Adaptable Analytical Vistas Illumine a Touchstone: Langston Hughes as Minor Author/Poet

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Abstract
The authentic association of spontaneity, as a spur or basis for artistic expression, with the vaunted notion of autonomy in literary creation is nowhere more clearly established than in the work of theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari as they, inter-alia, explicate the unique literary repertoire bestowed upon the world by Franz Kafka. In their acclaimed works: *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature and Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, they offered to literary theory the fascinating and analytically productive constructs of deterritorialization and anti-Oedipus in the context of a compelling portraiture of the ways in which various institutionalized relationships subtly prescribe and reinforce inequity in society’s power mechanics that tendentiously impact, among other realities, the nature and quality of literary products. They offered, in the process, a refreshing definition of minor literature that unequivocally restores to literature its distinctive place and role in the amalgamated adjudications of society’s intergroup dissensions. In this regard, the present paper subscribes to the idea that spontaneity equaled the intrinsic and immutable desire of the gifted literary mind of African-American author/poet Langston Hughes to reach expressivity in accordance, strictly, with his unalloyed literary vision and thus made autonomy the inevitable upshot of his inspiration and practice.

*Key words:* Langston Hughes, African-American author/poet, Minor author/poet, Literary spontaneity and autonomy, Deterritorialization

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1. Introduction
The concepts of MINOR LITERATURE and MINOR AUTHOR are substantially resourceful windows into any effort to evaluate intriguing nitty-gritties about formative phases in the development of newer traditions of literature that naturally present potential for the exploration of fresh analytical vistas. African-American literature presents many moments that are known to have marked the genesis of formal steps to define the parameters of a new and evolving literature against the backdrop of established and dominant traditions. Discourse about these watershed moments in American cultural history is characterized by a fecundity of variegated ideas and theories about approaches, methods, and ideological positionality that key movers brought to bear on the common agenda of producing a robust and self-sustaining literary tradition. This article examines the unique contribution of one of the more notable actors in this tradition, Langston Hughes, whose particular practice is remarkably illuminable by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1983; 1986) particular take on the theories of anti-Oedipus and minor literature.

2. Background to the Study
   2.1 Theories of Oedipus, Anti-Oedipus, and minor literature
Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983) styled their constructs as centering theories that seek to valorize all kinds of centrifugal forces in human thought while regarding askance all formal codifications, institutionalizations, traditions, and continuities that pervade myriad fields of social and intellectual endeavor. They argued that “Oedipus—[the Freudian psychoanalytic phenomenon] - is the figurehead of imperialism,” the amalgamated locus of powers that are inherent in most conventional formal arrangements that ought to be countered by “anti-Oedipus,” a centrifugal attitude, potency, or “art of living counter to all forms of fascism—present and impending” (as cited in Seem, 1983, pp. xiii; xx). Thus, in literary terms, Deleuze and Guattari conceived of artistic inspiration and artistic impetus in terms of a “desire” for self-expression, or a desire to “produce” a literary product; this desire is, of necessity, imperiled by a ubiquity of “Oedipal” forces demanding symmetry and conformation at every turn.

   2.2 Minor Literature: meaning and features
Deleuze and Guattari (1986) offered three defining characteristics of minor literature: “The deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation” (p. 18). While they did not go so far as to show how Langston Hughes’ self-styled and critically acknowledged status as the Negro people’s poet exemplified the last dyad of this triad (an important aim of this article), one of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1986) illustrative assertions includes a key reference to Afro-American literature. They wrote that “Prague German is a deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses. (This can be compared in another context to what blacks in America today are able to do with the English language)” (p. 17). One can thus begin to see how the conclusions they educed in their study of Kafka might apply to Hughes’s practice.
Moreover, their definition of a minor author clearly exemplifies this application. The minor author, they wrote, draws from the major language in the production of a minor literature. And by “major language”, they referred to an established literary tradition, including the language of its rendition, and by the terms, “vehicular” and “vernacular” (by which they referred to German and Yiddish respectively) they implied a parallel relationship between the language of Hughes’ practice and the vehicular version of the English language (1986, p. 23). The minor author, they argued, “stacks him/herself in opposition to all the ‘vehicular’ intrigues of the major language” both directly and indirectly. Thus the minor author’s expressive medium, the vernacular, a common parlance name for a non-standard form of a major language, must dramatize itself as an aspect of the vehicular. “It is an escape language, for music, for writing, with a plurality of intensive expressive avenues, or “polyligualism,” which the minor author uses to “oppose the oppressed quality of language to its oppressive quality, to find points of non-culture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape” (1986,p. 28).

The referent of the word “escape” in this context is clearly subversive; it exposes intrigues and, simultaneously, manifests the armor and insusceptibility of a vernacularised reality. In this article, this word will share a semantic field, theoretically, with the theorists’ term, “deterritorialization,” a term that has been variously interpreted in relevant scholarship. As implied above, it has been used in this article to signify the introduction of an element of destabilization in an otherwise conventionally staid and stable cultural, ideological, and semantic environment, a destabilization that is reminiscent of Derrida’s deconstruction in the sense of affording rein to expressive impulses that have traditionally been stifled or rendered absent either through direct stereotyping or by dint of other tendentious discursivity. Thus the anonymous “territorialization” and “reterritorialization” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p.19) will here signify deliberate or unwitting reactionary stances against the centrifugalizing impulse of deterritorialization.

3. Langston Hughes as a Minor Writer/Poet

What qualities must a writer have in order to produce a credible minor literature? Creative autonomy, spontaneity, and fearlessness bolstered by a commitment to language and art as viable forms of social expressivity: these, inter-alia, are the qualities that lie at the core of minor author’s afflatus. This article claims these qualities for Langston Hughes, arguably Afro-America’s most versatile and prolific writer-poet. The first part of the body of the article will demonstrate Hughes’s sui generis qualities as a minor author by foregrounding ways in which he managed to “escape” the shackles imposed by the logic of a “vehicular” language, and thus created new statements via “deterritorialized” English. The second part of the article will examine Hughes’s operations in the context of the second and third strands of the above definition of minor literature: showing the implications of his “connection… to a political immediacy” and to “a collective assemblage of enunciation.” This section will entail analyses of how Hughes’ “reworking of the language” and recourse to “a signifying” utilizations of it (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 22) set him apart from such other practitioners as Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Richard Wright, and
Ralph Ellison. The final part of the paper will exemplify how Hughes worked his way around major Oedipal barriers by virtue of a “sticky and coagulated” latitude (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986 p. 26).

