The Worlds of Langston Hughes: Modernism and Translation in the Americas by Vera Kutzinski (review)

John Patrick Leary

African American Review, Volume 47, Number 1, Spring 2014, pp. 211-215 (Review)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/afa.2014.0006

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/afa/summary/v047/47.1.leary.html
Later in *Pimping Fictions*, Gifford embarks on a revelatory examination of Holloway House’s sister venture, an all-black pornographic magazine titled *Players*, which he describes as “a cross between *Playboy* and *Ebony*” (128). In fact, the periodical was closer in kind to Bob Guccione’s *Penthouse*, since it included full-frontal nudity and more graphic content than Hugh Hefner’s established pin-up magazine. Although *Players* has only a tenuous material connection to African American crime literature, Gifford’s detailed outline of work done by former editors Wanda Coleman and Joseph Nazel and his analysis of rare back issues of the magazine mark an important contribution to the study of African American print and popular culture. The undocumented history of *Players* constitutes an ideal opportunity to discuss the contours of post-civil rights black male fantasy. Yet Gifford’s refrain about the magazine amounts to trumping the cause of populism yet again. To wit, before the white owners completely wrested control of the magazine away from black editors, *Players* encouraged “the consumption of black female nudes as a radical political act,” allied with the “Black Is Beautiful” cause (140), and “utilize[d] the ‘nudie’ magazine to advance an informed black national and international consciousness” (136). As for the magazine’s reactionary and most visible parts—“full-body shots of black women masturbating as well as explicit pictures of what is known in the industry as ‘pink’”—Gifford’s explanation is simple: co-owner Ralph Weinstock “took control of the selection process” once Coleman left her post early on (146).

If this is the central point we are to take away from *Players*—that graphic nudity mattered only insofar as it was a racist “white” imposition on an otherwise progressive “black” text (ignoring the fact that *Players* remained a popular magazine among black men for decades)—then Gifford might have begun his study with a different reference to *Invisible Man*. Instead of the zoot-suited hipsters, he could have cited Rinehart, the cool hustler for whom the narrator is mistaken when his gaze becomes invisible to passersby. Now wearing dark glasses as he ambles through Harlem, the narrator is subject to people reading their desire for hipness onto his body. *Pimping Fictions* aims to reveal the political meaning of the zoot-suiters, but it only ends up repeating a fundamental misrecognition.


Reviewed by John Patrick Leary, Wayne State University

As the terms “hemispheric” and “transnational” proliférate in American cultural studies as subjects of scholarship and standbys of Humanities job descriptions, they have come under pressure from critics aiming to historicize the concepts and the politics of their use. Vera Kutzinski’s *The Worlds of Langston Hughes: Modernism and Translation in the Americas* offers a skeptical, deeply researched critique of the current transnational vogue by examining the career of a writer who embodied an earlier ideal of internationalism in U.S. literature. Ultimately, however, this book fails to provide a compelling alternative to what its author regards as insufficiently comparative hemispheric work.

Hughes’s globetrotting career as a journalist, translator, and cultural broker is a fascinating and still relatively understudied part of his work and of U.S. modernism more generally. He came to global prominence at a time when the institutional structures of literary left internationalism were at their height, especially via the Communist Party and affiliated groups. (As Richard Wright poignantly and regretfully described the John Reed Clubs he repudiated in his autobiography, *Black Boy*: “Who
had ever, in all human history, offered to young writers an audience so vast?”) Hughes was also an active translator who introduced Haiti's Jacques Roumain, and along with Ben Carruthers, Cuba's Nicolas Guillén to English readers. Kutzinski devotes considerable attention to Guillén’s *Motivos de son*, a collection of vernacular poems based on the Cuban ballad form known as the *son*. Hughes was also an enthusiastic traveler, as his diaries reveal and as his local hosts sometimes joked. (Guillén, in fact, poked fun at the American's eager sightseeing at Afro-Cuban clubs in Havana in an article he wrote in the Havana press on Hughes's visit.)

In this respect, Hughes is an ideal subject for exploring both the universalizing ideals of modernism and its heterogeneous fragmentations along linguistic, racial, and political lines. The great strength of this book is its emphasis on these asymmetries in its assessment of Hughes's popularity in Latin America, for which Kutzinski provides extensive archival documentation that will be a starting point for future students of the circulation of African American literature in the hemisphere. She argues that Latin American translators of Hughes's work tended to avoid the blues poetry for which he is celebrated in the United States, revealing an opportunistic political logic in countries with large African-descended populations like Cuba, where it was common “to separate blackness as a cultural commodity from the social and political realities of racial conflicts” (64). Furthermore, the politics of anti-imperialism meant that for such editors and translators, racial segregation could be singled out as the United States' own unique problem. Kutzinski writes that such translations “constructed Hughes's verse in Spanish as a vehicle for nationalist and transnational anti-imperialist alliances” (64).

