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## LOOKING FOR HARLEM

*The Absent Narrator in Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes' Sweet Flypaper of Life (1955)*

**ABSTRACT:** Despite its decidedly humanist angle, Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava's *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955) also positions itself in a no-man's land, not simply because it is seen through the eyes of a woman but because it occupies a space where the compelling narration by the fictitious character of Sister Mary and the equally compelling photographs by DeCarava still rest uneasily—literally and at times photographically—within the wider landscape of Harlem. As such, this collaborative photo-text on the daily life of Harlem is a much more subtle and complex project than it first appears. Even though the project was enabled by Hughes's reputation as a prominent writer of African American life, the actual approach allows for something 'subversive' to take place in the interaction between the text and the photographs accompanying it. This examination looks at how *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*—vastly underrated in studies of American photography—pushed beyond previous photographic studies of Harlem and as such, beyond the boundaries set by photo-textual collaborations in general.

**KEYWORDS:** Harlem, African American Studies, Documentary Studies, American Photography, Langston Hughes, Roy DeCarava, 20th century American Studies.

Looking at a few sequences in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* from 1955, a photo-textual collaboration by the writer Langston Hughes and the photographer Roy DeCarava, it becomes clear just how much the documentary impetus of post-war America had changed by the 1950s. Beginning with the cover of the book itself, a cropped photograph of a child's face with the title superimposed on top of it and underneath the very first paragraph of the narrative itself, it dispenses with the usual introductory material in order to move seamlessly from the cover to the story inside. Consisting of 140 photographs in black and white of varying format with a running commentary below and around it, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* therefore looks as much like an extended magazine exposé from the period as a collaboration between two artists. Compared to previous documentary studies of Harlem from the 1930s and 40s Roy DeCarava's photographs of Harlem are nonetheless more lyrical than informative, rendering an intimate vision of a people usually seen as

dispossessed and disenfranchised than as neighbors and equals.<sup>1</sup> DeCarava does this partly by focusing on images of people sitting on stoops, meandering along, conversing on street corners and interacting with their families rather than for instance working, shopping, or going to school. In many ways, the photographs have more in common with Helen Levitt's lyrical images of Harlem from the 1940s than the ethnographic studies of the 1930s; a tone accentuated by Langston Hughes' accompanying text. The text, or rather the extended captions that circle around the photographs, are made up of a fictitious series of memories and anecdotal material as focalized through the on and off narrator: Sister Mary, an elderly, pious and hardworking African American woman. She tells of the various travails of her extended family, their ups and downs, their children and circumstances and through this the various vicissitudes of urban life. Nonetheless, despite its decidedly humanist angle, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* also positions itself in a no-man's land, not simply because it is seen through the eyes of a woman but because it occupies a space where the compelling narration by Sister Mary and the equally compelling photographs by DeCarava still rest uneasily—literally and at times photographically—within the wider landscape of Harlem.

For the few critics who have taken note of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, it is the politics of the photographic material more so than the captions, the fact that it presents the residents of Harlem as people with their own idiosyncrasies and personalities rather than simply ethnographic subjects, which kept the collaboration out of print initially. For instance, according to Sonia Weiner in "Narrating Photography in The Sweet Flypaper of Life":

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. ... Only after Hughes supplemented the photographs with a fictional text, turning them into what DeCarava called 'a marketable package' did Simon and Schuster agree to publish the book. Even then, ... the book was printed on relatively cheap paper in a small format size and sold for only one dollar. (Weiner 2002, 4).

Weiner's point that DeCarava's photographs departed from previous studies because of its more 'artistic' bent is important. Nonetheless, by taking DeCarava's images with their more subtle rendition of Harlem life as the starting point for a reading of the collaboration itself and its politics,

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<sup>1</sup> The most notable of such projects: Harlem Document (1936-1940), was a study commissioned by The New York Photo League and led by Aaron Siskind. For more on this and other similar projects see: Klein-Evans 2011.

the subtleties and complexities of the writing are to some extent left by the wayside. Thus, even though the project was enabled by Hughes' reputation as a prominent writer of African American life, Hughes' actual approach to the narrative is much more unorthodox than it appears upon a first reading. In this sense, Weiner ignores an important factor, namely the possibility that there is something 'subversive' taking place in the interaction between Hughes' text and the images accompanying it and not merely in the photographs themselves. Not only does *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* push beyond previous photographic studies of Harlem, it pushes beyond the boundaries set by photo-textual collaborations in general.

