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Narrating Photography in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*

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*The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955) is the result of a collaborative effort between photographer Roy DeCarava and writer Langston Hughes. Their unique fusion of words and images provides an opportunity to examine how the two media can be brought together to form composite modes of expression. DeCarava and Hughes’s work reveals their deft command of both African American and Western cultural practices, which they employ to forward their vision of black Americans as full participants in American life and culture. My analysis of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* explores the intersection of the visual and the verbal in the work. The two media are most fully appreciated through their relation to one another, as they are shown to interact in a constant flux of boundary crossings, resulting in a dynamic interconnectivity. In addition, the two media are linked and interrelated by a passion for subversion: the images created by DeCarava deviate from and subvert standard portrayals of black Americans in the mainstream media, while the text created by Hughes resorts to trickster tactics, articulating a double-edged message of compliance and subversion.

*The Sweet Flypaper of Life* has received little critical attention to date. None of the approaches put forth has sought to read the text comprehensively as an instance of boundary crossings between the two media, yet they touch on the complexity of the image-text and provide a springboard for my investigations. Thadious M. Davis suggests, “The dual communicative nature of the enterprise aims at both a verbally oriented access and a visually oriented one.” Yet, she keeps the verbal and visual separate, positing that the collaborative effort gives two “contextual realities”: that of “the individual behind the camera and the individual behind the word” (152). Maren Stange emphasizes the innovative photographic approach of DeCarava, delineating his struggle for artistic autonomy. She generally regards Hughes’s verbal intervention with DeCarava’s photos as “reductive, an injustice to the fullness of the work” (77). Yet in her closing argument, Stange examines a few one-word titles provided by DeCarava
to his photographs, juxtaposing them with Hughes’s verbal references, which leads her to suggest that the issue of “words” can be “reframed . . . to enable a wider range of possibility: rather than only marking weakness and inadequacy, intertextual language may act as well to legitimate, empower, and liberate” (85). Sara Blair’s discussion of the book situates it within shifting traditions of documentary reportage in Harlem. She underscores both Hughes’s “belief in the power of the image . . . to render visible and to dignify its subjects” (53) and DeCarava’s desire to “transform the expressive capacities of the medium” (55). Blair implies that their attempts to forge new modes of expression were successfully explored in their unique collaborative effort, yet she does not fully explore how this occurs. My approach goes further, reading image and text as instances of cross-fertilization.

My discussion originates in the unconventional tale of the production and publication of this book. DeCarava’s photographs were rejected by the publishing houses until Hughes created a verbal text to go along with them. This paper examines the reasons behind the rejection of DeCarava’s photographs and considers the function of the text and how it mediated the images to enable their publication. First, I discuss how DeCarava’s photographs differ from other photographs of black Americans. In order to understand the uniqueness of his work and the unwillingness to publish it, I survey standard representations of African Americans in the media, underscoring DeCarava’s distinct point of view. The text written by Hughes pitches to two disparate audiences and lends itself to different readings. Unlike Arnold Rampersad, who feels the text “match[es] the images almost perfectly” (244), I suggest that it adopts a trickster strategy, which not only appealed to the white publishers and their readership, but also spoke to African American readers through a complex network of signifying, conveying meanings that might have escaped many non-African American readers. Hughes employs techniques that disarm white resistance to the images while being geared to an African American sensibility.

In the catalogue to the 1996 retrospective of DeCarava’s work, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) curator Peter Galassi praised the photographer’s work, stating that the text of the catalogue “masks the eloquence of photographs so complete in themselves that they require no elucidation” (19). By calling attention to the trope of the mask, Galassi evokes the figure of the trickster, who can weave a web of words in order to mask meaning. Behind or beneath every stereotypical reading of the narrative, an alternative reading exists that denies the stereotype, belies the literal meaning, and resurrects the power of the image. By enriching
the narrative in this way, these alternative readings reveal the narrative’s doubleness. The text and the image coexist in a continuous interplay of reading and rereading, blurring the boundaries between the two media and keeping the text in a constant flux.

In 1952, DeCarava, a native of Harlem, became the first African American photographer to be awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. He used this opportunity to pursue his deep interest in Harlem, producing a collection of approximately 2000 photographic images. DeCarava later recalled that collecting the images was one matter, but “What to do with them was another matter. I had simply shelved them, put them away for good, I was sure, until one day I started to think about Langston Hughes” (qtd. in Rampersad 242). DeCarava was certain that Hughes, a fellow Harlemite whose “grand enterprise” was to make black America the major raw material of his art, would be able to appreciate his photographs, and showed him approximately three hundred images (Rampersad 242). Hughes was moved by the photographs, which seemed to coincide with his own take on life in Harlem. DeCarava’s images showed day-to-day black family life—at home, at work, and at play, in moments of solitude, joy, and distress. They portrayed the bustle, energy, and excitement of the city streets. DeCarava, later acknowledged as “the first to devote serious attention to the black aesthetic as it relates to photography and the black experience in America,” created images of Harlem and its African American inhabitants that had no parallel.1 Bringing an artistic sensibility to his photographs, DeCarava showed subjects who exuded humanity, subjective autonomy, and individuality, and have most recently been recognized as “complexly located subjects of modernity, negotiating the panoply of its terrors and pleasures” (Blair 51).