Hughes’s unique method turned upon his defining qualities of spontaneity, creative autonomy, and explorative intrepidity. At a formative point in his career, he “did not dare write stories yet, although poems came to me spontaneously, from somewhere inside” (Hughes, 1940/1993, p. 34). Later, in the same text, he described the moment (during his second train journey to his fathers’ Toluca home in Mexico) that gave birth to, arguably, his most famous poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers:”

I looked out the window … at the great muddy river flowing down toward the heart of the South, and I began to think what that river, the … Mississippi, had meant to Negroes in the past—how to be sold down the river was the worst fate that could overtake a slave in times of bondage. … Then I began to think about other rivers in our past—the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa—and the thought came to me: “I’ve known rivers,” and I put it down on the back of an envelope I had in my pocket, and within the space of ten or fifteen minutes, as the train gathered speed in the dusk, I had written this poem, which I called “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” (1940/1993, p. 55)

The depository or fountain of his writing was thus simultaneously the engendering seat of another key element of Hughes’ practice: his unabashed and explicit “love” of Negro life in all its ramifications. He loved to talk about his “love” of Negroes, and wrote as if this pledge was a particularly genuine one. Thus his spontaneity thrived in this un-stylized manner of drawing inspiration directly from his relationship with the material he thematized in his writing. His language was the raw form out of the maws of his subjects and was rendered in the most artistic form that spontaneous poetry would allow. In so proceeding, Hughes became “the bearer of an affirmation without reserve,” who embraced and adopted for his artistic province exactly those aspects that, being awesomely authentic, problematized the most compelling aspects of what was at stake in Negro reality in the United States (Bensaia, 1986, p. xiii).

3.1 Aspects of the contemporary criticism of Hughes’ work

Hughes’ unique relationship with his material inevitably brought him in conflict not only with those who, failing to accept the “epistemological mutation of history” (Foucault, 1972, p.11), thought that their practice was only legitimate if it was amenable to adjudication by traditional literary criteria, but also with those like W.E.B. Du Bois who believed in the exigency of didacticism in writing by Afro-Americans (DU Bois, 1986, p. 1000). Du Bois targeted

Hughes’s January 1926 publication, The Weary Blues, which Du Bois, among other Negro critics, found to be both un-didactic and downright offensive in its raw portrayal of what these purists considered scandalizing Negro “low life.” Hughes would respond to this criticism in a manner perfectly consistent with the following Deleuze and Guattari construct: While “a major, or established, literature follows a vector that goes from content to expression…. a minor, or revolutionary, literature begins by expressing itself and
doesn’t conceptualize until afterward” (1986, p. 28). Thus, offering, it must be inferred, his post-performance take on his book, Hughes wrote, “if the colored newspaper critics… choose to see only… the ugliness of my verse and not the protest against ugliness which my poems contain, what can I do?” (March 22, 1927, p.40). In other words, Hughes was here arguing that the essential ontology of minor literature’s raw material is revolutionary, requiring, for actualization, no more than “true,” credible, depiction.

In designating the subject of his famous 1926 essay, the “Negro artist,” instead of the unqualified, “artist,” (a preference of fellow Harlem Renaissance poet, Countee Cullen) Hughes reached for a specifically minor literature concept. And this is not necessarily a function of the historical and social connotations of the word “Negro.” It is, rather, the idea that the presence of an adjective before the noun creates a particularity that acknowledges difference and bears ramifications of instability which are consistent with the minor of minor literature. Here, Hughes asserted two things that, in a different context, would seem to be mutually exclusive. He claimed the defining elements of artistic autonomy and rejected the shackling of pedantic theory, while, simultaneously, renouncing the “possibilit[y] for an individual enunciation” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 17-18). As Du Bose Howard (1926) wrote, “He … wisely refused to be fettered by a theory and … allowed his mood to select its own music…. When he is able to create a minor, devil-may-care music, and through it to release a throb of pain, he is doing what the Negroes have done for generations whether in the “Blues” of the Mississippi region or [in] a song like ‘I can’t Help from Cryin’ Sometimes’” (pp. 74-75). In other words, as a typical minor author, he did not premise his performance on pre-existent trajectories and showed no concern with conceiving ahead of expressing. This approach was innovative, against odds, and fearless. For Hughes knew that in order to bring forth a vibrant and authentic Negro literature, he would have to banish fear, and he realized this objective through substituting “laughter” for the “extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness,” which fear engendered (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 47). As Francois Dodat affirmed, “This poet is not a thinker, but nobody would dream of reproaching him for it, because, on the contrary, he possesses an extra-ordinary faculty for defining the confused sensations that constitute the collective conscience of simple minds” (as cited in Cruse, 1967, p. 33).

Now, that spontaneity in a creative persona might manifest itself as a kind of thoughtlessness was noted in Hughes fairly early in his career. He “fended off every attempt to probe into his inner self and did this with such an unconscious and naïve air that the prober soon came to one of two conclusions: Either [he] had no depth whatsoever, or else he was too deep for plumbing by ordinary mortals” (Thurman, 1932/1992, p. 232). Some reviewers of Hughes’s book had also underscored this point, avowing, with approbation, that Hughes was generally free from the encumbrance of self-consciousness. Howard Mumford Jones wrote that “Mr. Hughes’s trouble is that he is afraid he will not be literary. I assure him on my honor as a reader of some thousands of verses that literature has ruined more poets than it has ever saved” (as cited in Dace, 1997, p. 49); Joseph March’s review claimed that Hughes’s work was “vigorou[s], spontaneous, and so unaffected that the simplest adornment of emotion and thought stands out vividly” (as
cited in Dace, 1997, pp. 94-95); and in a review of *Fine Clothes*, Theophilus Lewis wrote: “[Hughes] sees deeper into life and is able to discern movements [others] are unaware of. This is what makes his work appear strange and startling when it is compared with art already crystallized by convention and familiarity” (as cited in Dace, 1997, p. 103).

