"I let down my nets and pulled." Langston Hughes' *The Big Sea* (1940) as a Slave-Narrative Inspired Autobiography

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The aim of the essay is to investigate the connection between the slave narrative and the Harlem Renaissance through Langston Hughes' *The Big Sea* (1940). The work recalls Hughes' personal growth and professional development from a struggle-filled young adulthood to becoming an accomplished literary figure. I consider Hughes's text a slave narrative-inspired autobiography. In order to substantiate my hypothesis I primarily rely on Frances Smith Foster and Kim Green's cyclical interpretation of the slave narrative, John Olney's theory concerning the respective form and content related conventions, and Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope model. I identify three formative experiences in Hughes's life: his extended stay with his father in Mexico at age 19, his voyage to Africa in 1923 and his "sociological study trip" to the South in 1924. My treatise retraces how the options provided by the genre of autobiography helped Langston Hughes to convert an unwritten self into literary representation.

Keywords: life writing, agency, ports of call, pulpits of consultation, pastoral chronotope

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Introduction

One of the main aspects of African American literature is the construction of racial identity, which is usually realized via a set of dyads or "a linked series of opposites" entailing Black/white, enslaved/free individual, European/African, etc. (Smethurst 563). The Harlem Renaissance, a period of flourishing black literary production and growing mainstream appreciation, reflects both the construction of race and a break from this tradition as well. The era encompassing the third decade of the twentieth century saw the emergence of such acclaimed authors as Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. Although this movement is generally considered an essentialist variant of modernism, the very term, Renaissance, implies a "return to and reengagement with the texts of the past"(Stokes 29). Such literary retrospection (Stokes 29) is signaled by the rediscovery of the slave narrative as indicated by James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1927) and Langston Hughes' *The Big Sea* (1940).

The connection between the slave narrative and the Harlem Renaissance autobiography has been explored by several scholars. Dennis Chester asserts that *The Big*

Sea is a "derivative of early slave narratives" (44), while Claudia Stokes identifies both formal and content-based similarities with Hughes' text as she "equates [the search for] manhood and self-determination" in the slave narrative with the author's striving to achieve "literary control" in *The Big Sea* (34). Another example is Johnson's novel mentioned above. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* displays such time-honored conventions of the genre as the self-affirmatory introduction, the detailed description of the racially mixed family background, along with the Preface of the Publishers (31) offering a "bird's-eye view of the conflict" [...] brought on by the respective "race drama" (Johnson).

The significance of the slave narrative is based on its capability to provide an authentic description of enslavement and its social, cultural, and psychological consequences. Along with the Indian captivity narrative, it conveys the myth of American origination, while it refutes such stereotypical images of blacks as the savage brute, the tragic mulatto, the wretched freedman, or the natural slave. Zsolt Virágos highlights the slave narrative as a survival and success story (197). In Houston Baker's view, the authentic description of the slavery experience functioned as a means of the slave to write himself or herself into being (*Journey* 30), while Arna Bontemps considers the slave narrative the Rosetta Stone of early America (Sekora 483).[1] In the same vein, Baker holds that the narratives themselves are derivatives of the blues matrix, which is the foundation of black culture in general (Baker *Blues* 14). This interlocking system offering a code to interpret African American cultural production entails progress from the "obdurate economics of slavery to a resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity" (13). As Baker asserts, one of the leading blues moments is provided by the best-known examples of the genre, Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* (13-14).

The slave narrative, which John Barbour considers to be, along with the Indian captivity narrative, one of the principal forms of American autobiography (Juster 9), questions the very idea of race construction. The slave narrative can be divided into three categories: the late eighteenth century—mostly Afro-Briton—texts, the classic antebellum accounts of the first half of the nineteenth century, and the neo-slave narrative, a principally twentieth-century version of the latter. In light of Vincent Caretta's four-part interpretation of the slave trade[2] and Richard Van Der Beets' modeling of the plot of the Indian captivity narrative[3], the first-generation narrative—among others, Ottobah Cuguano's "Thoughts and Sentiments" (1787) and Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* (1789)—includes the following stages: separation from the homeland, relegation into the position of an object, integration into the system of slavery, and the eventual acquisition of subject status. The acquisition stage includes the determination to escape, escape itself, (self) emancipation, and

1 Just like in case of the actual Rosetta Stone, whose ""decipherment led to the understanding of hieroglyphic writing" (Augustyn), the slave narrative had become an authentic source of information concerning the social, economic, and political relations of the respective period.