Hughes’s immediate response to the photographs was, “We have to get these published!” (Rampersad 242-43).2 By then an established figure in literary circles, Hughes tried his contacts among New York publishers, but to no avail. The publishers admitted to the brilliance of the photographs and the genius of the photographer, but they declined to publish the photographs. In the words of Richard Simon of Simon and Schuster, DeCarava’s photographs were “unpublishable in book form.” As the editor of Doubleday put it, in publishing DeCarava’s work, “there was no way not to lose vast amounts of his firm’s money” (244). The images, it appeared, had no market. In representing the daily life of family and community in Harlem in an artistic and humane way, they dramatically departed from the general public’s embedded conceptions of black Americans instilled by previous photographic efforts. As such, they were deemed politically subversive and far too liberal. Publishers felt that mainstream America was
not yet ready to see these pictures. Only after Hughes supplemented the photographs with a fictional text, turning them into what DeCarava called “a marketable package” (Stange 78),3 did Simon and Schuster agree to publish the book. Even then, to keep costs down and minimize economic risk, the book was printed on relatively cheap paper in a small format size and sold for only one dollar.4

The Black Image in the White Press, 1930-1950

In order to fully understand the resistance to DeCarava’s photographs, an examination of dominant representations of black Americans is required. While African Americans have been involved with photography from its inception, both as its subjects and as practitioners of the medium, research has shown that there is a vast difference between the representation of black Americans in photographs commissioned by black patrons, mostly intended for private or communal viewing, and those taken by whites. When taken by whites—whether scientists, slave masters, or photojournalists—the images are subjected to a scrutinizing and tendentious gaze. For example, early representations of African Americans by whites include a series of naked slaves commissioned by a Harvard scientist,5 slaves practically invisible in their darkness as they hold white babies, stereotypes of blacks in humiliating positions and situations (including lynching),6 and images of black poverty and displacement. Alternately, images of black Americans photographed or commissioned by blacks reveal another picture. Prosperous blacks in the late nineteenth century were eager to pronounce their status by means of the popular studio photographs,7 and families created photographic albums to establish cohesion in their often tumultuous lives.8 Portraits of black leaders and role models decorated black institutes and homes, images were used to bolster the black self image (such as the New Negro), and the ardent social activities of black communities were documented in the 1930s and 1940s by growing numbers of black photographers.9 These formal images constituted a significant presence in the lives of black Americans and were increasingly published in various local and national papers catering to African Americans, such as Our World, Ebony, Sepia, and Flash!, yet they had minimal circulation in the white media.10

Photographic studies of African Americans undertaken in the period immediately preceding the publication of The Sweet Flypaper of Life, which had extensive visibility in the public arena, bear the legacy of the documentary enterprise of the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The FSA was a wide-ranging agency funded by the federal government,
designed to promote and gain support for New Deal relief programs. In order to increase public awareness of the plight of mostly white but also black sharecroppers, migrant workers, and evicted tenant farmers, FSA photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Gordon Parks were sent mainly to the South, but also to large northern cities to collect images of the underprivileged and the poor. Images were widely circulated in journals such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Life* magazine and in book-length projects such as Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor's *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939), and James Agee and Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). The images, which claimed an inherent truth value, were received as objective transcriptions of reality, yet they were clearly driven by the ideology of the New Deal. Like much documentary photography, in carrying information about an underprivileged group of people to a more socially powerful group, the FSA images often soothed the liberal conscience. While eliciting sympathy and moving viewers to acts of charity, they also maintained the social and cultural rift between classes and races. Portrayals of the photographic subjects as incapable of helping themselves reassured viewers of their own more privileged status, allowing them to maintain a paternalistic, condescending attitude toward the underprivileged. As noted by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "the place of the documentary subject" is "given in advance," insofar as "a double act of subjugation" occurs, "first in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then re-presents" (176). While they aided in effecting social reform, the photographs also inculcated in the viewing public a specific way of seeing groups of others.

As revealed by the New Deal camera, images of African Americans tended to distort their life experience. Although the project brought African Americans more fully into the visual arena of the US, this visibility was maneuvered to portray them in a specific light. Primarily, the number of images circulated in the media was small in relation to the proportion of blacks in society. Whites were predominantly represented in the FSA images in the press, beyond their actual numbers among the poor and displaced. In addition, the images exposed the manifestations of social and racial disadvantage but failed to reveal the underlying systems of discrimination. The FSA's focus on "individual misfortune" tended to "eclipse or obscure the political sphere, whose determinations, actions, and instrumentalities are not in themselves visual" (Solomon-Godeau 179). Furthermore, representations of black Americans tended
to the stereotypical, as Nicholas Natanson points out, and presented the viewer with types such as the “Noble Primitive” (23), the “Colorful Negro” (20) and the “Black Victim” (24). In addition, most FSA images of African Americans are rural and therefore fail to document a central component of the twentieth-century black experience, namely, the migration of millions from the rural South to the urban North. Finally, the upper classes of black society are sorely absent from these representations. The images therefore highlight only a certain segment of black America and distort the larger picture.

FSA photographers Edwin Rosskam and Russell Lee engaged with the black urban experience in 1941 during a two-week session in Chicago’s South Side. The images they produced during this period primarily expose the horrors of the South-Side slums, yet they also explore “the workings of a complex community” (Natanson 148). When selecting images to accompany Richard Wright’s photo-text of American blacks, 12 Million Black Voices (1941), Rosskam chose those images that seemed more in line with the textual message, sacrificing much of the richness and diversity that was apparent in the original Chicago coverage (Natanson 249). Wright’s text is an angry account that takes the reader from the horrors of slavery to the sprawling urban ghettos of the North, presenting the urban experience as harsh, alienating, and debilitating, an environment that cultivates a new generation of blacks stunted by poverty and deficiency, and capable of producing characters such as Bigger Thomas of Wright’s Native Son (1940). Wright’s photo-text was a form of social protest meant to draw attention to the plight of African Americans in the urban North and reveal the grave injustices they faced due to racism and prejudice. In this regard, the photographs uphold the notion of blacks as victims.

