

**“NOBODY’S GONNA FIX A PLACE FOR ME”**  
HOW LANGSTON HUGHES CHALLENGED RACIAL STEREOTYPES  
WITH HIS 1935 PLAY *MULATTO*

Luca Garcia Tercero  
Studentennummer: 01402745

Promotor: Prof. dr. Gert Buelens

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## PREFACE

For as long as I can remember, theatre has been a dominant passion in my life. I am therefore very thankful to have been given the chance to finish my four years of literature studies with a dissertation on this topic. To combine it with the theme of race relations has been an interesting journey and resulted in this study, to which I have gladly dedicated my time during the last few months. While the subject of race relations has interested me for quite some time now, I am well aware of the dangers of writing about a sensitive subject like this one as a White person. This preface serves as a short explanation to the terms I will be using in my dissertation.

As you will have noticed in the previous sentence, I have decided to capitalize both ‘Black’ and ‘White.’ This decision has been inspired by a 2014 opinion piece by Lori L. Tharps, to which all of the consulted articles referred.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, ‘Black’ in itself is a bit of a problematic term to include in a study in which the theme of color is a dominant element. In order to avoid the ‘one-drop’ rule which ‘sees biracials not as equal members of both parent groups, but as belonging more to their minority parent group,’<sup>2</sup> I chose to use the terms ‘African American,’ ‘people of color’ and the adjective ‘colored’ in my dissertation. I realize that these last two terms are under some scrutiny today, but I believe they are the most representative terms for the study I have conducted, partly because they are the terms that appear in the play *Mulatto* itself and most of the academic sources I consulted. Since the 1980s, ‘African American’ has become the most general term, so I will be using that when talking about more recent topics. Derogative racial slurs do appear in this dissertation, but they will always be in the form of a citation and do not represent my personal views.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, I refer to the original piece in the New York Times in my bibliography

<sup>2</sup> Definition by Steve Bradt in a Harvard University study

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## 0. INTRODUCTION

Among the most prevalent topics in the current (African) American art scene are the themes of race and the depictions of African American racial emancipation. On every level of American culture, the African American artist occupies an increasingly prominent position. For example, a quick look at today's top charts shows that the music industry is being dominated by hip-hop, an originally African American, Bronx-originated art form. Next to that, 4 out of the 5 Grammy nominees for the 2018 Best Album of the Year Award were African American artists. Similarly, the movie industry has produced a great number of high-profile films concerning race relations and racial pride, like *12 Years a Slave*<sup>3</sup> (2013) and *Moonlight*<sup>4</sup> (2016), both of which won an Academy Award for Best Picture. Over the last few years, I have developed an interest in the representation of race relations in popular culture. Yet, one question remained unanswered: how did African American reach the mainstream success it enjoys today?

For that, I had to find out the sources of inspiration for the entertainment business. The preoccupation with race relations is booming in the U.S.A., stemming from the rise of movements like Black Power in the 1960s up until the recent Black Lives Matter. However, this does not fully account for African American art's modern success. For that, I had to trace back to earlier instances of racial pride. The current array of equality movements are extensions of the original Civil Rights Movement which started in the 1950s, with iconic figures like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. However, when I took a step further back, I stumbled upon something interesting. The period before the Civil Rights Movement – and a part of the Movement's period as well – is called the Jim Crow era. So, who is this Jim Crow? In fact, he is a fictional character, created by White comedy actor Thomas Dartmouth Rice around the 1830s, for a sketch called 'Jump Jim Crow' in which he played the title character. For Jim Crow, Rice painted himself black using charcoal, popularizing the technique called 'blackface,' and jumped around singing songs about working by the railroad. (Cockrell 180). This caricature of the Black man became so widespread that a set of laws enforcing racial segregation were named after it, making it not only an artistic stereotype but also a political

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_4](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/?ref_=nv_sr_4)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4975722/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4975722/?ref_=nv_sr_1)

one. In other words, the first instances of 'Black theatre' were a creation of White actors. Due to this, something big had to happen within African American art to resist the Jim Crow stereotype.

