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“They ‘Thought They Owned Her, and They Were Perfectly Right’: Fiction as a Site of Emancipation and Identity Construction in ‘Cora Unashamed’ and ‘Slave on the Block’”

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In his 1943 essay entitled, “My America,” Langston Hughes outlines one of the pervasive problems affecting the African-American community of the post-Emancipation era. As he writes, “All over America...against the Negroes there has been an economic color line of such severity that since the Civil War we have been kept most effectively, as a racial group, in the lowest economic brackets. Statistics are not needed to prove this. Simply look around you” (Hughes, “My America” p. 501). In these words, he highlights not only the racial divide that stills fractures the nation after the Civil War but also the emergence of an economic divide reinforced in part as an effort to affirm flawed notions of white supremacy while keeping the African-American people in “their place” as second-class citizens, if citizens at all. As a result, Black workers were denied job opportunities outside of menial roles and a culture of disenfranchisement swept the nation in what became known as Jim Crow.

This tradition Hughes reflects in his 1934 collection of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks*, in which he explores the long-standing discrimination and abuse enacted against the Black community. As he notes, characters like the Studevants in “Cora Unashamed” and the Carraways in “Slave on the Block” function under the dangerous perception that “they owned” their Black employees (Hughes, “Cora” p. 3) as a result of 1) a resurgent white supremacist ideology and 2) an equally problematic consumption, turned near-obsession, of a culture they saw as having “such jungle life about it” (“Slave” p. 11). Through these stories, Hughes then exposes the socioeconomic factors that needed to be addressed before racial uplift could ever take hold in the United States, specifically “the trap of economic circumstance that kept [Blacks] in [white] power practically all [their] live[s]” (“Cora” p. 5), while also challenging the notion of a continued enslavement of Black peoples post-Emancipation due to the stranglehold of poverty and second-class citizenship.

This proposed paper will thus examine the overarching implications of Hughes’ “Cora Unashamed” and “Slave on the Block” in an attempt to trace how Hughes uses his writing as an activist tool to empower the disempowered and to speak truth to a racist power structure that could not sustain itself on the backs of those its champions sought to oppress. Given the continued presence of this struggle now decades later, by turning to Hughes’ work, we can better understand how people of color can resist the new Jim Crow and, like Cora, “somehow [still] manage to get along” (“Cora” p. 11).

Works Cited

- Hughes, Langston. “Cora Unashamed.” *The Langston Hughes Reader*, George Braziller, Inc., 1958, pp. 3-11.
- . “My America.” *The Langston Hughes Reader*, George Braziller, Inc., 1958, pp. 500-501.
- . “Slave on the Block.” *The Langston Hughes Reader*, George Braziller, Inc., 1958, pp. 11-17.