The Harlem Document, a series of photographs produced by Aaron Siskind, a member of the New York Photo League during the years 1932-1940, may provide a link between the FSA photography and DeCarava’s new perspective. Siskind sought to use the documentary practice to encounter the complexity of the modern experience of black Americans in Harlem. Blair notes that Siskind’s images address both social and aesthetic concerns, creating “a space for more complex, meditative engagement” and capturing the multi-dimensionality of urban existence rather than reducing its implicit richness (20). As Blair notes, Siskind kept a respectful distance from his photographic subjects in Harlem, never quite penetrating their intimate lives: “[T]he camera insists on its constructive role in composing the image, even as it marks a respectful distance from the life-world it registers” (35). With Siskind’s images, we are always left at the threshold, never quite entering the intimate psychological and social
spaces, while simultaneously becoming aware of their existence.

DeCarava’s Harlem work continues where Siskind’s leaves off (Blair 56), insofar as he takes us into the intimate world of Harlemites. In his application for the 1952 Guggenheim Fellowship, DeCarava’s stated goal is “to photograph Harlem through the Negro people. . . . Morning, noon, night, at work, going to work, coming home from work, at play, in the streets, talking, kidding, laughing, in the home, in the playgrounds, in the schools, bars, stores, libraries, beauty parlors, churches, etc.” (Galassi 19). He grants his subjects an inner depth that displaces the documentary tendency toward fidelity to social facts. While The Sweet Flypaper of Life is inevitably in dialogue with the photo-texts that precede it, the understanding is that both DeCarava and Hughes sought to challenge the documentary dimension of these photo-texts and create “a post-, anti-, or meta-documentary” (Blair 55).

Bearing in mind how images of black Americans had been circulated in the press during the years preceding DeCarava’s work, it becomes clear why his images were rejected by the publishers. By avoiding cliché and refusing stereotype, superficiality, and caricature, DeCarava created an unprecedented visual aesthetic of African Americans that challenged and defied not merely the photographic climate but also the underlying prejudice that established and maintained it. The variety of human expression, the multiplicity of characters, moods, and emotions, and the diversity of life experience in the urban sphere as seen through DeCarava’s lens did not allow white America the easy comfort of condescending paternalism and racial superiority, for it revealed African Americans to be as human as any other Americans. These were people who were competent and could help themselves; they might be poor and suffer from the ills of a racist society, but this did not prevent them from also being full of life and love, capable of experiencing the full range of human emotions, and able to express depth and intellectual complexity. DeCarava presented America with the fact that blacks were not merely a problem, a statistic, but rather fellow human beings. At the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement, when desegregation laws were still being fought over in courts, this message was neither obvious nor convenient for all Americans to accept.

The Double-Edged Narrator

Writing the text to accompany DeCarava’s images, Hughes adopted a strategy that brought about the publication of the narrative; he also departed from conventional journalistic commentary. Blair suggests that he “sequenced and paced the text with an eye toward refuting several decades
of sociological and documentary gospel on Harlem poverty, crime, and psychic disintegration, yet “the resulting photo-story, whose recreation of extended family life was so convincing as to obscure its own fictional- ity, was read by critics as a signal instance of the form it sought to over- turn” (52). The fact that Hughes had engaged with the documentary genre in the past enhanced the inclination to read his text as factual and grant credibility to its narrator. Hughes’s Jesse B. Semple (often spelled Simple) sketches appeared as a column in the Chicago Defender and blurred the distinctions between “fiction and the kind of vernacular reportage associated with WPA fieldwork” (Blair 52). Furthermore, Hughes collaborated with photographer Griffith J. Davis, with whom he produced short photojournalistic pieces for Ebony, and was also involved with compiling a volume titled A Pictorial History of the Negro in America (1956) with the acclaimed children’s writer Milton Meltzer. Given all this, we can understand the inclination to read Hughes’s narrative as documentary, which would have caused it to be received as verisimilitude. However, Hughes’s experimentation with the visual-verbal fusion extended also to his fictional work, extending the understanding of his objectives. He had implemented visual images in his collection of poems One-Way Ticket (1949), with Jacob Lawrence’s black-and-white illustrations. Hughes’s verbal interactions with the visual incorporate the notion that they are compelling tools with which to enhance and complicate meanings.

I examine how Hughes’s supplementation of The Sweet Flypaper of Life facilitated publication of DeCarava’s images, working on the assumption that it downplayed their potential for radical impact in the eyes of white publishers. The book was embraced by black audiences, despite the controversial—or what can be conceived as compromising—nature of the narrative. This incongruity implies that the text was read differently by different audiences. Dual readings were possible because Hughes crafted a dynamic text that accommodated two diverse audiences.

By supplying a text to go along with the images, Hughes engages in what Roland Barthes calls “the anchorage” of meaning. A visual image is radically elusive and can convey a variety of meanings. A text attached to an image controls the reader’s reception, as “the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others” (275). Despite the fact that the layout of the book directs the gaze toward the images, Hughes’s text, read literally or documentarily, modifies the richness and complexity of DeCarava’s photos. Like a smoke screen, the words of Hughes’s narrator provide a way of reading the images without actually seeing their subjects in all their complexity, paving the way for the book’s publication. However, to read the text only on its literal
level is to overlook a crucial aspect. Hughes’s narrator presents a double-edged text. Textual anchorage, it would appear, does not always work, or perhaps works in different ways for different audiences. Hughes devises a slippery text that has the power to reach two different audiences.

