the satisfactory completion of
another translation, that of Hughes’s contract. Once we consider the implications of all the translations that quixotically proliferate in this brief passage, it dawns on us that, for Hughes, the very act of writing is always a translation whose sources are prior translations. Does this sound like Jorge Luis Borges? Russia may not, in the end, be as far away from Argentina as we think, especially not with Cervantes mediating our passage.

My brief excerpt is one of the many droll tales with which Hughes regaled readers in both I Wonder and The Big Sea. It was precisely because of such passages that reviewers have quite consistently showered Hughes with deprecatory adjectives such as “shallow and slick” and “pedestrian and thin” (CR, 274). The reception of The Big Sea was overall more generous than that of I Wonder As I Wander, which reviewers targeted for proffering little beyond an affable “smiling surface,” with Hughes telling us “about himself but not of his self” (CR, 275). Writing for the New Masses in 1940, Ralph Ellison carped about Hughes’s “avoid[ance] of analysis and comment” (CR, 261). “One wishes that more of life had irked him,” Alain Locke scoffed when he reviewed The Big Sea for Opportunity in 1941, adding that “important things are glossed over in anecdotal fashion, entertainingly but superficially” (CR, 274). Worse yet, Milton Rugoff patronizingly opined in the New York Herald Tribune that Hughes’s autobiographical prose was “characterized by a tolerance, simplicity and unpretentiousness that borders on the naive” (CR, 241). The only African American writer who raised his voice in Hughes’s defense was Richard Wright. “Hughes is tough,” Wright wrote in the New Republic in 1940, “he bends but he never breaks, and he has carried on a manly tradition in literary expression when many of his fellow writers have gone to sleep at their posts” (CR, 269). While it is difficult to say exactly what Wright meant by “manly,” I suspect that his idea of masculinity was rather at variance with Hughes’s. The notion of “manliness” recurs in Henry Lappin’s review for the Buffalo Evening News Magazine, in which he calls The Big Sea “the first attempt by a Negro to write a full and manly account of the recent history of Negro literature in the United States” (CR, 237). What is drowned out by this nearly unanimous chorus of detractors is the fact that in both autobiographies Hughes does tell plenty about himself as a person and a literary artist. This is not to mention the fact that both autobiographies also put in evidence plenty of “modernist complexities” beneath seemingly tactful surfaces. One simply has to know where to look or how to listen. I argue in this chapter that early reviewers and many later scholars have let their own expectations of what an African American autobiography should be get in the way of reading how and what Hughes actually wrote.

On the one hand, then, Hughes’s literary artistry as an autobiographer has been neglected and misrecognized due to readers’ unwarranted insistence that knowledge of the text give them access to knowledge of the autobiographer’s private self. On the other hand, that self had to have the
shape of a distinctively “black” identity. Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), which Robert Hemenway admits can be “a discomfitting book,” also fell victim to this peculiar version of the autobiographical fallacy. Reviewers’ criticisms of Hurston’s “folksiness” and her “raceless” posture are echoes of the charges of naïveté leveled at Hughes. But Hurston’s case is not strictly analogous to Hughes’s, in part because much was edited out of *Dust Tracks* after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, especially Hurston’s not-so-tactful criticisms of USAmerican foreign policy.6

Ironically, what the expectation of a self revealed disregards is an author’s concern with audience. The question of audience was particularly fraught for African American writers in the USA prior to the civil rights movement and the defeat of Jim Crow legislation. His remarks in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) notwithstanding, Hughes was no less sensitive to and at times apprehensive about audience expectations than were other New Negro writers: “What can he [a black writer in the USA] presume about an audience, however liberal or even progressive, that is not predominantly black? What is the appropriate discourse for an audience whose power he distrusts but must nonetheless respect? And what is the relation of one’s subjective vision to a public sphere in which every word can be (mis)judged?”7 John Lowney poses these questions specifically for the 1940s, “the era of incipient anti-Communist hysteria” and “red smear” campaigns. They apply equally to earlier and later decades.

Why, then, would anyone expect an African American autobiographer living in the USA in the early 1930s, and especially in the mid-1950s when the so-called Red Scare was in decline but by no means over, to reveal his innermost thoughts for all the world to see? Given antiblack racism, red-baiting, homophobia, and other pressures that existed during Hughes’s lifetime, would it not be perfectly understandable that *The Big Sea*, as one reviewer noted, has an “odd quality of seeming to be written in two moods—one that is explicit and another that follows through like an undercurrent”? Could we not expect that parts of *I Wonder* might seem “strangely evasive” and that, along with the value of frankness, Hughes also knows “the value of reticence”?8 To Hughes, being reticent about his personal life would have been a matter of sheer survival.

Reserve might also help explain why *I Wonder As I Wander*, which commences roughly where *The Big Sea* leaves off, did not extend the later volume’s time frame into Hughes’s then present. Although *I Wonder* is twice the length of *The Big Sea*, it ends at the start of 1938, covering barely seven years, whereas the first autobiography spans twenty-nine, from Hughes’s birth in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902 to 1931. Arnold Rampersad attributes this disparity to the fact that “the second volume of autobiography presented challenges and opportunities that Hughes had not quite anticipated,” veteran writer though he was (*BS*, xi). It is more plausible, however, that Hughes, in the immediate wake of his broadcast testimony before the McCarthy
Committee—he began to work on *I Wonder* in 1954—might have responded to this harrowing experience by turning to his earlier travels to make certain political points. Notably, Hughes devoted a great number of pages to his stay in the Soviet Union in 1932–33, leaving few doubts about his positive, though by no means uncritical, impressions of a Soviet-style government. If what had initially motivated Hughes had been a desire to set his own political record straight in ways that he could not have during that testimony, his defiance did not last long. Only two years later, he excised the same Russia chapters from *The Langston Hughes Reader* (1958). Most significant about the writing of *I Wonder* is that Hughes took imaginative recourse to travel writing to work through what was clearly a personal and political crisis of major proportions (see chapter 5). He did so in ways that allowed him to come away with his dignity intact, at least for the most part. The historical exigencies impinging on Hughes’s acts of self-writing are linked to broader theoretical concerns about autobiography as a literary genre. The usual premise of autobiographical referentiality is that life-writing is a more or less transparent record of an already completed and hence fixed subject, a self, and that we can therefore move from knowing the text to knowing that self without any obstructions. What if the autobiographer constructs a self that would not exist otherwise, that is more than a more or less mimetic representation of the external reality we call life? Since the very act of writing is “an integral and often decisive phase of the drama of self-definition,” an autobiographer’s may well not represent the kind of self we expect, or perhaps not even a self at all. This is very much so in Hughes’s case. Stubbornly refusing to turn self-inscription into self-revelation, Hughes put pressure on the “two universals—truth and the first-person ‘I’—that [popularly] define the genre of autobiography.” As a result, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder As I Wander* redirect readers’ attention to the very obstructions themselves, that is, to Hughes’s literary strategies, which displace the figure of the author and set it in motion, making it a point of departure, not perpetual arrival.

Some reviewers did notice “style” in *The Big Sea* but complained, as Ellison rather unreasonably did, about “too much attention . . . given to the esthetic aspects of experience at the expense of its deeper meanings.” But it is precisely in the “esthetic aspects” that the “deeper” meanings reside, as the future author of *Invisible Man* (1953) would have been well aware. Straddling the fact-fiction divide, Hughes’s autobiographies should be read as we read his verse: by paying close attention not to the obvious narrative line but to the elements that disrupt that line, throw it off course. The pattern of these breaks creates an implied beat over which Hughes tends to linger, as any experienced musician or poet would. Ellison would have called this communicating on the “lower frequencies.” Ellison’s metaphor alerts us to the importance of sound as a vehicle for knowledge in Hughes’s writing, where the interplay between phonetics and
visual representations is always troubled, not infrequently leading to some form of violence when thematized. Iain Chambers’s point about the problematic of the visual as a privileged vehicle for knowledge applies directly to the role of sound in Hughes’s poetics: “[W]e have inherited the centrality of visuality as the hegemonic modality of humanist knowledge, leading, via cartography, writing, and visual representation, to the continual reconfirmation of the I/eye in every corner of the globe. The gaze is rarely able to attend to listening, is unable to accommodate a reply.”

Hughes’s autobiographies, like his poems, require that we listen, not just look, for what he calls, in yet another turn of the figure of the sea, “the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power” (BS, 209; my emphasis).

The concept of the implied beat—the undertow of black music—confers upon Hughes’s prose the rhythmic qualities of what Amiri Baraka has famously called the “changing same.” Hughes himself connects his autobiographical writing with African American music when, in “Jazz as Communication” (1943), he riffs on the poetic metaphor from which The Big Sea takes its title—“Life is a big sea/ full of many fish./ I let down my nets / and pull” turns into “Jazz is a great big sea. It washes up all kinds of fish and shells and spume and waves with a steady old beat, or off-beat.” Hughes’s repetitions turn life (“Life is a big sea”), literature (“Literature is a big sea,” BS, 335), and jazz into intertranslatable terms; that is, they are perpetually translated into one another. Through this process of intertranslation, “jazz seeps into [Hughes’s] words.” I agree with Anita Patterson and others that jazz appealed to “Eliot and other avant-gardists during the 1920s, in part because the music affirmed their cosmopolitan outlook, enabled their struggle against conformity with tradition, and aided their engagement with vernacular sources.”

Jazz, however, did something more for Hughes, whom Patterson also includes in her statement. It made his words move differently, inflecting their overtones and undertones to convey gradations of delight and despair at the same time. That Hughes also applied the words “overtones and undertones” to “the relations between Negroes and whites in this country [the USA]” points to an aesthetics awash in the history of race relations (Essays, 33).

In Hughes’s prose, no less than in his poetry, proximity to the formal structures of jazz results in privileging diachronic movement and sound over stasis and visuality. “Music,” Larry Scanlon explains, “defines its formal elements precisely by their movement through time. To highlight the affinities between music and poetry is to highlight the diachronic aspect of poetic form.” Diachrony, of course, does not mean linearity or unidirectionality. Hughes tends to encode movements through time in tropes of transit, that is, movement through space. By aligning spatial movement with the formal properties of jazz, Hughes creates poetic patterns that emphasize cyclicity and reversibility. Layering these patterns in writing creates the effect of
multidirectional movements across spatial geographies and temporal grids. Pasts, presents, and futures are no longer arranged along a single vector that points in one direction; instead, they are locations from which one can move in different directions and to which one can return at will and repeatedly. In this way diachronic patterns work together with synchronic arrangements. In Hughes’s texts, their copresence always makes available histories of musical and literary forms as destinations in the past linked with particular actual and symbolic geographies. For Hughes, the rural history of the blues is always already inscribed in urban jazz, so that the question is never whether Hughes’s is a blues or a jazz aesthetic. It is inevitably both.

A brief excursion to W.C. Handy, a Memphis musician whom Hughes admired tremendously, helps clarify how this jazz/blues aesthetic might work in Hughes’s writing. Handy’s celebrated and beautifully illustrated *Blues: An Anthology* appeared in print the same year as Hughes’s *Weary Blues*. In *Father of the Blues*, his own autobiography, W.C. Handy talks about how he transformed “bits of music or snatches of song” into fully fledged blues compositions “embellished by my harmonizations and rhythm.” Jürgen Grandt astutely concludes from this passage that “[t]herefore, Handy’s blues are a product of pastiche and collage and result from the collisions of the snatches of folk songs, field hollers, and other vernacular musics on the one hand, with his classical training and inclinations on the other, and are thus thoroughly modernist.” Hughes’s autobiographical anecdotes work in the same way that Handy’s “snatches” of different tunes do: they are blues composition in the making. For “all its eclecticism,” Grandt continues, Handy “sees his music standing firmly within a greater African American tradition. The arc of this tradition, in the case of his famous ‘St. Louis Blues,’ reached from Africa to Argentina and Spain to Cuba (via the tango) and then to St. Louis.” This is the arc Hughes himself imagined. If he did not complete its full span in his actual travels, his books, as we shall see, went the rest of the way for him.