### 3.2 Some features of Hughes’ poems

Many of the claims above may be appropriately supported with a reading of a selected number of Hughes’ poems. In one of his earthier realizations, “Aunt Sue’s Stories,” for example, Hughes achieves a deterritorialized semantic milieu through intensive (ontological) portraiture rather than through signification, thus exemplifying an effect of spontaneity. “Black slaves/ Working in the hot sun,/ And black slaves/Walking in the dewy night,/And black slaves/ Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty rivet/ Mingle themselves softly/ In the dark shadows that cross and re-cross/ Aunt Sues’ stories” (Hughes, 1959, p. 6). In this rendition, centripetal interplays between the signifier and the signified are attenuated, even erased, as the “stories” and the “black slaves” mingle with each other, instead of the stories “revealing,” and thus circumscribing, the “slaves” and the “dark shadows.” Typically, these are tableaus of humanity engaged awesomely in the business of being alive and present in spite of the efforts that abound in the world of signification and convention to undermine it.

In “*DanseAfricaine*,” the poet goes to the very heart of a vaunted controversy, the hackneyed primeval pulse.

The low beating of the tom-toms,
The slow beating of the tom-toms
   Low… slow
   Slow… low—
   Stirs our blood.
   Dance!
   A night-veiled girl
   Whirls softly into a
   Circle of light.
   Whirls softly… slowly,
   Like a wisp of smoke around the fire—
   And the tom-toms beat,
   And the tom-toms beat,
   And the low beating of the tom-toms
   Stirs your blood. (2002, p. 7)

When it reaches its zenith of intensity, the language of “*DanseAfricaine*” has become an amalgam of the “tom-tom” sounds, the stirred blood of the speaker, and the dancer and her whirling movements: all of which cannot be distinguished from one another. “Whirling” implicates a different kind of motion than a run-of-the-mill jig does. It is an attempt to contain the facets of the target subject material in an enthralling ontological rhythm, and to demand attention only at that level of intense realization, and not at any other variously and severally mediated one.
In “Dream Variations,” another one of the poet’s early pieces, this intensity in representation is markedly realized.

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
Dark like me—
That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.
Rest at pale evening…
A tall slim tree…
Night coming tenderly
Black like me. (2002, p. 14)

As each of these stanzas travels in a deliberately anti-climactic fashion, the reader notes that the culmination is a somewhat dull normalcy that speaks to an aspect of daily yearning. But the sense of emotional descent felt here is exacerbated by the sudden onset of its opposite: a sharp emotional and psychological peak that occurs in the context is juxtaposed with the staid ambiance connoted by the words “evening” and “rest.” The emotional and psychological peaks are conveyed not through a conventional lexicosemantic association, but through a device that diminishes the cognitive force of diction with a view to achieving an air of pure intensity. “To fling my arms wide/ In some place of the sun” releases a closed-eyed mental apprehension of an image whose only possible description is extreme exert[ivity], of the vigorous rather than the strenuous mode. Here is making the English “[language] cry with an extremely sober and rigorous cry…. Here is language being pushed “toward a deterritorialization that will no longer be [circumvented] by culture or by myth, that will be an absolute deterritorialization.” Here is a deviation from formal “syntax” and “lexis” that yet gives syntax and lexis to a dance, as it were (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 26)

In the following example, the teen poet practiced with what would later become a definite forte of his: unearthing the poetic beauty that is inherent in black dialect as a literary medium, the asset that harbinger Paul Laurence Dunbar had embraced and then remorsefully abjured as a “broken tongue.”

Just because I loves you—
That’s de reason why
My soul is full of color
Like de wings of a butterfly
Just because I loves you
That’s de reason why
My heart’s a fluttering aspen leaf
When you pass by. (Hughes, 1940/1993, p. 26)

The broken-ness, or, more appropriately, the deviation here is at the levels of both structure and sentiment. Structurally, the subordinate “Just because I loves you” at sentence initial, anticipates, in prescriptive terms, a contrastive (negative) independent clause, like, for example, “it does not mean that I am prepared to die for you.” At the level of sentiment, the clear implication is that the positive can be reinforced by the equally positive, and need not always be burdened by a structurally logical negative. The conception resists the centripetalizing schemes of the vehicular forms, showing how liberating language can be amidst centrifugal explorations.

3.3 Hughes’ literary ancestry (if any)
Now, since Hughes possessed these deterritorializing qualities as an African American writer in the early twentieth century, the question of who his antecedent practitioners were, naturally, suggests itself. In other words, did poet Langston Hughes have “ancestors” (Ellison, 1972, p. 140) that influenced his typical work? What sort of apprenticeship, one naturally wonders, had forged this poet’s practice? Well, when he came of age, intellectually, at Central High School, Hughes had already been involved in a unique sort of communing with books as epistemological depositories. A phrase that he invented and used in The Big Sea captures evocatively his relationship with books. In a Topeka library that he frequently visited with his mother, he came in contact for the first time with the awe-inspiring culture of consuming books, and with the air of dignified seriousness that went with this special kind of consuming. “And right then, even before I was six, books began to happen to me” (1940/1993, p. 26). Hughes’ use of this phrase was a moment of linguistic flourish consistent with a deterritorializing afflatus. It recalls “the talking book” trope that is such a crucial part of Afro-American literary theory (Gates, 1988, pp. 127-169). Books are supposedly objects without volition that we deliberately “pick up” and “read.” However, in this phrase, Hughes implied that such an attitude toward books is, in fact, complacent. For books are something that can happen to one the way an ailment of the mind might happen to one, notwithstanding the fact that they also have great edification potential for the reader. The effect of books on the reader, in other words, is much more complex than is generally believed. “After a while” Hughes wrote, “there came a time when I believed in books more than I believed in people—which, of course, was wrong. That was why, when I went to Africa, I threw all the books into the sea” (/1940/1993, p. 26).