Hughes’s central tool for devising such a narrative lies in his choice of narrator. Rather than use his own authorial voice to narrate the text, Hughes created a non-threatening fictional narrator, an elderly African American woman named Sister Mary Bradley. Sister Mary is an unassuming, underprivileged, hard-working, church-going, maternal figure who can be read differently by different audiences. Some readers may identify her as a mammy, amply represented in popular culture by characters such as Aunt Jemima; Delilah Johnson, the black housekeeper played by Louise Beavers in John M. Stahl’s film *Imitation of Life* (1934); or “Mammy,” played by Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Our introduction to Sister Mary on the opening page of the narrative helps define her as such, as she declines to receive St. Peter’s summons to heaven: “Boy, take that wire right on back to St. Peter because I am not prepared to go. I might be a little sick, but as yet I ain’t no ways tired. . . . I got plenty time to come home when I get to be eighty, ninety, or a hundred and one” (3). She is cheerful, full of zest, and scornful of weakness, all characteristics that a good mammy should have. Sister Mary’s mediating voice with its melodic southern nuances, grammatical inaccuracies, and subtle humor has a soothing effect that could put white readers who sought the comfort of superiority at ease. The mammy’s prose is perceived by such readers to be simple and unassuming and forecloses other possible levels of meaning suggested by the images. Contemplating the photo-text, the reader/viewer could privilege the surface level of words spoken by a stereotypical mammy over the possible meanings conveyed by the accompanying images. Thus, the potential of the images to create affect, to be really *seen*, is diffused, and an entire dimension of the work is neglected or overlooked. This is compounded by the fact that the voice and tone of Sister Mary’s narration is reminiscent of documentary oral histories of blacks, lending it credibility and contributing to its verisimilitude.18

However, Sister Mary’s narrative is more complex than it appears at surface level. Rather than relegating Sister Mary to the realm of the stereotypical mammy, Hughes has created what Paul Giaino terms a “hyper-ethnicized narrator, a kind of ‘funkier-than-thou’ wisdom or trickster figure who philosophizes” about multiple issues. Giaino’s discussion of Jesse B. Semple, the fictional character created by Hughes, likens the hyper-ethnicized narrator to a “Harlem ‘juke-box’ philosopher” who “presents a kind of folk wisdom about current events and fairly complex cultural realities”
This type of narrator, Giaimo further states, “was not intended to mock Harlemites but rather to expose their repression and their insights” (136). The character traits of the hyper-ethnicized narrator are exaggerated to reflect a stereotype; therefore, they are often critiqued. Giaimo claims that this exaggeration exists only to “further a positive representation” of their racial group and subtly engage in social critique. This is achieved through a technique of “refracted intention,” whereby a clash exists between the outward statement, often made in vernacular dialect, and the inherent underlying complexity of meaning, typically illuminated through the observations of a foil character. The stereotype is evoked only to be refuted. Finally, Giaimo claims, the role of the narrator is to provide a form of “social commentary on issues immediately relevant to the narrator’s own group and issues which encompass but go beyond racial or ethnic concerns” (142).

Sister Mary fits snugly into this type of hyper-ethnicized narrator; her character recalls Hughes’s Jesse B. Semple. Sister Mary can be further identified as a trickster figure as defined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who posits the trickster as the seminal trope of African American literature. The trickster manipulates figurative and literal meanings, creating a text in which the dynamics of truth and understanding constantly shift. Carried over from Africa, the trickster in America evolved in response to the “confrontation between two parallel discursive universes: the black linguistic circle and the white.” The black linguistic sign—signifying—appropriates standard white signs and repeats them with a slight difference (Gates 45). In this dynamic, the subversion of the sign has larger implications. As Gates argues, “to revise the received sign . . . is to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning” (47). When a black trickster talks, s/he inevitably engages in signifying, using a double voice that “always entails formal revision” (51), complicating any simplistic notion of meaning.

Sister Mary engages in signifying practices, manipulating the text so as to suggest one thing and imply another. While Sister Mary’s vernacular dialect and outwardly unsophisticated, stereotypical observations might identify her as a mammy figure, familiarity with the trickster’s methods and signifying practices allows one to see into the ambiguities of her language. The narrator’s words additionally engage with the images and count on them in the signifying process, inviting them to “have their say” as well. The images serve as a foil to her narrative, creating a space for the “refracted intention” to emerge. Rather than impose Sister Mary’s narrative on the images in a limited way that only enables us to see what we already think we know is there, the text asks us to reconsider the words in
light of the images.

Sister Mary’s words create a mask for DeCarava’s photos that grants them the authority to speak. By masking Sister Mary’s words, Hughes succeeds in veiling a parallel narrative of strength and endurance that is accessible to those living on the other side of the “veil,” namely his black readership (Du Bois 38). The African American trickster, born out of the need to hide her interior dimension beneath a mask while presenting to others the type of exterior they expect, is expertly enacted here.

**Photo-Text Case Studies**

A close reading of Sister Mary’s words in relation to the images to which they refer illuminates the interpretive possibilities at play. The surface reading reveals how the text anchors meaning and determines what is seen. In this reading, Sister Mary remains a stereotype, and meaning is conveniently foreclosed. A closer reading of the text considers the narrator as a hyper-ethnicized trickster and exposes the gap between the outward statement and the underlying complexity of meanings. These meanings are revealed through dynamic interactions with the images, where seeing the images can activate a reevaluation of the words.