The suggestion of political opportunism here hints at her broader critique of “transnationalism” in contemporary literary scholarship, which she regards as often sloppy and motivated by political concerns over philological and literary rigor. Kutzinski takes issue with a U. S.-centered transnationalism that reinforces U. S. anglocentrism, especially in an academic field dominated by institutions in the United States. (As she shows, most of the Hughes scholarship on his international ties commits this error, assessing Hughes's influence on Latin American writers, and rarely the other way around.) Too often, however, she works from straw-man arguments like this one:

Instead of considering intellectual traffic in the Americas as a two-way street, most USAmerican scholars have drawn patterns of cultural influence that spread in one direction only: from north to south. The field of African American (literary) studies is no exception to this rule. In inquiries into [the] “shared cultural forms used by black writers to reconnect to a common, ancestral resonance,” which started to multiply in the [1970s] and 1980s, it is a critical commonplace to assert that African American writers based in the USA were instrumental in disseminating ideas of literary blackness across the Americas and particularly in the Hispanic Americas. (84-85)

Kutzinski's footnote for this rather large claim, however, only cites two articles, both about Hughes and both more than thirty years old. The essays, by Melvin Dixon and Richard Jackson, are important texts of Hughes criticism, but they are hardly representative of African American literary studies as a field. Elsewhere, Kutzinski considers Hughes's international links as “testing grounds for theories of black internationalism that relativize assumptions about cultural and political sameness and equivalences often so deeply lodged within the academic discourses of African American and African diaspora studies that they have become virtually invisible,” which is a vast overstatement. Perhaps her point is inelegantly phrased; the kind of essentialism she opposes can be found (arguably) in the smaller world of Hughes scholarship and in Cubanist scholarship of the U. S. academic left, which sometimes represents as historical fact the anti-imperialist racial solidarity that motivates the scholarship. But the book suffers for polemicizing that its evidence does not substantiate.
Kutzinski's use of translation studies in the service of her critique of hemispheric American studies is similarly problematic. She reads translation as an act of becoming, “a way of simultaneously registering cultural differences and searching for common ground—not necessarily similarities” (27) and she is able to show this principle at work in a few very compelling close readings of the *Motivos de son* poems and translations. She explains how Hughes and Carruthers negotiated *Motivos*’s untranslatability, grounded as Guíllén's poems were in a Cuban and particularly *habanera* vernacular. This attention to the failures of translation—which follows Emily Apter’s theory of the translation as a struggle with the linguistic inassimilability of the original—is a compelling way to grapple with Hughes’s labors in Spanish America. But Kutzinski often loses sight of the political object of this labor in her criticisms of the anglocentrism of contemporary hemispheric critics. Is it enough to simply point out the failures and misunderstandings that are a part of the history of diaspora? While translation may always point to a receding horizon, this only raises the logical next question of what is therefore to be done: what kind of politics is possible, and what sort of cultural internationalism? To answer this question, it seems that critics must concede some generalizable, or what poststructuralists like to dervisely call “totalizing,” claim of solidarity and unity.

Kutzinski’s emphasis on philological rigor reveals her suspicion of such political claims in criticism. “Insofar as translation returns our attention to language,” Kutzinski says in the conclusion, “it helps restore a philological dimension to a cultural studies discourse in which literary analysis has largely been replaced by sociology,” another critical swipe at unnamed offenders. Here is one of the dangers of comparative literature’s historical emphasis on translation: paradoxically, in the name of rigorous interdisciplinarity, it can be used as a talisman of disciplinary expertise, waved at philological trespassers, shutting down potentially disruptive critique. Kutzinski is right to be skeptical of the branding and rebranding of “transnational,” “hemispheric,” and “border” studies amidst the devaluing of language study (and, I would add, academic labor, where “transnational” might just be a way of getting more for your college’s dwindling hiring budget). But what does one do then? Kutzinski proposes “TransArea studies,” which simply rebrands the thing again, except this time with an oddly capitalized neologism that sounds more appropriate to a regional bank or a telecom firm.