Apparently, during the period between when “books began happening” to him and the tossing a-sea “of all the books,” Hughes discovered that not all books happenedo one in the same way. Some books, it seemed, just sangsongs that touched your heart and filled you with feeling, while others delivered a high-handed didacticism, seeking to determine for your mind what its view of the world should be. At Central High, “Ethel Weimer [his
English teacher] discovered Carl Sandburg for me. Although I had read of Carl Sandburg before—in an article, I think, in the Kansas City Star about how bad free verse was—I didn’t really know him until Miss Weimer. . . brought him. . . Then I began to try to write like Carl Sandburg” (1940/1993, p. 28). Now, since Hughes associated Sandburg with free verse, we can safely infer that his beginning to write like the latter meant that free verse was the source of his attraction to Sandburg. The question here, then, is whether this relationship between impressionable young Hughes and Sandburg’s poetry fits the conventional definition of literary influence? And, the answer, for this article, is “NO!” The answer is “NO” because, for one thing, “the notion of influence” is not always “amenable to analysis” since its parameters assume, often without concrete evidence, a “medium of propagation” between entities (Foucault, 1972, p. 21). Secondly, assuming that such parameters do, in fact, become identifiable, formal literary influence entails an “anxiety” ridden “agon for aesthetic supremacy” between the poet and his admired “precursor” (Bloom, 1997, pp. xi-xlvii). Obviously, Hughes did not have this kind of relationship with Sandburg’s poetry. The latter was a harbinger of Hughes’ mode of poetry with whom he shared a creative impulse, but from whom he differed in a fundamental sense, since Sandburg cannot be said to have written minor literature as such. The latter’s work did not have the same kind of immediate political resonance and collective appeal that the work of a typical minor author like Hughes perforce possessed. Secondly, the word “form” in the conventional literary parlance in which it is utilized cannot be applied to free verse. Form betrays the self-conscious and artful element of composition, an element that is, of necessity, abjured by the practitioner of free verse and superseded by preponderant spontaneity. Indeed, free verse is a kind of formlessness, which, ipso-facto, is not reproducible, patentable, or territorializable; its pioneering practitioners cannot make any exclusive claim upon it beyond the advantage of temporal priority over their successors. Moreover, the very existence and fastidiousness of its formal counterparts suggest the availability of free verse for universal appropriation as a potent symbol of deterritorialization. In writing like Carl Sandburg, then, Hughes merely chose to take advantage of the aforesaid potency.

But Hughes also loved Sandburg’s writing so much that he paid tribute to this predecessor in the following piece:

**Carl Sandburg’s poems**

Fall on the white pages of his books
Like blood-clots of song
From the wounds of humanity. (1940/1993, p. 29)

In effect, then, Sandburg captured Hughes’ imagination because he [Sandburg] “was a lover of humanity.” Indeed, in his longing to be “a people’s poet” who was read and understood by “the average truck driver…[and by] farmers, thieves, and deacons—and not [just] by little cliques” (as cited in McMichael, 1993, p. 950), Sandburg wrote a poetry that was both accessible and touching in its “love… for humanity.” Both Sandburg and Hughes evinced an abnegation that is true of the practice of those who delight in being labeled “people’s poet[s].” This abnegation, coupled with the bohemian tendencies that are
also true of their miens of defiance, becomes an assertion of artistic autonomy without undue investment in literary trailblazing. It is an assertion of autonomy that argues for the centrality of a writer’s relationship with the material that reflects his most basic inspiration, a relationship that must never play second-fiddle even to the most sublimated stylization. For, by dint of their quotidian fare, “the people” are a “peculiar [literary terrain that is] ruled by a special type of relationship, a free, familiar, marketplace relationship.” Here, hierarchy and other kinds of regimentation, indispensables of formal literary culture, are relegated to the background, and a language other than “the tongue of officialliterature” reigns (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 154). It is thus significant that, Like Sandburg, Hughes embraced passionately his famous designation as the Negro “people’s poet.”

3.4 Understanding the collective context of Hughes’s writing

Yet as an author whose work, as Deleuze and Guattari insist, cannot escape collective resonance, Hughes vernacular relationship to the vehicular reality had refractive counterparts intensifying his identity. Four particularly germane cases in point are worth examination here: Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer from the Harlem Renaissance era, and Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison from the immediately succeeding era of Afro-American literary history. None of these other prominent players of their times were prepared to pursue the autonomy logic to the extent that Hughes did. Content with merely demonstrating their intrinsic capacity to operate, as far as possible, within the vehicular realm, and to underline in that way the falsity of historical anti-black stereotypes, they understood little of Hughes’ pursuance of an unmediated, definitely deterritorialized, alternative medium. In other words, they found it sufficient to temper a territorialized literary logic by using it to dress up material with a reformative, but not transformative potential.

Countee Cullen, dubbed poet laureate of the Negro Renaissance by some, embraced the British Romantic tradition in poetry (Thurman, 1932/1992, p232; Early, 1991, p. 53). In his famous couplet, “Yet do I marvel at this curious thing?/ To make a poet black and bid him sing,” Cullen rendered in verse and poetry an argument he had elsewhere advanced, that a poet need not be defined by his ethnic or racial specificity (1991, p.79). In “John Keats, Poet, at Spring Time,” Cullen attributed to the British romanticist “a monopoly” of the sense of beauty in poetry: “I know, in spite of all men say/ Of Beauty, you have felt her most,” and, three stanzas later, “John Keats is dead, they say, but I/ Who hear your full insistent cry/ In bud and blossom, leaf and tree,/ Know John Keats still writes poetry” (1991, pp. 130-31). Obviously, there was no Keatsian ghost haunting the ramparts of “Niggerati Manor” (Thurman, 1992, p. 105), from beyond the epitaphic, “Here lies one whose name was writ in water” (Hewlett, 1950, 373). The notable point is that in spite of the fact that his name “was writ in water”, a trope for dissipation and impermanence, Keats’s influence on those who depended on tradition to give themselves identity and legitimacy, was as eternal as if his name had been “writ in marble” (Beaumont & Fletcher, 1620, Act 5, Sc. 3).