Sister Mary introduces us to her community, prioritizing her extended family, especially her children and grandchildren. As Davis points out, the narrative “deemphasizes a single conventional middle-class paradigm for racial and familial survival,” and as such promotes a progressive message that challenges mainstream standards (154). The deviation from middle-class values does not take away from Sister Mary’s fierce pride in her family, which is beset by occurrences of divorce, teenage pregnancy, absent fathers, negligent parents, and rebellious children. Sister Mary takes things in stride and speaks “without despair and without bitterness” (Davis 154), about both the good times and the hard times. In her words, she is “tangled up in living” and accepts that “life . . . ain’t always so sanitary as we might like it to be” (39). She embraces life, thoughtfully musing, “I done got my feet caught in the sweet flypaper of life—and I’ll be dogged if I want to get loose” (92).

When we meet Sister Mary, she is “kinder ailing and not working” (39), and therefore temporarily living with her youngest daughter and her family, who are introduced through a sequence of intimate photographs revealing the warm home environment. The sequence concludes with a photograph of Sister Mary’s daughter Melinda (57). The photograph portrays a young black woman reading the paper at the kitchen table. The adjacent text reads as follows:
Maybe then [when the kids go to sleep] Melinda gets a chance to set down and read her paper—if Jerry ain’t home. One of Jerry’s faults is, he don’t come home every night. Melinda got the idea she can change him. But I tells Melinda, reforming some folks is like trying to boil a pig in a coffee pot—the possibilities just ain’t there—and to leave well enough alone. Long as Jerry brings his wages home, he don’t always have to bring his self. And when he does come home—well, I do believe Melinda is getting ready to populate the colored race again. (57)

The text primarily reflects the character of the narrator, who evokes notions of the stereotypical mammy. Her language is laced with vernacular speech idioms and incorrect grammar and is steeped in folk wisdom that seeks to accept, appease, and placate, rather than challenge, confront, or defy. Thus, she is recognized as a non-threatening naïve figure who is easily put in her place by those who need to feel superior. Furthermore, the narrator projects onto the image elements that are external and even irrelevant to it, such as Jerry’s wayward habits and the woman’s alleged pregnancy. This directs attention away from the image and toward other negative stereotypes of blacks such as the unfaithful husband and the lustfulness that characterizes his relationship with his wife. Such a textual reading reduces the fullness of the photographic reference, and the richness of possibility is forsaken as our attention is directed away from the image and toward the stereotype. Melinda is perceived as a pregnant-yet-again, over-worked black woman with an errant husband. The photographed woman is denied agency, subjectivity, and individuality, and is transformed into a stereotype. Her face is haggard, her surroundings bleak, her body fatigued. Sister Mary’s words enable the reader to hold on to the notion that both the narrator and the photographed subject are negative stereotypes of African Americans.

If we bracket Sister Mary’s narrating voice for a moment and examine the photograph more closely, we may see something beyond the tired woman seated before a paper. DeCarava photographed the woman from close up, at a vantage point that is eye level with her. She rests her head on her left hand in a gesture of contemplation. Her appearance reveals a cultivated style, evidenced by a decorative gold ring on her finger and a carefully tied headscarf, which preserves her coifed hairdo. Her dress, open at the neck to reveal a flouncy white blouse beneath, is decorated with a playful print of sunhats and flowers, suggesting a joyfulness of spirit. Her right hand is poised to turn the page of the newspaper, ready to obey her desire to read on. The paper takes up the entire forefront of the picture, forming a kind of barrier between the viewer and the woman, whose attention is totally absorbed in the world of words. The tightly structured com-
position directs focus on the woman’s downward-looking, concentrated glance, further directing attention to the act of reading. The background of subtle blacks, grays, and whites enhances the focal subject: a woman in a private moment of self-reflection and contemplation, absorbed in her own thoughts. The woman is oblivious to the world and the photographer/viewer. The composition further reinforces this solitude, as it leads our gaze in a full circle drawn between Melinda’s head, left arm, paper/torso, right arm, and back to the head, allowing no entry into her private moment or state of mind. We cannot intrude, invade, penetrate, violate, or disturb her thoughts. Her sheer concentration and obliviousness to the intruding other is the strongest point of the image, subsequently granting her dignity, agency, and independence—all qualities denied to her by Sister Mary’s narrative.

Such a reading displaces the literal, surface reading of Sister Mary’s narration. Are the image and the text simply at odds? If we return to Sister Mary’s narrative with the impact of the image clearly in mind, the words reveal other possible meanings. Rather than inclining toward the stereotypical, Sister Mary’s soft-spoken dialect can be read as brimming with compassion, wisdom, and charity. Her common sense prevails over a rigid sense of propriety, endorsing dynamic social relations and free interplay between people. She does not criticize and judge, but rather understands and empathizes. Her benevolent authority extends to include the larger community and put them at ease. In this community, Jerry, for whom “Worriation ain’t no part of his nature,” is not rejected, but is loved for what he does and can offer (41). Sister Mary’s words reconcile black readers to a lived reality that is difficult, but not devoid of comfort and joy, rather than the traditional glories of the next world, rejected by Sister Mary at the opening of the narrative. Reread in this way, the words continue to signify upon the image so that Melinda is transformed from a woman one can pity to an independent and progressive woman to be admired. Sister Mary’s narrative emanates beyond the stereotypical to encompass both the pregnant woman and the woman enjoying a contemplative moment—an individual woman with agency and subjectivity. The power of the image is reinstated, while both its subject and its narrator are rescued from the realm of stereotype. Sister Mary is no longer the naïve southern peasant, but rather a figure of authority who bestows dignity on those around her.

