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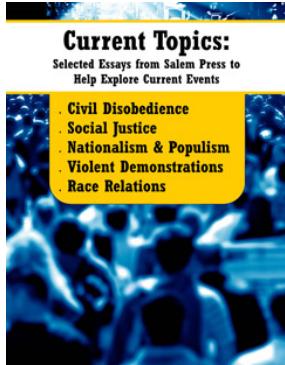


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Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

"The Bitter River": Langston Hughes and the Violent South

by Seretha D. Williams

The editors of the August 1921 edition of *The Crisis* published an English translation of a letter written by a Mexican national. The letter, published under the heading "Mexico Marvels," was submitted to *The Crisis* by Langston Hughes, "an American... living in Mexico" (171). Miguel de Zarraga, author of the letter, decries the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan and the rise of racial and religious hatred in the United States. He argues, "Lynch law was the product of this hate, and it is still practiced here with impunity" (171). Hughes, residing with his expatriate father James Hughes, submitted frequently to *The Crisis*, his formative poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" published two months earlier. The letter—with its focus on intolerance and tyranny—is consonant with Hughes' poetic vision, what Maryemma Graham describes as Hughes' social art (214). Hughes' submission of this letter is evidence that, from the beginning of his literary career, Hughes is socially and politically conscious and motivated to affect change. In 1921, Hughes was an aspiring student and writer who hoped to attend Columbia University in Harlem; he was not yet one of the leading voices of the social and political movement that would be described as a renaissance marking the birth of a new "Negro." Nevertheless, Hughes—the grandson of Mary whose first husband had been Charles Lewis Sheridan Leary, a participant in John Brown's Raid at Harper's Ferry, VA, and the grandnephew of the renowned lawyer, ambassador, and politician John Mercer Langston—was primed to use his art to denounce the pervasive and debilitating violence done to black bodies. America, post-slavery, continued to be a dangerous place for black people, and Hughes' canon reflects his preoccupation with the culture of violence that compelled Southern blacks to move en masse to other regions.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett's widely circulated pamphlet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*; investigative lynching reports in African-American newspapers, such as Robert Abbott's the *Chicago Defender*; the prevalence of 1920s lynching dramas;¹ and the NAACP's campaign to implement anti-lynching legislation are a few examples of citizens' public efforts to eradicate American lynching culture. Hughes, too, makes public the "lawless killing of black men and women," acts Hughes proclaims are "old Southern custom going back to slavery days" (Metress, *The Lynching* 125). Christopher Metress and W. Jason Miller, whose work builds upon the earlier scholarship of Trudier Harris and Sandra Gunning, have written extensively on lynching and Hughes' literary and journalistic responses to specific lynchings. Miller identifies four forms of lynching—spectacle, mob, legal, and domestic terrorism—in Hughes' canon (3–4). Furthermore, Miller proposes that the site of trauma, for Hughes, is specific and symbolic; his analysis draws upon the concepts of "topophobia" and "topophilia"² to explain Hughes' treatment of place and responses to lynchings. While Miller is interested in the recurrence of lynching as topic and trope in Hughes' poetry, Metress' study of Hughes concentrates more narrowly on Hughes' response to the Emmett Till lynching in 1955. By tracing the publication history of Hughes' poem "Mississippi—1955," Metress uncovers the poem's original context as a lynch poem. Miller's and Metress' analyses of Hughes' lynch poems, his treatment of place, and his overt (and covert) protests against American lynching culture are correct. Hughes historicizes the violence and oppression of blacks in America. He documents and reminds his readers of "the repeated suffering of the lynched black man" (Thurston). However, Hughes' poems about the violence of the American South perform and transcend the perfunctory tasks of documenting and decrying.