By the same logic, setting out also implies a return, or returns, to history and tradition. The relationship between what we tend to see as two separate movements is fluid in Hughes’s writing, but it is not shapeless. The concept of syndesis, which Edward Pavlić has transplanted from anthropology to African American literary scholarship, explains this process well. Building on Robert Plant Armstrong’s use of syndesis to describe “[Yorùbá] cultural systems organized by aligning voices or rhythms in multiple layers of repeating cycles,” Pavlić suggests that “syndesis creates a fluid and dynamic relationship between repetition and variation, as well as between past and present. The interplay between repetition and variation situates the past emerging in the consciousness of the participants in a fluid but structured milieu.” To Pavlić, these insights about the participants in Yorùbá ritual ceremonies can be applied to African American literature from the USA as well. The challenge he poses for what he calls “syndetic criticism” in
the context of African American studies “is to describe how the [symbolic] spaces [of North and South] overlap, how the social patterns shape the contours of personal space and vice versa.” He adds that “the best theoretical exploration of these issues often occurs in the literature itself.” While I concur with both statements, I find that analyzing Hughes’s work makes it necessary to enlarge the range of symbolic spaces, or “ritual grounds,” relevant to African American literature.

While repetition as a literary trope tends to be most palpable in the formal elements through which Hughes’s poems situate themselves in relation to literary, vernacular, and musical traditions, it is no less evident in his autobiographies. The effect of Hughes’s lingering over the implied or offbeat in his autobiographies opens up textual spaces in which selves can multiply. These selves are not simply mimetic extensions of the historical Hughes, even when the narrated events reflect on his lived experiences. Rather, they are the result of repetitions with a difference at the level of theme and character. I argue that the proliferating selves in Hughes’s autobiographies and verse are closely linked to human and textual interactions that involve more than one language. When Hughes’s selves engage with each other and with presumed Others they encounter as a result of travel, they create possibilities for communality out of what I call translational performances. Such performances model—sound out, if you will—relations among humans that work against, and as a result render audible and visible, “conditions of dialogue in which the different powers, histories, limits and languages that permit the process of ‘othering’ to occur are inscribed.” That is, possible communal relations are tested out without necessarily being resolved. Unlike identity, which is an unmoving social delimiter, selfhood—being a person—is crucially a function of being in translation, of translating and being translated in turn. The same ontology applies to the kind of human community that acts of translation make possible, even if only for a limited time. Translation, then, is always at least implicitly at issue in any multilingual literary practice, even, and especially, when mutual understanding remains either elusive or is not, in the end, an exclusive function of language. What makes the translational performances in Hughes’s autobiographies especially valuable for inquiring into how “social patterns shape the contours of personal space and vice versa” is their status as highly self-conscious acknowledgments of the possibilities and limits of creating communities across languages and cultures.

Since this issue of subjectivity connects Hughes’s autobiographies with his verse, it is odd that until quite recently academic readers have virtually ignored The Big Sea and I Wonder As I Wander. It is as if Arnold Rampersad’s remarks about Hughes’s “honest, water-clear prose” (BS, xxv) have left most scholars with little more to add. Few have explored Rampersad’s suggestion that “deeper meaning is deliberately concealed within a seemingly disingenuous, apparently transparent, or even shallow narrative”
Nomad Heart

What appears to have escaped notice altogether is that both of Hughes’s autobiographies teem with tales of linguistic adventures and misadventures in both domestic and foreign settings, settings in which one translates oneself and is being translated in turn. While some have commented on the use of different languages in Hughes’s poetry, even the sheer frequency of multilingual scenes in his autobiographical writings has gone almost entirely unnoticed. The insistence with which Hughes draws attention to translation in all sorts of settings is indeed striking. Whether traveling to closer or more remote areas of the world, including the outer reaches of the former Soviet Union, Hughes always, and repeatedly, remarks on the linguistic “bedlam” that was going on around him—conversations in Haitian Kréyòl, Uzbek, Tajik, Russian, Georgian, and Tartar (IW, 17, 149). I propose to read the tales of linguistic adventures and misadventures in The Big Sea and I Wonder As I Wander as traces of “syndetic cultural patterns [that] resist the stable and ordering influences of modern rationalization.”

The passage I quoted at the outset of this section is but one of countless instances that show Hughes’s keen awareness of the ever-present potential for cultural misunderstandings across languages and cultures. In the case of the unfortunate film script, the reasons for misapprehension are not linguistic incompetence but a lack of cultural knowledge. The hapless Russian writer had produced “a script improbable to the point of ludicrousness” because he had—unsurprisingly at the time—never traveled to the USA, relying instead on the “very few books about contemporary Negro life in our country [that] had been translated into Russian” (IW, 76). The film script, then, is already a translation of a translation even before being rendered in English: “Imagine the white workers of the North clashing with the southern mobs of Birmingham on the road outside the city, the red forge of the steel mills in the background, and the militant Negroes eventually emerging from slums and cabins to help with it all!” (IW, 79). “It would have looked wonderful on the screen,” Hughes admits, “so well do the Russians handle crowds in films”—“Russians” meaning director Sergei Eisenstein, who threw a party for the cast in Moscow. There is only one small problem: superimposing a Soviet future upon a USAmerican past creates a clash of cultural sensibilities that, to Hughes, distorts the present almost beyond recognition. Like the movie scene in which a “hot-blooded white aristocrat” from Alabama would ask the “lovely dark-skinned servant” to dance at a party, “it just couldn’t be true. It was not even plausible fantasy—being both ahead of and far behind the times” (IW, 78, 79).

While Hughes’s recourse to Cervantes’s “slightly demented knight” is a suitable response to this travesty, invoking Don Quixote also has another effect. As a literary reference, Cervantes represents the undercurrent of another generic mode in this autobiographical narrative: not the Quixote’s parody of courtly love but the picaresque whose tricky legacy—fictional autobiography—is one of the keys to Hughes’s episodic inscriptions in both
I Wonder and The Big Sea. None other than a rather paternal Carl Van Vechten points us in this very direction when, in his introductory remarks on Hughes’s “picturesque and rambling” life in The Weary Blues, he projects how Hughes might set up his autobiographical writing: “[A] complete account of his disorderly and delightfully fantastic career would make a fascinating picaresque romance which I hope this young Negro will write before so much more befalls him that he may find it difficult to capture all the salient episodes within the limits of a single volume.” Van Vechten was right; one volume did indeed prove insufficient. Given that both of Hughes’s autobiographies lay claim to a far-flung literary genealogy in which Cervantes and Lazarillo de Tormes sit gleefully with Frederick Douglass and Brer Rabbit, it is no accident that trickster figures akin to the wily pícaro populate Hughes’s autobiographies. Gatesians would probably prefer the figure of the “Signifyin’ Monkey,” a trope that comes to life in the seemingly extraneous story of Jocko, the riotous monkey Hughes brings back from Africa only to have him defecate on a pool table (BS, 131–37). The pícaro, who signifies in similar textual ways, is surely a branch of a family tree that sprouted in very close proximity to North Africa. Yet simply conflating the Spanish pícaro with the West African figure of Esu-Elegba on which Henry Louis Gates bases his theory has the serious disadvantage of rendering imperceptible Hughes’s allusion to the picaresque novel. This allusion enables a discussion of narrative structure here in ways that Gates’s theoretical framework does not. A wonderful example of the pícaro in The Big Sea is the sailor named George (no last name) on whom I will comment below. In I Wonder, there is Emma, the former actress who presumably makes a living as a translator but is really too busy playing a socialite “Kentucky Mammy” in Moscow (IW, 83–84). There are also “Yeah Man,” the woman chaser—whose “Russian was far worse than mine when he would try to speak it at all….most of the women never knew a word that he said”—and Yusef Nishanov aka Nichan, who “knew about a hundred words of Russian—our only language in common” (IW, 112, 144). This is not to mention the ubiquitous besprizorni, the street urchins who lurk at every corner (see IW, 152–53). And let us not forget Sylvia Garner, the only one of the movie’s USAmerican cast to defy “that old cliché that all Negroes just naturally sing—without effort” (IW, 80). Sylvia’s antics deserve a close look.

Sylvia, who “became an American folk-song star on the Moscow radio” (IW, 81), in many ways exemplifies the figure of the translator-as-trickster. Hughes recounts that because of Soviet restrictions, when spirituals were sung, “the words God, Lord, Christ, or Jesus were not to be used…Sylvia would substitute whatever word came into her head” (81). Because her Russian listeners presumably did not understand English, or not well enough, she could get away with substitutions that were quite comical and perhaps as heretical as Lazarillo’s would have been in sixteenth-century Spain: “My God is so high, you can’t get over Him, you can’t get under Him,” came
out as “Old mike is so high, I can’t get over it, I can’t get under it! Oh, this mike is so high! Hallelujah!” (IW, 82). The most compelling scene for my purposes is the one prompted by Sylvia’s stubbornness: “I’m tired of faking. I’m gonna get God into my program today.” Her friends are understandably skeptical.

All of us had our ears glued to the radio receivers in the Grand Hotel. When Sylvia came on the air that night, she opened with, “Oh, rise and shine and give God the glory.” Only what she actually sang was:

*Rise and shine*
*And give Dog the glory! Glory!*
*Rise and shine!*
*Give Dog the glory. (IW, 82)*

This episode resonates with the earlier scene not because it performs or thematizes translation as such or because Sylvia modifies the original song lyric by using wordplay worthy of Ezra Pound. More important is that Hughes shows here how the linguistic distance between Russian and English can be strategically exploited to circumvent censorship. In the case of the botched movie script, that distance is more cultural than linguistic, and the attempt to cross it produces the effect of a “burlesque” (IW, 76), an unwitting hybrid. In Sylvia’s performance of the spiritual, the comic effect of her substitutions is entirely lost on her Muscovite listeners, as “Them Russians don’t understand English.” Had they understood English, they, as presumably good Stalinist comrades, might have actually appreciated her sacrilegious humor. Initially, Sylvia’s ingenious anagrammatic solutions are lost even on her American friends, who seem slow to comprehend exactly where God is in that song. “Where He ought to be,” said Sylvia. ‘What is d-o-g but God spelled backwards?’” While the joke may not have been lost on Hughes’s English-speaking readers—clearly, puns such as this one do not translate into another language—38—they nevertheless seem to have missed the fact that Sylvia functions as a foil for the autobiographer himself here. It is plausible that Hughes would use this anecdote to call attention to the sly strategies he employs in his own writing, including in this very text.

As a picaresque trickster figure whose African American literary pedigree includes memorable characters such as Hughes’s own Jesse B. Semple and Charles Chesnutt’s resourceful Uncle Julius in *The Conjure Woman* stories, among many others, Sylvia throws the proverbial monkey wrench in the gears of the Soviet government’s authority by feigning compliance with its restrictions on free expression. As autobiographer, Hughes confronts not Soviet censorship but the entrenched racial and social biases of his USAmerican readers and the presumed unavailability of “true self-consciousness” to African Americans who, according to W.E.B. Du Bois, were stuck with
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an ironically lesser version: “double consciousness.” I quite agree with Kate Baldwin that Hughes’s goal as a writer was not “proper self-consciousness” (my emphasis), that is, the idea of an integrated, immutable, and supposedly unreachable self. Baldwin’s related point, that Hughes refused to link African American art with lamentation and victimhood, is equally valuable.  

Hughes shared this rejection with Zora Neale Hurston, who was similarly opposed to being classed with what she, in 1928, rather unkindly dubbed the “sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal.” While Baldwin makes her case by focusing mainly on Hughes’s writings in and about Russia—notably the pieces about central Asia he purged from I Wonder and from The Langston Hughes Reader after his brush with McCarthyism in 1953—Hughes’s lack of desire for a proper self, or any one self for that matter, is evident well before then. Hughes’s resistance to Du Bois’s idea of “double consciousness” as both African and American went very much against the grain of dominant discourses about black male identity during and after the Harlem Renaissance. The literary articulations of his opposition, however, follow the strategy of outward compliance that we see in Sylvia’s circumventions of political restrictions. As Hughes shows, such subtle tactics are easy to miss or to misread.  