One sign of this is the fact that the print of the book "on relatively cheap paper in a small format size" (despite Hughes' fame) was allowed to stand. The design of the book is instrumental in how the overall look of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* immediately overturns conventional ideas of what a photo-textual collaboration should look like. If the decision to use a certain format and cheap paper came out of financial precautions, the book's cover immediately links the image and the text in a synthetic fashion signaling just how important the space between the two is for an overall understanding of the book's politics.

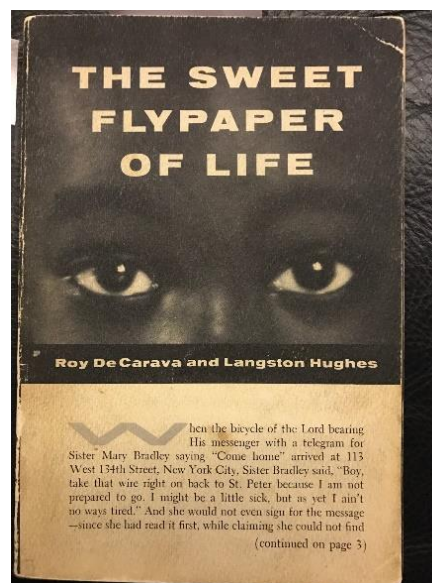


Fig. 1. Cover of the First Edition of Hughes, DeCarava 1955.

The close up of eyes on the front cover is one of very few close ups in the book overall. By insisting on returning the gaze of the subject rather than on the more conventional trope of surveying anonymous subjects from a distance, the cover also signals that something more intimate and

personal will be presented. Nonetheless, in the book proper DeCarava tends to frame occupants at some distance and from a slightly elevated position, placing the Harlem residents at a remove from the accompanying more intimate narration by Sister Mary. The sense that there is a slight disjunction between the two formats, between the vernacular tone of Sister's Mary descriptions and the measured look of the photographs, seems to indicate that the anecdotes and situations indicative of African American life cannot entirely solidify or make corporeal the distinct nature of Sister Mary's voice. It is not until the very last page of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* that a medium sized portrait of a woman smiling directly at the camera presents us with the underlying caption: "Ever so once in a while, I put on my best clothes. Here I am," that we are given what appears to be an actual image of Sister Mary. It is not until the end that a direct alignment between image and statement reoccurs.

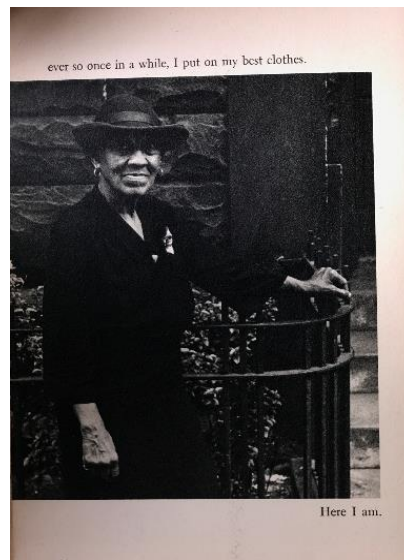


Fig. 2. Portrait of Sister Bradley, in Hughes, DeCarava 1955, 98.

