

## LIMINALITY AND TRANSGRESSION IN LANGSTON HUGHES' *MULATTO*

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**ABSTRACT.** *This essay explores societal fear of the mulatto as charted by Langston Hughes' play "Mulatto" (1931). "Mulatto" dramatizes the demand for social incorporation by a mixed-race young man, Robert Norwood, who suffers a double exclusion: from the white body politic, and from the black community, by virtue of his claim to a white heritage. I make extensive use of the terms 'liminal' and 'liminality' (taken from the work of anthropologist Victor Turner) to refer to Robert's status, his attempts to redraw that status, and the representation of space in the play. I argue that white characters', and hence white society's, refusal to grant Robert access to their power structures reveals a complex anxiety or fear of the borderland or liminal creature that is the mulatto, born of transgression (and, in Robert's case, ultimately a transgressor himself). I will also argue that the play is as much about female agency as it is about the dangers attendant on the (non-white) exercise of power.*

**RESUMEN.** *Este ensayo estudia el temor social hacia el mulato tal como se recoge en la obra dramática "Mulatto" (1931) de Langston Hughes. "Mulatto" dramatiza la exigencia de Robert Norwood, un joven de raza mixta, de ser incorporado socialmente. Robert es doblemente excluido: por el "statu quo" blanco y por la comunidad negra, exclusión que surge de la insistencia por parte de Robert en reclamar su patrimonio blanco. Se hace aquí uso extenso de los términos "liminar" y "liminaridad" (tomados de la obra del antropólogo Victor Turner) para referirse al estatus de Robert, a sus esfuerzos por recomponer ese estatus, y a la representación espacial en la obra. Se argumenta que el rechazo por parte de los personajes blancos y, por tanto, de la sociedad blanca a que Robert acceda a sus estructuras de poder revela una ansiedad o un temor complejos hacia la criatura fronteriza o liminar que es el mulato, nacido de la transgresión (y, en el caso de Robero, transgresor él también). Se argumenta además que la obra trata tanto de la autonomía femenina como de los peligros relacionados con el ejercicio de poder por parte de un ser no blanco.*

Langston Hughes' 1931 play *Mulatto* dramatizes the demand for social and familial incorporation by Robert Lewis, who suffers a double exclusion: from the white body politic and from the black community, by virtue of his claim to a white heritage. In what follows I argue that the play's white characters' and, by extension, white society's, refusal to grant Robert Lewis –the hero and *mulatto* of the title– access

to its power structures reveals a complex anxiety or fear of the borderland creature that is the mulatto, born of transgression and ultimately perpetrator of transgression himself. I will also argue in favour of a reading that stresses female agency both in its own right and as a strategy in response to the curtailment of Robert's.

The plot of *Mulatto*, which unfolds in a classically tight, one-day, one-setting structure, is as follows: the protagonist, who is also referred to as Bert, is described as a "light mulatto with ivory-yellow skin and proud thin features like his father's", and is home after having been away at school for several years. Home is a plantation in Georgia in the 1930s, where his mother, Cora, is the black housekeeper and long-time mistress to the plantation owner, Colonel Thomas Norwood, Robert's father and local bigwig. Cora has four other children by Norwood, only three of whom actually figure in *Mulatto*, with the fourth, Bertha, being referred to on just three occasions, and a fifth mentioned just once. (More about Bertha below and the possible reasons for her being consigned to textual oblivion).

Events climax at the close of Act I when, after a violent verbal exchange, Bert strangles his father to death. The play ends with Bert's suicide in his mother's bedroom out of sight of the audience and conveyed by the sound of a single shot from a pistol, his father's. The curtain falls after one last gesture of abuse towards Cora – a slap across the face by Talbot, the overseer. It is Cora's physical presence that nevertheless commands the final tableau. Throughout, the futility of Robert's efforts to reconcile his black and white lineage is reinforced through, among others, patterns of fatality and prophecy embedded in the play's text and structure: his mother's premonitory dreams of bloody tragedy, and the seemingly immutable power structures replicated in the contrapuntal black-white speech rhythms.