Richard Rankin Russell suggests, "Hughes' poems break the news of this tragedy through the power they draw from the blues" (153). Implicit in Russell's statement is the belief that bad news should be broken or carefully delivered. Hughes, then, in certain instances, serves as an itinerant mourner breaking the news of violent act after violent act. Violence in America, especially the South, he reveals, is persistent and pervasive. Approximately four thousand known lynchings of African Americans occurred in the South between the 1880s to the 1960s. Lynchings were only one form of violence African Americans endured. Hughes, a chronicler of black experiences, wrote extensively about the rape and exploitation of black women's bodies, the rampant domestic violence normalized in black heterosexual relationships, and the psychological trauma of oppression and economic disenfranchisement.³ Hughes conveys this pervasiveness in his lynch poems by describing the violence as inherent to the natural landscape of the South. "Blue Bayou,"⁴ "Song for a Dark Girl," "Christ in Alabama," "The Bitter

River," "Mississippi—1955," and "Birmingham Sunday" are representative poems⁵ that correlate violence and landscape, expanding upon core themes of the Harlem Renaissance introduced by other key poets, such as Claude McKay, Sterling A. Brown, and Countee Cullen.

"Blue Bayou" describes the tragic lynching of a man ensnared in an interracial "love" triangle. The speaker laments the loss of Lou to Old Greeley; the circumstances of this betrayal are unclear, but we do know that the speaker is black and Greeley is white. Hughes uses the environment of the bayou, a land feature unique to the lower Mississippi Valley region, to foreshadow the fated demise of the speaker. The bayou is blue with a blues that hovers over the land and the people who live there. The speaker has the blues because Greeley has taken his mate. As the speaker moves through the bayou, he grows agitated at his inability to stop Greeley or to protect Lou, who presumably is taken away against her will. Hughes uses the "setting sun," a standard blues motif, to indicate the action of the poem. The tension builds as the sun moves lower in the sky, and the climax of the poem occurs just as the sun sets. As the sun goes down, the protagonist dies. The sun, then, a part of the natural setting of the bayou, embodies the anger, hatred, and violence inherent in the racial landscape of the South. The slow pace of the poem replicates both the leisurely setting of the sun and the measured breaths of the speaker dying an agonizing death. His demise is accented by the repetition of the word *down*; the poem moves us downward until the sun and the speaker are no more. The ugliness of the lynching supplants the reader's image of the beauty of the bayou sunset. Hughes, through his description, gives poetic form to the physical and psychological violence rooted in southern culture and practice. Violence, he proposes, is inherent in the racial landscape of the South.⁶

Moreover, the italicized chant of the lynch mob is interspersed with the speaker's exhaustive account of his final moments. His voice remains calm, while the voice of the lynch mob is excited, as indicated by the command to "*Put him on a rope/ And pull him higher!*" (lines 20–21). The higher the speaker ascends, the lower the sun descends. The blue of the bayou diminishes, and by the final stanza, the bayou that was as red as fire (line 15) is now itself "[a] pool of fire" (line 23). What remains at the end of the poem is violence and blood. Although the imagery of the setting sun suggests the inevitability of the lynching, Hughes provides minimal description of the act itself. His restraint shifts attention away from the spectacle of the ritualized violence toward the human life in its final moments, and, in doing so, Hughes preserves a degree of dignity for the victim. The persona, now a disembodied voice, invokes a prayer in the last line: "Lawd I saw the sun go down!" (line 27). "Blue Bayou" suggests that "ultimately blacks are lynched because they are powerless, because they have none but God to protect them" (Jemie 144).