The dynamic word-image interplay can further be seen in a photograph of a child lying on a gray and vacant city pavement, propped up on her elbows, looking abstractedly beyond the frame of the picture. The text states straightforwardly, “And some [folks] ain’t going no place at all” (64).
Sister Mary’s words direct the reader to think that this black child is going nowhere, and it is easy to think of her as a poor, neglected, perhaps even ignorant child who must play in the street for lack of any other place to go—a child who has no future and nothing to look forward to. Her bleak, stark existence allows the reader to pity the child and her evident lack of opportunity.

Paying closer attention to the image rather than the words suggests a wealth of information that the words initially fail to address. The child is a girl; her clothes—jeans, a home-knit sweater, and white top—seem well kept. The girl’s feet, clad in white socks and sturdy shoes, are turned inward in a childish pose that suggests both flexibility and a metaphoric inward turning, or reflection. Her chin rests on her right hand in contemplation. In her right hand, she holds a piece of chalk. She has made marks on the pavement—drawings and figures—in a manifestation of creative self-expression, while simultaneously claiming the cityscape as her own. The girl is lying on the pavement exactly where four lines meet in an X such as those that mark a treasure, suggesting that the child has either found the treasure or is the treasure. The figure of the girl and the straight lines upon which she is lying are counterbalanced by a suggestively decorated star-spangled manhole at the bottom right of the photograph. While the manhole evokes subterranean depths that might be dark and unpleasant, in the African American tradition the manhole resonates with the underground and is a site of resistance, which offers the girl protection or a subversive alternative. In the European tradition, the underground and the subterranean signify a return of the repressed, as the sewer’s contents pose a threat to order, cleanliness, and social rank. This intertext hints at the social unrest bubbling just beneath the surface of Harlem and beneath the surface of The Sweet Flypaper of Life.

The girl’s gaze, focused on something beyond the frame, is just that: a forward-looking gaze that goes beyond and can take her out of the frame. The photographer has captured her from above, and from this vantage point she may seem like a pawn on a game board, but her gaze suggests that she is capable of playing her own game. This reading reveals the child as an autonomous thinking subject, perhaps even a future artist or writer.

Reading Sister Mary’s words with this in mind, we discover that perhaps going no place at all is also a form of going somewhere. This child seems to have voyaged deep into her imagination, far away from everyday realities to a world she has created. To go elsewhere in mind and remain in body is a sophisticated form of travel, and it seems as though it has been achieved by this young and budding artist. While Sister Mary’s words may be read as foreclosing a deeper reading of the image, rendering the girl
as poverty-stricken and ignorant, they may also be read as bestowing the 
greatest of compliments. Drawing on the sidewalk from a horizontal posi-
tion, oblivious to the hazards of the environment, might convey a sense of 
ultimate freedom.

Another depiction of childhood in The Sweet Flypaper of Life reveals 
a young boy sitting in a window, utterly absorbed in the act of reading 
(84). Beneath the image and continuing on the reverse page, Sister Mary’s 
words read: “Yes, you can set in your window anywhere in Harlem and 
see plenty. Of course, some windows is better to set in than others mainly 
because it’s better inside, not that you can necessarily see any more. But 
back windows ain’t much good for looking out” (84-85). Sister Mary’s 
words fail to address the reading act or acknowledge that the boy is not 
looking out of the window at all. Her words deny the act of reading and 
reduce the situation to a question of socioeconomic status; one window 
is better than another because it is “better inside.” We cannot discern the 
inside from the photograph of the window. The window is large, and its 
peeling wooden frame is in a state of decay. Beyond the reading figure, 
we encounter a lacy curtain that seals the boy off from the interior of the 
house, allowing him to occupy a space that is entirely his own; a liminal 
space that is neither outside nor quite inside. The boy is not stifled by this 
space; rather, it is charged with energy created by the act of reading. Nor 
is he threatened by the gaze of those in the street, buffered as he is by 
basis in his book.

Framed by the window and sealed off from behind, the child sitting in 
the left-hand corner with his back to the wall becomes the central focus 
of the viewer’s gaze. His pronounced glasses bring our attention to the 
act of reading, which is further clarified by the boy’s facial expression of 
total concentration. With his elbow on the windowsill, catching the sun, 
he is already fingering the next page, eager to turn it and explore its con-
tents. Following his gesture, we look closely at the book and see that it is 
a comic book. The panels out of which comics are constructed evoke the 
window framing the child and suggest spaces where he is free to reimagine 
and reinvent himself. Comic books with postwar superheroes were 
very popular in the 1950s, and they serve here to create a link between this 
child and millions of others nationwide. On a fundamental level, the pho-
tograph suggests that despite obvious disparities, this child is no different 
from many boys his age. The image also lends a metafictional dimension 
to the work that not only refers to the act of reading, but also introduces an 
image-text similar to the one Hughes is creating.

The window scene with its emphasis on reading enriches the meaning 
of window of opportunity, suggesting that reading creates opportunity,
that the "inside" Sister Mary refers to may in fact signify interiority. This boy can "see plenty" without physically seeing "any more," without even looking out of the window, to which he is oblivious. He is busy, engaged in a mental activity with the interiority of his thoughts. Therefore, while Sister Mary does not directly refer to the act of reading, she subtly and adroitly alludes to it.