I will not attempt here a reductive psychoanalytic reading — Bert shoots himself with his father's pistol in the parental, if not legally conjugal, locus. Instead I will focus on the emotion which drives the action, anxiety. The anxiety expressed right across the racial spectrum over Bert's skin colour, with its approximation if not actual equivalence to 'whiteness', arises from a collective anxiety over the crossing of boundaries, the transgressive act or gesture which propels the subject to abandon one space for another, previously inaccessible, space. I will be applying the term 'liminal' as used by Victor Turner in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974), and which he defines as representing "the mid-point of transition of a status-sequence between two positions" (237). I propose a reading of *Mulatto* that supports a close analogy between the terms 'liminality' and transgression, an equivalence implied by Turner himself when he acknowledges the 'structure-dissolving quality of liminality' (263). *Structure* refers to "society as a differentiated, segmented system of structural positions ...which is ultimately maintained and sanctioned by power and force" (237-259). Invasion of the liminal, then, poses a threat to the body politic, which maintains its margins and thresholds pre-emptively, or punitively, through force.

I propose also that the tragic resolution of *Mulatto*, that is, the dual deaths of Bert and Norwood, enacts and is the culmination of societal anxiety over the various acts of transgression the play dramatizes. Put another way, if we bear in mind the structure-menacing (Turner calls it “-dissolving”) quality of the liminal, Bert’s transgressive act is necessarily doomed. His claim for participation in white power structures elicits precisely the ‘power and force’ Turner refers to. Yet Bert’s failure to survive *as such*, that is, as a mulatto, should not obscure a political reading: he ultimately escapes his oppressors by shooting himself and hence avoids the lynch-rope. This otherwise tragic outcome is partly countered, then, by Bert’s self-assertive act and also by transferring the range of action denied him to certain female members of his family — his mother above all, but also to his tantalizingly absent sister Bertha. To varying degrees they become repositories for a measure of agency which, together with Bert’s suicide, suggest a defiant ideological agenda not immediately evident from a superficial reading of the play’s ending.

Hughes thus does not confine his problematization of black, or non-white conformity, to his male protagonist. The shadowy presence of Bert’s other sister, Bertha, is significant here. As I noted above, she is mentioned a handful of times and never seen. We are, however, given tantalizing information about her: she lives in the North, not, as her father Colonel Norwood believes, working in a hotel kitchen, but earning her living as a typist. Even more telling, Cora reveals to Bert that “yo’ sister has to pass for white to get along good” (I, 18). The historical context — the southern United States in the 1930s — to Hughes’s text may well have proscribed a more explicit violation of white societal space, yet in the figure of Bertha it is as if Hughes wanted to provide Bert with a symbolic ‘transition of status-sequence’ in a nominally- and gender-transformed sibling. (One might also draw autobiographical, as well as political-aesthetic inference about the transformation of Bert into the feminine Bertha who lives up North and earns her living by doing something akin to writing).

It is no coincidence that Robert’s exclusion from the white body politic and feelings of impotence are matrilineal in origin. Nearly seventy years after emancipation, he is still defined by the dictum that the child shall go the way of the (slave-) mother and by the legacy of the notorious ‘one-drop rule’. Robert’s mother, Cora, is black, thus he is too, despite his light skin and eyes, inherited from his white father; Robert is bequeathed also his mother’s curtailed range of power. Yet the play, which is as much about a particular woman/mother’s tragedy as it is about Robert’s, replicates his strategy of challenge or resistance to the white status quo above all through the figure of Cora. The final stage instructions read: “She does not move. It is as though no human hand can touch her again”. Cora has willed herself to a state beyond reality, recalling her son’s self-defining though self-destructive act, and Turner’s reference to the liminal as a “no-place and no-time”. That she is in the parlour, occupying the space where all transaction between black and white characters

occurs, most notably the murder of Norwood by Bert, underscores the interface nature of the liminal as a site, or point of access, between two spaces.