While "Blue Bayou" is told from the point of view of the lynching victim, "Song for a Dark Girl" describes a young woman's struggle to deal with the recurring image of her murdered lover. At the forefront of the poem is the girl's palpable grief. Here, the persona asks "the white Lord Jesus/What was the use of prayer" (lines 7–8). Though the question is not answered directly, indirectly the reader surmises the response. Hughes does not offer prayer. Rather, he raises poignant questions about African Americans' relationship to the religion of their oppressors and engages in a discourse with other texts within African American letters that ask similar questions about divine justice. Benjamin E. Mays' *The Negro's God, as Reflected in His Literature* calls attention to the rise of religious skepticism in the works of Harlem Renaissance writers, including Hughes and Countee Cullen. However, earlier texts, such as the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, reflect similar tendencies by African American writers to question a God who seemingly does not answer the prayers of the black masses. In "A God of Justice?": *The Problem of Evil in Twentieth-Century Black Literature*, Quiana J. Whitted extends the theme of the abandoned masses forward to contemporary writers, such as Rachel Eliza Griffith, who write about post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans.⁷ Griffith, like Hughes, writes about tragedy and the seeming absence of God.

In the poem, expanding upon the earlier critique, the lover's black body, hanged on a crossroads tree, is positioned against the idea of the white Jesus. Through the figure of the crossroads tree, Hughes recalls the conventional use of this image in folk accounts of encounters with the devil and, in doing so, replicates the moral, racial, and religious intersections that complicate the culture of the South. Hughes evokes images of Christ's crucifixion, and by placing the black man on a "cross," he proposes that the man, like Christ, is persecuted by those who stand on the side of injustice and intolerance. The comparison equates black suffering with divine suffering; in this equation, whites, then, are on the side of evil. Moreover, the parallel placement of "my black young lover" (line 3) and "the white Lord Jesus" (line 7) in stanzas one and two ironically inverts the roles of the black lover and the white Jesus. Love, the mourning woman posits, is embodied in her lover, not in Christ; the lover, as a result, bears the burdens of the whites' sins. In the third stanza, competing images of Christian

ideology and Christian practice fuse, and the speaker surmises: "Love is a naked shadow/On a gnarled and naked tree" (lines 11–12). The brutal practices of those who identify as Christian undermine the Christian doctrine of love.

The lover, now a figure of piety, does not transcend the physical, moving beyond the body into the divine; although the speaker describes his body as "a naked shadow" (line 11), the lover remains mortal. Hughes allows the image of the body hanging from the tree to speak for itself. He offers no direct commentary. Literally, the dark girl's love is hanged on the tree, and figuratively, the gnarled tree suggests the elusiveness of love in an environment so distorted and blatantly diseased. Certainly, whatever innocence the girl might have had has now been subsumed by the very grown-up reality of racial violence in the South. The ironic echoes of the Confederate anthem "Dixie" remind the reader that racial violence and intolerance are a part of the social fabric of the South. To illustrate this concept, the poem repeats the last line in the song; as such, "Way Down South in Dixie" serves as the unifying element or refrain for the poem. Hughes intentionally uses this song as a way of articulating complicated realities about the South. "Dixie" calls for Southerners to raise arms, to live or die for the ideals of the Confederacy. Unmistakably, Hughes avows southern culture is predicated upon its use of violence against black bodies. The light-hearted cadence of the poem underscores the absurdity of this tragedy; the female speaker mocks the South, using a voice dripping with sarcasm and contempt.

"Blue Bayou" and "Song for a Dark Girl," published in 1927, are indicative of Hughes' early responses to violence against blacks. The poems announce and decry the violence, but as Anthony Dawahare asserts, "Hughes' [Harlem Renaissance] subjects are politically incapacitated by a weariness of social oppression" (26). However, Hughes continued to develop his social art and began to write more overtly and boldly about injustice. The poem "Christ in Alabama," written in response to the March 25, 1931 arrest of nine young black youths on a Southern Railroad freight run, is a scathing indictment of the absence of justice in the Alabama legal system. The poem sparked heated debate because of its depiction of Christ as a lynched black man. "Christ in Alabama" and its accompanying satirical essay, "Southern Gentlemen, White Women, and Black Boys," were published in an unofficial local newspaper, *Contempo*, in North Carolina. Hughes explains in his second autobiography *I Wonder As I Wander*, "It was an ironic poem inspired by the thought of how Christ, with no human father, would be accepted were He born in the South of a Negro mother" (46). Linking the crucified black Christ, a recurrent metaphor in African American literary tradition, to the Scottsboro case proposes that the victims, although not physically killed, are lynched by the legal system and denied justice by humans and by God. As Whitted surmises, the displacement of Christ for the black man puts Southern white Christians in the role of crucifier (36). Certainly for Hughes, the Scottsboro Nine are emblematic of the violent lynching culture of the American South.