That big thing is called the Harlem Renaissance, and it was set in motion by the Great War. Williams (2011) comments on the important shift in race relations that World War I brought with it:

How African Americans responded to the postwar resurgence of White supremacy reflected the depths to which the aspirations of the war and expectations for democracy shaped their racial and political consciousness. [...] the contributions of the soldiers, as well as peoples of African descent more broadly, to the war effort swelled racial pride.<sup>5</sup>

The war was one of the key reasons for the Great Migration that took place between 1914 and 1920, in which around 500,000 Blacks travelled from the segregated South to the North. The Migration became a melting pot for Black artists to meet and interact with each other, resulting in one of the most impactful movements in the history of Black culture: the Harlem Renaissance. In this movement, Black artists 'explored the beauty and pain of Black life and sought to define themselves and their community outside of White stereotypes.'<sup>6</sup> As this is a milestone in the history of African American art, I have decided to look at this period in more detail.

For my dissertation I chose to focus specifically on James Mercer Langston Hughes, one of the core contributors to the Harlem Renaissance, in order to examine the state of race relations during this pivotal moment that lies at the heart of the later Black Pride movements. In an article published in 1926, when Hughes was only 24 years old, American author DuBose Heyward described him as 'intensely subjective, passionate, keenly sensitive to beauty and possessed of an unfaltering musical sense.'<sup>7</sup> Langston Hughes turned into one of the most iconic Black writers, having produced a wide corpus of poetry, prose and dramatic works. He mentored other great Black artists such as James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. His unquestioned status as a literary figure and leading role in the Harlem Renaissance are the primary reasons

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<sup>5</sup> In an article by the Research Centre for Black Culture in New York Public Library

<sup>6</sup> From the introduction on the Harlem Renaissance on History.com

<sup>7</sup> Cited from Poetryfoundation.org

for why I picked Hughes for this thesis. Additionally, Hughes' personal history places him in the middle of the racial emancipation of his time. Both of his grandfathers were White slave traders while both of his grandmothers were Black women, which makes Hughes a person of mixed descent. Next to that he has been caught between two opposed views on race, a situation that was recently described in a biographical article in the *New Yorker*. His mother, Carrie Langston, was proud of her race whereas his father, 'color-struck' James Hughes, despised Blackness as he equated it with poverty and powerlessness. He left the country one year after Langston Hughes was born and moved to Mexico, where he hoped to find better opportunities as a Black man. (2015) Langston Hughes himself carries this history over into his work. He received a lot of mixed responses, but in general the Black critics were harsh, especially towards his early work. While some called him out for the unattractive representation of Black life in his work, others criticized him for idealizing it. Nonetheless, his impact has been enormous.

In this dissertation, I will focus on his heavily overlooked 1935 play *Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South*<sup>8</sup>, the first ever Broadway hit by an author of color. Despite the ground-breaking success of *Mulatto*, which played over 400 times on Broadway, the play has barely received any academic attention. Hughes' prose and poetry have been studied extensively, but his dramatic works have been left in the dark, despite theatre being a medium with an incredible social reach and academics like McKay claiming that

Black intellectuals [...] tried hard but failed to bring a vibrant Black theater to birth, and to make that theater a significant part of the history of the Harlem Renaissance. Serious, authentic Black theater that attracted public attention did not emerge from the Afro-American community until the 1930s and 1940s with such playwrights as [...] Langston Hughes. (616)

Bigsby called the play 'a blend of bitter protest and rather heavy-handed satire, [...] a melodrama which was disturbingly close to the truth in the South of the 1930s.' (11-12). Therefore, my dissertation will be an analysis of how Hughes' *Mulatto*, as the first Black Broadway success, challenged the racial stereotypes of the Jim Crow era in order to put authentic African American art on the map. However, I have to emphasize that the version of

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<sup>8</sup> All quotes from the play throughout my dissertation are cited from the anthology *Three Negro Plays* (1969) by Penguin Books

*Mulatto* I will be using is not the one that was originally performed on Broadway in 1935. Hughes' White stage director Martin Jones edited the play and added a rape scene, for sensation, that Hughes himself did not approve of, yet had to agree to for financial reasons. The edited text by Jones has over time been lost in the archives and has not been recovered, so the version I will be using is the original script as written by Hughes in 1930, which was not published until 1963. While it is not the exact text of the original Broadway shows, all textual elements that I will be discussing were still in the play, which means that Hughes' ideas still reached the audience despite the added rape scene.