As for the author of Cane, he was, in the testimony of one of the greatest biographers of the Harlem Renaissance, “more than a natural poet; his was a lyrical nature. He thought in
rhapsodies and felt in meter, merging his soul with the present moment and place—and race” (Lewis, 1981, pp. 61-62). Toomer’s literary friends and mentors proffered equally exuberant responses to his work. “I believe it is the genuine thing—your new technique applied to the [Negro] material for the first time,” Sherwood Anderson wrote; “[you have] struck a note I have long been waiting to hear come from one of your race…. More power to your elbow” (as cited in Turner, 1988, pp. 99-110). In these panegyric assessments, Toomer emerges as a “race” artist drawing his inspiration directly from race based literary material. On his own testimony, _Cane_ had “happened” to him as a direct consequence of his encounter with the social landscape that he met in Georgia. “My seed was planted in the cane-and cotton-fields, and in the souls of the black and white people in the small southern town. My seed was planted in myself down there…. Here were cabins. Here were negroes [sic] and their singing. I had never heard the spirituals and work songs [before]. They were like a part of me. At times I identified with my whole sense so intensely that I lost my own identity” (as cited in O’Daniel 1988, p. 4). Writing to Waldo Frank, his friend and mentor, Toomer expatiated on how his Georgia-born inspiration had pursued him to Washington, a city that he was able to “grasp” and impress upon it “the stamp of a personal vision” (Kerman & Eldridge, 1987, p. 86). Washington promised as infectious a flow of _soul-baring_ humanity as Sparta had done, for, “at evening, Washington opens to a dusk-bloom…. Their [blacks’] rhythm approaches the soft slow music of the black belt south. But above the stems of streets and pavements, their faces are deep clusters of macadam flowers” (Waldo Frank, personal communication, May 5, 1922, Jean Toomer Papers). Clearly, the source of Toomer’s great potential as a writer extended beyond his sophisticated literary ability to his very special apprehension of Negro life. His predominant thematic landscape had put him squarely in a racial frame of inspiration. But Frank and Anderson had also had words of caution for Toomer. They had expressed fear that he might get so carried away by this technical accomplishment as to let “intense white men” derail him (Turner, 1988, P. 106). Offering the discursive formulation of the biggest threat to autonomy that Toomer faced, Frank underscored the danger of theorizing innate talent by trying to render it amenable to a conceptualized and stylized literary ambiance. “Use every decent means in your reach to protect yourself from a too early pushing to the surface,” he Counseled. “Keep yourself warm underneath, in the soil, where the _throb_ is,” he added (as cited in Lewis, 1981, P. 65). And what else could that throb be but the effect on him of the very distinct social landscape that had invigorated the latent (versatile) fires of creation in the first place?

At any rate, the cautionary remarks of his friends proved to be prescient in Toomer’s career as his attitude toward his material would drastically change in subsequent years. To a publisher who credited him a “promising Negro writer,” Toomer declared, “I must insist that you never use such a word, such a thought again” (as cited in Rampersad, 2002, P. 120). This was a renunciation of his acknowledged special connection to Negro literary material, and it must have led to the virtual dissipation of his ability to produce literature of the minor brand. His checkered post-renunciation career attests to the efficacy of the territorializing forces that had dogged him (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 24). They
undermined the contextual affluence, the author of *Cane* had demonstrated, and subordinated his literary inspiration to the metaphysical attractions of a mystical cult, which “bleach[ed]Tooer’s” talent [so much] that [it] would never again even approach the achievement of *Cane*” (Rampersad, 2002, p. 120).

In their turn, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were a set of conformist practitioners who, respectively, presumed to prescribe and inaugurate a code of operation, and described their practice in terms of lineage, bloodlines, and heredity. In his “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Richard Wright (1978) proffered ten undergirding pillars for what should replace the, to him, heretofore cramped gestures that he called “humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America” (P. 37). Unlike the descriptive collectivity expressed by Hughes (in “We younger Negro artists who create now…” (as cited in Desanti, 2002, p. 36), “Blueprint” is prescriptive in a heavy-handed institutional fashion. And to the extent that this oracular assertion of codification is ultimately directed against a dominant, subjugating nemesis, it seems to vindicate Terry Eagleton’s (1990) otherwise untenable claim that “All oppositional politics . . . move under the sign of irony, knowing themselves ineluctably parasitic on their antagonists” (p. 26). An exacerbation of this irony is found in Ralph Ellison’s (1972) response to Irving Howe’s association of his (Ellison’s) writing with the priority of Richard Wright. Ellison’s couching of the issue in terms of “ancestors” and “relatives” is oedipal and conformist, and a furious vouching for epistemic hierarchy as against spontaneous autonomy, in spite of his ostensibly valorization of choice. “Perhaps you will understand when I say he [Wright] did not influence me if I point out that while one can do nothing about [who becomes] . . . one’s relatives, one can, as artist, choose one’s ‘ancestors.’” Wright was, in that sense, a relative; Hemingway an ancestor; Langston Hughes . . . was a relative; Eliot . . . and Malraux and Dostoievsky [sic] and Faulkner, were ‘ancestors’” (p. 140). When Ellison (1972) charitably honors his “ancestor,” Hemingway, thus: “he was . . . the true father-as-artist of so many of us who came to writing during the late thirties,” (p. 141) he suggests as well that while one is allowed a choice between “ancestors,” one cannot NOT choose and thrive. This filiopietistic commitment to tradition and to sires is what Langston Hughes defiantly abjured in his pursuit of autonomy, and thus forged a path informed only by the most quotidian of inspirational fountains. He not only renounced conventional “coding,” but “scrambled the codes” and send them “flee[ing] in all directions. . . . No daddy-mommy-me” for him; no “beliefs” . . . and “no territories” for him either (Seem, 1983, p. xxi).