Through the kinds of sundry spaces that translational performances allow him to create, Hughes, like Sylvia, hides his political moves in plain literary sight. Hughes’s prose teems with words and phrases from an array of languages; some are translated, most not. The effect of this textual cohabitation is that the linguistic fabric of English becomes marvelously flexible. Like Hughes himself, at least in Richard Wright’s estimation, Hughes’s brand of American English bends, but it does not break. Significantly, translation is a function of marvel, or “wonder,” that, for Hughes, is always part of his Whitmanian physical and spiritual roaming the world: wandering is wonder; such movement becomes wondrous through the simple substitution of a vowel. Hughes’s purported poetic realism notwithstanding, the literary strategies he employs in his autobiographies are much closer to Alejo Carpentier’s lo maravilloso (the marvelous) and Gabriel García Márquez’s realismo mágico (magical realism). Like them, Hughes unexpectedly defamiliarizes what is familiar, though his slanting of reality is slighter. In Iain Chambers’s words, “the taken for granted is turned around, acquires an unsuspected twist, and, in becoming temporarily unfamiliar, produces an unexpected, sometimes magical, space.” Hughes’s purpose in creating such spaces is to bring to the fore the unexamined assumptions that all systems necessarily include, be they linguistic, literary, social, or political.  

One way in which Hughes destabilizes the presumed linguistic integrity of USAmerican English is by calling attention to the multiple mediations in his own writing. Linguistic layering characterizes Hughes’s stories about his stays in France and Haiti, both places where his “high school French didn’t
work very well, and...I understood nothing anyone said to me” (BS, 144; also IW, 20). A Haitian fisherman translates for Hughes a dirge from patois to French, which Hughes quotes together with his own English version (IW, 23). Similarly, when speaking of the notebooks he kept in Russia, Hughes acknowledges that “a great many words and figures were translated by Kikilov [head of the Turkoman Writers Union] from Turkoman into Russian to Koestler, and by Koestler from Russian into English to me”; some notes he took “were [even] fourth hand—from Baluchi to Turkoman to Russian to Koestler to English to me” (IW, 115, 129). The Hungarian-born Arthur Koestler, whose phobia of contagion Hughes ridicules more than once in I Wander, is the only one of Hughes’s travel companions in remote central Asia to speak any workable English at all, and Koestler is happy to share the notes that would become the basis for his 1934 travel account, Von weissen Nächten und roten Tagen (Of White Nights and Red Days). Their shared language and partially shared politics notwithstanding, Hughes points to fundamental differences between Koestler’s perspective on central Asia and his own: “To Koestler, Turkmenistan was simply a primitive land moving into twentieth-century civilization. To me, it was a colored land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites” (IW, 116). This remark goes a long way toward explaining Hughes’s affinity for the people he encountered in these parts of the world. Tellingly, Hughes’s note taking ceases with the departure of his fastidious friend (see IW, 138). Left in Bokhara without a translator, Hughes engages in other kinds of translational performances.

Whether enacted or thematized, translation for Hughes is a way of simultaneously registering cultural differences and searching for common ground—not necessarily similarities. Stuart Hall has fittingly called what Hughes models “a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference.” As the following episode from I Wonder demonstrates, understanding and common ground can be created in all sorts of ways. In Hughes’s writing, translations that we would typically regard as failed usually involve recourse to jazz.

[My Mongol-looking friend of the unknown tongue] was a very outgoing fellow,..., lots of fun, intensely active, crazy about my Ooo-wee Harm-Strung records (as he termed Satchmo), a stout vodka drinker, good at wine, a woman chaser and an acrobat.... I never did get his name straight, but it sounded like Yeah Tlang, or Yaddle-oang, or Ya-Gekiang. He said it so fast and matter-of-factly, as if I must be familiar with it, that when I slowed him down, it didn’t sound the same at all. As nearly as I could gather, it had two and a half or three syllables. I finally settled for a nickname of my own coining, Yeah Man, and he called me Yang Zoon which seemed to be the best he could do with Langston. Yeah Man was a bright fellow, though I think he was allergic to languages [his Russian was far worse than Hughes’s]. But after a while each understood everything the other said—or implied—without strain, and with laughter. ( IW, 111–12)
Yeah Man and Yang Zoon are, of course, not translations proper. They are phonetic approximations that signal the creation of a linguistically mixed common ground mediated by the undertow of jazz. Here the musically inflected phrase “Ooo-wee Harm-Strung” serves as a springboard for similar onomatopoeia in the space between Mongol and English, as does the shared appreciation for Louis Armstrong’s playing. In this act of translation, layers of cultural differences are not erased but respectfully and humorously flaunted; they are amalgamated into an unstrained form of implicit understanding that reaches beyond language. Shared laughter is always a catalyst for successful communication in Hughes’s autobiographies, marking the point at which a group of total strangers come together in a makeshift community. Here is an earlier encounter in Turkmenistan, a former Soviet republic.

A stream of musical inflections filled my ears—but I had not the least idea what he [the bright-eyed, grinning Oriental youth in a spick-and-span Red Army uniform] was saying…. Since he kept right on talking in his musical tongue without a word of Russian mixed in, I began to talk in English. Thus we carried on a conversation in which neither understood the other…. I would have thought understanding under such conditions impossible, but I learned differently. Later, when the teacher came to call on me, it turned out that he spoke not English but Flemish. There was at that time no one in Ashkhabad who spoke English—not a human soul. My Red Army friend came from the high Pamirs away up near the Sinkiang border, and spoke only his own strange language. He was a captain of the border guard, and looked like a Chinese Negro, very brown, but with Oriental eyes. He was my friend for weeks, in fact my boon buddy, yet I never knew a word he said. However, when the ear gives up and intuition takes over, some sort of understanding develops instinctively. (IW, 110–11)

This passage shows how reciprocal communication requires that one acknowledge the existence of cultural differences and a lack of understanding in the first place (“I had not the least idea what he was saying”). Hughes admits to the limitations of his linguistic skills almost as a matter of course, regardless of whether he is in Moscow, Mongolia, Italy, or Haiti. The fascinating thing, however, is that he never lets linguistic obstacles impede contact. A fitting exception that may prove the rule is Hughes’s memorable “blind date” with a Tartar woman, one of the “amatory” episodes of whose frequency some reviewers of I Wonder As I Wonder actually complained! "I had no idea what language a Tartar spoke,” Hughes confesses to his readers. What further compounds the problem is that he and his new friend Hajir, who had arranged the double date, “had no language in common for me to tell him how strangely that Tartar woman had behaved” in resisting what Hughes considered expected sexual advances (IW, 158, 163)
Particularly revealing of the different ways in which Hughes uses translation in his autobiographies is the following carefully crafted scene set at a rail depot in Uzbekistan, clearly a figure of the crossroads. Abandoned by the rest of his party, Hughes is waiting for the next train to arrive.

"Drasvoti, tovarish." I said to a young Uzbek in half-European, half-native clothing—and English-type coat, a tibeteka cap of bright embroidery, and soft, heel-less boots. "Good morning."

He answered in a flow of guitarlike syllables that certainly weren’t Russian. I grinned and shook my head. We began with signs. Hand to belly: hungry. Fingers pointing down the track with a frown: disgust, train late. Hands across brow, then pretending to fan: hot, sun getting hotter. He pointed at my face, then at his: Brown, same color. But myself, ni Uzbek.

"Russki?" he asked.

"Niet," I said, "No. Me, Americanski."

He shrugged. More guitarlike syllables. I thought I might as well speak English since it really didn’t matter. Neither of us understood a word but it was fun to talk…. He knew two Russian words anyhow. Then back into his own tongue, king-ting-a-ling-ummm-ding, which is about the sound of the Uzbek language—a kind of musically tinkling tenor speech, as decorative to hear as Persian script is to see. (IW, 141)

Hughes frames the image of cultural hybridity in his description of the young Uzbek’s attire with utterances in both Russian and English, the latter being a partial translation of the former. The narrator’s Russian greeting, which sets him apart from English-speaking readers much like Yang Zoon does in the previous passage, initiates a dialogue that detours into sign language upon contact with the Uzbek’s “guitarlike syllables.” Language as the space for communication is displaced onto the body. Once the bodily exchanges reach the issue of identity by way of shared skin color, it is necessary to return to speech to articulate different cultural and political affiliations. Interestingly, Hughes is first identified as “Russki,” not as American. Hughes again represents this speaking as a mixture of Russian and English. English phrases that translate gestures to the reader are now cast in italics, usually reserved for unfamiliar languages in an English text. As in other passages from I Wonder, the narrator never once pretends to understand the Uzbek, whose words are literally music to Hughes’s ears. The young man’s shrug, in turn, suggests that he has absolutely no clue what this stranded “Americanski” might be saying. Rather than eliding a tongue he does not comprehend, however, Hughes incorporates it into his text, rendering its musicality through the onomatopoeic approximation king-ting-a-ling-ummm-ding—elsewhere he refers to it as “tinga-a-ling-gong-ling language” (IW, 156). A surprising simile reconciles ear and eye via synesthesia, translating the Uzbek’s radical linguistic otherness into aesthetic appeal: to Hughes, this
“musically tinkling tenor speech” is “as decorative to hear as Persian script is to see.” Although English is the language that mediates this comparison, the culture it represents is not a point of comparison here. The centers of cultural power represented by English are thus sidestepped. It is not just the comparison itself that confers aesthetic pleasure but also the very act of circumventing other political frames for this encounter.

As in the earlier scene with the Oriental-looking youth in a Red Army uniform, no meaning is being transacted between the two speakers once they abandon using gestures. As a result, the simultaneous flow of English and Uzbek—“neither of us understood a word but it was fun to talk” (my emphasis)—must be interpreted as a performance in which speech acts signify not so much an effort at comprehension but simply play. Important is the mutual engagement in a play with words that is actually far from simple. Such play, once represented in writing, has aesthetic value beyond the element of “fun.” Play, which is ritual performance, returns us to repetition. “In nearly all the higher forms of play,” writes Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1950), the classic study of play in culture, “the element of repetition and alternation . . . are like the warp and woof of a fabric.” The play in this translational scene signals not misapprehension but understanding at a different level: this is mutual understanding, a new form of order, achieved amid cultural and other differences in which the dynamics of play prevent those differences from congealing into otherness. According to Huizinga, play not only “adorns life, amplifies it,” but “is in fact freedom.”

*Caliban’s Company*

In Hughes’s writing, translational scenes of this sort always occur in special places and almost always outside the USA. It was in rented quarters in Uzbekistan that “[c]onversations in Uzbek, Tajik, Russian, Georgian and Tartar flowed around [him] continually. At times, bedlam could hardly have been more linguistic than this room in the former Tsarist—but now Soviet—hotel in Tashkent” (*IW*, 149). Other such spaces include rooms in hotels across the world, train depots in central Asia, Paris nightclubs, and, of course, freighters bound for Africa and Europe. These spaces are important in that they are cultural crossroads of one sort or another: they are temporary locations inhabited by transients from elsewhere who often share “the quick friendship of the dispossessed” (*BS*, 150). Hughes himself is one of those transients and self-consciously so: “Most of my life from childhood on has been spent moving, traveling, changing places, knowing people in one school, in one town or in one group, or on one ship a little while, but soon never seeing most of them again” (*IW*, 101).

Even though Arnold Rampersad suggests that Hughes “craved the affection and regard of blacks to an extent shared by perhaps no other important
black writer” (BS, xv), Hughes’s autobiography shows that his sense of home and belonging is highly conflicted and not cast in familial, national, or racial terms. Here Hughes represents his well-known wanderlust as a direct response to acutely felt anxieties that disturb assumptions about expected affiliations. Both physical dislocation through travel and imaginative displacement through (self) translation—Paul Gilroy calls it “intercultural positionality”—become survival mechanisms for Hughes. In The Big Sea, he encodes personal and cultural anxieties about belonging in scenes of misrecognition in which prior assumptions about familial, cultural, or political identities and ties are rendered unstable and often severely ruptured. More often than not, figures of travel and translation enable Hughes to draw out the assumptions behind the identities others readily assign him. In his writing, he replaces assigned identities, be they national, racial, or sexual, with the multiple and shifting truths he ultimately holds dear—truths about himself as a person and about the worlds in which he lived. In response to crises of belonging, such as his lie about being “saved” at Auntie Reed’s church (BS, 18–21) and his visits with his father in Mexico, Hughes creates provisional communities as contexts in which to assert and safeguard the multiplicity of human values and behaviors that discourses of nation, blackness, and compulsory heterosexuality work hard to deny. This is entirely consistent with the dynamic patterns of divergences and convergences that surface in I Wonder As I Wander and especially The Big Sea, where tears in the fabric of belonging alternate with the creation of provisional communities through which the original terms of belonging—assumptions about and ascriptions of identity—can be emotionally reevaluated and aesthetically rearticulated.