*Mulatto* is set in Georgia in the 1920s. While the play does not focus on the World War, it paints a clear picture of the racial situation after the war. *Mulatto* focuses on the household of Colonel Thomas Norwood, a White plantation owner. He lives together with his Black housemaid Cora, with whom he has 5 children. The main character is Robert "Bert" Lewis, second-oldest son of Thomas and Cora. Robert and his sister Bertha are returning from school in the North, where Robert witnessed the beginning of racial emancipation. When he returns home on his summer break, he causes a scene in his hometown by getting kicked out of a hardware store for complaining about some broken radio tubes. The Colonel, incited by his White friends, as well as the other Black workers on the plantation try to calm down Robert but the latter does not want to bow down to White society. The tension builds to a confrontation between Robert and his father. The Colonel refuses to recognize Robert as his son and almost instinctively pulls a gun on him. Robert manages to disarm his father and chokes the Colonel to death. After the death scene, Robert leaves for the swamp as he tries to escape from the White mob trying to lynch the boy for killing his father. Afraid to be caught and too proud to get killed by the White mob, Robert commits suicide, which concludes the play.

The first chapter of my thesis will include a brief overview of the state of Black theatre leading up to *Mulatto*, as that will help us understand the background in which the play operated. It will also serve to close the gap between the creation of the Jim Crow figure and the Broadway run of *Mulatto*. Next to the theatrical tradition, I will briefly discuss the theatre audience of that period. We will see that Black and White spectators had different expectations of race relations on stage after the First World War, which contributed to the social and political atmosphere in which Hughes created *Mulatto*. After this contextual part, I will begin the analysis of the play. Even when one considers the title alone, it is clear that this play is concerned with the topic of racial tension. As we will see further on in this study, the term

Mulatto was not that common at the time of Hughes' writing, nor was it a very positive one. Webster Dictionary defines Mulatto as '*now sometimes offensive*: a person of mixed White and Black ancestry.' As we have seen in the short plot summary, *Mulatto* features both Black and White characters, as well as characters of mixed ancestry. As a person of mixed ancestry himself, it is no surprise that Hughes chose to write a play on this topic, bearing the controversial title *Mulatto*. Next to that, interracial violence plays a big role in the piece. Hughes includes lynching, the most common act of White-on-Black violence of the Jim Crow era. With the murder of the Colonel by his son Robert, Black-on-White violence also constitutes a part of the play. In referring to Robert just now as Black, I have touched on another theme that Hughes explores throughout *Mulatto*: the one-drop rule, which states that even one small percentage of Black ancestry immediately makes a person 'Black.' More generally, Hughes opens up the theme of color to discover what it means to be Black, White or something in between, but also includes the motif of a broken family, just like his own was. Robert's suicide at the end of the play will be the last element we look at. While I will be looking for Hughes' interpretation of the social unrest of his time, the analysis will be based around the characters. After an analysis of these themes, we will consider the history of the play. Around the time of writing *Mulatto*, Hughes wrote a poem of the same name and a short story called *Father and Son*, which shares the same plot as the play. I will include a thematic analysis of those works to see how Hughes' views and techniques have evolved and to explore the significance of the differences between the play and the other two works. I will finish my dissertation with a brief discussion of the ideas in the Revolutionary Black Theatre movement of the 1960s, which Hughes anticipated almost 30 years earlier with *Mulatto*, to show the pioneering position of his play.