2 The process includes capture, the Middle Passage, seasoning, or introduction into the system of slavery, and full enslavement (Caretta 296).

3 According to Van Der Beets, the given experience can be divided into three main stages, Separation, Transformation and Return (562).

reintegration into mainstream society. In the case of second, or even third-generation slave narratives, the model is simpler since the given individual is born into slavery. In the latter instance, exemplified by the accounts of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845) or Henry Bibb's *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures* (1849), such stages can be discerned as the slave's recognition of object status, determination to flee, escape, and reintegration into free society.

Inspired by the above mentioned research findings, my study delves further into the connection between the slave narrative and Hughes' autobiographical writing, which I view as a slave narrative-inspired autobiography. In order to substantiate this claim, I explore the particular plot, identify correlations and overlaps between the respective forms and conventions, and point out the relevance of selected autobiographical theory models. For the sake of realizing the given research objective, I will mainly rely on interpretations developed by Frances Smith Foster and Kim Green, in addition to that of John Sekura, Sidonie Smith,Julia Watson, and John Barbour. I will substantiate my findings with the help of Pierre Nora and Mikhail Bakhtin's critical views as well.

Journey and Personal Transformation in *The Big Sea*

Langston Hughes' (1902-1967) *The Big Sea* (1940) commemorates the author's personal and artistic development while it provides a behind-the-scenes look at the internal dynamics of the Harlem Renaissance. The text retraces Hughes' life through early adulthood. The account contains three formative experiences: Hughes' time spent in Mexico with his father at age 19, the voyage to Africa in 1923, and his visit to the South after his return in 1924. Hughes mostly grew up with his mother and stepfather, as his father deserted the family when he moved to Mexico and became a successful businessman. Years later, aiming to promote the personal well-being and career of his son, he invited him to his ranch. Hughes' move to Mexico alienated him from his mother, who maintained a hostile and tension-filled relationship with her former spouse. Despite the extended time spent in Mexico and the attendant personal development that entailed learning Spanish and becoming familiar with accounting, Hughes could not get closer to his father. While James N. Hughes wanted his son to escape restrictions posed by the color bar in the United States by studying mining engineering in Europe and eventually resettling in Mexico, Langston refused to follow his father's footsteps and chose to study at Columbia University instead (62).

The other major episode is the journey to Africa in 1923. At the age of twenty-one, Hughes signed up to serve on a West Africa-bound merchant marine vessel, the SS Malone, as a mess boy. In addition to retracing the Middle Passage, the voyage entails a confrontation between the myth of Africa and the sobering reality. Having returned from his trip, Hughes attempted to reintegrate into American society. After taking various odd jobs in 1924, he eventually enrolled in Columbia University, only to drop out later in the same year. Although he deserted the Ivy League, he continued his education at Lincoln University of Philadelphia. Fulfilling a self-imposed sociological

research project in 1924, he took a longer visit to the South, including the states of Louisiana and Georgia where, despite his status as a budding writer and poet from the North, he ran into the frustrating restrictions of the color line. Hughes indeed provides a "behind-the-scenes look" at the Harlem Renaissance as he brings to life the excitement of the period along with providing a panorama of the contemporary cultural and literary elite. Hughes' account ends with him becoming an established author in 1930 when his first novel *Not without Laughter* is published.

2.1 The Text as Autobiography

The autobiographical aspects of the account reveal the applicability of Smith and Watson's concept of life writing, while Elizabeth Bruss' theory of the autobiographical act and John Barbour's view of the slave narrative as the cornerstone or primary example of the specific genre offer the backbone of the forthcoming analysis. Although Smith and Watson distinguish between life writing and life narrative, as the former refers to all writing in which life is a subject and the latter being self-referential, Hughes' work qualifies on both counts. At the same time, it can be considered as an autobiographical narrative, combining imaginative acts of remembering—in other words, subjective memory—with rhetorical acts such as assertion, judgment, conviction, or interrogation (16).

The text, due to its original self-affirmatory intent, includes several aspects of assertion. When Hughes declares: "And right then, even before I was six, books began to happen to me, so that after a while, there came a time when I believed in books more than in people—which, of course, was wrong. That was why, when I went to Africa, I threw all the books into the sea" (29), he reverses his former conviction. Seeing "the raised club, the commanding white man, and the frightened native" (112) on the ship brings the antebellum plantation to mind, while noticing Africans working like slaves in loading mahogany boards brings him to the remark: "perhaps someday [these logs would be] somebody's grand piano or chest of drawers made of wood and life, energy and death out of Africa (111).