In one more word-image interplay, Sister Mary’s words, “Almost nothing except stoops to set on,” direct us to note the absence of porches and benches on an urban street, clearly a sign of poverty and scarcity. A quick glance at the photograph reveals a young man sitting on the stoop of a building (67). That may be all we see before we move on to the next page. However, a further examination of the photograph suggests that the stoop in Harlem may be quite the place to sit. The building, once a glamorous brownstone, has fallen into disrepair, as can be seen by peeling plaster. Yet the man, in stark contrast to his surroundings, has taken great care with his clothing. He wears a dress suit and has placed a cloth beneath his pants, preventing them from becoming soiled. His feet are planted firmly on the pavement to reveal well-polished shoes; his hat tilts at an angle just-so. He exudes a sense of confidence and self-assurance. We are perhaps surprised to notice an infant clad in white encircled in his arms. This young father figure contradicts stereotypes of negligent African American fathers, and as if to confirm the strength of this bond, the light falls on the child and on the front of the man. If we look closely at the entire verbal/visual sequence, the double-edged aspect of the lack of porches becomes clear. The theme of sitting is explored in the text over a six-page spread interlaced with images, and reads as follows:

It's too bad there're no front porches in Harlem. Almost nothing except stoops to set on... or steps... or doorways to lean in. And in the summertime, maybe a vacant lot. But almost everywhere there's something to set on or lean on, somebody is setting or leaning. In what few parks there is, some just set on a park bench... and hold their hands. (66-71)

Initially, the lack of porches suggests a deeper social and psychological lack. However, as we continue integrating the reading and viewing process, we realize that the people make the most of the urban space at their disposal, and that this is a dynamic space where life happens. Sister Mary engages in a critique of the harsh social conditions—the absence of adequate housing and a decent standard of living. But this does not, she suggests, indicate a corresponding sense of psychological deprivation. The Harlemites turn their environment of stoops, doorways, and alleys into a vibrant place where social interaction and engagement takes place—
where a young father may sit peacefully with his child.23

Sister Mary Bradley, a fictional creation of Hughes, was inspired by an image taken by DeCarava. The image appears on the final page of the book and seals it like a signature (98). The text above the image states, “Ever so once in a while, I put on my best clothes”; while the narrative’s closing words below the image state simply and directly, “Here I am,” thereby “elaborating the fiction” that this woman is actually Sister Mary (Stange 84).24 The photograph reveals a somewhat fragile woman dressed in black, standing by an iron fence leading to a doorway—perhaps that of a church. The woman is well-groomed and wears jewelry (earrings, a ring, and a brooch) and a black hat. From underneath the hat’s brim, we encounter a straightforward gaze that does not ask us to recognize or accept her, but rather suggests a sense of confident selfhood. The woman radiates an aura of self-satisfaction mitigated with humility and benevolence, as seen in her smile and comfortable posture, which is open and slanted toward the camera in an inviting gesture. Only her hands betray a hint of tension; one grasps the iron railing tightly, the other closes into a fist below her waist. The expressive hands suggest that beneath her projected ease lies a deep defiance that challenges and confronts. Perhaps Hughes chose this image to represent Sister Mary because it subsumes within it both her unthreatening good nature and her defiance. Yet, the image of Sister Mary may take readers by surprise, for it fails to resemble the conception of her that may have emerged from reading the text. Until this revelation, Sister Mary is a disembodied voice, able to function as a stereotype, her words taken at face value. However, seeing the image of Sister Mary deflates the stereotype of the robust, cheerful mammy. By introducing this image at the end of the narrative, Hughes may have sought to make his double entendres more palpable. If you had not caught on to his trickster methods until now, he lays his tools on the table for all to see. In doing so, he asks his readers to reevaluate their misconceptions about black Americans and to confront their prejudices.

The photograph brings home the extent to which Sister Mary’s narrative and the photographs incorporated within it go beyond the voice established by Hughes and the images captured by DeCarava to create a statement that is more elaborate and complex than the individual work of either artist. By waiving his authorial voice to create a trickster narrator whose words rely on the photographic contingent to enhance meaning, Hughes raises the photo-text to a new level that grants equal importance to text and image, showing the importance of reading across boundaries. As such, the technique and methodology adopted by Hughes correspond with his larger ideas about race and class segregation in America. His artwork
beckons readers to implement the fluidity seen in his treatment of text and image (a treatment that does not discriminate or segregate between genres) within the larger social and racial spheres of American life. Only when blacks and whites, rich and poor, learn to work and live together across boundaries can the idea of America be fully realized. This analysis suggests that for Hughes, art does not consist of merely making an aesthetic statement. He seems to imply that a work of art ought to embody its philosophical and ideological essence also in its technique and execution. In this case, it must exemplify the tools needed for social change, equality and integration, creating a model wherein everyday life can look to art for direction and guidance. Hughes’s message of fluidity and boundary crossing still remains relevant today, suggesting that the wheels of change turn slowly, especially when it concerns racial difference in America.