3.5 Understanding the effects of Hughes’ creative persona on his interpersonal relationships

After exploring the questions of influence and of Hughes’s place in a political collectivity, this section of the paper turns now, logically, to an examination of the effect of Hughes’ peculiar creative persona on his interpersonal relationships. The Harlem Renaissance, Hughes’s formative domicile, was largely dependent on literary patronage for its sustenance. It is imperative to explain how this poet’s credible claim to autonomy was
sustained in this patronage-driven literary environment in order to cap the case for his identity as an authentic practitioner of minor literature.

From very early in his life, Hughes’s creative personality served him as a fortress for his creative autonomy, and many of the experiential episodes that he casually presents in his autobiography are particularly revealing in this regard. One such occasion involves an incident that occurred when he was twelve years old, a short while after the death of his grandmother. Once, while living with his Aunty (Reed), Hughes was invited to her church during a great revival, to get saved and accept Jesus as his personal Savior. At this tender age, one is tempted to attribute to youthful naiveté Hughes’s expectation that the conversion moment would be a tangible experience in which he would see Jesus with his “naked” eye, rather than a nebulous one in which he would receive the savior only spiritually. But Hughes was a sensitive young man on whom “books had been happening” for some time already. At another level, therefore, this expectation of divine incarnation in a situation that even twelve-year-olds generally know depends on faith was a strategic weapon of sorts. Hughes likely found the possibility of Jesus’ coming into his life intrusive, and he resisted it under the subconscious pretext that he did not “actually see” the Savior.

In other words, Hughes’s decision to go along (with the conversion experience) or not to go along involved a significant, yet subconscious, cost-benefit analysis. It was a choice between letting in the Savior and enjoying the attendant benefits of grace, on the one hand, and, on the other, giving up the innate sense of artistic freedom that inscrutably assails minor authors. As a matter of fact, Hughes was quite at sea about the mystery of that armor that hermetically protected him against the otherwise spellbinding force of ecclesiastical discourse. For his failure to “see Jesus” did not necessarily reveal (to him) a great ecclesiastical lie; rather, it revealed his involuntary stubbornness against infringing influences of all kinds, including the spiritual one. As we shall see below, the fact that he felt personally saddened by his failure to see Jesus and by the consequent lie he told to the congregation is entirely consonant with the manner in which his nature generally exacted a painful emotional and spiritual toll on him for resisting stylization in a preponderantly formalized world.

An even more dramatic demonstration of this innate impulse to defend artistic/creative autonomy, regarded Hughes’ mother, Carrie’s, literary activities and her effort to involve her son in them. Unlike the ecclesiastical context with his Aunty Reed, Carrie’s terrain was more definitely literary, making the stakes for involvement that much higher. On the material occasion, Carrie was to recite at the “Inter-State Literary Society,” and like any conventional mother, she expected her son to fully support her endeavor.

She had me and another little boy dressed in half-sheets as her sons—jewels, about to be torn away from her by a cruel Spartan fate. My mother was the star of the program and the church in Lawrence was crowded. The audience hung on her words; but I did not like the poem at all, so in the very middle of it I began to roll my eyes from side to side, round and round in my head, as though in great distress…. Wilder and wilder I mugged, as the poem mounted,
I batted and rolled my eyes, until the entire assemblage burst into uncontrollable laughter. When the program was over and my mother found out what happened, I got the worst whipping I ever had in my life. Then and there

*I learned to respect other people’s art* (emphasis added). (1940/1993, p.25)

The italicized words foreground a key element in Hughes’s artistic vision. His grimacing sabotage of the mother’s artistic effort was his protest against her assumption that she could involve him and his artistic integrity in a situation of her fashioning. Thus, the italicized words, in effect, evoke the kind of relationship he subconsciously aspired to foster between himself, his art, and the wider world of literature.

In his fine introduction to the Hill and Wang edition of *The Big Sea*, Hughes’ biographer, Arnold Rampersad, suggests that the poet subverted his mother’s artistic venture for a more mundane reason: to get back at her for having neglected him, and to ensure that she did not then falsely “represent herself as a paragon of motherly devotion” (Introduction, 1993, p. xix). Anyone who knows about Hughes’ early struggles with poverty and hardship at his grandmother’s house will find this reading highly persuasive. Nevertheless, and with due deference to Professor Rampersad, I suggest that his view, inadvertently, ascribes to Hughes a vindictiveness that seems to have been alien to his nature. Even as a child, Hughes evinced broad empathy for the struggles of people like Carrie, and would not have so easily attributed improper motive to her decisions. But if further evidence is sought for our claim that Hughes’s actions on this occasion were motivated by the genesis of an inexorable commitment to artistic autonomy, his adventures on a subsequent occasion at his Aunt’s church proffers it. “At a Children’s Day program at my Aunt’s church, I deliberately … forgot a poem I knew very well, having been forced against my will to learn it” (1993, p. 25). And his will, it must again be noted, was not the recalcitrance of a predetermined ideological stance, but a part of that intrinsic rampart that would continue to insulate his work against tendentious headwinds of all sorts.

**3.6 Force-Feeding Langston: understanding paternity and literary patronage**

Later in his yet-young career, this intrinsic urge to resist influence would grow so strong and vital as to lead to a health-threatening morbidity. Key cases in point emerge out of his relationship with a significant triune: father, mother, and substitute mother. In his emblematic role, James Nathaniel Hughes, Langston’s father, was one of the first barriers that Langston had to scale as he pursued his dreams as a writer. There is a real temptation to oedipalize the relationships here, and, consonant with vogue and tradition, to produce a treatise on the profundities of domestic chaos. We know, however, that the father’s actuating intrigues find resolution in the ultimate questions that would manifest themselves in the un-intrusive intensities of the future poet’s writings. James Hughes’s being Langston’s father, in other words, was incidental to the larger issues that could be adjudicated by the encounter between the two (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, P. 17). Many incidentals account for the rupture in the fragile amity that brought them together in Mexico in the first place. These occurrences (the father’s money-making obsessions, such inhuman treatment of servants like paying the houseboy and the cook “almost nothing,” and his insensitivity to the son’s sensitive (poetic) nature) emphasize the incompatibility
of the two worlds they represent. But this enmeshment of relational factors brings about the first of two psychic collapses in Hughes’ life, and though he attributes this to the father’s humming “hurry up,” it is clear that his reaction was a more fundamental reaction to any attempt to mold him in accordance with conventional ideas, to his hatred of “all languages of masters,” and to his “fascination for servants and employees” (Hughes, 1940/1993, p. 44; Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 26).