In a chapter on Hughes’s testimony before Roy Cohn and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Kutzinski stretches the trope of translation to read Senator Joseph McCarthy’s denunciation of Hughes’s leftist poetry. She considers Cohn’s cynical red-baiting a “mistranslation” of poetic ambiguity into bureaucratic literalism, an interpretation that seems to rehabilitate the execrable demagogue as, in the end, little more than a rather poor student of poetry. The politics of translation in Hughes’s and Guíllén’s careers was linked closely to the radical politics of interwar internationalism—in the varied forms of the anti-imperialist avant-garde in the Caribbean, the Spanish republic-in-arms, and the Marxism of *New Masses*, for example. Now, it seems, it is reduced to this, in which Kutzinski quotes Hughes’s “Ballads of Lenin”:

More than five decades ago, Hughes imagined the transformative potential of a conversation that, in our present world, Cohn surely would have supported: the truly revolutionary changes that the Internet—a new kind of “room”—has brought to modern Russia, China, and, more recently, the role that digital texting has played in the so-called Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East. (208)

However much Hughes had retreated from Marxism by the time he appeared before HUAC, one assumes he would have at least insisted on a more careful definition of “revolutionary.”
It’s worth pointing out that Hughes, during his time in Cuba and Madrid, would hardly have cared about this sort of disciplinary staking of territory, which reminds us that it wasn’t just his international fame that made his career so distinct. His moment of political engagement and of social influence for literature, which Wright was mourning already in *Black Boy* and which Roy Cohn still feared enough to humiliate him before Congress, seems so distant now. Will we simply replace it with “TransArea” studies?


Reviewed by Sharon L. Jones, Wright State University

In *Which Sin to Bear?: Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes*, David E. Chinitz analyzes how Hughes sought to present an accurate and credible depiction of African Americans in his texts. Chinitz articulates the purpose of the book in the Introduction: “The issues I treat include Hughes’s interventions in the shifting definition of ‘authentic blackness,’ his work toward a socially effective discourse of racial protest, his engagement with liberal politics, his lifelong ambivalence toward compromise, and the imprint of all these matters in texts ranging from his poetry and fiction to his non-fiction prose and even his Congressional testimony” (3-4). He succeeds in developing the primary topics that he lays out in his Introduction within the rest of the book due to his use of evidence, his astute analysis, and enlightening observations.

Chapter one, “Becoming Langston Hughes,” emphasizes influences upon Hughes’s literature. According to Chinitz, “For Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, the South represented indispensable cultural capital. On one’s relation to the South depended in good measure one’s authority to speak from the position of an authentic racial subject” (31). Chinitz contends that Hughes’s writing about that region of the U.S. prior to his first trip was not complex, and he uses “The South” as an example of a poem by Hughes which Chinitz contends lacks sophistication due to its conventional and stereotypical language (32-33). Chinitz states “On balance, the value of his southern experience accrued less to his creative imagination than to his social awareness, his understanding of the possibilities of poetry, and his sense of himself as an organic intellectual” (39). Chinitz’s insightful comments here imply that Hughes did evolve into a more self-assured author as a result of exposure to that region of the United States (39).

Similarly, Chinitz continues his interpretation of Hughes’s texts within chapter two, “Producing Authentic Blackness.” He claims that “Hughes’s work implicitly urges a redefinition of African American authenticity as dynamic—as process rather than origin” (51). Additionally, he addresses Hughes’s relevance to more recent times. He points out that “Since 2007, the rise of Barack Obama in American politics has placed ‘authentic blackness’ repeatedly at the center of public debate. The question of whether candidate Obama was sufficiently black to appeal to African American voters was aired persistently during the primary and general election campaigns” (65). This comparison illustrates how adept Chinitz is at connecting Hughes to discourses on contemporary events, ideas, and topics.

Chapter three, “Authenticity in the Blues Poems,” considers the development of Langston Hughes’s technique during the poet’s life in texts such as *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (71-72). Chinitz also emphasizes how Langston Hughes negotiated the complexities of merging orality with written discourse (83). In chapter
It’s worth pointing out that Hughes, during his time in Cuba and Madrid, would hardly have cared about this sort of disciplinary staking of territory, which reminds us that it wasn’t just his international fame that made his career so distinct. His moment of political engagement and of social influence for literature, which Wright was mourning already in *Black Boy* and which Roy Cohn still feared enough to humiliate him before Congress, seems so distant now. Will we simply replace it with “TransArea” studies?


Reviewed by Sharon L. Jones, Wright State University

In *Which Sin to Bear?: Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes*, David E. Chinitz analyzes how Hughes sought to present an accurate and credible depiction of African Americans in his texts. Chinitz articulately states the purpose of the book in the Introduction: “The issues I treat include Hughes’s interventions in the shifting definition of ‘authentic blackness,’ his work toward a socially effective discourse of racial protest, his engagement with liberal politics, his lifelong ambivalence toward compromise, and the imprint of all these matters in texts ranging from his poetry and fiction to his non-fiction prose and even his Congressional testimony” (3-4).