What most immediately connects travel with writing in Hughes’s autobiographies is that both are ways for him to take some measure of control over his life; for him, aesthetic rearticulation is a way of coping emotionally. We should not take lightly that writing itself had a therapeutic function for Hughes, which is clear from repeated admissions that he did most of his writing when he was utterly miserable and lonely: “[M]y best poems were all written when I felt the worst. When I was happy, I didn’t write anything” (BS, 54; also see 56). Hughes is quite explicit about this relationship when, at the end of the first part of The Big Sea, he repeats the text’s well-known opening scene on the S.S. Malone in which he divests himself of “all the books I had had at Columbia, and all the books I had lately bought to read” (BS, 3). This retrospectively melodramatic gesture of divestment is as obviously modernist as it is postcolonial.

It was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart—for it wasn’t only the books that I wanted to throw away, but everything unpleasant and miserable out of my past: the memory of my father, the poverty and uncertainties of my mother’s life, the stupidities of color prejudice, black in a white world, the fear
of not finding a job, the bewilderment of no one to talk to about things that trouble you, the feeling of always being controlled by others—by parents, by employers, by some outer necessity not your own. All those things I wanted to throw away. To be free of. To escape from. I wanted to be a man on my own, control my own life, and go my own way. I was twenty-one. So I threw the books in the sea. (BS, 98)

This scene benefits from being read with Hughes’s dramatic sensibilities as a playwright in mind. In the years leading up to the publication of The Big Sea, for instance, Hughes enjoyed quite a bit of success in the theater, starting with the Broadway production of Mulatto in October 1935. The Karamu Theater in Cleveland staged three other plays, Little Ham, Troubled Island, and Joy to My Soul in 1936 and 1937, and Don’t You Want to Be Free? premiered at the radical Harlem Suitcase Theater in April 1938. Although Hughes was not known for writing melodrama, the self-reflective adjective “melodramatic,” with which the autobiographer distances himself from his younger persona’s coming-of-age scene, functions as an invitation to read this framing as a carefully staged performance. At the same time that the narrator asserts that “[he] felt grown, a man, inside and out. Twenty-one” (BS, 3), Hughes works against the conventions of black male autobiography for which Frederick Douglass’s 1845 Narrative served as prototype. In fact, with his departure from the USA, Hughes places himself beyond the reach of these conventions. This move brings The Big Sea closer to postcolonial writing than we have come to expect from an African American text from the USA. Such proximity to postcolonial literatures allows for a host of new affiliations and readings. Hughes casts himself in the role of Caliban seeking to divest himself of Prospero’s apocryphal books and the imperial and racist shackles they represent. On the other hand, Hughes’s dramatis persona also resembles Shakespeare’s Prospero in that he, too, departs an island—Manhattan—toosing his books into the “moving water in the dark off Sandy Hook.” (Perhaps he holds on to his magic wand.) Hughes’s variations on the Shakespearean plot are not entirely unfamiliar. Rather than being left behind, his Caliban follows in Prospero’s footsteps, or so it seems, sailing to Europe but via Africa, where he is ironically misrecognized as a white man. Liberia, also Marcus Garvey’s destination (see below), “was the only place in the world where I’ve ever been called a white man. They looked at my copper-brown skin and straight black hair—like my grandmother’s Indian hair, except a little curly—and they said: ‘You—white man’” (BS, 103). Giving the figure of Caliban the ability to move, to travel and reenact both the Grand Tour and a Middle Passage in reverse is the first of many imaginative revisions of literary and historical sources in The Big Sea. Unlike Prospero, an exile on his way back home to Italy, Hughes’s Caliban is a nomad for whom home remains elusive on both sides of the Atlantic. By setting Caliban in motion, Hughes maximizes the
potential of the figure's cultural and linguistic mixture and multiplicity.\textsuperscript{55} Being set in motion here means to travel \textit{and} to inscribe one's own self. For Hughes's Caliban writes his own books, and it is in writing that he seeks to recover his mother tongue. Although he writes in English, it is an English that suffers certain sea changes, as indeed the language we still call English had when it was previously ferried across the Atlantic. What transforms Caliban's English into something rich and strange is the undercurrent of a vernacular voice that engages English in a perpetual state of heterolingualism best described as a state of translation. Bill Ashcroft has specified this dialogue as a “dialogue in difference,” arguing that this form of literary contact, typically identified as a characteristic of postcolonial writing, produces “a translated reader, just as it produces a translated/translating writer.”\textsuperscript{56} Clearly, Hughes's maneuvers in this scene align the cultural and linguistic engagements that characterize African American literature from the USA with the translational situations in other postcolonial writing.

The way in which Hughes initially constructs his autobiographical persona, which strongly suggests an amalgam of Caliban and Prospero, places his literary and cultural sensibilities in close proximity to those of writers from other postcolonial islands, notably C.L.R. James, George Lamming, and Aimé Césaire, who would take issue with the figure of Caliban in their own versions of \textit{The Tempest}.\textsuperscript{57} The above passage makes clear that Hughes's younger self, like Shakespeare’s Caliban, acts out of a “deep sense of betrayal.”\textsuperscript{58} The intense psychological and physical pain that Hughes experiences when confronted with betrayal—from his father, his white patron, and some of his fellow writers, notably Hurston\textsuperscript{59}—is surely akin to the aches with which Shakespeare’s Prospero threatens the monster repeatedly as a punishment for disloyalty, which we can easily read as nonconformity in Hughes's case. Instead of plotting murder, Hughes’s Caliban exacts his revenge by making these tales of betrayal part of his autobiography, digesting them for his own purposes of resignification. What concerns him is not revenge but, above all else, his own survival.

I am hardly proposing that \textit{The Tempest} serves as an explanatory matrix for \textit{The Big Sea} as a whole. What I am suggesting, however, is that recourse to Shakespeare’s comedy helps illuminate salient features of Hughes’s autobiographical self-fashioning. The reason that his personae seem to lack psychological depth is that Hughes’s goals in \textit{The Big Sea} are more performative than mimetic. Hughes the dramatist represents aspects of himself as “character-masks,”\textsuperscript{60} stylized and highly symbolic figures of memory that multiply and move through his autobiography as if they were actors upon a stage. The performance of which they are part may well be called a \textit{ritual} of self-fashioning.\textsuperscript{61} In a sense, Hughes’s character-masks become his joint authors. By controlling the movement of these figures, Hughes controls his narrative, deciding what to reveal and what to withhold and how. This control is just as important to Hughes the autobiographer in the late 1930s and
the mid-1950s as assuming control over his life is to his twenty-one-year-old persona in 1923. Just how tight Hughes’s controls are over his narrative is plain right from the start of The Big Sea, where he withholds the fact that his younger self did not, in fact, toss all his books to the sea. He kept one, and not just any one: Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass (see Life, 1:xxx). Consider also that the image of radical divestment he constructs here clashes with the figure of the baggage-laden traveler in I Wonder As I Wonder. There we encounter Hughes in war-torn Madrid and at a small train depot in the middle of central Asia, surrounded by what appears to be a veritable mountain of luggage, including not just books and a typewriter but also a Victrola and a record box. “It took three trips,” he laments, “before I had all my luggage inside the station” (IW, 108; also see 394). Although, astonishingly enough, this baggage does not seem to encumber his movements, the self Hughes invents here differs markedly from that of the earlier autobiography. In 1954 he no longer casts himself as a happy-go-lucky vagabond but as a professional writer: “This is the story of a Negro who wanted to make his living from poems and stories” (IW, 3).

Through its emphasis on the figure of the writer as working-class itinerant, The Big Sea parodies the Grand Tour in ways that once again affiliate Hughes’s autobiography with the picaresque genre. The picaresque’s peripatetic narrator, always a member of a lower socioeconomic class, is a confidence man. Typically male, he functions as trickster in relation to varied representatives of both sacred and secular authority, notably the Spanish monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church. The loosely episodic structure of the pícaro’s narrative encounters with such forms of political and social authority is one of the models for The Big Sea and its chronological jumbling of events in which the persona confronts power in many guises and in situations that range from familial to religious and economic. It is a model Hughes continued to utilize in I Wonder As I Wander, where stories persistently interrupt a narrative line that seems otherwise fairly linear. Conflict invariably prompts the crises I mentioned earlier, whose narrative function is to keep the personae moving both backwards, through memories, and forward, through Hughes’s modernist desire to leave the past behind him. Hughes’s opening reference to Columbia University, for instance, makes us instantly aware that we are not at the beginning of a chronology here but at the start of a new departure that is also the aftermath of a personal predicament that had occurred a year earlier and is narrated some eighty pages later. This crisis culminates in Hughes’s intense dislike for Columbia, where, after having battled with his father to get him to pay for attending this college, he spends only a term. Hughes’s decision to move down to Harlem and into a life of precarious financial independence marks the final break with parental authority and his father’s oppressive acquisitive ethos: “I felt that I would never turn out to be what my father expected me to be in return for the amount he invested. So I wrote him and told him that I was going
to quit college and go to work on my own, and that he needn’t send me any more money. He didn’t. He didn’t even write again” (BS, 85). At this point in the text, all that is left of James N. Langston, whose name Hughes drops from his genealogy, is a waning echo of his favorite exhortation—“Quick now! Hurry!” (BS, 89). This echo, also a form of repetition, marks an emotional distance Hughes achieved at great cost. The young Hughes’s departure from New York is a way of translating that emotional distance into bodily movement.

The Big Sea always returns to metaphors of setting out and transit, out of which Hughes builds up the narrative frame for the first part of his autobiography. Each return repeats and reinflects the metaphors and adds to their cumulative meaning. The text’s larger frame, which opens with the epigraph and ends, or pauses, with its qualified restatement in the narrative’s final sentences, weaves together images of movement in a figure of networking that is decidedly not a closure but another opening: “Literature is a big sea full of many fish. I let down my nets and pulled. I’m still pulling” (BS, 335). The tense change in the second sentence turns the act of writing into a mnemonic figure that pulls in things from the past, while the addition of a third statement—“I’m still pulling”—turns writing into an ongoing process of recovery and innovation. The substitution of literature for life—“Life is a big sea” becomes “Literature is a big sea”—signals the transformation of life (zoê, not just bios) into literature that is at the heart of all autobiography. Self-writing as a function of continuous movement thus folds back into the text’s travel metaphors. The sea here is not just history, as Derek Walcott has it, a space of remembrance across which one floats. It is an what Chambers dubs an “intricate site of encounters and currents” where the self knowingly exposes itself to the risks and pleasures of being culturally translated by voluntarily relinquishing recourse to any prior culture and the essentialism that might come with it. Self-writing, no less than fiction, renders the autobiographer vulnerable to self-estrangement, a process in which the “proper” self is broken up and constituted anew by the strangers that become part of it. There are losses and gains. “What we lose,” suggests Chambers, “is the security of the starting point, of the subject of departure: what we gain is an ethical relationship to the language in which we are subjects, and in which we subject each other.” In Hughes’s autobiographies, the strangers that come to inhabit the self as a result of its being in transit and in translation assume the shape of fictional characters, be they personae or understudies. Transit, for Hughes, marks the desire for distance from oppressive situations and discourses that insist on his being or projecting a unified self. His desire—indeed, his need—is for creating alternative spaces of belonging in which writing not only articulates belonging but itself becomes a form of belonging to the world.