Hughes composes the stanzas in threes and, in doing so, evokes an alternate version of the holy family: the bastard son, the mammy/mother, the white master/father. In tercet one, Christ the son is "[b]eaten and black" (line 2); the image simultaneously recalls images of a crucified Christ, a whipped slave, and a lynched black man. Mouth bloodied, Christ by the fourth stanza is wholly human with no hope of emancipation from the "Cross of the South." His white father has forsaken him. The mulatto trope recurs as image and theme throughout Hughes' work; in this poem, the biracial Christ-figure attests to the hypocrisy of white Christian men who, on the one hand, impregnate black women and, on the other hand, treat black people as less than human. In tercet two, Mary the mother is "Mammy of the South" instead of a divine woman full of grace or the mother of God; furthermore, the victim of a rape or perhaps a coerced relationship, she is silenced, unable to decry the injustice enacted upon her body and her son's body. Finally, in tercet three, God the father is described as "White master above" (line 8), a phrase replete with biblical and historical meanings. The doubleness of the line reifies Hughes' underlying admonition: black suffering is without merit, and justice—legal and divine—is illusive.

In "Christ in Alabama", the characters seem as politically incapacitated as the personas in "Blue Bayou" and "Song for a Dark Girl." However, the tone of "Christ in Alabama" suggests an agency missing in the other two poems. Hughes' diction is intentionally confrontational; his imagery is sharp and specific. While the first two poems are impressionistic, "Christ in Alabama" is direct and sardonic. In "The Bitter River," Hughes is equally confrontational. First published in the Autumn 1942 issue of *Negro Quarterly*, "The Bitter River" documents and reacts to the lynching of Ernest Green and Charlie Lang on October 12, 1942. Green's and Lang's bodies were found beneath the Shubuta Bridge over the Chicasawhay River in Mississippi. The bridge was known locally as the "Hanging Bridge," a suspension bridge where more than seven lynchings occurred (Miller 68). In the same year, Cleo Wright and Howard Walsh were lynched in Missouri and Mississippi, respectively. In "The Bitter River," the river functions on multiple levels. It is simultaneously the site of violence against black bodies and the symbol of the bitter

racism that permeates the American South. The poem moves from the specifics of the lynching to a broader statement about African Americans' relationship to and encounter with the South. The imagery of the lines "the blood of the lynched boys... / Mixed with the hopes that are drowned there" (lines 11, 13) intimates that racial hatred has become a part of the natural topography or landscape. The poisoned river, then, is the source of strangled dreams (line 16), and the imagery of the bloodied river merges with the imagery of the red clay of the South to connote the pervasiveness of this tainting. The speaker's response to this contamination of American society is corporeal. He seems literally to taste the swill of oppression and exploitation, and he describes how "its gall coats the red of my tongue" (line 10).

Hughes moves from his abstraction of the oppression and exploitation of blacks to a more concrete delineation of the wrongs exacted upon this group. In stanza three, he draws upon the concluding image of stanza two, which posits that the river refracts light rather than reflects it, to discuss the absence of light—a metaphor for hope—in the lives of blacks. Some of these disenfranchised figures include sharecroppers, muggers, prostitutes, and labor leaders. Hughes calls by name the Scottsboro Boys and reminds his readers that not long ago:

Behind closed doors liberal ministers and racist Governors debated the fate of black youngsters unjustly imprisoned. In 1937 the State of Alabama compromised, allowing four of the nine boys to go free. In return, the SDC promised that Communists would not agitate about Scottsboro. The Communists agreed, and such agitation, propaganda, and literature virtually disappeared. (Murray 85)