The ending of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, despite its straightforward reassurance to the reader that Sister Mary is 'real' nonetheless renders the book's politics far from transparent. While it uses the African/American vernacular of Sister Mary as a way to fuse text and imagery into a poetic vision of togetherness, the dynamic between writer and photographer remains complicated. In other words, the photographs may occupy the same space as the narrator—that is Harlem—and yet they stand visually apart as well. This is more noticeable in some of the internal sequences. On two consecutive pages towards the beginning of the book Sister Mary talks

about her favorite grandchild Rodney, a music loving, easy going but somewhat unreliable father. Together with the writing, photographs of people in movement, a young man with a ball, one sitting under a tree in a park, a woman with her back turned to the camera in the distance and another of a man walking a pram, become illustrations for Sister Mary's observations:

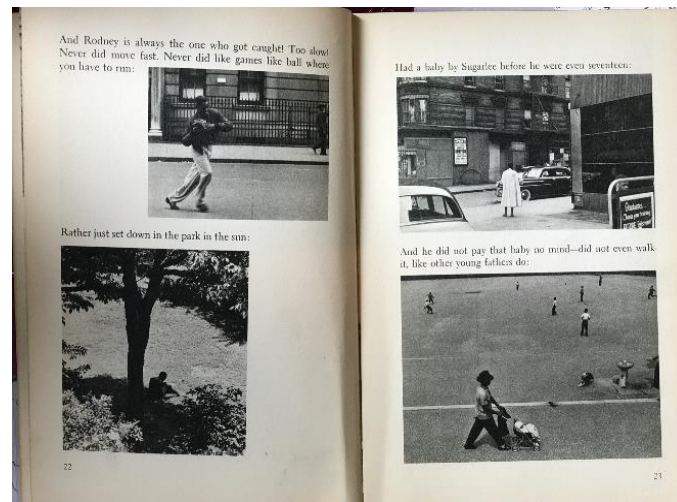


Fig. 3. *Four B&W images of Harlem Residents*, in Hughes, DeCarava 1955, 22-23.

And Rodney is always the one who got caught! Too slow! Never did move fast. Never did like games like ball where you have to run. Rather just set down in the park in the sun. Had a baby by Sugarless before he were even seventeen. And he did not pay that baby no mind—did not even walk it, like other young fathers do. (*Ibid.*)

Sister Mary's colloquial speech works synthetically to guide us through the photographs, but the images themselves never linger long enough to provide any detailed information about the characters, or even about Rodney himself. The faces of the people in the photographs are noticeably darkened or invisible, so anyone might conceivably be a stand in for Rodney's 'narrative', a narrative that turns Rodney into more of a cipher for a wider representation of Black masculinity than a real photographable person.

Given the somewhat melancholy tone of the description one might think that *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is about the desire to break out of an environment rather than be stuck there (despite the title's connotations). And yet, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* paradoxically places its faith in Sister Mary's partly resigned, partly accepting interior monologue; a monologue centered in her distinctive tone of voice even though the documentary focus of the photographs gravitates towards other spaces within the urban

environment. Sidewalks, parks and street-corners are all in various ways used to connote transitional spaces, places where people linger, pause, and occasionally play but seldom spaces that Sister Mary herself necessarily occupies.

The focus on these transitional spaces is just one way in which DeCarava's visual aesthetic is different from how Harlem had been rendered in previous documentary projects, but in other ways, it constitutes a variation of several urban themes that were already photographic tropes by the 1950s. Like the crime and tabloid photographer Weegee, DeCarava has an astute command of the metaphorical potential of the urban landscape, the ways in which light points toward the presence of lines and divisions framing and structuring the built environment. As with Weegee, DeCarava's images work both as a metaphor for the limited perspective afforded to the citizens of those areas and for the camera eye's attention to the borders of everyday life.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, however, Langston Hughes's folksy narrative is of course much different from Weegee's hard-boiled captions in which dead gangsters and other urban calamities are presented with deadpan humor. What they do share is an interest in allowing the writing guide a very particular reading of the photographs, one that renders them less anonymous and more message driven. Like Weegee's *Naked City*—an unexpected publishing success in 1949, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* as initially published by Simon & Schuster in its inexpensive pocket-sized format, sold out its initial print run of 25,000.<sup>3</sup> Despite the success of the initial print run, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* has only recently been reprinted and has never achieved the same notoriety as *Naked City*. Whether this is because DeCarava was seen predominantly a documentary photographer of Black life, rather than an artist in the same modernist vein as for instance Helen Levitt or Weegee, attests to subsequent attitudes to images of African Americans as much as it does to the images themselves. For Maren Stange in "Illusion complete within itself' Roy DeCarava's Photography": "Using the most verisimilitudinous of mediums and always referential rather than nonobjective, DeCarava made form, rather than subject alone, convey his meanings" thus taking the images away from a purely documentary realm and into something more experimental (Stange 2000, 289).

