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Crossing *The Big Sea*: Explorations in Langston Hughes' *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*  
and the Sustainability of the African-American Autobiographical Tradition

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In Vernon Loggin's *The Negro Author*, he asserts that "with the exception of his folk songs, the Negro's most valuable contributions to American literature have been in the form of personal memoirs" (4). From the days of slavery, the African-American autobiographical tradition has played a rather significant transformative role in shaping the awareness of a larger American and global audience concerning the constantly shifting African-American condition. While much scholarship has engaged these early works from Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* to Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, considerably less attention has been given critically to the autobiographical works of the Harlem Renaissance. This is particularly true of Langston Hughes' 1940 *The Big Sea* and his 1956 travelogue, *I Wonder as I Wander*.

Though these works, in early reviews, were criticized for their limited insight into the author's life and expansive engagement with the society and politics all around him, these criticisms seem to point to an understated yet absolutely vital consideration for future Hughes scholarship. In these two texts, Hughes offers an intentional transformation of the autobiographical form and decentralization of the all-important *I* as a means of presenting social and cultural commentary he could not achieve in an alternative literary form. To ensure the sustainability of Langston Hughes scholarship and to develop an increased understanding of the vital role he has, in fact, played in the tradition of the African-American autobiography, we must therefore expand our examination of Hughes outside of his more widely studied poetic and fictional works, exploring more and more into the wide expanse of Hughes' big literary sea.

This proposed paper will thus examine Hughes' transformative socio-political commentary on both negritude and American identity, as presented in *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*, as the beginning of a much larger and much needed conversation on sustainability and the Harlem Renaissance tradition.