Among the spaces I discuss above, all of which are either explicit or implicit crossroads, one stands out because of the prominent position in which
Hughes places it in *The Big Sea*. Once Manhattan has melted into the darkness of the night, the narrative moves down into an airless mess boys’ cabin in the freighter’s capacious hold, which, at first glance, resembles a prison cell more than anything else. The location of this cabin, which the young Hughes shares with two other sailors, anticipates the better-known underground spaces from Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). In both Wright’s story and Ellison’s novel, descending into such a space signifies a withdrawal from history into contemplative solitude and, at times, hallucinatory revelry. Hughes’s underground space is cut from the same cloth, though it is far from solitary; the narrator identifies it as a communal site from the start: “I went down a pair of narrow steps that ended just in front of our cabin” (*BS*, 4; my emphasis). That the freighter is bound for Africa makes the collective quarters take on aspects of a Middle Passage in reverse. It turns the cabin into a time capsule in which geographical movement literalizes and reinforces processes of memory that reconnect present freedom with past enslavement, to people and ideas.

This space, tellingly located aboard a ship that sails the pages of *The Big Sea* under an invented name, is not a stage for mimetic realism. It is a textual and cultural vortex repeated in the image of another floating stage: the afterdeck on a cargo vessel in Port-au-Prince harbor where a nearly penniless Hughes, here in the company of Zell Ingram, is “caught greasy-handed, half-naked—and soxless—by an official delegation of leading Haitians.” Jacques Roumain, whom Hughes had met earlier that day—conversing with him “[f]or an hour, in French—mine halting, and in English—his bad”—had assembled that distinguished group “to pay me honor at the last moment and to present me with bon voyage gifts” (*IW*, 30, 31). When the boat lifts anchor, Hughes describes himself “standing on the poop deck over the churning rudder to wave farewell to the folks on the dock—Jacques Roumain, who was to become Haiti’s most famous writer, the elegant gentlemen of his delegation, and the girl of the town who had come to see me off” (*IW*, 32).

Paul Gardullo notes that “Hughes’s construction of a particular space—floating, nationless, transient [one might add classless]—in which this strategic identity [a complex form of pan-African identity] emerges,… rais[es] questions about how constructions of identity and constructions of space may be mutually constituted and enacted performatively.” This space, however, does more than raise these questions; it models the mutual constitution of space as a secular ritual ground and identity as performance. Edward Pavlić, from whom I borrow the term “cultural vortex” above, describes the dynamics of the underground space with admirable precision. He also pinpoints an important difference between Hughes’s representations and those of Wright and Ellison: “In this [communal underground] space, people perform (Jamesian) aspects of their subjectivity which remain off limits, or abstracted, in secluded contemplation. In this way, the diasporic
modernist self becomes an *accumulating repertoire of presences summoned from personal depth and communal interactions both past and present.*" The difference is one between abstraction and embodiment or action.

Hughes wrote the Haiti episode almost twenty years later than the cabin scene from *The Big Sea.* What remains constant in both, however, is his unflagging fascination with how people who barely know each other come to form a community, if only for fairly brief moments in time. The cabin scene is the first of the many provisional communities Hughes creates in his autobiographies. It is also the most complexly layered and deserves to be read with care.

Inside the hot cabin, George lay stark naked in a lower bunk, talking and laughing and gaily waving his various appendages around. Above him in the upper bunk, two chocolate-colored Puerto Rican feet stuck out from one end of a snow-white sheet, and a dark Puerto Rican head from the other. It was clear that Ramon in the upper bunk didn’t understand more than every tenth word of George’s Kentucky vernacular, but he kept on laughing every time George laughed.

George was talking about women, of course. He said he didn’t care if his Harlem landlady pawned all his clothes, the old witch! When he got back from Africa, he would get some more. He might even pay her the month’s back rent he owed her, too. Maybe. Or else—and here he waved one of his appendages around—she could have what he had in his hand.

Puerto Rico, who understood all the bad words in every language, laughed loudly. We all laughed. You couldn’t help it. George was so good-natured and comical you couldn’t keep from laughing with him—or at him. He always made everybody laugh—even when the food ran out on the return trip and everybody was hungry and mad. (*BS*, 4–5)

Here the autobiographical I, which had commanded the reader’s attention with its melodramatic opening gesture, disappears behind the voice of a third-person narrator who recounts the banter inside the cabin. “Puerto Rico,” whose other name is Ramon, has limited English, and George’s Kentucky vernacular presents rather a challenge to his mate’s comprehension. George’s Spanish, in turn, is nonexistent, his “only ‘foreign’ language” being “pig-Latin” (*BS*, 5). Because Hughes’s narrator does not directly report anything of what is said, as he does elsewhere (“‘Largo viaje,’ said Ramon,” *BS*, 5), he has no need to insert himself into the scene as a mediator who translates George’s every word to Ramon or Ramon’s responses to George. There may well not have been any verbal replies, since, as we later learn, Ramon “didn’t talk much, in English or Spanish” (*BS*, 6). Nor can readers who know nothing about Hughes immediately assume that he could even function as a translator here, for that assumption depends on autobiographical events yet to be narrated. Hughes’s description focuses not on language but on his cabin mates’ bodies—one naked and racially unmarked,
the other covered by a sheet that exaggerates the skin’s darkness—and on
sexual gesturing understood without translation, at least among the banter-
ers themselves. Translation enters when the narrator shifts to a paraphrase
of George’s vernacular antics, steering readers away from interpreting the
men’s interactions as homosexual: “George was talking about women, of
course.” Or so, at any rate, it seems. By adding the mildly exasperated yet
indulgent “of course,” Hughes asserts the heterosexual default precisely in
order to debunk it. “Of course,” a phrase that appears in *The Big Sea* with
some regularity, signals Hughes’s taking control of a discourse that consti-
tutes itself by denying or abj ecting the possibility of the multiple readings
that this scene enables, including—of course—homosexual ones. Brian Lof-
tus, in one of the few attentive readings of *The Big Sea*, rightly calls this
passage “multiracial, polylogic, and sexually ambivalent.” He adds that “by
virtue of its structural position, at the beginning of the text, it serves as a
model to allow readings that implicate the sexual, the racial, and the linguis-
tic in an overdetermined relation.”

By positioning himself as third-person narrator of this scene, Hughes can
both be part of the spectacle in the cabin and at the same time stand aloof.
What hints at his involvement in the scene he describes is a sudden explo-
sion of shared laughter: “We all laughed.” The laughter catalyzes a mutual
understanding that depends less on language—“all the bad words”—than
on the materiality, albeit euphemistic, of bodies, on the men’s physical pres-
ence to each other across linguistic divides. On one level, the characters
cackle at George’s obscenities, which are all the more powerful for being
withheld from us. On another level, the narrator chuckles—or grins—
at readers who do not recognize George’s paraphrased comments about
women as a heteronormative red herring. If we as readers join in the laugh-
ter, as Hughes invites us to do by opening the “we” onto an even more
inclusive “you” (“You couldn’t help it”), we should at least know why.
For laughter can signify understanding and intimacy just as it can indic ate
unease. We can easily find this scene funny without being entirely able to
appreciate the different layers of its humor. While there is room for a ho-
mosocial interpretation of this scene, in which a female figures mediates the
relations between the men, this mediation is purely rhetorical. George is
not exactly expressing an interest in having sex with his landlady; he simply
indicates that he would like to tell “the old witch” to go fuck herself. Using
the now popular expletive to which I resort here would, however, have
deflated the scene’s power of suggestion, turning it into mere salacious an-
ecdote. Loftus’s reading of sex and sexuality in *The Big Sea* as “that which
is withheld from representation” usefully suggests that “[t]he erotics of
bodily and racial display are not entertained, rather they are translated
into their economic significance” (152–53; my emphasis). In this case, it is the
rent money George owes and does not have. Elsewhere in *The Big Sea*, it is
prostitution, or “dancing.” Sonya, the Russian dancer with whom a broke
Hughes temporarily shacks up in Paris, sums it up beautifully: “I have no mon-ee nedder” (BS, 150).

There is yet another dimension to the laughter in the cabin scene. George’s mirth and his ability to incite mirth by “making up fabulous jokes” and “playing pranks” (BS, 7), even in near-desperate situations, is a survival strategy Hughes himself adopts throughout. As a survival strategy, Hughes’s humor taps self-consciously into the blues, and George, not coincidentally, “knew plenty of blues” (BS, 7). It is worth remembering that the blues, like jazz, is about movement, about wanting to move or the consequences of somehow having moved, that is, of crossing boundaries of race, class, culture, and gender. As a consummate performer, George has much in common with certain aspects of Hughes himself, “the ever-smiling, often-laughing boon companion,” as Rampersad calls him (xiv). More important, however, is that Hughes emphasizes George’s talent as a storyteller whose prodigious talent makes him resemble a New World Scheherazade: “George had a thousand tales to tell... And several versions of each tale. No doubt, some of the stories were true—and some of them not true at all, but they sounded true. Sometimes George said he had relatives down South. Then, again, he said he didn’t have anybody in the whole world. Both versions concerning his relatives were probably correct. If he did have relatives they didn’t matter—lying there as he was now, laughing and talking in his narrow bunk on a hot night, going to Africa” (BS, 6; my emphasis). In the context of an autobiographical narrative, this commentary cannot be passed over as mere character description. George is not just “lying” on his bunk; he is also telling “lies.” This pun is a highly self-conscious reminder that autobiography, much like the travelogue and the picaresque novel, is a literary genre that happily, purposefully, and productively straddles the fact/fiction divide. This is something well worth recalling, given the contemporary public excoriations of autobiographers who stray too far into fictional territory. Can we really be sure about the line that separates fiction from nonfiction, let alone truth from lies? I think not.

This is not to say that Hughes simply makes up tall tales about himself but that his truths take the shape of stories that may or may not use a first-person narrator. Some of them, like George’s anecdotes, have multiple versions, all of which are equally true, and some of these versions are stories not about Hughes but about others who stand in for him. George, who “always referred to himself as brownskin” rather than as “black” (BS, 103), is one of Hughes’s understudies, or character-masks. This is why “[e]verybody knew all about George long before we reached the coast of Africa” (BS, 5), and why readers of The Big Sea seem to know much about George and comparative little about the autobiographer himself. What about Ramon, who says little and does not care for women? “The only thing that came out of his mouth in six months that I remember is that he said he didn’t care much for women, anyway [this is not strictly true; he also talks about his mother].
He preferred silk stockings—so halfway down the African coast, he bought a pair of silk stockings and slept with them under his pillow” (BS, 7). Along with George, the boisterous talker with whom Hughes becomes “pretty good pals” (BS, 7), the quiet Puerto Rican who likes silk stockings also embodies facets of Hughes’s self. As I argued earlier, Hughes is well aware that to write within the conventions of autobiography—compulsory truth telling and first-person narrative voice—does not give him any standing as a speaking subject who does not easily fit prevailing norms and identities. This awareness makes him a resistant autobiographer who often prefers the distance of an impersonal narrator and first-person plural pronouns to representations of individual subjectivity. In Hughes’s autobiographies, no single and singular narrative voice has the final claim to truth. Producing meaning is always an ongoing process. Hughes’s vision of dispersed and “improper” selfhood exists within translational dynamics akin to Creolization.

The passage that immediately follows the cabin scene exemplifies the shifts in narrative voice through which the “I” is constantly formed and reformed: “Then it was ten o’clock, on a June night, on the S.S. Malone, and we were going to Africa. At ten o’clock that morning I had never heard of the S.S. Malone, or George, or Ramon, and anybody else in its crew of forty-two men. Nor any of the six passengers. But now, here were the three of us laughing very loudly, going to Africa” (BS, 5). Hughes marvels here at how quickly a series of unforeseen circumstances have welded a group of total strangers into a new community, and he insists on the collective pronoun. “We are going to Africa” is the refrain that echoes throughout the chapter. This refrain also sets the reader up for the denouement at the end of the section when Hughes is excluded from the one community he had assumed to represent unquestioned belonging: “[T]here was one thing that hurt me a lot when I talked with the people. The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro” (BS, 11). This peremptory expulsion from “the great Africa of my dreams” provides Hughes with an opening for meditating on racial identity and misrecognition back home: “You see, unfortunately, I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word ‘Negro’ is used to mean anyone who has any Negro blood at all in his veins. In Africa, the word is more pure. It means all Negro, therefore black. I am brown” (BS, 11).