Resistance is thus enacted principally through transgressive acts or gestures which result in an occupation of the liminal such as Cora's 'occupation' of the parlour, in metonymic representation also of white space. The liminal, as Turner points out, is not a place where the subject is caught and statically held, from which never to emerge. It represents a threshold which contains within itself the concept of passage, the movement from one status to another, usually higher or preferable status. To quote Turner again, liminality implies the "transition rites" which accompany every change of state or social position" (231). That Bert's bid for a "change of state or social position", indeed every non-white individual's similar bid, becomes a life-threatening enterprise for that individual, is explained by the "structure-dissolving quality of liminality" (263) noted by Turner. Liminality, briefly to sum up, embodies an action (the occupying of the 'no-time' and 'no-place') but also a movement both of 'transition in status-sequence' and transgression, since its ultimate goal is to 'dissolve' the 'structure.'

Langston Hughes dramatizes a transitional or transgressive movement via at least two strategies. One concerns the choreography, so to speak, of the play, since actual motion is involved; the other becomes evident if we compare the successive drafts of *Mulatto* (held at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Manhattan) with the final version. I will take the latter strategy – textual revision – first.

The revisions to *Mulatto* can be traced back nearly 30 years, from the portion of an early draft written between 1929 and 1930<sup>1</sup>, to what appears to be the final version dated "after July 1957"<sup>2</sup>. We find that Hughes introduces certain straightforward revisions, such as the correction of spelling and grammar errors, rearranging word order, or, more tellingly, inserting or suppressing sentences, clauses, words. This last discursive move has significant implications not simply for how something is told, but what is being told. We find a consistent pattern of erasure of blackness through the use of the word 'yellow'. 'Yellow' as a qualifier of skin colour, meaning a light-skinned person of African descent, possibly able to pass for white, appears on numerous occasions either as an insertion or a substitution in the typescripts. For example, in an early draft (probably prior to 1963)<sup>3</sup>, a character named Higgins addresses Colonel Norwood and refers to Bert as "that damned nigger buck of yours" (I, 8). In the 1963 published version, that line is now "that damned yellow nigger of yours". The term

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1. LHP (JWJ) Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Folder 705.

2. LHP (JWJ). Folder 713.

3. Undated carbon copy typescript. LHC. Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. New York Public Library for Research in Black Culture. New York Public Library.

'nigger' is itself frequently revised to the less harsh and also more equivocal 'colored'. Later on in the same opening scene, the earlier version "That's one nigger don't know his place", again in reference to Bert, becomes "That's one yellow buck don't know his place" (I, 9) in the later published work. Bert's sister Sallie, whom we are told initially is "very light with sandy hair and freckles, ... could pass for white" is shifted further along the colour spectrum becoming 'fair' instead (I, 6), normally an adjective attached to whites and suggestive of bloneness.

It is clear, then, that Hughes intended to stress Bert's liminal status, in transition between black and white or, more reductively stated, between an object and a subject status. Let us not forget that in the southern United States of the 1930s agency was chiefly the prerogative of white society. Hughes creates and sustains a tension between Bert's strategies of self-authentication and the surrounding societal pressures to wrest his whiteness away from him, where whiteness connotes entitlement, power, agency. Significantly, of Bert and his siblings, only William, who is unmistakably of African descent, is not problematic. "You's mo' like de field hands", says his mother, Cora, "too much of my blood in you" (II: 2, 31). Color itself, then — Bert's and Sallie's and Bertha's — is the marker of transgression. Put another way, William conforms to the 'outsider' or 'marginal' category which, according to Turner, "refers to actions and relationships which do not flow from a recognized social status but originate outside it" (237). William's blackness safely confines him to beyond the margins denying him access to a liminal or threshold status, which in turn would pose an unacceptable 'dissolving' threat to the white status quo.

Perhaps the most significant textual revision to *Mulatto* occurs in a stage instruction prior to the beginning of the action. In an early carbon-copy typescript, probably pre-1931, Hughes' description of Colonel Norwood's parlour ends thus: "It is a clean, but somewhat shabby and rather depressing room. The windows are raised. The late afternoon sunlight streams in". By 1953, the description has to changed to the following: "It is [a] very clean, but somewhat shabby and rather depressing room, *dominated by a large oil-painting of NORWOOD'S wife of his youth on the center wall*" (I, 3; my italics). The rest of the passage remains unaltered. Thus the entire action of the play unfolds against the image of a white woman, long dead, who was the wife of Colonel Norwood but not the mother of his children. The dominating visual presence of the unnamed, childless white woman is a masterful device condensing the tensions which inform the play before a single word of exposition is uttered by a character. The device points the reader/spectator analeptically to a time prior to the raising of the curtain and proleptically to the tragic outcome of the play — note the inserted revision's textual proximity to the adjectives 'shabby' and 'depressing'. The choice of the passive form 'dominated by' is also suggestive. This is, after all, a play about the access or denial of access to power and agency.