Smith and Watson also identify the components of the autobiographical effort as memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency (16). Hughes' experiences in Africa, Mexico, and the American South forged his truly multicultural identity. In him, one can see the embodiment of the new self-liberated black artist gaining agency via the examination of the self. Such a heightened self-awareness and subsequent essentialist pride led to his article, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), which became the manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes proudly declared:

> We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either (Hughes, "Mountain").

While the article became the declaration of independence for the black author ushering in an era of racial pride by a break with the accommodation-oriented past, the concept of the racial mountain symbolized the cultural and literary expectations of "the smug Negro middle class" (Hughes, "Mountain") and the white literary taste black authors or artists traditionally had to contend with.

According to Elizabeth Bruss, in the case of an autobiographical act the author takes responsibility for the writing of the text, similarly to Philip Lejeune's autobiographical contract. Hence, the text's producer, the author, and the protagonist are considered identical, and the author reaffirms his credibility testifying to the truth of the narrated events. Hughes' self-emancipation expresses his own responsibility for himself:

> I took them all out on deck and threw them overboard. 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 [...]. 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. (96)

The detailed descriptions of family history guarantee the authenticity of the narrator. Hughes' great grandfather was a proud man helping black slaves gain their freedom. In fact, his grandmother's first husband participated in John Brown's raid. Unlike the nineteenth-century slave narrative, the text does not have any introduction or preface written by a white author vouching for the validity of the account. Hughes proudly declares ownership for the events of his life. It is noteworthy that the text itself combines several genres, including the autobiography, the essay, and poetry, bearing similarity to the bricolated form of the Caribbean slave narrative. One such example was the narrative of Francisco Manzano[4] which, in addition to retracing his slavery experience in Cuba, contained poems by the author and the amanuensis as well.

John Barbour asserts that the slave narrative, along with the Indian captivity narrative, are the first forms of American autobiography. He states that the main foundation of these texts is religion and, on this base, three impulses—race, individualism, and healing—are positioned (Juster 9).Hughes, just like the authors of the slave narrative, maintains a skeptical view towards religion. This is manifested in the salvation episode as he feels pangs of guilt for imitating or faking an emotional connection to God. "But I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus any more, since he didn't come to help me" (24). He also presents the animistic aspect of African religion, when he reveals how he was barred from entering a ritual to celebrate the Omali god Ju-Ju. "White man never go see Ju-ju. Him hurt you! Him too awful! White man never go!' 'But I'm not a white man,' I objected. 'I'll—' 'You no black man, neither,' said Pey impatiently" (116).

4 Manzano, Juan Francisco. "Life of the Negro Poet, Written by Himself" (1840).

Race, evidently, is the other backbone of the text, manifested among others by the denial of Hughes' racial identity by Africans and his critique of the snobbery and condescending attitude of the black cultural establishment. While he recognizes the help of the sympathetic white author and a promoter of black literature, Carl Van Vechten, and he is grateful to an unknown benefactor, Hughes castigates the Washington black intelligentsia for its snobbery and haughty accommodationist attitude. The individualist aspect is aptly demonstrated by his wish to be a "man on [his] own, control [his] own life, and go [his] own way" (96). The voyage to Africa serves the purpose of psychological healing as well: "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" (96).

2. 2. Manifestations of the Slave Narrative in the Text

In this section, I illustrate the connection between the genre of the slave narrative and Hughes' text. I suggest plot-based, formal-conventional, and potential criticism-based similarities. In addition to the general linear interpretations of the confinement narrative espoused among others by Richard Van Der Beets, I deploy the cyclical approach of Foster and Green, while the circular theory of John Sekura will become applicable as well.

2.2.1. Connections Based on the Interpretation of the Plot

Eschewing the original linear perspective ranging from captivity to freedom, Frances Foster and Kim Green elaborated a cyclical view of the slave narrative. Their resulting model, "ports of call and pulpits of consultation," enumerates physical and metaphysical points of entry the slave passes through on the one hand, while presenting a moral commentary on the institution on the other. Uniting the physical and metaphysical aspects of the slavery experience entailing travel, exploration, and transition, ports of call refer to literal and figurative gateways, while pulpits signify the didactic and heuristic capacities of such texts. Moreover, the first component of Foster and Green's theory invokes the *picaro* motive, whereas pulpits of consultation entail commentary on the religious or political foundations of slavery. Consequently, in said light, the slave narrative can function either as a travelogue or a pamphlet with abolitionist potential (45).