That the misrecognition Hughes experienced and wrote about is also a form of exile, or better, a mark of the condition of migrancy, comes into clearer focus when he recounts his conversation with the Japanese stage director Seki Sano in a café in Montmartre on New Year’s Eve 1937. Hughes placed this episode in the final chapter of I Wonder As I Wander.

“There are too many people wandering around the world now who can’t go home,” [Seki Sano] said, “Lots of them are in Moscow. More are in Paris—people from the Hitler countries, from the South American dictatorships, from China,
from my own Japan. No exiles from America—though I wouldn’t be surprised if the day didn’t come.”

“That’s one nice thing about America,” I said, “I can always go home—even when I don’t want to.”

“Bonne année!” said the waiter bringing our drinks. “It’s the New Year.” (IW, 404)

Having been forced to leave Japan in 1930 because of his Marxist politics, Seki Sano had good reasons not to share Hughes’s optimism. Unlike Hughes, he would never return to his homeland but would spend the rest of his active and quite influential professional life in exile in Mexico and other parts of the Hispanic Americas, until his death in Mexico City in 1966.76

Hughes, by contrast, although he could physically reenter the country of his birth, was in a similar position. In psychological terms, could he really go home? Although his response to Seki Sano may appear naive at first glance, Hughes’s words carry more than a hint of doubt. The final sentences in I Wonder apply here directly: “But worlds—entire nations and civilizations—do end. In the snowy night in the shadows of the old houses of Montmartre I repeated to myself: ‘My world won’t end.’ But how could I be so sure? I don’t know. For a moment I wondered” (IW, 405). For my part, I wonder whether Hughes also recalls Toussaint L’Ouverture in his snowy prison in the French Alps on this occasion. After all, his play about Haiti, Troubled Island, had premiered not long before, in 1936.

Hughes’s is a book-length moment of wondering, called out here to turn closure into another opening.77 The story, then, is by no means over, only temporarily halted. By repeating to himself the phrase “My world won’t end,” Hughes is in fact acknowledging that his world is about to end. The repeated words do not, however, simply spell denial; they are invocations that create a lifeline at a time when Hitler and Mussolini were about to “finish their practice in Ethiopia and Spain to turn their planes on the rest of us” (IW, 405). At the beginning of 1938, large parts of the world as people knew it before World War II were on the brink of being destroyed, physically and psychologically. Although the USA, unlike its European allies and certainly unlike Japan, appeared largely unaffected during the war’s aftermath, at least outwardly, the country was hardly the same place in 1945 as it had been before the war. Even in 1937, the time of his conversation with Seki Sano, Hughes’s point of departure (America) is no more certain than his return which the interjection of the untranslated French “Bonne année!” in place of the English “Happy New Year!” emphatically suspends.

When Hughes sat down to draft I Wonder As I Wander during the initial decade of the Cold War, the doubts he had had at the end of 1937 were even more tangible. We ourselves would risk naïveté if we did not consider, as contemporary reviewers did not, that Hughes probably wrote this scene not long after his encounter with McCarthyism in 1953, in which his loyalty
to the country of his birth had been harshly questioned. We might think of what transpired during these hearings as yet another misrecognition (more on this in chapter 5). At the time, potential measures for denaturalizing USAmerican citizens were actually being debated in Congress. Other than the fear of being deported from Japan as persona non grata, Hughes might not have had any compelling political reasons for not wanting to return to the USA in 1938, though there would have been ample reasons in the 1940s and 1950s. Either way, there was no homecoming for Hughes. Chambers elucidates that, unlike travel, migrancy “calls for dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming—completing the story, domesticating the detour—becomes an impossibility.” 78 The way in which Hughes dwells in language in this scene is by lingering on the repeated phrase “my world won’t end” long enough to turn it into a veritable blues motif.

**SWOLLEN TONGUES**

The fact that Hughes’s narrative building of what Homi Bhabha has called “differentiated communities” never occurs in the USA or in places where “the American color line stretched out its inconvenient prejudices” (BS, 197) speaks directly to this impossibility. Unlike the scenes set on the Africa-bound vessel or on the Genoa waterfront (BS, 116 and 192), episodes that focus on provisional and mixed communities rarely involve whites, especially white USAmericans. When such Anglos do appear, as in the case of the pregnant young woman who oddly insists on bearing her child in Moscow, they become occasions for different sorts of interactions or no interactions at all. Despite his initial sympathy with her, Hughes’s final diagnosis of the girl’s sudden, unexplained physical affliction is also a biting commentary on Anglo-Americans’ inability to communicate with people who are unlike them: “This speechless American’s tongue was swollen as thick as a sausage—salivated! I could diagnose that” (IW, 209). There are numerous scenes in both autobiographies in which racial and class biases foreclose linguistic and cultural translation, producing patterns of radical divergence. Racist incidents range from Hughes’s frustrating experiences at Columbia (BS, 83–85) and his vexing rail journeys across various southern states (see BS, 50) to his problematic relation and ultimate break with his patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, and his being refused entrance to a Havana beach leased to an “American concern” (BS, 11–15). Yet criticisms of color prejudice and classism also abound in Hughes’s interactions with Washington’s black bourgeoisie, on whom he comments rather disapprovingly: “They all had the manners and airs of reactionary, ill-bred nouveaux riches—except that they were not really rich. Just middle class” (BS, 207).
An especially resonant, indeed paradigmatic, episode comes near the end of the first part of *The Big Sea*. Here Hughes describes his encounter with a new teacher at the school in Toluca, Mexico, where he taught English after his second visit with his father in 1920. Important to this scene, which is worth revisiting at some length, is the characters’ displacement, their location in another country, and the fact that the young Hughes was about to return to the USA, where he had previously been mistaken for a Mexican (see *BS*, 50).

Professor Tovar had neglected to tell the new teacher that I was an *americano de color*, brown as a Mexican, and nineteen years old. So when she walked into the room with him, she kept looking for the American teacher. No doubt she thought I was one of the students, chalk in hand, standing at the board. But when she was introduced to me, her mouth fell open, and she said: “Why, Ah-Ah thought you was an American.”

I said: “I am American.”

She said: “Oh, Ah mean a white American!” Her voice had a southern drawl. I grinned.

She was a poor-looking lady of the stringy type, who probably had never been away from her home town before. I asked her what part of the States she came from. She said Arkansas—which better explained her immediate interest in color. For the next two days, she sat beside me at the teacher’s desk…. [S]he kept looking at me out of the corners of her eyes as if she thought maybe I might bite her.

At the end of the first day, she said: “Ah never come across an educated Ne-gre before.” (Southerners often make that word a slur between *nigger* and *Negro.*)

I said: “They have a large state college for colored people in Arkansas, so there must be some educated ones there.”

She said: “Ah reckon so, but Ah just never saw one before.” And she continued to gaze at me as her first example of an educated Negro.

I was a bit loath to leave my students, with whom I had had so much fun, in charge of a woman from one of our more backward states, who probably felt about brown Mexicans much as my father did. But there was no alternative, if they wanted to learn English at all. Then, too, I thought the young ladies from Señorita Padilla’s academy might as well meet a real *gringo* for once. Feminine gender: *gringa*. (*BS*, 78–79)

Right away Hughes takes discursive control by embracing a translated identity: *americano de color* is what his Mexican colleagues call him. (Being part of North America, Mexicans would not call USAmerican citizens *norteamericanos.*) *Americano de color* is a phrase that signifies the respect that the woman, who is described in terms not of her skin color but of her regional origins, will not grant Hughes in the exchange that follows. Naming himself an *americano de color* is a way for Hughes to place himself
outside a familiar frame of reference before someone else can put him in what she presumes his place is by excluding him from America. *American de color* has, of course, a referential range that is hardly limited to the USA, and it allows Hughes to make himself into a citizen of the Americas in a gesture that might be termed hemispheric cosmopolitanism. To the woman, however, it is the young teacher’s skin color, “brown as a Mexican,” along with his youthful appearance, that renders him perfectly invisible. She expects both an American and a teacher and sees neither. When she is finally forced to acknowledge his presence, she immediately tries to impose her very precisely defined, yet unspoken, expectations of what an American is. Hughes represents her words in a southern vernacular that makes her embarrassed stutter rupture her idea of her own selfhood and subjectivity. The standard signifier of a self, the I, dissolves in an inarticulate “Ah-Ah” as the presumptive authority of being a teacher of English founders on the rocks of regional grammar: “I thought you was.” Hughes shrewdly gives her utterances inflections of race and class that call into question both her cultural whiteness as a southerner and the level of her education. Adding the seemingly needless observation that “her voice had a southern drawl” is tantamount to a discursive grin, with which Hughes slyly indicates that he has got her. Indeed he has. Instead of defining the woman in racial terms, Hughes’s (to her) confusing assertion “I am American” forces her to spell out as yet unspoken racialist assumptions about the restricted meaning she gives that adjective and to name herself as white by implication. Sitting next to him at the teacher’s desk, she is made to grant Hughes respect after all but very grudgingly and warily, as her fearful sideways glances betray. Hughes plays here on the myth of white women’s fear of being physically assaulted by black men—a myth that gave rise to cruel historical reality through so many lynchings. He takes literally the metaphor of being “bitten” to bring to the surface the psychological remnants of a discourse of animalizing African Americans through which white USAmericans tried to safeguard their own racial difference as the default of humanity.

A sign of the woman’s reluctantly evolving respect is that she calls Hughes “an educated Ne-gre.” Hughes’s parenthetical comment is more of an extension of the earlier textual smirk than it is an explanation of this apparent neologism based on the French *nègre*. The broken-up noun “Ne-gre” is not really a word at all, not even in a southern USAmerican vernacular. Neither French nor English, this word exists only in the space between an insult and a somewhat more benign racial label. It fills the catachrestic space of the impossible and the unintelligible that the figure of the educated Negro already occupies. To his interlocutor, an educated Negro is a contradiction in terms. Once she is presented with the reality of such a contradiction in the flesh, her attempts to represent and contain it end up as a mere stammer that echoes her earlier “Ah-Ah.” In her vernacularized part of the dialogue, which contrasts sharply with Hughes’s own standardized, more educated
diction, English—the USAmerican version of it—visibly comes apart at the seams. Once made to confess to the tenuousness of its underlying assumptions about racial and national identity, the normative discourse on race that the woman’s language represents struggles in vain to maintain coherence and authority. In the end, this discourse, like her own language, loses its ability to produce meaning, disintegrating into nonsense syllables. Representing a normative discourse as regionally specific—“southern” in this case—further adds to its loss of authority.

By perforating the rigid surface of a discourse that would define him as non- or un-American, Hughes can name the woman for what she is where she is, in Mexico. Calling her a gringa from his perspective of an americano de color, he in turn withholds from her an identity as American, which his text had granted her prior to this scene. It is significant that even Hughes’s father, whose sentiments about “greasers and niggers” this woman might well have shared, is accorded more respect than a gringo (BS, 42). By the end of the passage, the woman has been stripped of any pretenses. The only thing that remains is her feminine gender, along with her status as an outsider, a despised foreigner. By the end of the passage, the woman effectively finds herself in the very place she had wanted to assign to Hughes.

By using another nameless white southerner who “frequently made unkind remarks about spicks and niggers,” Hughes consciously connects that episode with another incident whose setting aboard the S.S. Malone also ties it to the earlier cabin scene. The character in question is the ship’s “Third Engineer [who] was from Arkansas, the same state, strangely enough, as the lady who had taken my English courses in Mexico” (BS, 114). What makes the following excerpt resonate with the Toluca episode are the verbal replies; what makes them different is the threat of physical violence.

They [the customs men and the clerks] were entirely Negroes that day, Africans in European clothes, four or five of them, very clean and courteous in their white duck suits. They were in the midst of their meal at a single long table, when the Third Engineer came in.

He ordered: “Get these niggers out of here. I haven’t eaten yet.”

I said: “You can eat with them if you like. Or I’ll serve you afterwards.”

“I don’t eat with niggers,” he said. “And you know damn well an officer don’t have to wait for no coons to be fed.” He turned on the startled Africans.

“Get out of here!” he shouted.

