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Modernity at Sea
December 11th, 2017

Hughes, Blues, and Polygot Crews
The American Sailor Class as Portrayed by Langston Hughes

For nearly a century, Langston Hughes has captured the hearts of countless subsects of American society with his ability to speak on behalf of the "common person," in the words of literary historian Steven Tracy (98). Yet unlike many of his contemporaries, Hughes wrote in an easily readable style; his flow and rhythm are catchy, his words are pithy, his structure draws you in. These qualities helped Hughes reach millions of readers who had largely been left out of American poetry prior to the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, members of the working class, African Americans, and other oppressed groups throughout American history found a champion in Hughes for his ability to speak and write in their language, to tell their stories as *they* would tell them—not the traditional, opaque language of Romantic or even other American poets. As such, the theme of race particularly dominates his works, as Hughes used his poetry as a means to engage in social battles.

Yet, a series of works from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*—namely "Water-Front Streets," "Farewell," "Long Trip," "Port Town," "Sea Calm," "Caribbean Sunset," "Seascape," and "Natcha," hereafter referred to as the sailor or dock poems series—show a unique point in Hughes' career, wherein he pivots away from viewing American society through a racial lens. As analyzing the formal poetic elements and recurrent themes throughout the series will show, Hughes understood the American sailor as a fundamentally united class, as their

experiences as a people at sea were initiated by economic necessity, which then grew into the sailor culture that Hughes portrays in the series.

To understand the shift in Hughes' focus toward the American sailor, we must first understand the events of Hughes' life that prompted the series. As literary historian Steven Tracy chronicles in his *Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, Hughes spent time as a merchant seaman in the 1920s. Tracy writes,

> As with Melville's Ishmael, the African American narrator [Hughes] who has shipped out on a freighter bound for West Africa with a polygot crew of "Greeks, West Indian Negroes, Irish, Portuguese, and Americans" finds an "America" in which normative bonds of race, nationality, and ethnicity are at times temporarily transcended, redrawn, and reconfirmed — tellingly the Americans, black and white, are not always clearly marked by race. (142)

Indeed, Hughes' journey with this "polygot crew" led him to view a part of America without the typical dynamics of race. Hughes didn't so much as see the American sailor through a completely deracialized lens, but rather saw him as a member of a collective that "transcended" the typical racial dichotomy of America at the time. But without the commonality of race to unify the American sailor, Hughes had to turn somewhere. Hence, the shared economic impetus, leading into the shared experience aboard, takes stage as the unifying force in the series.

Though Hughes' purpose in his series stands as quite unique from his other works, he employs many of the same components of his standard style. To employ some of the theoretical terms that essayist Karl Henzy describes in his article in *Callaloo,* "Langston Hughes's Poetry and the Metaphysics of Simplicity," one can analyze Hughes' works through the framework of "Metajazz" and "Metablues," along with "Ventriloquism" and "Documentarianism." Indeed, as the musical genres of blues and jazz found their roots in the common struggles and resilience of the African American community, Hughes' poetic style grew out of a calling to connect with the

African American experience at-large. As Henzy eloquently put it, Hughes' style is "simple, but not simplistic," and thus elicits an entire "Metaphysics of Simplicity" (915).

In essence, these terms center around the idea that the ability to address the profoundly difficult problems of humanity through "simple," "light," and even "playful" means defines much of Hughes' style (915). As such, Hughes employs a jazz- or blues-like rhyme scheme and metric architecture, vernacular word choice, groovy onomatopoeia among other techniques. "Ventriloquism" and "Documentarianism" center less around the means of Hughes' style, and more toward the ends—namely to convey the human experience of whichever group Hughes is representing in any particular poem through words they themselves might employ (hence, Hughes as a "documentarian" or "ventriloquist"). These theoretical lenses will allow us to understand Hughes' dock poems with greater nuance than would traditional poetic devices, as anything that may appear "simple" elsewhere, takes on profound meaning in Hughes' agenda.