This approach is suitable to the eighteenth-century slave narratives which primarily commemorate the Middle Passage. Such works include the accounts of James Albert Gronniosaw and Olaudah Equiano. Passing through the given port has both physical and metaphysical consequences. The account of events in the first port, usually the originally Portuguese slave-trading fortress of Elmina, is followed by objectification, as after embarkation the slaves were treated as cargo. The arrival to the New World, as recalled by Equiano, among others, amounted to a culture shock. "This heightened my wonder; and I was now more persuaded than

ever that I was in another world, and that every thing (sic) about me was magic" (206). Similarly to said works, Hughes' text contains several interrelated journeys: physical and spiritual, literal and symbolic, reminiscent of the ports of call and pulpits of consultation model. The trip on the SS Malone includes the New York (Sandy Hook) - African Coast- New York route. Leaving New York harbor behind is coterminous with self-emancipation.

In the following passage Hughes provides a virtual register of all ports he passed through in Africa: "Along the West Coast we visited some thirty-two ports, from Dakar in Senegal to Loanda in the South. The Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast, Lagos, the Niger, the Bight of Benin, and the Slave Coast, Calabar, the Kamerun, Boma up the Congo, where we were moored to a gigantic tree, and our last port, San Paolo de Loanda in Portuguese Angola" (105). While ports of call implied additional bondage or being sold at the market for the slave, Hughes negotiates the harbors of Africa in an adventurous spirit:"Africa! When the Captain let us draw money, we enjoyed ourselves in what is, I suppose, the fashion of sailors everywhere. We drank licker and went looking for girls" (106).

Regarding the pulpit function, while authors of slave narratives commented on the immorality of the slave trade or that of the whole "peculiar institution,"[5] Hughes expounds upon the absurdity of race construction by contrasting the myth of Africa with the actual reality. Faced with the invalidity of the myth of the motherland in Africa when he is considered a white man, in fact his very identity is denied, he experiences disillusionment. "Our problems in America are very much like yours' I told the Africans, 'especially in the South. I am a Negro, too.' But they only laughed at me and shook their heads and said: 'You, white man! You, white man!' It was the only place in the world where I've ever been called a white man" (102). The passage shows how his efforts to promote intercontinental and intra-racial solidarity are foiled by the respective differing interpretations of race.

The Kru from Liberia, viewing him as white for being one of "those foreign colored" (102) men, perform cultural exclusion and racial discrimination in reverse. In other words, in the eyes of the Africans Hughes is an object, and any meaningful communication or cultural exchange is precluded due to his lighter skin color or place of birth. Thus Hughes, othered by the Other, dejectedly remarks: "The great Africa of my dreams! But there 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" (15).

Another example of the arbitrariness of racial division is offered as Hughes recalls the way white Americans categorized him after returning from Mexico: "On the way back to Cleveland an amusing thing happened. During the trip to the border, several American whites on the train mistook me for a Mexican, and some of them even spoke to me in Spanish, since I am of a copper-brown complexion" (50). Being asked

5 The arbitrariness of the institution of slavery is well illustrated by Douglass when recounting his roots from the enslaver he puts the Hamian curse argument to rest:"[...] it will do away the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right. If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters (1649)."

at a St. Louis ice cream fountain whether he was a Mexican or a Negro resulted in an equally bizarre and detrimental description of the color bar: "Because if you're a Mexican, I'll serve you,' he said. 'If you're colored, I won't" (51).

Speaking from Foster and Green's pulpit, Hughes shares his views on the ubiquitous and devastating racial epithet responsible for physical, economic, social, and psychological harm as well: "The word *nigger*, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America: the slave-beatings of yesterday, the lynchings of today, the Jim Crow cars, the only movie show in town with its sign up FOR WHITES ONLY, the restaurants where you may not eat, the jobs you may not have" (251). Hughes, however, singles out another equally demoralizing and damaging result of segregation, namely racial self-hatred demonstrated by his father: "That's what I want you to do, Langston. Learn something you can make a living from anywhere in the world, in Europe or South America, and don't stay in the States, where you have to live like a nigger with niggers" (61).[6]