Hughes keeps alive the memory of the miscarriage of justice the Scottsboro Nine represent. Moreover, Hughes expands his definition of lynching to include victims of racism, classism, and sexism. Each named group exemplifies the downtrodden of American society for whom the American Dream has faded. Though their circumstances are different, these people are the victims of ideological hatred. He traces the source of oppression backwards to a slavery that left "grandfather's back with its ladder of scars" (line 35) and indict the system of American injustice. The metonym of the steel bars imprisoning African Americans—physically and psychologically—takes over the imagery of darkness and sets up the stylistic shift in voice and tone in stanza four. The bars remind us of the steel of the bridge and that Hughes visited Kirby Prison where eight of the Scottsboro Boys were held.

In stanza four, Hughes disrupts the flow of parallelisms in earlier stanzas and interposes the persona of a "you" who seemingly represents the voices of whites who suggest, "Wait, be patient", you say/Your folks will have a better day" (lines 38–39). The speaker and Hughes reject the call for patience. Instead, falling back on the image of the poisoned bitter river, Hughes implies that the level of deceit is so apparent that "[t]he swirl of the bitter river/Sweeps your lies away" (lines 48–49). Too much time has passed, and too little change has occurred. Fatigued, Hughes asserts, blacks are "tired of the bitter river! / Tired of the bars" (lines 88–89) and immune to the hatred they have been compelled to swallow without complaint for generations. Oppressive tactics have made them stronger not weaker. "The Bitter River" does not end as "Blue Bayou" and "Song for a Dark Girl" end, with a sense of resignation; instead, the poem and Hughes call for immediate action. Ritualized violence persists, despite grassroots and political efforts to enact legislation, and Hughes' language conveys the urgency of his plea.

The year 1955 would be just as urgent and dangerous. The brutal murder and lynching of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago visiting family in Money, Mississippi, horrified most of the nation. Till was targeted because he allegedly flirted with a white woman. He was tortured and his body thrown into the river. Until Christopher Metress' article, many scholars failed to connect Hughes' poem "Mississippi" to the Emmett Till lynching.⁸ The original poem was untitled and appeared in Hughes' *Chicago Defender* column, "Here to Yonder," as an epigraph to the article "Langston Hughes Wonders Why No Lynching Probe." Hughes, then, granted permission to other news organizations to publish the poem with the title "Mississippi—1955." According to Metress, some publications misprinted the poem, and, later, Hughes revised the poem and changed the title to "Mississippi." The historical context and importance of the poem was lost as the specific markers to Till were edited out. Metress' recovery work is vital. Reading "Mississippi" as a lament for Emmett Till enhances our understanding of the poem and of Hughes' intentions. Hughes not only announces the tragedy of Emmett Till, but he also invites readers to mourn. The poem, an epigraph to the column, breaks the news. It prepares readers for the bad news of the article—the news that, again, nothing is done to stop the violence. It situates Till alongside Lang and Green, other fourteen year olds who were lynched. In the article, Hughes asks whether nothing will be done to stop the murder of children. The mutilated body of Till is not on display. Instead, Hughes focuses on the grief, the loss of life. In the moment of 1955, a year after the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, Hughes understands the nation needs to mourn this life, these lives. Indeed, Hughes denounces this pervasive violence and insists something be done, but he also grieves Till, Ernest, and Green.

News articles and photographs do not facilitate this contemplation and grieving in the same ways as poetry. When Hughes writes about lynching in other media, his purpose is different. The poem opens with a contest of sorrow, pity, and pain. The lines are exclamatory statements. The speaker is traumatized, but not surprised. The original draft of the poem, according to Metress' research, ends with the lines:

THAT TEARS AND BLOOD
SHOULD MIX LIKE RAIN/ IN MISSISSIPPI—
AND TERROR, FETID HOT,
YET CLAMMY COLD,
REMAIN.