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<sup>2</sup> The similarities between DeCarava and later meta-documentary works is noted by Ings 2009, 330.

<sup>3</sup> DeCarava's freelance career following the publication of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* successfully continued photographically, he opened a photography gallery, later taught at Hunter College, and became city university distinguished professor of art in 1989.

The idea that form, rather than subject alone, is instrumental in DeCarava's particular aesthetic also partly explains the disjunction between the writing and the photographic sensibility of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. For Stange, DeCarava's aesthetic is "based in part on the dissonance ... between formal beauty and mundane subject matter" (Stange 2000, 283) and it is this sense of "dissonance" that at times accentuates the space between the more "mundane" tone of Sister Mary's narration and the "formal beauty" of the images. However, as Stange rightly points out, this space is a political and not simply an aesthetic space and as such informed by an important question: "should the (Black) artist continue to document American black life and injustice in a ... social realist style, or should he or she engage more fully the formal experiment and innovation animating European Modernism" (*ibid.*).

To animate "European Modernism" photographically speaking is nonetheless something different from what is going on in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. Here it is the disjunction between the formal aspects of the images and the flowing vernacular narration that sets the tone for how we read the collaboration overall. In this sense, although *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* appears a rather insulated narrative in terms of its geographical location, and the steadfast way in which Sister Mary generates the description throughout, it is also symptomatic on a wider level of the 1950s as a time when the idea of documentary veracity was under scrutiny. This may have been because of an influx of European Modernism as noted by Stange but it was also because of DeCarava's interest in showing a Harlem informed by a more lyrical and creative tenor than seen previously.

For Sherry Turner DeCarava, DeCarava's assistant throughout much of his career, his consistent photographs of Black urban life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century "show an inward eye trained on an outer reality, [...] a personal vision that finds resolution more in the realm of metaphor than in the photographic particular."<sup>4</sup> This focus on the realm of metaphor rather than documentary veracity is also indicative of a post-war sense of photography, an acknowledgment that the photographic process must be both political *and* personal. Despite the measured look of DeCarava's camera, it is clear then that it wants to bear witness to an insider's perspective, even if that particular insider is not Sister Mary. In other words, perhaps *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is not so much about creating a disjunctive aesthetic between the anonymous residents and the named narrator as it is about the co-existence of two very different visions within the same space. Put simply, the photographs are specific to DeCarava's own circumstances and

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<sup>4</sup> Press Release *The Museum of Modern Art*, New York, 'Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective 1996', 2.

experiences, while the narration is Hughes' personal take on how to ventriloquize another experience, namely that of Sister Mary.

Rather than focus on the aftereffects of segregation and racism alone, DeCarava is set on making the contemporaneous come alive in Harlem, to illustrate how alive it actually is despite the politics of past and present racism. In this sense, there *are* strong alignments between the overall gist of the images and the book's narration. Sister Mary's narration also appears always to focus on continuity and movement. Her family may experience hardship, her nephew may disappoint but life in Harlem goes on unabated. Paradoxically, Harlem is then the opposite of a place of entrapment, despite the 'sticky' nature of its title. Instead, it is a dynamic site for a variety of encounters: an encounter between two very different forms of media, and an encounter between a photographer interested in presenting Harlem as a neutral ground and a writer trying to articulate one woman's place in it.