In other words, here, for the fourth time in his young life, Hughes’ formative temperament as a writer influences his choices (via an intractable physiological jinx) in his relations with a patronage intent on perpetuating territoriality about him and his work. Hughes does not write much poetry in his hospital bed in Mexico, distracted by the admittedly malicious intent to punish his father financially, but also because he really does not know himself much yet. Later, however, wising up and monitoring himself better, he would claim that he needed to be overwhelmed by sadness in order for his creative juices to begin flowing! This confession need not lead us any further into the psychoanalytical realm. What it reveals is that there was a connection between Hughes’s creative sensibility and his temperament that potentially made him, consciously or unconsciously, un-amenable to molding in stylized ways. Elsewhere in the story, Hughes clearly expects the simple answer “I hated my father” (1940/1993, p. 49) to be a sufficient explanation for his physical and psychic collapse, as if hatred of one’s father were the most volatile emotion a human being could experience. This is consistent with the conventional assumption that father and son are, ipso facto, capable of mutual understanding and empathy, and thus subject to the “hypothesis of [a common] innocence, of a distress shared [between them]” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 21). And before his Mexican journey, and in spite of his poetic disposition, Hughes was as susceptible to this territorialized element as any father’s son might be, and a feeling of the loss of a somewhat cherished illusion is not exactly wanting in his reaction to his father’s attitude, leading to his having, ultimately, to rely on the mundane fact that he had never developed a tangible filial connection to the father to trace an escape line.

But how does this confrontation between the familial duo relate to the politics of minor literature? Unlike the oedipal intrigues that pervade the world of major literature with an integral connection to a conceptual support system, Hughes’ collapse belongs squarely in the “cramped space” of minor literature, a condition that makes it “magnified, indispensable, because a whole other story vibrates within it” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, pp. 9-10). The later and, presumably, more equanimous discussion about careers between him and the father (Hughes, 1940/1993, pp. 61-63) is atypical of run-of-the-mill family fare. It is not a rational evaluation of pros and cons, because the possibility of rational consideration has long been shattered by the father’s explosive experiences with racism. James Hughes’s so-called “hatred of the niggers” (Hughes, 1940/1993, p. 40) is a red-herring, and while the son might understand it, he needs must elude it. This he does via the avenue of escape provided by the vernacular form of the deterritorialized language, his poetry. It is this avenue, understandably, that the father sought to close through his
terриториализированное выявление инженерии и неусловленного презрения к поэзии (Делуз и Гваттари, 1986, с. 22).

Now, is there a significant relationship between engineering and poetry? Well, there is none that is unmediated. But viewed in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-Oedipus construct, engineering connotes a territoriality that is separate from, and terribly agonistic toward, the desire of the expressive machine with deterritorializing potential that poetry is (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, P. 4). For, availing ourselves of denotative semantics here, we can apprehend engineering in terms of control, manipulation, design, and contrivance, and poetry as a capturing of an inexorable egress of profoundly inspired “life” images. Engineering entails malleability, tractability, provocation, and muffled antagonisms. In other words, by rejecting engineering, Hughes declared himself un-amenable to involuntary ductility, to the wiles of capitalism, to Oedipus: all of them conditions that his vainglorious father had both consciously and unconsciously embraced or submitted to for a long time. Hughes’s prosaic way of underscoring this element in his father’s personality is to contrast his parents’ relative attitudes toward money. His mother and step-father, he wrote, saw money as a tool that served their desires, but his father was interested “only in making money,” not for use in facilitating quotidian consummations, but just “to keep” (1993, pp. 81-82).

This particular father, then, is an appliance to a “territorial” system which is the very basis of the problems that manifest themselves as the “Oedipalizable” “family triangle”—James, Carrie, and Langston. Thus, to get away from this domestic extension of the official and commercial intrigues becomes Hughes’ fervent objective. Columbia University in New York provided that possible escape line, not because it was far from Mexico—Europe was further—and not because it was closer to Harlem—here territorial and reterritorializing ambivalences abounded—but because it was in the United States, where a dense network of escape lines provided innumerable possibilities for deterritorializing. For, even as he rejected the United States and seemed, superficially, to be “caught in a process of deterritorialization,” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, pp. 22-23), the father never stopped reterritorializing his family (he insults Carrie for working at a restaurant) and in his business (his vaunted frugality that verges on stinginess, on the inhumane). Thus, when Hughes heads North for the United States, the direction that was shirked by his father, he “finds a path there where the father didn’t find any” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, pp. 17-18).

The fraught literary ambiance that Hughes confronted in New York in the early twenties makes the employment in this section of the symbolic appellation, “Force-Feeding Langston,” highly appropriate. Here, Hughes’s spontaneous commitment to autonomy encountered great formal challenges in the form of influential men and women of letters and passionate patrons of the arts (all conventional and oedipal categories) whose impact recalled an apt observation that Deleuze and Guattari (1986) make in their reading of Kafka’s’ “Investigations of a Dog”: “The mouth, tongue, and teeth, find their primitive territoriality in food. In giving themselves over to the articulation of sounds, the mouth, tongue, and teeth deterritorialize. Thus, there is a certain disjunction between eating and
speaking, and, even more, between eating and writing” (pp. 19-20). Although, as a minor author, Hughes’s practice deliberately deemphasized signification and symbolism, it is impossible to ignore the symbolism of these moments in Hughes’s contact with “Godmother,” his Park Avenue patron who was introduced to him by Alain Locke. “When I left [after the first meeting] . . . she pressed something into my hand. ‘A gift for a young poet’ she said. It was a fifty dollar bill” (Hughes, 1940/1993, p. 313).