In order to better understand Hughes' overarching goal in his series, we must consider how Hughes historically employed serial poetry (namely the short, sequential form in which Hughes arranged the dock poems) to portray his subjects. As Tracy explains, Hughes recurrently wrote in the serial poetic form, or "montage poetry," to better represent the larger experience of one part of society. In one of his most important works, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), Hughes relies on the "cinematic technique of cutting rapidly from one shot to another, juxtaposing disparate images," with the "shots" being small, often two-line poems acting as "voices of America's ghettos, as an evocation of the dream deferred" (Tracy, 76). Both the Harlem series and the dock series parallel film montages of the voices of their respective

subjects. Just as *Montage of a Dream Deferred* targeted the Harlem struggle relating to race, Hughes targeted the common *class* struggle of the American sailor in his "montage" of American sailors at sea.

With the poems unified as a montage of the American sailor experience, analyses of individual poems and the will yield further nuance to Hughes' message. Indeed, before the sailors even reach the sea, Hughes unites them as a class; Hughes depicts the American sailor class as "wanderers" out of economic necessity, hoping to find stability in the opportunities of maritime labor. In "Farewell," Hughes writes,

> With gypsies and sailors,
> Wanderers of the hills and seas,
> I go to seek my fortune
> …
> But you will not miss me,—
> You who live between the hills
> And have never seen the seas. (Rampersad, 96)

Hughes construes money as the impetus that drives soon-to-be sailors to the sea. Indeed, the line "I go to seek my fortune" is a vernacular turn of phrase commonplace in jazz, blues, or even folk songs—a phrase regarding the driving force of economic necessity that the common person could easily say. As usual, Hughes' use of the vernacular makes his speaker more genuine.

Another interesting subtlety lies in Hughes' grouping of people, namely "gypsies," "wanderers," and "sailors." The history of the gypsy is one of dispersion and "wandering," parallel to Tracy's description of the "polygot crew." Indeed, by grouping "sailors" with "gypsies" and "wanderers," Hughes emphasizes the racial and ethnic diversity of the American sailor class, and the commonality of "wandering" in search of opportunity. Furthermore, Hughes alludes to the class dichotomy between those who must "wander" the "seas" and "hills" in search

of "fortune," and "You" who "have never seen the seas," and live "in between the hills." Indeed, the "wanderer" people of the "hills" who soon become the sailor people of the "sea" are united by their economic struggle; however, the second person "You" that Hughes carefully places out of reach of both the "hills" and "sea" represents the distant upper class. Hughes' representation of the working class is an act of both Ventriloquism and Documentarianism; the working class speaker confronts the higher class "You" for his/her indifference to the working class' economic struggles—as "you will not miss me" suggests. Hughes both documents the struggle of the working class that turns to the sea, and gives voice to their frustrations of not having the stability that the upper class enjoys.

But the impetus for the sailor setting out to sea remains far more nuanced than a tension between two classes. As the poem "Water-Front Streets," demonstrates, the prospect of maritime travel holds an existentially alluring grasp on the soon-to-be members of the sailor class. Hughes writes "Water-Front Streets" in two quatrains rhyming ABAB, ACDC. He arranges each quatrain as a line of tetrameter, trimeter, tetrameter again, and ending on dimeter. The simplistic rhyme scheme coupled with the predictable meter let the poem flow with dreamlike serenity, eerily echoing in the mind of the reader. Indeed, the dreamlike serenity fits perfectly with the thematic construction of the poem as well; the speaker of the poem is the sailor class' collective dream itself: "Who carry beauties in their hearts / And dreams, like me" (96). Furthermore Hughes depicts "dream ships sail[ing] away" from the docks, in search of a better life. He contrasts the docks with faraway lands through the metaphor of "spring:"

> The spring is not so beautiful there— [at the docks]
> But dream ships sail away
> To where the spring is wondrous rare
> And life is gay. (96)

Hughes alludes to what the sailor life represents for the people that turn to it: a gateway to a better life. As "spring" acts as a metaphor for growth, opportunity, and even rebirth, by comparing the "not so beautiful" "spring" of the sailor's hometown with the "wondrous rare" "spring" of across the sea, Hughes presents the offer of the sailor's dream. Indeed, the sailor in Hughes' depiction sees the sea as a means to better economic opportunity and to a carefree, or "gay," existence, instead of the hardships of the working class. Thus, perhaps the ethereal dream narrating the poem is a parallel to the American Dream, luring the sailor to pursue a more "beautiful" "spring."