In short, with this dissertation I hope to fill the academic void surrounding the role of theatre in the early stages of racial emancipation. I will argue that Hughes' *Mulatto* is a pioneer in the awakening of African American art and that it readjusted a lot of the ideas concerning social aspiration and the position of colored people in society, as well as reigning stereotypes.

## 1. THE BLACK THEATRE TRADITION BEFORE *MULATTO*

I have already briefly mentioned the name Thomas Dartmouth Rice, the creator of the Jim Crow character which became the mascot for segregation and race relations in the twentieth century. He is the ‘father of the Black minstrelsy.’ (Cockrell 180). For White audiences, Jim Crow quickly became a favorite and ‘blurred the lines between the real and the representational.’ In other words, White people saw colored people in the way Jim Crow acted, ‘the Black character, on and off stage, was defined in the White American mind by minstrelsy - lazy, comic, pathetic, childlike and idiotic.’ (McKay 617). All Black theatre goes back to this common core: the nineteenth century minstrel shows. The Encyclopaedia Britannica reveals that minstrelsy was created by travelling White musicians who, with charcoal over their face, ‘mimicked the singing and dancing of slaves.’<sup>9</sup> Rehin rightfully points out that because of minstrelsy ‘the Black man, the model of the minstrels, was excluded from membership and reunion, but in a paradoxical way he entered the mainstream of popular culture.’ (366). It is a fact that a lot of White spectators of minstrel shows, after enjoying a cultural exploitation of racial stereotypes, returned home where they had Black workers they treated horribly. Rehin explored the reason behind the popularity of minstrelsy among White spectators:

The minstrel show was a medium through which 'Northern White common people' conceptualized and coped with two sets of grave problems: first, those arising from the turmoil of urbanization and social change, and second, those arising from the facts of race and slavery. [...] The minstrel show was like the museum, only with laughter; it purveyed knowledge of new technology and new situations. (371)

Both of those sets of problems are part of Langston Hughes' *Mulatto*. He felt the need to change the representation of Black characters and counter the stereotypes with which they were regarded both on and off stage. He was not the first colored artist, to be clear. After the American Civil War, Black people themselves started to do minstrel shows, because those were ‘the only theatrical medium in which gifted Black performers of the period could support themselves.’<sup>10</sup> Black minstrelsy received a lot of criticism by Black progressive movements, with colored people claiming that minstrelsy was ‘a disgusting caricaturing [...] of the more unfortunate members of the race, which reflected against the whole and, traitorously, kept alive

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<sup>9</sup> Cited from *Britannica.com*

<sup>10</sup> Cited from *Britannica.com*

White contempt' (Rehin 367). McKay argues that 'the Black character (on and off stage), defined in the White American mind by minstrelsy [...] embodied an image that was disastrous to the advancement of serious Black theater, and one not easily reversed.' (617) However, there are Black playwrights, like LeRoi Jones, which called to its cultural importance by claiming 'I hope that Negro "low" comedy persists even long after all the gangsters on television are named Smith and Brown.' (Rehin 366). What Jones points out is that gradually the White audience would grow tired of minstrelsy (which indeed faded out around the mid-twentieth century) and the small amount of Black culture that it represented would get lost in the White-dominated mainstream. Keeping the Black minstrelsy as a cultural heirloom would help the Black artists in their emancipation and separation from White art.

Langston Hughes' *Mulatto* is not an ode to minstrelsy. It is an empowering showcase of the talent of colored artists. But yet again, *Mulatto* cannot be credited as the first play in that category. The first play devised to demonstrate that Black artists could perform outside of the constraints of minstrelsy was Bob Cole's 1898 play *A Trip to Coontown*. (H. Miller 22). In that play, Cole reversed the minstrelsy theme and played with White paint on his face, caricaturizing White people. Krasner explains that this performance went 'mostly unnoted, because nothing in the cultural system in America at the time prepared mostly White audiences for the revolutionary trope initiated by Cole.' Moreover, 'Cole was perceived as Black no matter what make up he wore, while White actors in Black-face claimed to represent 'authentic' Blackness' (H. Miller 23). In other words, the main problem at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not the inability of Black artists to create art, but it was the inability of White audiences to fully appreciate and value that art. The stereotype of the inferior, always silly and good-humored Jim Crow caused the White population to view Black artists and their creations the same way. The trend of cultural superiority in White audiences created a barrier for Black artists trying to offer their critique on the reigning social order simply because the White majority failed to see the revolution that was happening in front of them.