(lines 18–23)⁹

Till's lynched body haunts the poem. Terror remains. Hughes' subsequent revisions of the poem assert that terror not only comes again to Mississippi, but also remains. Actually, it never left. Russell asserts that the poem asks us to engage in a deep imaginative identification with that tortured body and soul" (157), although the body itself is not present or described. According to Myisha Priest's close reading of the poem and column, "Hughes calls for the named and unnamed dead to stand forth in the body of his column, addressing the political utility of the lynched body" (62). Priest and other scholars cite the Till murder as a galvanizing event for the development of the American Civil Rights Movement.

Eight years later, another horrific act of violence would shock America, and Hughes would be called upon to name the dead and to eulogize murdered black children. "Birmingham Sunday," an elegy, announces and denounces the murder of four African American girls killed by a bomb in an Alabama church in 1963. The racially motivated attack on the Sixteenth Street Church outraged the nation and marked a turning point in the struggle for civil rights. The deaths of the four girls—Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, Addie Collins, and Carole Robertson—framed a larger debate over racial integration. Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor and other city officials incensed the community by blaming the bombing on the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*. Hughes' poem calls for an appropriate and immediate response to this violence, but of equal importance, it focuses on the bloodshed and the lives lost. Hughes' authorial pose in "Birmingham Sunday" is consistent with his earlier poetic responses to violence; he situates the primary tragedy—the deaths of four little girls—squarely at the center of his denunciation.

In stanza one, the speaker positions the serenity of Sunday school next to the violent explosion of dynamite that blew out the walls and windows of the church and displaces the innocence of the children's prayers with the chaos and inexplicability of bloodied walls. Hughes' language is graphic: "With spattered flesh / And bloodied Sunday dresses / Torn to shreds by dynamite" (lines 6–8). He recounts the specificity of the horrific scene and then blurs the imagery of red by conflating the red blood of the girls with the Red (or Communism) of China. He raises images of two Chinas—an ancient China that invented dynamite and a Red China, a contrast that somehow links the bloodiness of this Birmingham event to the Chinese Communist Revolution. The underlying meaning or subtext of the stanza suggests that the United States is hypocritical in its criticism of undemocratic civilizations. Here in America, little girls are blown up in sacred spaces, while politicians are preoccupied with defending the nation from a perceived threat by a "godless" Communism. Moreover, Hughes' reference to the Chinese invention of explosives locates the violence in Birmingham in a broader historical context. War and hatred span centuries and millennia. These martyred girls and the Civil Rights Movement are a part of a larger historical struggle against intolerance.

In the second stanza, Hughes revisits this idea of the dynamite. This time, the dynamite refers to a different type of explosion, a collective response to this act of hatred. Hughes again invokes China, asserting that the difference between a Chinese response and African American response is that Christian influence teaches African Americans to do unto others as they would have them do unto them. He points again to hypocrisy. This time, he singles out self-proclaimed southern Christians, who would attack a church in the name of racism. The ideology and practice of non-violence, upon which the Civil Rights Movement was predicated, the speaker suggests, might be ineffective in bringing about change among people who do not subscribe to their own religious teachings. The poem tells us that "Four tiny girls" (line 1) await action; their deaths must be avenged, but, first, they must be mourned.

Certainly, in the final stanza of the poem, the speaker calls for new songs "among magnolia trees (line 27)," a symbol of the South. President John F. Kennedy, assassinated in November 1963, only two months after the Birmingham bombing, had called for legislation on civil rights in the summer of 1963. President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 the following summer. Hughes' call for change was answered, only to a degree. The deaths of these four girls served as one impetus for social upheaval in the 1960s, but violence persists in

the South. On June 17, 2015, nine African Americans were killed during Bible study at Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, SC. The shooter is white. The continued violence against black bodies thus speaks to the relevance of Hughes' poems even today, as Hughes' response to violence evolved over his career. During the Harlem Renaissance, his poetry described and documented black suffering, but increasingly, his poetry made direct appeals for action. Moreover, Hughes, recognized the African American community's need to mourn. He bestowed dignity upon the victims of violence and created opportunities within his poems for readers to mourn the dead.