He succeeds in developing the primary topics that he lays out in his Introduction within the rest of the book due to his use of evidence, his astute analysis, and enlightening observations.

Chapter one, “Becoming Langston Hughes,” emphasizes influences upon Hughes’s literature. According to Chinitz, “For Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, the South represented indispensable cultural capital. On one’s relation to the South depended in good measure one’s authority to speak from the position of an authentic racial subject” (31). Chinitz contends that Hughes’s writing about that region of the U.S. prior to his first trip was not complex, and he uses “The South” as an example of a poem by Hughes which Chinitz contends lacks sophistication due to its conventional and stereotypical language (32-33).

Chinitz states “On balance, the value of his southern experience accrued less to his creative imagination than to his social awareness, his understanding of the possibilities of poetry, and his sense of himself as an organic intellectual” (39). Chinitz’s insightful comments here imply that Hughes did evolve into a more self-assured author as a result of exposure to that region of the United States (39).

Similarly, Chinitz continues his interpretation of Hughes’s texts within chapter two, “Producing Authentic Blackness.” He claims that “Hughes’s work implicitly urges a redefinition of African American authenticity as dynamic—as process rather than origin” (51). Additionally, he addresses Hughes’s relevance to more recent times. He points out that “Since 2007, the rise of Barack Obama in American politics has placed ‘authentic blackness’ repeatedly at the center of public debate. The question of whether candidate Obama was insufficiently black to appeal to African American voters was aired persistently during the primary and general election campaigns” (65). This comparison illustrates how adept Chinitz is at connecting Hughes to discourses on contemporary events, ideas, and topics.

Chapter three, “Authenticity in the Blues Poems,” considers the development of Langston Hughes’s technique during the poet’s life in texts such as *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (71-72). Chinitz also emphasizes how Langston Hughes negotiated the complexities of merging orality with written discourse (83). In chapter
four, “The Ethics of Compromise,” Chinitz also argues that Langston Hughes’s texts differed in emphasis, perspective, and content (96). He writes, “What, then, of Hughes’s move away from radical socialism in the late 1930s after almost a decade of leftist political activism and vocal revolutionism?” (96). Chinitz offers up the explanation that Hughes encountered obstacles that could have made the author vigilant about being able to continue writing. Chinitz writes: “Barred by his race from such lucrative fields as screenplay and radio-script writing, Hughes made a precarious living off his work. He had good reason to be wary of his reputation” (97).

Chinitz also address how attitudes about communism affected Hughes. In chapter five, “Simple Goes to Washington: Hughes and the McCarthy Committee,” Chinitz provides important historical contexts that illustrate that the impetus behind questioning Hughes about his ideology stemmed from the fear that texts by Hughes and others promoted communism. “To support of contention, McCarthy subpoenaed Hughes, Dashiell Hammett, and other writers in an effort to establish that their books were inappropriate presences in the overseas libraries” (111). In remarking that Hughes actually testified before the McCarthy committee twice, Chinitz also claims that Hughes was questioned in different settings during 1953 about his ideology. Pointing out that what Hughes answered privately was not accessible until 2003, he stresses that this information is vital in understanding how Hughes discussed his ideology with others in positions of power (113).

Chapter six, “Speak to me now of compromise: Hughes and the Specter of Booker T.,” addresses how Hughes represented an important black historical figure within his literary texts. Chinitz interprets texts by Hughes that were either about or influenced by Booker T. Washington. Chinitz suggests that in these texts, Hughes shows that he can write favorably or unfavorably about Booker T. Washington (150-54). Chinitz convincingly contends that Hughes’s writings about Booker T. Washington reveal his ability to present complex depictions of other people.

The book also contains two appendices with transcripts: “Appendix A: Hughes’s Executive Session Testimony” and “Appendix B: Hughes’s Public Testimony.” The inclusion of such materials is quite useful here, as it provides the reader with insight on Hughes and how he reacted to queries related to his ideology; it is also another example among many of Chinitz’s careful work as a scholar. Overall, Which Sin to Bear? is a rich and thorough study. Readers will find the book to be of significant value due to its depth of research, use of evidence, and the range of Hughes’s texts as interpreted by its author.


Reviewed by Robert J. Butler, Canisius College

This is an extremely ambitious and valuable study that is comparable in scope to Jay Leyda’s massive two-volume documentary study of Herman Melville’s life in The Melville Log. Like Leyda, Hakutani and Kiuchi take as their task a well-documented, finely detailed account of the life of a major American writer from birth to death, focusing on everything from the mundane details of daily life to careful tracings of the composition of major works.

The product of many years of sustained study, the book is an important contribution to Wright studies because its strict chronological organization enables readers to gain easy access to important information that often gets obscured by thematically