While segregation is different from slavery in form, it is a related pattern of the systematized race-based oppression leading to the rise of slave narratives. In Chester's view, Hughes' account qualifies as a Jim Crow narrative, similarly to that of Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) which, due to the author's birth in the antebellum period, is also considered a slave narrative (44). In this vein Hughes' work yields to the partial application of John Sekura's core and periphery model as well. The core is the institution of slavery or, in his case, segregation, the periphery implies the individual experience. The journey to the mythical homeland, followed by the failure of communication coupled with cultural exclusion and the eventual return, brings his experience full circle. Thus, Hughes signs up to serve as a mess boy in order to escape the de facto segregation experienced in the North. Subsequently, upon arrival at the West African coast, he is in fact faced with intra-racial discrimination and eventually he returns to the original point of departure. Although for obvious reasons the return phase can hardly, if ever, be discerned in slave narratives, Briton Hammon's *Narrative*[7] describes how after suffering as a captive at first of the Indians and later of the Spanish in the Caribbean and followed by a tumultuous "career" as a sailor in British warships he is reunited with his "good Master, General Winslow."

2.2.2 Connections Based on Form and Content

Hughes' text reveals several formal aspects and conventions of the slave narrative including the self-affirmatory introduction, the description of the racially impacted

6 Such racial self-hatred is applicable in the case of Harriet Jacobs' *Narrative* as she "admits that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. They do the work" (69).

7 Hammon, Briton. *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man*.(1760)

family background and the struggle to achieve personal integrity, along with a potential parallel with standard character types.

The author follows the respective self-affirming tradition and positions himself both chronologically and geographically: "I was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902, but I grew up mostly in Lawrence, Kansas" (18). John Olney distinguishes the main form and content-related features of the slave narratives. The term "I was born" reaffirms the personhood of the slave in light of the legally warranted chattel status, and the actual recalling of the ordeal in first person singular implies the slave's ability to cope with the tribulations mentioned (152-53).

In the second chapter titled "Negro," Hughes provides several parallels with the slave narrative, including the description of his family lineage, the direct connection to a white slave trader, and even to Henry Clay:

> I am brown. My father was a darker brown. My mother an olive-yellow. On my father's side, the white blood in his family came from a Jewish slave trader in Kentucky, Silas Cushenberry, of Clark County, who was his mother's father; and Sam Clay, a distiller of Scotch descent, living in Henry County, who was his father's father. So on my father's side both male great-grandparents were white, and Sam Clay was said to be a relative of the great statesman, Henry Clay, his contemporary (16).

This passage implies a link with the indirect slave narrative, the account of slavery included in the correspondence or texts of mainstream authors or those written by the representatives of the slaveholding society (Tarnóc 65). One such example is John Gabriel Stedman's report on his participation in putting down the slave rebellion in Surinam.[8] Furthermore, William Lloyd Garrison, in his book-length letter attacking Lajos Kossuth during his visit to America for his professed neutrality on the topic of slavery, singled out the Hungarian statesman as the lackey of the slaveholding and slave breeding government. The work also contains Garrison's recollection of the cruel treatment of Lewis Richardson, one of Clay's slaves, and retraces how Richardson determines to escape and becomes a spokesman for the abolition movement.

Taking the second-generation narrative into consideration, Hughes directly experienced de facto segregation, which resulted in a determination to escape. The first escape or separation attempt was the move to his father's ranch in Mexico. While he definitely was not relegated to the status of a slave, he was subordinated to the will of his father, regardless of the fact that the latter wanted to make life better for him through education. Hughes even reached the nadir of the slavery experience, the stage of symbolic death when the ordeals of captivity lead to suicidal thoughts or actual attempts to kill oneself. "I began to be very sorry for myself, in a strange land in a mountain town, where there wasn't a person who spoke English. It was very cold at night and quiet, and I had no money to get away, and I was lonesome. I began to wish I had never been born—not under such circumstances" (47). Several slave narratives include this stage, suffice it to refer to Douglass as he laments: "I often found myself

8 *Narrative of a Five Year's Expedition amongst the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796).

regretting my own existence, and wished myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed," (1665). Likewise, in Briton Hammon's text combining both the Indian captivity narrative and the slave narrative, the protagonist expresses his state of mind after suffering an Indian ambush:"I immediately jump'd overboard, chusing rather to be drowned, than to be kill'd by those barbarous and inhuman Savages" (Hammon).