Notes

2. Arnold Rampersad adds that the photographs inspired Hughes to the extent that they pulled him out of a writer’s block (243).
3. Sara Blair notes: “For Hughes . . . the production of Flypaper extended a long experience of working in photographic and photojournalistic modes” that include his Jesse B. Semple sketches and a close working relationship with Henri Cartier-Bresson (52-53). Hughes further implemented images created by Jacob Lawrence into his book of poems One-Way Ticket and also worked with acclaimed artist Aaron Douglas.
4. The book sold out on its first printing and received critical acclaim (Rampersad 249). The final version, which includes 140 photographs, appeared in two subsequent editions (Hill and Wang, 1967; and Howard University Press, 1984).
5. See, for example, the discussion of J. T. Zealy’s daguerreotypes commissioned by Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz in 1850 (Trachtenberg 53-60). See also Shawn Michelle Smith’s discussion of the Zealy daguerreotypes (46-49).
6. Deborah Willis discusses “Portrait of a Young Black Girl Holding a White Baby; c. 1850,” (Picturing 23-25) and a genre of photographs commonly known as “Black Americana,” “which includes a wide variety of popular artifacts depicting crude, degrading, racial caricatures of African Americans” (15). She also discusses images of lynching (13-15), as does Shawn Michelle Smith (113-45).
7. Smith examines the rise of the carte-de-visite and the larger cabinet photograph among the members of the middle classes, which both created and captured their status, class, and taste (63-76). She also studies the rise of the black middle class
as documented through photography (77-112).
8. See, for example, bell hooks’s description of her family photographs.
9. Willis discusses the building of the New Negro image through photographs (Reflections 33-82). She also documents the growing number of African American photographers and the papers and journals in which they published that were marketed to black Americans (85-107).
10. An exception to this is the photographic archives W. E. B. Du Bois compiled for the Paris Exposition in the year 1900. Smith discusses how his Georgia Negro Albums brought African American types and accomplishments to the attention of a larger, world public; she demonstrates how this archive, a diverse mélange of black Americans, posed a challenge to scientific racism and eugenics through erosion of the racial type. It further offered African Americans alternative ways to view themselves not as victims of lynching, poverty, or humiliation, but as equal participants in Western culture (43-76).
11. Nicholas Natanson points out that Roy Stryker, the head of the FSA, “tended to see black material as notably less usable than white images” (61) and did not encourage his staff to photograph blacks. However, photographers seemed drawn to this subject matter; the archives of the FSA reveals the percentage of photographs of blacks to be close to their proportion in society (66), even if they were not circulated in the media in equal numbers.
12. Maricia Battle similarly claims that “the photographs better proclaimed the aesthetic priorities of an artist who sought control over his medium. They were not to be insensitive intrusions into the life of a community but, rather, compelling pieces of art to probe the social and aesthetic perceptions of the artist” (Siskind 6).
13. Stange refers to The Sweet Flypaper of Life as “a mock- and anti-documentary” (82).
14. Hughes did not consult DeCarava regarding which images to include in the text from the 300 he had seen, nor did he wish to obtain any facts about them. Rather, Hughes sought to “meditate on the pictures, and write what came into his head” (Rampersad 244). The collaborative effort, therefore, is seemingly one-directional—Hughes’s meditation on the work of DeCarava. However, DeCarava’s contribution is in fact the impetus for the narrative.
15. Blair notes, “So heightened was the documentary or reality effect of Hughes’s pieces that, shortly after they first appeared in 1949, the Chicago Defender began receiving large volumes of mail ‘addressed on to Simple, as if his creator were superfluous—or a fiction himself’” (53).
16. Explaining the term anchorage, Roland Barthes states that “in every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs; the linguistic message is one of these techniques . . . by means of an often subtle dispatching, . . . remote-controls [the viewer] towards a meaning chosen in advance” (274-75).
17. DeCarava in fact sought autonomy for his work, claiming that “a photograph is . . . an illusion complete within itself, depending neither on words, reproductive processes or anything else for its life, its reason for being.” Words, he felt, were
a “literary crutch” that weakened the images and relegated them to a subordinate position. DeCarava agreed to collaborate with Hughes on this project because he felt that Hughes’s “story [did] not bind itself too tightly and mechanically around the pictures” and “allowed [them] to live and breathe”; furthermore, it was the only way to have his photographs published (qtd. in Stange 79).

18. By creating such a narrator, Hughes taps into the African American tradition that upholds the matriarch as the keeper of memories, responsible for maintaining a communal commitment and togetherness, often by means of storytelling.

19. Sister Mary’s trickster dimension is made apparent at the outset of the narrative, when “she would not even sign for the message [from the Lord calling her home] since she had read it first, while claiming she could not find her glasses to sign the slip” (3).

20. Permission to reproduce images from The Sweet Flypaper of Life discussed in this essay was denied by the copyright holder, the DeCarava Estate.

21. In the film Conversations with Roy DeCarava (1983), DeCarava notes that he had been the “muralist of the block” when he was young, making drawings on pavements, streets, and walls, thereby claiming the city space for himself (qtd. in Stange 87, 88).

22. For explication of the African American and European symbolic meanings of the underground, see Hana Wirth-Nesher (85-107).

23. In Hughes’s subversive poem Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951), the stoop is also rendered as a social space where life happens, despite deprivation and poverty.

24. Stange suggests by this the “complimentary uniting of the two artists’ work” (84). Thadious M. Davis also suggests that “Hughes displaces his own signature with the photograph of Mary Bradley” and that by signing the text as hers, Mary “also displaces the shaping act of DeCarava.” Davis fails to suggest anything beyond their coming together in “a spatial context” (151).

25. Hughes objected to racial and social discrimination, as seen in his volume Jim Crow’s Last Stand (1943) and in his poem, “Let America Be America Again” (1936): “I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart, / I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars. / I am the red man driven from the land, / I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek” (190).

Works Cited