“You get out of here yourself,” I said, reaching for the big metal soup tureen on the steam table.

The Third Engineer was a big fellow, and I couldn’t fight him barehanded, so I raised the tureen, ready to bring it down on his head.

“I’ll report you to the Captain, you black—!”

“Go ahead, you—and double—! I said, raising the soup tureen. He went. The Africans finished their meal in peace. (BS, 115)
Note that the engineer does not initially address the African officials directly, although “they spoke English.” He only stares at them in Conradian horror, resorting to a familiar racial slur, the verbal equivalent of his gaze, as he addresses the mess boy who, he assumes, shares his sense of racial hierarchies (“you know damn well”). The mess boy’s replies, conciliatory at first, reject this assumption and put the engineer in a place wholly unfamiliar to him: that of an intruder whose conduct is highly inappropriate. Unaware that the social rules aboard the ship are different from what he is used to, the incensed engineer escalates the situation into a shouting match, in which Hughes leaves the invectives that are traded up to the reader’s imagination, much as he elides verbal obscenity in his narration of the cabin scene. Once again Hughes reworks the discursive terrain of antiblack racism, here replete with potential physical violence, to create an alternative sense of understanding, in this case with the shocked Africans at the table and in fact, the rest of the nonwhite crew. Confronted with signs of verbal and physical opposition, the engineer is effectively expelled from the scene and forced to adjust his future behavior: subsequently, “he kept quiet and never referred to the day of the soup tureen” (BS, 116).

The briefly rendered aftermath of this confrontation confirms the existence of a differentiated community with its own understanding of race relations. This understanding is marked if not by respect for foes then at least by tolerance. In this community, the disgraced officer is silenced and put in his place, but he is not completely cast out. When mess boy Hughes informs the chief steward of his refusal to wait on the engineer ever again, the “grave little Filipino” replies “forlornly,” “Mess boy, in this my life things is not always easible. Sometimes hard like hell! I wish you please help me out and feed the Third” (BS, 115; my emphases). That Hughes predictably relents—“because I liked the steward”—is less interesting than the remarks that prompt his acquiescence. What stands out is the neologism “easible,” which sounds like English but, as the nonstandard grammar and syntax imply, is not. It is not hard to gather that what the Filipino means is that “life hasn’t always been kind to me,” or that “life hasn’t always made things easy for me.” Realizing that “easible” does not just mean “easy” attunes our ears to the Spanish underneath the English words. It is as if the steward were saying: la vida no me ha sido facilitado. “Easible,” then, is his English version of facilitado, from facilitarse, “to help out,” which reappears as what would have been facilitame, por favor, “please help me out”—had the steward spoken in Spanish. The reason why this little word is so remarkable here is that “easible,” occupying as it does a space between English and Spanish, encapsulates the ethos of mutuality that underlies the provisional communities Hughes assembles in both autobiographies: helping one another out. Adding to this ethos the element of (linguistic) play brings out important ritual dimensions in this scene. If, “as a sacred activity play naturally contributes to the well-being of the group,” it does so in
Nomad Heart

a secular context as well. In this sense, the communities Hughes models are ludic communities, even if some players are unaware of themselves as such and hence unaware of the changed rules of the game. It is no accident that the drunken brawl in which “crew solidarity outweighed race” (BS, 116) follows hard on the heels of a confrontation in which racial epithets had taken on rather less playful connotations.

In *I Wonder As I Wander*, the principle behind Hughes’s own drunken yells in *The Big Sea*—“Get them niggers! Get them limeys!” (BS, 116)—finds its counterpart in the traveler’s frustrated ranting at his less adventurous fellow travelers, who have left him standing at yet another train depot in the middle of nowhere:

You don’t need to stop with me in Ashkhabad, you low-life Negroes! You dirty Russians! Double-crossing movie-makers! You trade-union Communists! I’ll get along! I damn sure bet you I’ll get along! Right here in the middle of this Godforsaken desert, I’ll make it! (IW, 109)

Even in the absence of interlocutors and the usual derogatory references to female family members, Hughes’s flood of mock curses brings to mind the dialogic play of the dozens, that ritualized insulting of “yo’ mama.” He used the cultural matrix of this performative trading of insults elsewhere to good effect and most memorably in *ASK YOUR MAMA: 12 Modes for Jazz* (1961). The logic of defiant play may be extended to many of the other performative situations I have analyzed in this chapter, where humor almost invariably serves as springboard for engaging with pressing issues of physical and psychological survival. In *I Wonder*, it is the little Russian word *nichevo* that assumes the function of the more familiar generic incantation “yo’ mama,” announcing the translational adaptation of African American ritualized play to different linguistic and sociocultural circumstances:

“Nichevo,” he [the Turkoman station master] said with a grin.

*Nichevo* can mean a hundred different things in Russian, depending on the inflection. In this case, there in the middle of the desert, I gathered that it mean, ‘So…Well?…What’s the difference?…Anyhow, to hell with it!*

“Nichevo,” I grinned back at him.

We both laughed. (IW, 109)

From this point forward, Hughes uses the virtually untranslatable *nichevo* so freely that it becomes part of his regular vocabulary, leaving his readers to figure out which inflection he prefers at any given time in any given place. This is the kind of translation that disrupts and reworks the real, to the extent that the real typically insists on more clear-cut distinctions between concepts and identities. In his autobiographies, Hughes routinely sabotages the operations of dominant discourses. Instead of a counterdiscourse, however, he offers us
the “the enigmatic present of language that attempts to reveal an opening in ourselves and the world we inhabit.”

To wit, we need not know any Russian to appreciate the myriad possibilities of niente in all sorts of cultural settings.

**SPANISH ACCENTS**

The discourses of race, gender, and nationality that Hughes takes to task are often quite specific to the conventions of USAmerican English. As such, they are quite distinct from other forms of English spoken and written in the Americas—for instance, the New Orleans Creole and the British West Indian “brogue” Hughes mentions in The Big Sea (92, 195)—and sometimes used in his plays. Given the linguistic cultural diversity of his autobiographical voice, it is well worth asking how his autobiographies have fared in translation. Both The Big Sea and I Wonder As I Wander make it abundantly clear that learning Spanish was vital for Hughes, even more important than learning French (see BS, 33–34). Knowing this particular language was his passport to the other parts of the Americas, notably Mexico and Cuba, and it mattered to him that “people in far-away lands” would be able to read his work (BS, 34). Indeed, his poetry and prose would be translated into a number of languages, even during his lifetime, among them French, German, Japanese, Russian, Portuguese, and, of course, Spanish. Since I discuss the Hispanic American translations of Hughes’s poems in the next chapter, I conclude my commentary on his autobiographies by taking a brief look at passages from two Spanish translations from Argentina: Luisa Rivaud’s El inmenso mar (1944) and Julio Gáler’s Yo viajo por un mundo encantado (1959). I reserve more detailed comments on these two translators for chapter 3.

There is no question that the nuances of Hughes’s rhetorical maneuvers, his puns and linguistic admixtures, and his insistence on a multilingual texture in which Spanish plays an important role make his autobiographies a formidable challenge for any translator, much more so even than his short stories and plays. And it is clear that both Gáler and Rivaud struggled with these issues, resolving them more or less successfully. Take, for instance, Hughes’s emphasis on sound and musicality, which is no less vital in I Wonder As I Wander than it is in The Big Sea, starting with the title’s homophony. This shared sound is entirely lost in Julio Gáler’s choice of a title, Yo viajo por un mundo encantado, an English retranslation of which would be “I am traveling in an enchanted world.” Hughes’s title would be more effectively rendered as “Erro maravillando”—“I wander wondering”—which better captures the sense of an incomplete and uncertain movement (in errar, to err or roam), as opposed to traveling (viajar), which implies having a destination and the expectation of returning home.

Not surprisingly, Rivaud encountered related problems in El inmenso mar. While Gáler had to navigate languages other than Spanish in I Wonder,
Rivaud was confronted with a situation in which the contrast between varying inflections and linguistic registers too easily fades in Spanish. In her rendition of the voice of the chief steward, for example, the quality of Hughes’s Spanglish disappears entirely behind flawless, unaccented Spanish, and clearly it would not have done to imitate the character’s Filipino English in what would have been his native tongue, or one of them. Similarly, the two voices in the Toluca scene become indistinguishable but for different reasons. Although vernaculars are notoriously difficult to translate, and philosophies differ widely about whether a black vernacular from the USA should be turned into, say, a black Colombian or Cuban dialect, the absence of an orthographic contrast makes it impossible to discern Hughes’s careful play on language and the layers of intralingual translation. The ironies with which Hughes ruptures the normative discourse in English are largely invisible and inaudible in this Spanish version. We catch only a residual glimpse of them when Rivaud distinguishes negro instruido, or “schooled Negro,” from negro educado, meaning an educated or learned Negro—her not very satisfying rendition of Hughes’s “educated Ne-gre.” There are many missed opportunities in El inmenso mar that are more likely the result of the inevitable cultural disparities between an African American from the USA and a European Jew in Argentina than a matter of outright mistranslation. In the same scene, we also no longer hear the woman’s utterances break down into stutter. “Why, Ah-Ah thought you was American” becomes “Ah! Yo creí que era usted americano” (IM, 90)—“Oh! I thought you were American.” It would have been fairly easy at least to render the stutter as “Y-yo” or even “Yo-yo.” That Rivaud chose not to do so makes one wonder if she, coming from and living in countries (Spain and Argentina) without significant populations of African descent and without comparable racial and racist lexicons, fully grasped the significance of this scene. It is not that Rivaud’s translation does not make any sense. The problem, rather, is that it often makes almost too much sense, that is, it is too comfortably readable for Spanish-speaking audiences. In Spanish, this key scene becomes mere anecdote instead of a disturbing reflection on racial and national identity.

Without overstating the significance of Hughes’s use of italics and other kinds of typeface, it is fair to say that they do modulate his meaning, often to a significant degree. Although fonts are visual markers, they also change how we hear words in our heads and require close attention from translators, especially in texts with linguistic overlap. Both Rivaud and Gáler tend to italicize and footnote words and phrases that are in Spanish in Hughes’s texts, although Rivaud is more inconsistent about this fairly standard practice and does not seem entirely comfortable with Hughes’s multilingual practice. While Americano de color is both italicized and footnoted in El inmenso mar, possibly because it would have been an unusual locution in Argentina, the more ubiquitous gringo and gringa are allowed to blend into the Spanish text. English book titles and lines from poems by Hughes and
others are routinely kept in English, with Spanish translations supplied in footnotes. One noteworthy example is Rivaud’s clunky translation of the title *Not Without Laughter*, Hughes’s first novel, as *No sin regocijo* (IM, 313), which the musicologist Nestor Ortíz Oderigo wisely chose not to adopt for his own Spanish version of the novel. His alternative, *Pero con risas*, gives the title a more graceful poetic turn. In other places, Rivaud is hesitant to retain English words in her translation, not even when Hughes foreignizes them in his own text by placing them in italics, as he does with “nigger” and “Negro” in the Toluca episode. It would have been perfectly plausible to have kept both of these words in the Spanish text, perhaps even with a footnote about the history and usage of “nigger.” Rivaud might have considered at least a reference to the later section “Nigger Heaven,” where Hughes himself uses Carl Van Vechten’s oft-maligned novelistic title as an occasion to comment on the word that “to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull.... The word nigger in the mouths of little white boys at school, the word nigger in the mouths of foremen on the job, the word nigger across the whole face of America! Nigger! Nigger! Like the word Jew in Hitler’s Germany” (BS, 268–69). Somewhat confusingly, Rivaud does not translate “nigger” at all in this section except in her version of Countee Cullen’s poem “Incident” in the footnote: “but he poked out / his tongue and called me, “Nigger,” becomes “pero el sacó / la lengua y me gritó, ‘Negro.’” But the Spanish noun negro does not render “nigger” as it is used in the Estados Unidos. As we shall see in the next chapter, there can be a world of difference between the two, as there is between negro and gente de color. Rivaud is not particularly sensitive to such nuances, nor does she seem to realize that the word “Jew” (judío) needs not quotation marks but italics to complete the link to the Third Reich (see IM, 279). That Rivaud refrains entirely from any interpretive annotations might be regarded as a virtue, but it also perhaps shows that she is being pushed to the limits of her cultural understanding. Gáler, by contrast, is a more confident translator who does not shy away from informing his Spanish-speaking readers that “Yeah Man” is a “Deformación de ‘Yes-man,’ que significa: ‘hombre que obeede ciegamente’” (deformation of “Yes-man,” which means: “a man who agrees or obeys silently”). He is also flexible and astute enough to turn Hughes’s “Ooo-wee Harm-Strung” into the equally comical “Uuu-i Jarm-Strang,” adapting the sound of the phrase to the phonetic requirements of Spanish (Yo viajo, 89, 118).