Interestingly, while some critics have noted the politics of how Sister Mary is represented in the book, very little has been said about Hughes' choice to ventriloquize a woman rather than a male figure. In terms of gender, both DeCarava and Hughes are aware of how their Harlem subjects are inevitably both cloaked in anonymity and at times unwilling representatives of something more spiritualised, or rather, iconic figures of a particular version of 'blackness'. The figure of Rodney, Sister Mary's nephew is a good example of a character whose lazy somewhat perfunctory life style risks—as previously mentioned—stereotyping a particular version of African American manhood. Equally problematic perhaps is the fact that Hughes takes this central figure of spiritualised power to be an old Black woman. Thus, on the one hand, the narrative of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* insists on the realism of the topic at hand by not sugar-coating the domestic and familiar patterns that mark the hardships of Harlem life. While on the other hand, Sister Mary's attempts to articulate the terrain verbally means that she is both implicated and yet unable to mediate on the social implications of her surroundings. Hughes in particular therefore has to walk a tightrope between the empathy we feel for her as believable, with the attendant tendencies to downplay the economic circumstances of her life that this brings, and at the same time provide her voice with a certain gravitas and solidity. The question of how this schism is inscribed into the text itself is fundamental and by Hughes removing his own voice to another generation and another gender, questions of identity and representation are made visible that might otherwise have remained hidden.

According to Sonia Weiner:



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. (Weiner 2012, 4).

Thus another double bind exists at the very heart of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. On the one hand—the confines of a racially segregated sphere are deliberately established and the humanity of the subjects described in such a manner that readers unfamiliar with the territory may understand it, on the other hand, the authenticity of the vernacular voice depends on this segregated sphere as precisely that, as a place made by and for African Americans. In addition, the subjects shown in DeCarava's photographs need to be individualised in ways that are essential for the lyrical tenor of the project as a whole, if they remain purely representational their inherent humanity risks being subsumed in the aesthetics of the project. In Sister Mary's case, the narrative is designed to both move them beyond their regional identities and situate them very specifically as family above all.

This awareness of the potential of the photo-text as a way to render both a universal and humanist vision of daily life and as something specific to a local population of course complicates the idea of Harlem. Harlem is established as a community but more importantly, on an emotional level, it is established as an idea of community in familial terms. An example of this can be found in DeCarava's 1951 application for a Guggenheim grant (successful) that would enable him to take the pictures that emerge later on in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. In his application, the language employed by DeCarava, rather than scientific or ethnographic, is configured in the language of a poetic indexicality contingent on everyone and everything being related:

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.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that DeCarava's entry into the photographic establishment of the 1950s was facilitated by MOMA curator Edward Steichen's purchase of three prints in 1950 for inclusion into *The Family of Man* exhibition in 1955 is not insignificant. Replete with images of children and mothers, *The Family of Man* project was amongst other things a way to posit global affinities and alignments, affinities reliant on an idea of family as superseding individual tribal and national antagonisms. *The Sweet Flypaper*

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<sup>5</sup> As quoted in: <http://www.utata.org/sundaysalon/roy-decarava/>.

*of Life* came out the same year as *The Family of Man* and like *The Family of Man*, became part of a larger body of work distinctly tied to ideas of community and more particularly how to define community in the wake of massive post war growth economically and nationally (Steichen 1955). In this instance while *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* appears to stick closely to a pre-war idea of regionalism and the importance of local culture, at the same time, it is very much aware of how it might speak to a much larger audience across racial divides in the 1950s.