With a common dream comprised of primarily economic aspiration, Hughes bore witness to the organic formation of an American sailor culture cultivated by the shared experience at sea. Indeed, in "Seascape," Hughes portrays the shared experiences of both witnessing the marvels of sea-travel, and ultimately missing home. The poem follows the form of four trimeter lines, two trochaic, one iambic, followed by one more trochaic. The iambic lines read as "We saw a line of fishing ships" and "We saw an Indian merchantman" (98). Hughes isolates these iambic trimeter lines from the trochaic lines to draw attention to the spectacles the sailors see—as both begin with "We saw." As essayist Isabel Soto describes, travel "was an aesthetically enabling experience for Hughes" (*The Art and Life of Langston Hughes*, 171). Indeed, the "[aesthetic]," or that which can be "[seen]," stands out in "Seascape," just as the "fishing ships" and "Indian merchantmen" stood out to the sailors. Hence, Hughes acts again as the documentary poet, recording the experience of the sailors.

Additionally, Hughes uses meter to emphasize the final line in the poem: "Coming home." This line breaks both metric patterns that precede it: the line is dimetric instead of

trimetric and contains two equally stressed syllables instead of either trochaic or iambic. Hughes, despite bringing the reader into the marvels of seafaring travel, places the most emphasis on the act of "Coming home." He conveys the sentiments of the traveller: despite all the adventure and excitement that these spectacles represent, the traveller still feels a powerful longing for "home." Indeed, this longing is so powerful that it not only breaks the meter of the poem, but as its placement as the final line suggests, stops the sailor's marvelling altogether.

Indeed, Hughes further develops the isolating force of maritime travel in "Long Trip," wherein he conveys the shared feelings of isolation, and consequent camaraderie, through songlike tone and structure. Hughes writes, "We dip and dive, / Rise and roll, / Hide and are hidden" (97). The form of three short, sequential dimeters with satisfying alliteration evokes a blues tune that the sailors themselves could likely sing to pass the time. Similarly, the poem follows with an indented two-line passage paralleling a musical bass line:

> On the sea.
> Day, night,
> Night, day,
> The sea… (97)

The simple, repeating, chant-like rhythm of "day" and "night" acts as both a symbol of the monotony of sea travel, and as the bass line of the poem, as the indentation subverts it underneath the rest of the poem. The same Metablues style applies to the beginning and ending of the poem, as Hughes writes, "The sea is a wilderness of waves, / A desert of water. / … The sea is a desert of waves, / A wilderness of water." The parallel structure between the pairs of lines acts as a musical chorus tying the piece together, emphasizing the profound isolation that the "sea" and its "waves" create: a "desert" and a "wilderness." Through the Metablues

construction of the poem, Hughes suggests a sense of camaraderie amongst the sailors prompted by the isolating force of the sea.

But the effects of isolation take a dark turn in the poems "Natcha" and "Port Town." Indeed, the isolation of life at sea makes the sailors vulnerable to the economic perils of port towns, ironically recreating the economic need to take to the sea. In the poem "Natcha," Hughes introduces the mysterious character of Natcha with a simple, repetitive style ("offering" repeats thrice) like that of an advertisement:

> Natcha, offering love,
> For ten shillings offering love.
> Offering: A night with me, honey. (98)

Hughes purposefully conflates the idea of emotional security, "love" and "honey," with the pecuniary world to which the sailor class finds itself indentured. Quite literally, Hughes writes "For ten shillings offering love," as the sailors would see a port town prostitute, Natcha. Furthermore, the port town, represented through the prostitute, preys upon the sailor class by beating down on the sailor until he finally sacrifices any economic gain he's made for the sake of "love."