I mentioned in my introduction that the script I am using for my thesis is not the one that was originally performed on Broadway. Hughes' text got adapted by a White stage director in order to make it more appealing to the primarily White audience. African American theorist Theophilus Lewis commented on this problem in the 1930s, blaming the middle-class Black people for their, amongst other accusations, lack of economic interest in Black theatre. (McKay 616). Because Black people themselves, at the time, did not (want to) see the benefit of

authentic Black theatre, the financial tools for those plays were mainly provided by White benefactors. This meant that the plays, while they are representations of Black life, were still being produced by and for White audiences. The adapted text has not been preserved, so it is not possible to include the added scene. I am more interested in Hughes' original text anyway, because it contains the original ideas with which Hughes tried to reach the Black audience instead of appealing to the White one.

Throughout this chapter, I have mentioned several pioneers in the Black theatre tradition, which brings me to the reason why Hughes' name belongs in that list. The first play written by a Black playwright to be produced on Broadway was Willis Richardson's 1923 play *The Chipwoman's Fortune*, but that did not at all become a widely acclaimed success in the way *Mulatto* did. *Mulatto* was in fact the first Black hit success on Broadway. It is undeniable that a play interacts intensely with the audience, particularly a play like *Mulatto* that has been staged over 400 times on Broadway. Therefore, there is one last aspect of Black early twentieth-century theatre that needs to be addressed before we start the analysis of the play itself: the double audience problem.

In his essay "Best and Worst of Professions," Jean-Louis Barrault describes the relations between actors and audience. He calls the audience a 'synthesis of the whole community of the world.' (24). An audience can be seen as a *pars pro toto* of the society in which a playwright writes his play. In the case of Langston Hughes, a Black playwright in the early to mid-twentieth century, the question of the audience gets a bit more complicated due to the social struggles of Black people in those decades. To analyze this matter, we turn to the acclaimed 1925 essay "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" by James Weldon Johnson:

The Aframerican (sic) author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience. It is more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both White America and Black America. The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or un-consciously, this problem of the double audience. To whom shall he address himself, to his own Black group or to White America? Many a Negro writer has fallen down, as it were, between these two stools. (477)

Johnson clarifies that the main problem with White audiences lay in the fact that they did not want their vision of Black people challenged. They saw Black people as a ‘pathetic and pitiable figure,’ as we just saw in the form of minstrelsy. While this comment does seem like an overly generalized statement, it has been repeated by other renowned Black theorists like Adam David Miller and W.E.B Du Bois. Furthermore, Johnson treats the Black audience as one whole. Where White people had their vision of Black people, so did Black people themselves. They had been so used to being treated as slaves and lesser beings, sometimes not even considered human, that they wished to see the Black man glorified on stage. The playwrights were thus not only supposed to comply to White expectations, but also to Black idealizations. The problem, as noted by Miller in his own essay on the double audience problem, is that Black playwrights were obliged to lie about their own experiences and ideas. (147). Not only was this probably severely obstructing the messages they wanted to convey, it also became an impossible task to combine both demands, especially keeping in mind that most plays were sponsored by White benefactors. In an essay on the history of revolutionary Black drama, Black playwright and author Errol Hill claims that it was not until the 1960s that Black playwrights focused their texts primarily, and often exclusively, to Black audiences. (425) We will see later on in this study that Hughes’ *Mulatto* does indeed contain a mixture of messages, often clearly directed at White people too. Black theorist Alain Locke commented on the problematic urge of Black theatre to bow down to both of the audience’s expectations:

In the Negro field the tyranny of what the public is supposed to want has stood in the way of the development of some of the most obviously original and significant strains of Negro drama, particularly the social problem play based on one or another aspect of the racial situation. (93)

Following that thought, we get to the main importance of an audience in a theatre. While the pitfall of audience expectations is a strong burden for playwrights, the audience is what gives Hughes, or any playwright, the opportunity to offer his individual consciousness to a group of people with possibly different views and opinions. In an essay on Black theatre, Rhett S. Jones quotes humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers who claims that ‘persons develop a sense of self either as a consequence of their experience in society, or as the result of *introjecting* ideas about the society – and themselves – from others.’ (71). In other words, Hughes’ *Mulatto* helped develop the colored audience’s vision on their colored self. In writing a play, Hughes adds his

consciousness to the formation of the individual consciousness of every member in the audience. With *Mulatto*, he (un)consciously helped to adjust the group consciousness and incite social aspiration and change.

Before *Mulatto*, the mainstream Black theatre tradition was about keeping the stereotypes of the minstrel shows alive in order to keep White audiences interested. Although some Black artists tried to challenge the status quo, their creations and intentions did not receive the attention they needed and deserved. The discussion of the importance of audiences shows the merit in discussing a play, since its social reach is far beyond any other art form, especially for colored people in the Jim Crow era. Langston Hughes' *Mulatto* helped change the view of colored people on the value of their own lives, and in the following chapters I will analyze how Hughes' themes and characters embodied the social change that the Black audience so desperately needed.

## 2. THE CALCULUS OF COLOR

The first theme that I would like to discuss in *Mulatto* is the notion of color and race. I have mentioned in the previous chapter that *Mulatto* was not the first Black theatre show on Broadway, but it was the first one to include this theme. Before Hughes, Black issues had already been explored in Angelina Grimké's *Rachel* (1916), one of the first Black-written plays to include it. *Rachel* is the story of a young colored woman who, because of the racism in her own life, vows not to bring children into this world. Nonetheless, *Rachel* was not performed on Broadway and the common Black-and-White view was still intact.<sup>11</sup> As the title of Hughes' play suggests, *Mulatto* goes beyond the classic 'one-drop' rule, a Black-and-White view that White people held in the twentieth century, and which still is the reigning distinction in the western world today. The rule states that even the most remote Black ancestry automatically makes a person Black as well. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century were marked by minstrelsy, as I discussed at the start of the previous chapter. That being said, the challenge for Black artists was to transcend the stereotypes of the one-drop rule and White representations like minstrelsy. Atop of that, Encyclopaedia Britannica mentions the political impact of the first World War, in which Black soldiers (in segregated armies) were told to fight for democracy and equal rights. They returned to White supremacy, but the war gave them renewed strength to fight for equality and social reform. Langston Hughes himself did not fight

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<sup>11</sup> Everything about *Rachel* was found on [Britannica.com](http://Britannica.com)

in the war but he grew up amidst this new-found racial pride. While the current focus in African American art is that racial pride, I will be focusing my character analysis on the calculus of rebellion. Black theatre in the twentieth century, and Black art in general, was about the rebellion against stereotypes. I will work in chapters divided by the skin color of the characters to see how Hughes implemented rebellion into *Mulatto*, but also how he countered – or maybe reinforced – racial stereotypes of Black, White and mixed people.

## **2.1. Mixed Characters: The American Mulatto**

As is shown through the title of the play, the main focus lies on the mixed characters. For that reason, I will begin my analysis with those characters. In particular, I will be looking at Robert Lewis, the main character, his sisters Bertha and Sallie and his brother William. They each present a different level of rebellion, tied to different stereotypes, which will serve as the introduction to each of the characters. After that first analysis, I will look more closely at the theme of the Tragic Mulatto, a literary device that appeared in the nineteenth century but did not receive a lot of attention until a few decades later, to see how Hughes is breaking or reinforcing those stereotypes.