Subsequently, an even more dramatic moment, conceptually, ensues. “From Lincoln, I wrote her to thank her for the gift. In reply, she asked me to dine with her and her family on my next trip to New York” (Hughes, 1940/1993, p. 313). Note the apparently incidental correlation between writing and dining in this exchange, and the territorial and deterritorial implications inherent therein. He wrote, and she asked him to ‘dine,’ ‘to eat.’ Now, on this second visit, Hughes, instead of just eating, (seeming overly engaged in an inveterate search for an escape route), speaks: “What did one do with strawberry stems on Park Avenue? Or were these a very special kind of Strawberry that you could eat?” The answer, when it came, asserted that those who used their “mouths, tongue, and teeth” to speak, were, necessarily, “allergic” to “eating,” unless that eating was itself symptomatic of deterritorialized “mouth, tongue, and teeth” ((Hughes,1940/1993, p. 313). Thus, though, as Rampersad implies (2002, p. 148), Hughes and Godmother enjoyed a common interest in Negro folk culture, their relative capacities for the coordination of eating, speaking and writing were so divergent that their eventual emotionally wrenching (for Hughes) break would seem to have been inevitable from the outset.

In less arcane parlance, then, the patron’s first gesture of generosity had also been an establishment of a relationship of power between them, an only thinly veiled tacit arrangement whereby Hughes would receive material gifts in exchange for significant concessions in his creative autonomy: an orchestration in which matters of what, how, and when to write would cease to be the poet’s exclusive prerogative to determine (1940/1993, pp. 311-330). This violently jarred the minor poet’s equanimity. “So I asked kindly to be released from any further obligations to her, and that she give me no more money, but simply let me retain her friendship and good will that had been so dear to me . . . But there must have been only one thread binding us together. When that thread broke, it was the end” (1940/1993, p. 325). The thread he speaks of here was, of course, the channel of “semolina” (Fanon, 1959/1965, p.38) which had been devised to keep his “mouth, tongue, and teeth” trapped in their “primitive territoriality,” lest they deterritorialize and dare speak. Is it by mere coincidence, then, or is it a case of theory’s sometimes amazing precision that Deleuze and Guattari use the word “primitive” here as if in echo of Hughes’s desperate bawl: “She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did . . . I was not what she wanted me to be”? (1940/1993, p. 325). By asking to be released from all obligations to a patron, then, Hughes was asserting the intent to forge a path counter to an oedipalization captured in Deleuze and Guattari’s (1986) assertion that the “The dogs try to take over the mouth of the investigating hound by filling it with food so that he’ll stop asking questions” (p. 19).
All this makes the need to determine the actual historical circumstances attending the rupture in the relationship between Hughes and his patron particularly exigent. And here, there is an intriguing cleavage whereby the poet’s biographer disputes the account given in the autobiography. At the center of a phase of variegated moments of tension and potential distrust between poet and patron, Hughes places the impact of a poem he wrote about the opening of the Waldorf Astoria, a poem about which “Godmother” is said to have quipped: “It is a powerful poem! But it’s not you” (Hughes, 1940/1993, p323). But Rampersad has argued that the poem was written one year after the rupture, and that Hughes must thus be mistaken in his attribution. Be that as it may, we do not need to determine the facts were in this dissension between subject and biographer; we need merely to use the subject’s own characterization of matters to determine his attitude toward the issues in contention between him and his patron. The poem that Hughes claims “she did not like” was a “protest” against “the luxury of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel” and, by extension, against the luxuries of power that exacted concessions of silence or of sycophantic, “primitive” noises in exchange for “semolina.”

4. Rounding up

But to even better understand the “Godmother” figure in the calculus of Hughes’s scribal and filial biography, attempt has been made here to put her together with similar conventional outfits—the father, the mother, and her, the literary patron—to constitute the otherwise seemingly mundane arrangement that, nevertheless, resonates uncannily with the kernel of Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-Oedipus theory. The provenance of these theorists’ idea that Oedipus is the amalgam of imperialisms and hegemonies that manifest themselves as belief, mythology, hierarchy, and orthodoxy (1983) is not in the perceived hubris of Sophocles’ tragic protagonist, but in what they style as “Freud’s tripartite formula… daddy-mommy-me” (P. 23). Hughes literally winces with pain from the filial quagmire occasioned by the matrimonial tension between Carrie Langston and James Nathaniel Hughes. “That summer in Mexico,” he laments, “was the most miserable I have ever known. I did not hear from my mother for several weeks. I did not like my father. And I did not know what to do about either of them” (1993, p. 39).

But while the peregrinating and frequently bitter Carrie had not been much of a mother to Hughes as child and as poet, “Godmother” had filled this role with significant ramifications for Freudian psychoanalysis. She it was that had “loved” this “born poet” for his innate ability to capture and represent, unadulterated, the arcana of the primeval tom-tom; she it was that promoted, inspired, inveigled his inspiration that would, nevertheless, prove to be defiant of dogma and doctrine; and she it was that thus constituted a graphic foil to the father who had sought to purge the son of this spontaneous impetus. How tempting it is then to see Godmother as maternally fulfilling the desire in the son that the father had valiantly sought to repress? Well, Hughes was not the bien-pensant son looking to supplant the father he hated and had, in any case, already renounced. The desire that brought him to Mason was not a “desire to be led [or] … to have someone else legislate [his] life,” but the desire of “anti-Oedipus,” a desire that is “not a lack” but “a process of production” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 27); it was a desire that might be galvanized
and made “explosive” (Seem, 1983, p. xxiv) by a collectivity (“We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our... dark-skinned selves without fear or shame” (1926, p.36)), but that would not be appeased by the “fascisizing” (Seem, 1983. p. xvi) generosity of wealthy patrons of the arts like Godmother. It is thus crucial to underscore that the same impedimenta was responsible for the rupture between the poet and the father as between the poet and the mother-patron.

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