The distribution of the visual elements of the play's central, indeed only, setting also bespeak a connection between power, authority and the feminine. By having her

framed presence ‘dominate’ the parlour, Hughes makes the defunct’s wife complicity with the power structure textually and visually explicit. The parlour, as I indicated earlier, functions symbolically as the limen itself. It is where black and white come together either through dramatic interaction, but also *through* the figure of Bert (and, fleetingly, Sallie). Their skin colour makes them the living, literal representation of the liminal and, in the case of Bert, of its subversive and ‘dissolving’, if not potentially destructive, nature: Bert, let us not forget, kills his father.

The final tableau establishes both a difference with and reinforcement of the opening tableau: the parlour now incorporates another, critical visual element, Cora, who produces a shift in the connotative power of the portrait of Norwood’s dead wife. Instead of power and agency, the portrait now connotes absence, or a series of absences: individual, conjugal, maternal. Presence is reformulated in terms of Cora — living, mistress, mother — to whom reader and spectator alike now focus their attention. This shift in turn restates retroactively — just as Mrs. Norwood’s portrait anticipated — the play’s major concern: the anxiety about maintaining or acceding to power and agency. Power this time is definitively articulated in terms of gender: Cora, voiceless though we leave her, has the ‘last word’. Yet the play’s extraordinary final moment avoids forging a visual congruence between the dead white woman and the living black one; on the contrary, it is the latter, now, who visually ‘dominates’<sup>4</sup>.

The visual and symbolic displacement of the dead wife also creates important retroactive reverberations. We become aware that Cora ultimately dominates the liminal, that indeed it is Cora who has for the most part determined the movement of characters into and out of spaces and thresholds. It is Cora who projects the imaginary space — her premonitory dream of “a path o’ living blood across this house” (I, 15) — that in the end becomes a real space in which the victim is nevertheless substituted. The blood-red light which invades her dream and that she initially connects to Bert is the same blood-red light which bathes the parlour at the moment Bert “drops the body of his father at her feet” (II: 1, 24).

As I noted earlier, spaces and thresholds, and who invades or is allowed to invade them, represent the second strategy Hughes deploys to dramatize the liminal. We have seen that the liminal involves the transition from one space or status to another and that this attempt to breach another space is what confers upon the liminal its transgressive quality. Indeed, movement itself becomes a transgressive act in that it connotes a displacement from here to there, from one place to another.

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4. The political engages the aesthetic here in Hughes’ creation of parallel familial structures. The institutional bond between Colonel Norwood and his wife ensures cultural legitimation; this legitimation is not ensured by the extra-institutional bond between Norwood and Cora, problematic on various counts: Cora’s skin colour, her unauthorized and unacknowledged conjugal relationship, the ensuing illegitimate offspring.

The notion of forbidden spaces or thresholds, that is, proscribed movement, is enhanced in *Mulatto* by confining in the first instance all movement to a single space, the parlour. When the curtain rises, movement and place, agency and status, are seemingly unchallengeable concepts. The terms of the dominant power structure are established in the opening minutes by placing Colonel Norwood as the sole visual and vocal occupier of the dramatic space. He is addressing an initially absent woman who soon appears but remains hovering on the edge of the visual field at the top of the stairs. The reader/spectator is instantly made aware of the relationship: she is black, he is white; she speaks in a black, rural vernacular, he utilizes a white, proprietary southern discourse.

No sooner is the relationship established through space, movement and speech, than the balance of power appears to falter, or at least undergo a challenge. The source of that challenge comes from Cora's son Bert who has without permission driven his father's Ford into town. Transgression is instantly formulated in terms of agency and movement, and indeed the motorcar and driving become powerful symbols of Bert's will to occupy an insider status denied him. References to Bert not acting or speaking or behaving 'like a nigger' or, more tellingly, of not 'knowing his place', accumulate with the play's unfolding. Bert's transgressiveness is associated above all with his repeated challenge to Norwood's prohibition to enter the house by the front door. Bert links his use of the front entrance to his claim to a white birthright: when accused by his brother William of using the front door "once too much", Bert retorts: "Yes, like de white folks" (I, 16).