Hughes's inability to maintain close relations with his father and, in fact, losing his power of expression, leads to a decision to escape: "As the weeks went by, I could think of less and less to say to my father. His whole way of living was so different from mine, his attitude toward life and people so amazing, that I fell silent and couldn't open my mouth when he was in the house" (47). The fact that he plans his departure in secret is reminiscent of the slave narrative's description of the slave's escape: "Not caring what that meant, I made up my mind to see about getting away myself" (66). The transatlantic voyage symbolizes the desire to reach subject status, which culminates in throwing his books into the ocean soon after his departure. Getting rid of his previous readings represents self-emancipation and a personal and artistic declaration of independence while it echoes the motto of the modernist movement: "Make It New!"

One standard aspect of slave narratives is the physical confrontation with the representative of the slaveholding society, as shown in accounts written by Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, Francisco Manzano, or Harriet Jacobs. Hughes' clash with the Third Engineer, who wanted to remove African families while he was having dinner is reminiscent of Douglass' altercation with Edward Covey: "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" (113). Just like when Douglass' fight with the overseer helped him to rekindle the "few expiring embers of freedom and revived a [...] sense of [his] own manhood" (1679), Hughes achieves self-liberation and invokes racial pride and solidarity.

Baker's view of the blues functioning as a foundation of African American cultural and literary production along with his recognition of blues moments in Douglass' work, not to mention Hughes' regular deployment of the respective motif in his art, suggests the relevance of the given idea to the present inquiry. Baker posits that the blues offers a "vernacular trope for cultural explanation"(14). He identifies the slave narrative perpetuating personal suffering and victory over the given ordeal as a blues text or a blues moment. Hughes, however, undergoes mostly psychological tribulation due to a distant father, or being continuously hampered by the restrictions of the color bar. The potential causes of his suffering include "the memory of [his] father, the poverty and uncertainties of [his] mother's life, the stupidities of color-prejudice, [being] 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" (96).

While Baker locates the blues performer at the juncture of the train tracks, Hughes appears to negotiate the physical and metaphysical crossroads composed of American and African culture along with the snobbery of the Washington black elite and the

down-to-earth community of average blacks. “To me it did not seem good, for the ‘better class’ Washington colored people, as they called themselves, drew rigid class and color lines within the race against Negroes who worked with their hands, or who were dark in complexion and had no degrees from colleges” (196).The autobiography itself also contains several references to the blues as a leading motif of Hughes’ poetry, exemplified by “The Weary Blues” (92).

Hughes finds the blues moment with “people [...] on Lenox Avenue in New York, or Seventh Street in Washington or South State in Chicago—people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten” (246). In another episode, Hughes invokes the blues and the Negro spirituals as the tangible evidence of the black past. He visited a plantation in Georgia where he came across one of the descendants of Jean Toomer, the author of another outstanding work of the Harlem Renaissance, *Cane* (1923). The old black man was wearing a worn patchwork hat, which reminded Hughes of “the quaint soul of labor in the Old South, caroling softly souls of slavery” (278).

2.2.3 Connection through Critical Interpretation

The centrality of the voyage to Africa in Hughes’ narrative and the actual transatlantic passage gives rise to the application of two critical approaches otherwise relevant to the slave narrative. The idea of travel, regardless whether forced or voluntary, entails the application of the chronotope viewed by Mikhail Bakhtin as a binary conceptual structure implying the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” within a given text (84). Chronotopes have two main types, the pastoral pattern and the one reflecting displacement (Ganser et al. 2). In the case of the first, space dominates over time. The pastoral pattern can be found in traditional travelogues commemorating a journey undertaken at the traveler’s will and usually refers to an idyllic immersion in the beauty of the landscape. In the chronotope expressing displacement, the temporal or time-oriented perspective prevails over spatiality (Ganser et al. 2).The first-generation slave narrative, describing among others the ordeal of the Middle Passage, is characterized by the displacement chronotope, while Hughes offers an example of the pastoral one.

The SS Malone, the ship on which he traveled to and along the coast of Africa, functions as a chronotope, a concept fusing space and time and the respective journey facilitates an answer to Countee Cullen’s rhetorical question “What is Africa to me?” posed in his poem “Heritage” (1922). Hughes writes:“The crossing was bright and sunny. We reached the Azores, the Canaries, and finally Africa. A long, sandy coastline, gleaming in the sun. Palm trees sky-tall. Rivers darkening the sea’s edge with the loam of their deltas. People, black and beautiful as the night” (101). Due to his nervous anticipation of seeing Africa, the attractiveness of the given space takes precedence over the duration of the journey. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Hughes rarely indicates the length of the given voyage.

