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Proposal/Abstract
2012 MLA Session: Reading Langston Hughes in the Age of Barack Obama

Postmodern, Post-Racial African-American Radicalism: Reading *The Big Sea* in Obama's
Nation

Barack Obama has profoundly shaped a national discourse often referred to as “post-racial”: race is one strand of a multicultural American identity that, his rhetoric of hopeful futurity insists, should and will ultimately trump racial particularity and difference. Critics have noted that this “postblack” politics forecloses upon the specific socioeconomic needs of blacks and minimizes the utopian visions of radicalism in the name of a national unity defined in universal, conservative, and sometimes normativizing terms. Informed by scholarly parsings of this post-racial discourse and by Madhu Dubey’s delineation of a postmodern moment in African American literature, I identify the need to represent black identity as politically salient in its own right *without* fetishizing blackness in nostalgic, pre-postmodern terms of essentialism. Langston Hughes’s *The Big Sea* anticipates and informs this need. Hughes’s text syncretizes a definition of blackness that incorporates the contingent and constructed nature of racial identity while paradoxically defining it in materialist, politically-radical terms. Deploying a tropic system of books and bricks, Hughes tries to theorize a blackness that is fluid (it cannot be written, coded, contained) but that unlike Obama’s, cannot find realization within the material infrastructure of the democratic nation and thus entails a (utopian) alternative futurity to Obama’s. Hughes associates this radical blackness not with anger or narrow militancy, but with expressive traits Obama has strategically employed: optimism, humor, and openness. Reading *The Big Sea* today lets us think a racial politics to the left of Obama that at the same time embraces a postmodern logic of fluidity and an ethos of hopeful futurity that Obama has since energized.