*Mulatto*, then, charts the white attempt to confine non-white characters, perceived as threats to the status quo, to spaces of impotence and disenfranchisement thus keeping them out of spaces of authority and entitlement. Flouting the paternal law and invasion of the liminal by crossing the threshold (the front entrance) become one and the same and lead to the fatal father-son confrontation, but not before Norwood makes one last effort to repel Bert's challenge. Norwood does not simply order Bert never to use the front entrance again, he attempts definitively to displace him: "...get the hell off this place and stay off. Get the hell out of this county...Get out of this state...Get out of here now" (II: 1, 24). Bert's crime, for which he brings down paternal and white society's retribution is to occupy "the mid-point of transition of a *status-sequence* between two positions" (my italics). The paternal response is to attempt to displace him to a space occupied by his (black) brother, namely, to a where "actions and relationships ... do not flow from a recognized social status but originate outside it".

It is no surprise, then, that the townsfolk's intended punishment — the lynch-ropes — is not to avenge Norwood's murder but Bert's crossing of a forbidden line: "They'll probably hang him to that tree", predicts with sadistic relish the undertaker to Cora, "'cause they tell me he strutted right out the front gate past that tree after the murder" (II: 2, 29).

The undertaker is right, Bert does exit the house at the same place he entered it, by the front. What the undertaker does not know is that Bert flees the scene of the murder by crossing that threshold *at his mother's bidding*. The violation of white societal authority, though enacted by the son, is instigated by the mother.

At the play's close Cora occupies, as we have seen, both a literal and figurative liminality. Throughout she has borne testimony to and the burden of the family's first transgression, the primary invasion of the liminal, perpetrated by Norwood by maintaining sexual relations with a black plantation worker: herself. In all cases — Bert's, Cora's, Norwood's — occupying the liminal entails an exercise of agency or power. *Mulatto's* lyrical and compelling articulation of that will to agency, its bold questioning of black submission and victimhood has elicited two memorable responses of white anxiety. In both instances patterns of female (s)exploitation and black victimization have been reinforced. The first is well known. Martin Jones, the play's 1935 Broadway producer, substantially revised the play, incorporating the rape of Robert's sister Sallie by a white overseer. Hughes' biographer Arnold Rampersad gives a thorough account of this grotesque sensationalist revision and the protracted humiliations Hughes and the cast endured while the play was on Broadway.

Some thirty years later, the Spanish playwright Alfonso Sastre adapted *Mulatto* for a brief staging in Madrid in April 1963. This 'versión libre' is problematic on numerous counts, not least for the way in which Sastre systematically suppresses references to Bert's light skin colour; indeed he emerges simply as a black character and Sastre even confesses in an interview that he wanted to enhance Bert's status as representative of the black community<sup>5</sup>. For Sastre black equals victim and Bert does not kill himself but is caught and lynched by white townfolk<sup>6</sup>. Both Jones and Sastre, it would seem, sought to obscure, indeed erase, *Mulatto's* powerful ideological content, through which Langston Hughes provides less an exploration of victimhood than a moving exposé of strategies of resistance and subversion through both his male and female characters.

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5. "Se trataba de [...] expresar [...] la tragedia desgarradora de un hombre *de color* en el sur de Estados Unidos" (*Mulato*: 8). "It's the case of the mulatto who [...] doesn't belong to the blacks, and yet suddenly [...] it's like a reconciliation with his black roots and with blackness when he's going to die [...] he becomes affected by his black inheritance. He suddenly defines himself just when he's going to die" (Sastre, qtd. in Saz: 20).

6. "I wanted to present the image of a lynching, the image of the black man strung up" (Sastre, qtd. in Saz: 20).



### Abbreviations

- LHP Langston Hughes Papers. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
- JWJ James Weldon Johnson Collection. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
- LHC Langston Hughes Collection. Manuscripts, Archives and Books Division. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. New York Public Library.

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