The same predatory relationship between the sailor and the port town persists in the poem "Port Town." A series of four quatrains, with no more than one, simple thought per line evokes the process of the port town seducing the sailor into its grasp to take his money. The simple thoughts of "Come here, I love you," "Come on drink cognac," or even just "Solid land, kid," appeal to the sailor deprived by life at sea. Indeed, the line "Come here, I love you" most accurately shows this relationship. After extended time at sea, the sailor is a fundamentally vulnerable figure, one that port town capitalism can exploit with ease, simply by offering "love."

Ironically, Hughes shows the sailor falling victim to the same economic demand as before, requiring more time to be spent at sea to earn more money.

Perhaps Hughes suggests that it is exactly this economic cycle that perpetuates the sailor class, whose members may find themselves a part of the system for life. Indeed, the most frequently repeated phrase in "Port Town" contains some variant of "come with me," the same temptation of escape to which the sailor finds himself constantly falling victim. Thus, Hughes depicts the sea as making the sailor vulnerable to the very economic entrapment that caused the sailor to take to the seas in the first place.

While most of the series explores the intricacies of the sailor class, Hughes briefly alludes to the inevitable racial differences among the sailors in "Caribbean Sunset." The entire poem follows as such:

> God having a hemorrhage,
> Blood coughed across the sky,
> Staining the dark sea red,
> That is the sunset in the Caribbean. (98)

This graphic, dark turn stands in stark contrast to the rest of the series, like an underlying truth that the sailor crew would prefer not to address. This truth could likely be the racial history of African slave captives brought to the Caribbean in the Atlantic Slave Trade. Indeed, unlike any other poem in the montage, Hughes gives a particular location to "Caribbean Sunset," suggesting that the very location of the Caribbean carries with it the implications of the West Indies slave trade.

Hughes, being a poet with profound social convictions regarding the treatment of African Americans throughout Western history, would not have written about a unified American sailor

class without at least alluding to the inevitable racial differences among its constituents. "Caribbean Sunset" accomplishes just that. While never explicitly connecting the racial history of the African Americans among the "polygot crew" to the Caribbean, the poem teems with tragic, bloody, and traumatic imagery suiting to slavery in the West Indies. Words like "hemorrhage" and "blood" connote brutality, with the phrase "Staining the dark sea red" perhaps alluding to the malicious treatment of "dark" slaves tortured in the Caribbean. Hence, while a member of the sailor class without this racial history might perceive the Caribbean sunset in its quintessential beauty, a member of African descent—or Hughes himself—might feel a more profound connection to the pain and suffering of his ancestors felt under the "blood"-stained sky. By addressing the inevitable in such an oblique way, Hughes doesn't detract from the unity of the sailor class, but rather adds a subtle recognition of the complex history that the very formation of the class attempts to move past.

Perhaps this suggests Hughes' ultimately meaning of the series: the American sailor class represents a subsect of American society wherein the racial boundaries of the mainland fell apart in the face of camaraderie through isolation, prompted by economic necessity. Despite the underlying racial differences acknowledged in "Caribbean Sunset," the American sailor class accomplished a racial unity through class nonexistent in the American mainland. For a writer such as Hughes, so dedicated to the social context and implications of his work, a portrayal of this unique phenomenon would have called upon him and his poetic capacities with profound resolve—leaving us with his brilliant montage of dock poetry.

But what made the American sailor class so unique in its ability to transcend race? Surely other similar economic commonalities existed that would've led to parallel phenomena. What

made the American sailor collective so unique is suggested throughout the series as a whole, and defines the very title of "sailor." Indeed, the *sea itself* made the phenomenon of the American sailor class possible. The sea lured sailors in with "dream ships" and boundless opportunity. The sea isolated the sailors from the outside world, cultivating a unique and powerful bond across ethnic and racial backgrounds. The sea even weakened the sailors' resolve against the economic perils of port towns, perpetuating their servitude to its waves. And sure enough, the sea even reminded the unified class of the underlying racial differences amongst its members. Quite simply, and perhaps quite intuitively, without the sea, there is no American sailor class. To use Henzy's framework, such a "simple" but "not simplistic" truth the perfect force to drive a Langston Hughes narrative.

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