Notes

- [1] 1. Judith L. Stephens' article, "Racial Violence and Representation: Performance Strategies in Lynching Dramas of the 1920s," provides a detailed summary of the development of the lynching drama genre. Stephens posits, "lynching dramas function as a dynamic cultural text by both conserving the memory of this particular form of racial violence and continuing to evolve as a theatrical genre on the American stage" (656).
- [2] 2. Miller's proposed "topophilia" captures the affection a person connects to a place. He uses "topophobia" to describe the fears and anxieties a person associates with a place (9).
- [3] 3. "Mammy of the South," "Mulatto," and "Cross," for instance, address the exploitation and rape of black women's bodies by white men. The allegation of raping a white woman generally was enough justification for lynch mobs to lynch black men and for juries to sentence them to death. Hughes challenges the supposition that black men were sexual threats and suggests, instead, that white men posed a greater threat to black women. Hughes offers the existence of fatherless "mulatto" children as evidence. Hughes, in addition, addresses the violence done to black women by black men. Poems such as "Bad Man," "Beale Street," and "Evil Woman" attest to the danger of being black and female. Joyce Ann Joyce and Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper discuss Hughes' depiction of black women and his treatment of black women's issues including rape and domestic violence. See Joyce's "Race Culture, and Gender in Langston Hughes' *The Ways of White Folks*" in *Langston Hughes: The Man, His Art, and His Continuing Influence* and Harper's *Not So Simple The "Simple" Stories by Langston Hughes* for further discussion of gendered violence in Hughes' short stories.
- [4] 4. The versions of Hughes' poems referenced are those included in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. However, I refer to Hughes' original draft of "Mississippi," which is also known as "Mississippi—1955" and as an untitled work.
- [5] 5. In "Red Clay Blues," for example, Hughes addresses the African American migrant experience. The poem contrasts the hard concrete of the city with the red clay of rural Georgia. The red clay is a metonym for the culture of the South. In "Georgia Dusk," the landscape and sky betray the truths that belie the beauty of the South. For Hughes, Georgia spaces are transformed by the racism and violence; the sky and wind, contaminated by the ugliness of hate, bleed and cry. Blood is "in the Georgia dusk." The wind "scatters hate like seed." The first two lines of "The South" establish Hughes' dualistic reading of the American South. In line one, the personified South is "lazy, laughing," but Hughes immediately juxtaposes this initial image with one of the South as a carnivore "With blood on its mouth" (line 2). Hughes continues to develop this juxtaposition of the South as a site of great beauty and tradition and a site of brutality and intolerance. Simultaneously, the South is "sunny-faced" (line 3), "idiot-brained" (line 5), "child-minded" (line 6), and "magnolia-scented" (line 12).
- [6] 6. James de Jongh describes Hughes' use of place as a "spatial signing" or application of "spiritual geography" inherited from figurative practices of earlier black writers. Other critics, too, parse Hughes' treatment of place. Hughes, in fact, constructs extended metaphors or conceits using nature as his trope. These Hughesian conceits draw on a particular set of images—land, water, sun, and trees—and express what for Hughes is almost inexpressible.
- [7] 7. Whitted analyzes Griffith's poem "Hymn to a Hurricane" included in *Callaloo*'s special issue "American Tragedy: New Orleans under Water" (183).
- [8] 8. Hughes also wrote the lyrics to "Money, Mississippi Blues," a song about Emmett Till. Metress was instrumental in the recovery of that text as well. See Metress' *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative* for further discussion of the song.
- [9] 9. Hughes ends the version of "Mississippi" in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* with the lines, "That tears and blood/ Still mix like rain/ In Mississippi!" (lines 18–20).

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