Naturally, the ship Hughes serves on plies the same waters as the slave transporting vessels did. Just like in the case of the slave narrative, the bodies of water have special

significance. Having left America, the SS Malone is suspended between two cultures. Accordingly, both the physical connection to and the commemoration of slavery are represented by the actual vessel crossing the Atlantic.

Toni Morrison, building on Pierre Nora's *lieux de memoire* concept, argues that in African American culture, bodies of water serve as lieux de memoire, or sites of memory. "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was" (99). Nora identifies places of memory as physical and metaphysical repositories of remembrance with material, functional, and symbolic dimensions (19). Therefore, the Atlantic Ocean, the site of the black community's originary trauma, serves as a *lieu de memoire*. The actual bones of the victims as gruesome reminders of the slave trade represent the material aspect, the water and its capability to remember to symbolize the organic perspective of black history, while the very crossing stands for the archetypal black cultural experience (Wardi 6).

Although occurring in an opposite direction, Hughes's water crossing serves as a *lieu de memoire* as well. A *lieu de memoire* can be conveyed verbally, kinetically, and visually (O'Meally and Fabre 8). The verbal aspect is the actual description of the given action or concept. The kinetic dimension represents motion at sea, while the visual side commemorates the landscape. Thus, the actual concept in fact underlines the idea of the chronotope as well. The kinetic and visual aspects are represented by this passage: "The next day we moved on. And farther down the coast it was more like the Africa I had dreamed about—wild and lovely, the people dark and beautiful, the palm trees tall, the sun bright, and the rivers deep" (15).

Hughes further reinforces the cultural importance of water by recalling how his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was born during his trip to Mexico."[W] e crossed the Mississippi, slowly, over a long bridge. I looked out the window of the Pullman at the great muddy river flowing down toward the heart of the South, and I began to think what that river, the old Mississippi, had meant to Negroes in the past—how to be sold down the river was the worst fate that could overtake a slave in times of bondage" (55). The poem helps Hughes to form a linkage with antebellum slavery and, by extension, the slave narrative. The symbolic aspect of the *lieu de memoire* is the river, as it functions as the representation of the black soul: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (55).

Conclusion

Langston Hughes' autobiography, *The Big Sea*, demonstrates that the slave narrative influenced the text through form, content, and message. Naturally, not all elements of the slave narrative can be found in the text. *The Big Sea* in fact provides a behind-the-scenes view of the internal dynamics of the Harlem Renaissance, revealing the ruptures of intra-racial cooperation, the clash between the values of Seventh Street and the Washington cultural elite, along with Hughes' acrimonious conflict with Zora Neale Hurston over the publication of a jointly authored play titled "Mule Bone" (314). The Harlem Renaissance is a special, race-specific, essentialist version of modernism. It is a break with the accommodationist cultural

past, amounting to the declaration of cultural independence and the coming of age of Black America.

Thus, it follows the above that the most significant aspect of the related works is the enunciation of identity. Hughes breaks away from his previous self, limited by de facto segregation, and declares individual and artistic independence. Similarly to Frederick Douglass, Hughes retraces how he "discovers the path to true self-hood and freedom." He aims to return to his African roots, but the mission does not reach its original objective. The literary or genre-based connection is implied by the life writing aspect. Hughes' text displays the main features of both the slave narrative and the autobiography. He let his nets down in the big sea of literature (311) and dedicated himself to literary retrospection. The text implies that he asserted himself against the racial mountain. Faithfully performing the main function of the slave narrative, that is, to write the slave into being, Hughes does the same by describing his own attempts to reach the status of a full-fledged, legitimate literary figure.

Hughes invokes the slave narrative due to a strong internal compulsion to pay homage to his forebears, but he is remarkably influenced by the self-assertive and self-emancipatory dimensions of the given literary product as well. Accordingly, the message of *The Big Sea* can be summed up in a modernist version of Douglass' famous chiasmic statement, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man"(1676) as "you have seen how an artist was made a victim of segregation; you shall see how the victim of segregation was made an artist."In sum, Langston Hughes maximizes the potentials inherent in autobiographical literature as he converts an unwritten self into literary representation.

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