Werner Sollors, professor of English Literature and Afro-American Studies at Harvard University, wrote a book on the history of the Mulatto titled *Neither Black nor White yet both* (1997). Sollors traced the usage of the word ‘Mulatto’ back to 1595. Widely used in the British colonies, the word would be a descendant of ‘mule,’ an animal that is a cross between two species. (128). Mulattoes are children of mixed racial descent, but for a long time they were seen more specifically as children of a White slave-owner and one of his Black slave mistresses. Around the 1820s, the word became a term loaded with contempt, since Mulattoes were rejected by both the Black population and the White one. This connotation caused the complicated social position the Mulattoes occupied. To better understand the nuance of the term back when Hughes was writing his play, I will briefly turn to a sociologic essay written in 1928 by White sociologist E. B. Reuter. He describes the Mulatto as a ‘distinctly unstable physical type’ but, nonetheless, ‘inherently superior to the Negroes of unmixed ancestry.’ (39) What follows is a description by Reuter of what the ideal Mulatto would look like:

[They] ceased to struggle against the traditional rules of the whites. They have accepted the status of Negroes and identified themselves with the Negro group. Within the race

they have an assured position: their white ancestry gives them a certain prestige and the tradition of mulatto superiority gives a self-confidence rare in the Negro group. They form the small aristocracy and the local leadership of the masses. The mixed bloods who succeed in such adjustment become psychologically normal persons. (40)

This quote sums up the image White people had of a person of mixed descent. They formed a threat to White society. Elam Jr. *et al* argue that ‘the Mulatto as a sign of race-mixing threatens the economic and social order not simply because he marks difference, but because he can lay claim to *sameness*.’ (89). We will see that in *Mulatto*, the sameness that Robert tries to achieve is what ultimately escalates into the death of both his father and himself. While minstrelsy might have been declining, racist stereotypes like Reuter’s (his essay appeared 7 years before *Mulatto* was staged) were what colored artists needed to face and to counter in their work, but it was also what people of mixed descent like Hughes himself had to go through every day.

### 2.1.1. The Character of William

William is the least rebellious one of the mixed characters. He is the firstborn of Cora and Colonel Norwood and accepted his role as a colored worker on the latter’s plantation. Unlike Bertha, Sallie and Robert, he does not even go to school throughout the year, but rather stays to work on the plantation. In fact, Robert calls William an ‘old slavery-time Uncle Tom.’ (38). The term ‘Uncle Tom’ first appeared in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Based on the title character of that novel, Uncle Tom is the general name for “a person who is overly subservient to authority,” but also “a Black person who is overeager to win the approval of Whites.”<sup>12</sup> Robert uses the derogative name for his own brother. William does everything in his power to remain as quiet and unnoticed as possible, and tries desperately to get his brother to do the same. He is also the only mixed character to have his lines written in heavy dialect. Unlike Robert and Sallie, whose lines are written in a similar way to the White characters’ speech, William shares the dialect of the all-Black characters. He becomes irritated when Robert does unruly things as small as entering through the front door. The most striking line by William is uttered in a conversation with his mother Cora about Robert’s reckless behavior: ‘A nigger’s just got to know his place in de South, that’s all, ain’t he ma?’ It is remarkable that William would call himself (and Robert) a ‘nigger.’ The African American

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<sup>12</sup> Definitions cited from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

registry<sup>13</sup> defines the term as ‘a term of exclusion, a verbal reason for discrimination. Whether used as a noun, verb, or adjective, it strengthened the stereotype of the lazy, stupid, dirty, worthless nobody.’ Even though it has carried that same sentiment since its development, Black people and, in the case of William, people of mixed descent used the word to describe themselves. The African American registry explains that usage as follows:

Blacks, from slavery until today, have internalized many negative images that White society cultivated and broadcast about Black skin and Black people. This is mirrored in cycles of self- and same-race hatred. The use of the word nigger by Blacks reflects this hatred, even when the user is unaware of the psychological forces involved.