The choice to focalise the concept of community through the imaginary protagonist Sister Mary thus allows Hughes to sequence the images so that they conform not to a sociological study of various sections or classes in Harlem but to an ideal of extended family life with Sister Mary as the matriarch and narrator. It may be a life complicated by racial issues and domestic conflict but it is nonetheless surprisingly persistent in its elevation of a predominantly domestic outlook. If anything, this is probably what ‘dates’ *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* most; Hughes’ insistence on mimicking the documentary vernacular first person account of an older woman appears somewhat patronising in contemporary terms. Nonetheless, this presupposes that Hughes is attempting to render something essentially ethnographic and sociologically sound. According to Weiner: “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” (Blair 52). Previous collaborations between Hughes and other documentary artists, such as with photographer Griffith J. Davis, with whom he produced short photojournalistic pieces for *Ebony*, his involvement with compiling a volume titled *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* (1956) with the children’s writer Milton Meltzer, and his use of Jacob Lawrence’s black-and-white illustrations for his collection of poems *One-Way Ticket* (1949) certainly indicated an acute interest in combining visual material with both fictitious and ethnographic material in ways that pushed the boundaries of previous photo-textual collaborations.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, this does not explain fully Hughes’ choice to ventriloquize Sister Mary. By performing a version of Black identity that is not his own, Hughes may be repositioning the African American perspective in order to render something ordinarily hidden, or something unaccounted for, but

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<sup>6</sup> According to Stange, it was the Jesse B. Semple sketches that made DeCarava contact him, the “humorous conversations between two harlemites, one educated and northern and one southern and ‘semple” (Stange 2000, 290)—a version of the double consciousness that marks African American life but also perhaps a forerunner of Sister Mary’s rendering of Harlem life.

certainly something rarely empowered. In this sense, Hughes deliberately disturbs the boundaries between reportage, documentary study and fictionalisation—not only by breaking with his earlier work for the magazine *Ebony* and other projects as a WPA employee but by following the gist of the times, namely towards a desire to draw in the viewer/reader through emphatic devices that prove the lyrical potential of photo-text itself. Rather than focus on the embedded status of the artist within the community—something that Weegee took pride in for instance—Hughes takes as the artist's prerogative the ability to mask the documentary voice rather than make it transparently his own.

This sense of duality runs through the photo-text in its entirety and it provides us with a vision of Harlem as a place where overlapping sensibilities are allowed to play out—through Hughes' choice of Sister Mary as the main character—without the usual restrictions of gender or age. By ventriloquizing Sister Mary, Hughes is—in effect—not only performing a different version of Black identity, he is responding to a lyrical impetus which in this case is feminised. This also adds another slant to the use of various liminal spaces in visual terms. In the *Sweet Flypaper of Life*, the idea of Harlem as a boundary, a liminal space both in terms of racial and economic disparity, in fact enables it to become a particular type of testing ground for a more subjective and in this case, feminised vision. Like Weegee's urban backdrops, where houses become staging areas for social interaction as well as the aesthetic backdrops for a distinctly hard-boiled form of photography, Harlem is here *designed* as a place for a photographic interrogation that crosses traditional gender lines.

For Sonia Weiner, the strength of the book as a photo-text in fact relies heavily on the collaborative process of the two artists rather than on any possible disjunction between them. As she argues, this process is both thematically consistent and deliberately subverts the established norms of African American representation. According to Weiner “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.” Weiner's argument relies on the assumption that ‘the place of the documentary subject’ is ‘given in advance’. In these terms, ‘a double act of subjugation’ always occurs for the African American artist, “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” (Weiner 2012, 179). While she acknowledges the ways in which *Sweet Flypaper of life* tries to counter this ‘regime of the

image', the possibility that African American artists themselves might reproduce such a 'regime,' whether willingly or subconsciously, is left unexplored. Instead, she proposes that the success of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is mostly due to it being a lyrical poetic exercise in photography, an exercise that thus tends to "eclipse or obscure the political sphere, whose determinations, actions, and instrumentalities are not in themselves visual" (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, despite her trepidation regarding documentary photography as a 'double act of subjugation', Weiner concedes that a clever 'conceit' runs through the structure of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*; a conceit "that implies that the text was read differently by different audiences." Thus dual readings are possible, in other words, "because Hughes crafted a dynamic text that accommodated two diverse audiences." Thus, while dual readings are a measure of the interaction between text and image in terms of its racial politics, it also reflects the difficulty in anchoring specific meanings to images and vice versa within the photo-textual format. For instance, African American audiences might have seen a recognizable Harlem in DeCarava's photographs but not all African American audiences would necessarily have seen Sister Mary Bradley as the most obvious proponent of such a vision.

