

**"The Task of the Negro Writer as an Artist": Language as Vehicle of Power and Identity Construction in the Work of Langston Hughes and His Contemporaries**

Chair: Christopher Allen Varlack ([Ihsociety.president@gmail.com](mailto:Ihsociety.president@gmail.com)), Langston Hughes Society

**Alain Locke's Epideictic Air and the Closeted New Negro**  
Luke Doughty ([simon.doughty@ell.ox.ac.uk](mailto:simon.doughty@ell.ox.ac.uk)), University of Oxford

Studies in Alain Locke have attended to his race work but not to the full impact of his sexuality on that work. Neither Jeffrey Stewart's biography on Locke, nor Charles Molesworth's edition of Locke's writing, nor any other work, has shown *how* Locke's sexuality functioned in the texts that launched the New Negro Movement. This paper qualitatively studies Locke's use of air—so common, so unnoticed—in two parts to fill that gap. First, it analyzes Locke's archived material: postcards, poems, prose, and letters to Langston Hughes. Second, it traces how the aesthetic that he created there informed published Harlem Renaissance writings. More particularly, Locke made air a modernist trope that could transcend the private archive and move into the public world. By honing air as a medium of Harlem's modern sounds (jazz, blues, lyrical poetry, ballads, cosmopolitan dialects, and urban noises), sights (modernist color, light, fog, and steam), and time (rapid communication via air mail, the telegraph, and the radio), Locke ensured that air became an affect of the closeted Harlem homosexual. By projecting a homosexual aesthetic onto his public reality, he turned homosexual dysphoria into euphoria, and Victorian miasma into glittery magic. Through these gay love letters, Locke cultivated the model that would help him explicitly divulge African-American subjectivity: moving the inner to the outer, showing White people their debts to Black culture, and encouraging Black people to live out and proud.

**When Semple Turns "Red":  
Exploring Afro-Indigeneity in Langston Hughes's Simple Stories**  
DeLisa D. Hawkes ([dhawkes@umd.edu](mailto:dhawkes@umd.edu)), University of Maryland, College Park

In his November 3, 1945, *Chicago Defender* column *Here to Yonder*, Langston Hughes recounts his infamous Jesse B. Semple character's Indigenous ancestry in "Simple's Indian Blood." Semple compartmentalizes his Indigenous and African ancestries as a way to negotiate how he interacts with others within his black community. By the short story's end, readers witness a critique of the opinions that racial traits are inherent according to one's race and that nearly every black American claims to have an Indigenous ancestor in hopes of gaining some sense of superiority or influence among her or his peers. In this example and others Hughes published through the 1960s, he satirizes racialized Afro-Indigenous character traits in an effort to shed light upon internalized racism and intraracial division within some black communities. Semple relies upon an Afro-Indigenous identity in these stories in an effort to distinguish himself from others within his community and to explain away certain negative character traits and claim certain positive others. Hughes ultimately signifies upon Afro-Indigeneity in order to challenge then-popular racial pseudoscientific beliefs, even those held by some *within* black communities. This paper argues that Hughes's use of satire places the question of asserting Afro-Indigeneity at the forefront of race consciousness during a period in which many black Americans with ties to Indigenous communities struggled to assert their identities through legal measures or to have their identities accepted by some within their communities due to intraracial prejudices.

## **Langston Hughes and the Cuney Family: Bridging the Racial Divide Through Art**

Cynthia Davis ([Cynthia.davis@sjcd.edu](mailto:Cynthia.davis@sjcd.edu)), San Jacinto College

Waring Cuney (1906-1976) and Langston Hughes met on a Washington streetcar in 1924. Cuney, an aspiring poet and musician, was reading the *Chicago Defender* and recognized Hughes's photograph in connection with his forthcoming book, *The Weary Blues*. Along with the irrepressible Bruce Nugent, Hughes and Cuney became "inseparable. Speaking Spanish to pass as foreigners ...they attended the segregated theatres downtown...on hot afternoons, they appalled onlookers by strolling barefoot on 14<sup>th</sup> Street" (Rampersad 114). Meeting the three men on a visit to Washington, Jessie Fauset warned Hughes about Nugent's camp behavior and his "rather too deliberate eccentricities" (Rampersad 114). Hughes and Cuney apparently had a more professional relationship; Hughes recommended the latter's work it to Charles S. Johnson at *Opportunity* magazine. In 1926, Cuney's poem "No Images" won first a prize in the magazine's annual competition. Cuney then encouraged Hughes to attend Lincoln University, to which he had recently transferred from Howard. Hughes recalled in *The Big Sea* that Cuney told him "it was a fine college, because you had plenty of time there to read and write. He said the tuition was cheaper than Howard" (219). The men remained close for decades; in 1954 they edited *Lincoln University Poets* and planned an anthology of poems from *Opportunity Magazine* (Berry, 320).