Black Internationalisms

Despite the challenges that Hughes’s autobiographies present for translators and even despite the often scathing reviews each received, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder As I Wander* are the only autobiographies by a Harlem Renaissance
writer to be translated into Spanish shortly after their initial publication. To be sure, Hughes was already very well known in the Hispanic Americas from the earlier translations of many of his poems, which I examine in the next two chapters. But that, I contend, was not the only reason. Hughes’s heightened sensitivity to being always in translation was rather unique among the New Negro intellectuals who gathered mainly in Harlem and Washington, D.C. The literary sensibility that grows out of such sensitivity to translation does not necessarily have anything to do with how many languages someone knows. Rather, it is a matter of what precise role other languages play in self-perception and in (self-) writing. James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, and others certainly had linguistic competencies in languages other than English. Yet few of their literary writings have inspired translations.88 This is not insignificant in light of Brent Edwards’s argument that “the cultures of black internationalism can be seen only in translation. It is not possible to take up the question of ‘diaspora’ without taking account of the fact that the great majority of peoples of African descent do not speak or write English.”89

I wrap up this chapter by amplifying Edwards’s point. To this end, I offer a condensed commentary on a text that pays homage to Langston Hughes in a rather unusual way: Manuel Zapata Olivella’s epic novel Changó el Gran Putas (1983, 1985), which Jonathan Tittler, a bit stuffily, translated as Changó, the Biggest Badass (2010). While there are many who have dedicated and addressed poems to Hughes—some of these tributes serve as epigraphs to my chapters—Zapata Olivella went so far as to make his friend a novelistic character. In a scene from Changó’s fifth and final section, Zapata Olivella grafts his own encounter with Hughes in 1940s Harlem onto a fictionalized meeting between Hughes and the Jamaican pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey.90 Garvey is the historical mask that Ngafúa, the messenger of the titular Yorùbá deity, has donned for the occasion. Changó-Ngafúa-Garvey, in turn, is recounting the exchange with Hughes for Agne Brown, a character that strikes me as a cross between Zora Neale Hurston and Angela Davis. I quote the passage at some length because it situates Langston Hughes at several important crossroads, some already familiar, others yet to be explored.

El viento frío no lograba descapotar los muelles de Sandy Hook, en New York…. Y esa mañana, Agne Brown, el vapor “S.S. Malone” atraco inesperadamente en la punta de Manhattan. Langston Hughes desembarca con el envoltorio de su ropa bajo el brazo. La visera de su gorra o las noches le han oscurecido la mirada. Hasta sus viejos zapatos necesitan un poco de luz. Anduvo buscando los libros que diez meses atrás arrojara a las aguas estancadas del puerto como si aún estuvieran allí esperando su regreso.

Años después me confesaría que en aquella partida lo embargaban los temores:
—Marcus Garvey, yo tenía veintiún años como tú, cuando embarqué en este
same port heading to Africa. I have washed my face in the Niger and Congo Rivers where our ancestors were hunted down. I know France, Germany, Italy, Holland, and Spain. At that time I left with seven dollars. I don’t know if I return enriched or poorer.

Miró hacia los rojos edificios de Harlem y en voz alta, como si se confesará ante sus Ancestros, recita aquel poema:

He contemplado ríos,
viejos, oscuros, con la edad del mundo
y con ellos, tan viejos y sombríos
el corazón se me volvió profundo…

[The cold wind did not manage to blow the top off the covered docks of Sandy Hook, in New York…. And that morning, Agne Brown, the steamer S.S. Malone moored at the tip of Manhattan. Langston Hughes disembarks with his clothes bundled under his arm. Either the brim of his hat or the late nights have darkened his gaze. Even his old shoes could stand a little light. He walked about searching for the books that he had thrown into the port’s stagnant waters ten months earlier, as if they would still be waiting there for his return.

Years later, he will confess to me that fears engulfed him during that departure. “Marcus Garvey, I was twenty-one years old like you when from this very port I set sail for Africa. I have bathed my face in the Niger and Congo Rivers, where the traders hunted down our grandparents. I know France, Germany, Italy, Holland, and Spain. At the time I left I had seven dollars in my pocket. I don’t know if I return wealthier or poorer.”

He looked toward the red buildings of Harlem and, as if confessing to his Ancestors, recites aloud this poem:

I have contemplated rivers,
old, dark, the world’s age,
and with them, so old and somber,
my heart grew deep…]^{91}

This scene can be read as a conjoined translation of *The Big Sea* and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Zapata Olivella invokes the opening frame of *The Big Sea* to peg Hughes as a transatlantic traveler, not setting out but returning home in this instance. At first glance, Hughes seems to be the weary voyager situated squarely in the Europe-Africa-USA triangulation that we easily recognize as a version of the Black Atlantic. Garvey’s Jamaica is an implicit part of this configuration; so is Hughes’s own encounter with “Mother Africa.” The Atlantic triangle, however, is but a partial shape here. By transplanting the erstwhile poet laureate of the Negro race into a Colombian novel, Zapata Olivella repositions Hughes in time and space, extending the poet’s travels in the Hispanic Americas to a place he never
visited in person. Zapata Olivella thus makes the hemispheric Americas a directional axis that intersects with that of the Atlantic world. We might say that the Black Atlantic meets the Black Americas in the playfully fluid temporalities of the novel that also encompass the time of its own publication in the late twentieth century and the place where it was written and published, Bogotá. Their junction and overlap are as vital to Zapata Olivella’s grand Afro-diasporic literary project as they are to my own scholarly endeavors. The main difference—other obvious differences aside—is that my focus is not exclusively on the African diaspora.

Translation is at issue in this extract from Changó in several ways. Indeed, Zapata Olivella explicitly posits the need for translation a bit later in the novel by having his narrator excitedly tell Hughes about a new journal entitled “el Nuevo Negro”—*The New Negro*—which, unlike Alain Locke’s celebrated 1925 collection, has “secciones en francés y español para aquellos de West Indies y América Hispana que no conocen el inglés” (sections in French and Spanish for those from the West Indies and Spanish America who don’t know English). Most conspicuously, however, translation moves into the foreground when the fictional Hughes recites a poem by the historical Hughes, arguably his most famous verse, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” He recites it in Spanish, of course. This is not the first time that Zapata Olivella pays homage to Hughes by using this very poem in one of his novels. On neither occasion did he use a translation of his own. The unacknowledged translator whose work Zapata Olivella quotes in both Changó and the autobiographical *He visto la noche* (I’ve Seen the Night), is the Colombian poet Carlos López Narváez, who included “EL Negro habla de los ríos” in his 1952 anthology of French- and English-speaking writers, *El cielo en el río* (The Sky in the River). López Narváez took considerable liberties with Hughes’s text that find their way into Tittler’s English version as well. What Tittler offers is a retranslation of the poem that displaces Hughes’s English text. It is worth comparing Tittler’s translation of López Narváez’s to Hughes’s prior version of his poem’s final stanza:

I have contemplated rivers,
old, dark, the world’s age,
and with them, so old and somber,
my heart grew deep…

I’ve known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(*CP*, 23)

I will have more to say about other Hispanic American translations of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in chapters 3 and 4. For now, suffice it to
point out that having “contemplated rivers” is clearly not the same as having “known rivers,” neither in English nor in Spanish. As if representing the act of growing more ponderous, the stanza in López Narváez’s poem is now a syntactical unit that takes up the space of four lines rather than three, regularizing the shape of Hughes’s unrhymed stanza by turning it into a quatrain with an abab rhyme scheme. Unable to render the Spanish rhymes in English, Tittler only follows López Narváez’s lead in loosening up Hughes’s notably denser diction and clipped syntax and in unifying Hughes’s three discrete statements, one per line almost like a syllogism, into a single sentence. In this way, the stanza acquires an ungainliness quite untypical of Hughes’s tighter modernist verse.

Because it is a translation of a translation, Tittler’s version of López Narváez’s Spanish adaptation of Hughes’s poem raises the question of how a translation relates to a presumed original, and it does so with greater emphasis and urgency than most other translations would. In this case, which is admittedly more complicated than a more typical translation from one language into another, the presumably unidirectional flow of translation is reversed such that the Spanish text assumes the status a new “original.” When transferred (back?) to English, that new, other original becomes a new poem. Neither the Spanish nor the new English version is identical with, or equivalent to, Hughes’s poem. What Tittler gives us, then, are lines that Hughes, in fact, never wrote. It is unclear whether Tittler deliberately offered his own translation of these lines or whether he simply did not recognize “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in Changó. Either way, it seems oddly logical to have the imagined Hughes recite a poem that the historical Hughes actually did not write. After all, Zapata Olivella’s character is both Hughes and not Hughes; the historical Hughes was no more of a Garveyite than Sandy Hook is in New York. Analogously, a translation is both a version of another text and a new text in its own right.

It is fitting that Zapata Olivella should choose to retool a key scene from The Big Sea to move the poet into closer ideological proximity to Marcus Garvey’s Pan-African project. In The Big Sea, Hughes does, after all, focus on what connects people of color—not only African Americans from the USA—worldwide. Hughes, unlike his fictional counterpart in the novel, did not support Garvey, and he may never even have met the charismatic orator outside the pages of Zapata Olivella’s novel. And unlike Garvey, Hughes had been to Africa. Hughes was also hardly unaware of the Jamaican’s tremendous—and to some, frightening—popularity among USAmericans of African descent at or near the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Many attended his famed rallies in Harlem, and many bought stock in the Black Star Line, an investment enterprise that was to become the instrument of Garvey’s political undoing. These were of course the same people who stomped to the blues of W. C. Handy, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and later Muddy Waters, the low-down, often criminalized black folk after whom
Hughes modeled many a character in his poems. Hughes’s internationalism, however, went far beyond the racial essentialism that continues to cling to terms such as “Pan-Africanism,” “Afro-centrism,” and even “African diaspora.” In *The Big Sea*, as in his poetry, Hughes shows us how black internationalism as a discourse emerges in the multiple mediations and refractions that occur when people who speak in different languages interact with each other, often generating meanings several times removed from the original utterances, meanings that also take on lives of their own. In *I Wonder As I Wander*, his sense of belonging reaches well beyond the expected areas of the African diaspora—Europe, Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean—to include Russia and what are now the central Asian republics. It is through metaphorical and literal acts of translation that Hughes knits together these varied sites into a global cultural network that extends far beyond the still largely anglophone idea of an Atlantic world.

Modeling the dynamics of cross-cultural and cross-racial communities, Hughes’s autobiographies stand as remarkable reminders that the intersecting discourses of black internationalism and international modernism do not come into being as fully formed abstractions. First and foremost, they exist as layers of the fundamentally chaotic conversations people carried out in different places at overlapping points in time. A literary artist such as Hughes reimagines the formless chaos of lived experience, reworking it into distinctive shapes and patterns in which multilingual, translational processes become visible on the page and audible in the reader’s mind. To read Hughes’s work attentively means to participate in the process of negotiating linguistic, cultural, and ideological differences; to experience what it is like to straddle the divisions between them; and, above all, to keep moving. To keep moving, in the context of Hughes’s autobiographies, means that there is no closure, only more openings. It also means that acts of translation do not overcome or resolve cultural differences. Translation is a process of reimagining those differences that lays the groundwork for mutual respect. It is worth noting that decades before Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and others started to theorize diaspora as a frame for cultural identity determined by dispersal and difference, Hughes had already put into literary practice a plurilingual, heterocultural poetics that articulated “the knowledge of [one’s] moving.”