If one returns to the unusual design of the first edition paperback, with its narrative text beginning on the cover rather than after the title page, the final page with its portrait of Sister Mary brings Hughes's narrative and DeCarava's photography univocally together in ways that are more useful for a reading of the book's political potential. Far from a stereotypical figure of Black servitude, the last image presents us with a confident Sister Mary returning the gaze of the photographer rather than acquiescing to it. In this sense, the returned gaze allows the photo-text to come full circle both structurally and emotionally, as the final illustration constitutes the disclosure of the narrator by finally showing us Sister Mary and with her closure of the book itself. As such, while the image of Sister Mary constitutes a form of closure for *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, the question still presents itself as to whether the book overall provides an operable vision of Harlem itself. In many ways it remains a liminal space, both in terms of the New deal aesthetic in documentary terms that preceded it and the new civil rights era that was underway, but also a testing ground for a significant change in photographic activity, one that places itself between formal experimentation and social action.

Does *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* avoid, then, falling into the general pitfall of documentary photography in which "the place of the documentary subject" is "given in advance" (176)? While it is tempting to read something like *The Sweet Flypaper of life* as a repetition of such a

‘regime of the image’; a book whose topic—the disenfranchised residents of Harlem by necessity reproduces the very environment it seeks to critique—it doesn’t allow for the book’s subversive potential. To answer the question, such a reading only works if one assumes that an underlying critique of Harlem lies at the heart of the project in the first place. Contrary to how much pre-war documentary material is read—in which text appears to always somehow anchor particular meanings to the images and vice versa—the synthesis between the two media in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is much more fluid. Again, the voice of Sister Mary’s is instrumental. On the one hand she can be seen as a somewhat placating Mammy figure, potentially sentimental, stereotypical and so forth, on the other hand, Hughes and DeCarava’s refusal to actually show her until the very end of the narrative indicates an awareness of just how complex the identity politics of such a representation might be. Thus while there is no doubt that Sister Mary engages in a signifying practice with a long history of both gendered and racial assumptions, her 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 a multitude of intentions 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. Despite the examples then of Sister Mary invoking various stereotypes of the downtrodden woman, or her nephew Rodney—the unreliable black man, her vernacular seemingly conformist rhetoric can take on additional meanings, meanings that might even be unmoored from the actual collaborative process between the photographer and the writer.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1960s DeCarava was more commonly read as one of the instigators of the post war meta-documentary form, a companion to such photographers as Robert Frank who championed a more introverted and personal aesthetic, and as such, a response to the earnestness of pre-war documentary photography rather than continuation of it.<sup>8</sup> For Langston

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<sup>7</sup> According to Rampersad 1988, 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 1988, 244). The collaborative effort, therefore, is seemingly one-directional, the photographs a fictional context for photographic material that was probably created under circumstances very different from those in the finished book.

<sup>8</sup> Tellingly, he was the only Black photographer to be included in the new canon of MoMA’s established post war photographers chosen by Edward Steichen for the *Family*

Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* was just one of many collaborative efforts with various other media, from theatrical productions, to more journalistic photo-essays. The fact that it remains largely underestimated within his wider canon of work is indicative of the ambiguous disjunction between the photographs and the narration in the book; a disjunction that paradoxically bears witness to just how innovative and complex *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* really is. Rather than look for a definite version of Harlem, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* appears to be content to provide a series of vignettes of daily life as filtered through one particular sensibility. But of course this vision—as with all creative reconfigurations—is both tempered by and in the end reliant on the accompanying photographs. By stating univocally “Here I Am” DeCarava and Hughes confirm that ultimately the fictitious Sister Mary is as present or absent as the reader wants her and Harlem to be.

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*of Man* exhibition where four of the images from *the Sweet Flypaper of Life* were displayed.