Waring Cuney belonged to an illustrious African-American Texas family whose lives, like Hughes's, were both enriched and complicated by their multiracial heritage. Cuney was the second cousin of Maud Cuney Hare (1874-1936), a writer and musician, born in Galveston. Her father, Norris Wright Cuney, was a handsome, charismatic politician and labor leader .He was the son of Gen. Philip Minor Cuney and of his mixed-race slave housekeeper, Adeline Stuart. Gen. Cuney, one of the largest slaveholders in Texas, freed Adeline Stuart and the couple's eight children before the Civil War. Norris Cuney and several of his brothers, including the father of Waring Cuney, raised their children in an artistic, musical, extended family dedicated to racial uplift. The beautiful Maud would be described by W.E.B. DuBois in his autobiography as a "tall, imperious brunette, with gold-bronze skin, brilliant eyes and coils of black hair" (Lewis, 105).

After graduating from Galveston's segregated Central High School, which her father had helped to establish, Maud was admitted to Boston's New England Conservatory of Music. Like her parents, Cuney could pass for white, but she refused to do so. When some Southern students demanded the expulsion of Cuney from the dormitory, she defiantly stood her ground. Her cause was supported by all of Black Boston, including W.E. B. DuBois, then a graduate student at Harvard University.

Waring Cuney, Langston Hughes, and Maud Cuney Hare explored racial identity, created art, and "used language to speak truth to power in a discriminatory racial landscape." This paper explores these three unique individuals, their relationships with each other, and their fight against cultural and political oppression.

## **They "Thought They Owned Her, and They Were Perfectly Right": Fiction as a Site of Emancipation and Identity Construction in "Cora Unashamed" and "Slave on the Block"**

Christopher Allen Varlack ([cavarlack@gmail.com](mailto:cavarlack@gmail.com)), University of Maryland, Baltimore County

In his 1943 essay entitled, "My America," Langston Hughes outlines one of the pervasive problems affecting the African-American community of the post-Emancipation era. As he writes, "All over America...against the Negroes there has been an economic color line of such severity that since the Civil War we have been kept most effectively, as a racial group, in the lowest economic brackets. Statistics are not needed to prove this. Simply look around you" (Hughes, "My America" p. 501). In these words, he highlights not only the racial divide that stills fractures the nation after the Civil War but also the emergence of an economic divide reinforced in part as an effort to affirm flawed notions of white

supremacy while keeping the African-American people in “their place” as second-class citizens, if citizens at all. As a result, Black workers were denied job opportunities outside of menial roles and a culture of disenfranchisement swept the nation in what became known as Jim Crow.

This tradition Hughes reflects in his 1934 collection of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks*, in which he explores the long-standing discrimination and abuse enacted against the Black community. As he notes, characters like the Studevants in “Cora Unashamed” and the Carraways in “Slave on the Block” function under the dangerous perception that “they owned” their Black employees (Hughes, “Cora” p. 3) as a result of 1) a resurgent white supremacist ideology and 2) an equally problematic consumption, turned near-obsession, of a culture they saw as having “such jungle life about it” (“Slave” p. 11). Through these stories, Hughes then exposes the socioeconomic factors that needed to be addressed before racial uplift could ever take hold in the United States, specifically “the trap of economic circumstance that kept [Blacks] in [white] power practically all [their] live[s]” (“Cora” p. 5), while also challenging the notion of a continued enslavement of Black peoples post-Emancipation due to the stranglehold of poverty and second-class citizenship.

This proposed paper will thus examine the overarching implications of Hughes’ “Cora Unashamed” and “Slave on the Block” in an attempt to trace how Hughes uses his writing as an activist tool to empower the disempowered and to speak truth to a racist power structure that could not sustain itself on the backs of those its champions sought to oppress. Given the continued presence of this struggle now decades later, by turning to Hughes’ work, we can better understand how people of color can resist the new Jim Crow and, like Cora, “somehow [still] manage to get along” (“Cora” p. 11).