Robert Shulman: On "White Shadows"

The concluding grim recognition emerges from the interplay of racial-political realities and physical impossibilities. "In the world" of racial and political experience, white shadows are everywhere, although "in the world" of physical experience white shadows do not exist. Hughes's imagery moves us back and forth endlessly between physical and racial-political realities, between the world of physics and the world of power. The white shadows that do not exist are at the same time ominous and omnipresent. The spare form answers to and underscores the elemental, inescapable presence of "white shadows" in an unsparing racial landscape.

The speaker is looking for a shelter someplace in the world "where white shadows / Will not fall." The sense of inescapable white power dominating the entire world, including the world of the speaker and the Dark Brother, shows the impact of Hughes's trip to Haiti in spring 1931. One of his essays about the trip is titled "White Shadows in a Black Land." In it Hughes uses his own observation to document specifically who has the power in Haiti. The U.S. Marines are everywhere. The cafés are filled with the "cracker" accents of the Marines, "drinking in the usual boisterous American manner." Beyond the military, "you will discover," Hughes continues, his eye on the other kind of control that counts, "that the Banque d'Haiti with its Negro cashiers and tellers, is really under control of the National City Bank of New York. You will be informed," he goes on, still concentrating on power and money, "that all the money collected by the Haitian customs passes through the hands of an American comptroller. And regretfully, you will gradually learn that most of the larger stores with their colored clerks are really owned by Frenchmen, Germans, or Assyrian Jews. And if you read the Haitian newspapers, you will soon realize from the heated complaints there, that even in the Chamber of Deputies, the strings of government are pulled by white politicians in far-off Washington--and that the American marines are kept in the country through an illegal treaty thrust on Haiti by force and never yet ratified by the United States Senate. The dark-skinned little Republic," Hughes concludes, "has its hair caught in the white fingers of unsympathetic foreigners, and the Haitian people live today under a sort of military dictatorship backed by American guns. They are not free."

In "White Shadows," as in a politically and racially charged Cubist landscape, Hughes eliminates the particular details and concentrates on the basic power relations and his grim response to them. The Dark Brother of the poem is not only African American but also Haitian and Cuban. He is also a much less hopeful version of "the darker brother" of Hughes's critical and affirmative "I Too Sing America." In "White Shadows" Hughes illuminates the racial impact of the same kind of world-ranging imperialism he had satirized in "Merry Christmas." The extremity of his vision in "White Shadows" is an index of his sense of the power and consequences of American and capitalistic might "in the world." Unlike such works as "Scottsboro Limited," "Tired," and "Union," in "White Shadows" Hughes does not modify his powerful negative criticism with the affirmative promise that black and white workers will make a revolutionary new world.

For readers in the present, Haiti still exists. Hughes's "White Shadows," "White Shadows in a Black Land," and "People without Shoes" take us back to an earlier period of American
involvement. The dominance Hughes highlights underlies the current situation even as we have almost totally erased the earlier history from public discourse, so that "White Shadows" and "White Shadows in a Black Land" are involved in both a political and cultural suppression.


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