In other words, the usage of the word by William shows how deeply the reigning White stereotypes surrounding people of color are engraved in him. Colored people all over the western world today still use the term, as we read in the quote from the registry, but today there is no longer the subservient behavior that William shows. The term is used today as ‘a term of endearment’ or as an act of militancy and revolt against the White reigning order. The usage of the word today coincides with the movements of Black Pride that I have already mentioned. Kennedy explains that the usage today flips the term by ‘designating a cultural domain that only Blacks are permitted to enter and exploit.’ (80).

The difference between today’s usage of the word and the usage by William is thus a nuance of meaning. So, if the term back in the twentieth century almost exclusively held the derogative connotation, why does William use it to refer it to himself and his family even when no White people are around? The answer to that question might be found in an essay called ‘The Ethics of Uncle Tom’s Children’ by Tommie Shelby, a fitting title for a character like William. In his essay, Shelby describes an ‘ethic of the oppressed, [...] [an] ethic of resistance aimed at living with dignity despite insurmountable injustice.’ The most important thing, Shelby argues, is that ‘although one’s life is structured by shame-inducing conditions one nevertheless lives in a way one can be proud of.’ (514) We have already seen signs of that pride in William, when he almost condescendingly claimed he ‘lives like a nigger should.’ While the word ‘nigger’ embodied a denigrating image of colored people, it still held a certain ruleset, and it is one that William can live by. Apart from William’s own acceptance of his situation,

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<sup>13</sup> All citations from the African American Registry come from the online version at <https://aaregistry.org/story/nigger-the-word-a-brief-history/>

Cora tries to keep him in that mindset. She tells him ‘Bert never has been like you was, and de girls, quiet and sensible like you knowed you had to be.’ (36) It becomes clear that Cora is encouraging her son to remain below the radar of the ‘White folks.’ Her words ‘you knowed you had to be’ express the pressure that was on Black people to ‘behave’ in order to not be beaten or lynched by White aggressors. One of the main motifs of *Mulatto* is (not) having the will to resist that pressure. Robert, as we will see, desperately resists it, but William embraced it since the start, and tries to build up his life and dignity within that confined social position.

While the position that William occupies was historically widespread amongst colored workers, William is the only mixed character in the play that does completely bow down and embrace his inferior position as a person of color. His sisters and mother, while still not nearly as rebellious as Robert, each show a hint of beginning rebellion, as we will see in their respective analysis. The moment that makes Cora shift her attitude towards a more rebellious one, as we will see later on, is the death of the Colonel, killed by his son Robert. However, William does appear in the play after that death scene but still seems incapable to escape his subservient behavior. While Cora is waiting for Robert to escape from the White lynching mob, William appears to tell her that he is leaving with his family, fleeing the scene where surely ‘de White folks’ll come here too.’ (57). Where Cora would have previously encouraged William to do that without skipping a beat, here she tells him ‘you never was much like [...] Bert – you’s mo’ like de field hands.’ (57) William can see his own family falling apart before his eyes, but he leaves out of fear, and out of knowing that Robert is a lost man. Because of Robert, the established social situation that William was trying to live by, got destroyed. While William, following Shelby’s ‘ethics of the oppressed,’ was living his life as a worker in search of dignity and something to be proud of, here he is seen expressing loud and clear that he fears the White man, and he does not want to give up his comfortable role as an inferior worker which he had maintained for years. With William’s final exit, we move on to the sisters, the characters of Bertha and Sallie, two mixed character that do show some social aspirations.

### **2.1.2. The Characters of Sallie and Bertha**

Sallie is one of the first characters we meet in the play, after Cora and the Colonel. Apart from appearing in summaries of *Mulatto*, her character has not been studied before in any essay on the play. However, she occupies an interesting intermediary position between her brothers William and Robert. In the beginning of the play, we see how Sallie is leaving for

school. Just like Robert and their sister Bertha, Sallie was allowed an education by the Colonel. Education for colored people was not at all a popular idea at the time, though. The two opposing visions on Black education around the 1920s are perfectly captured in an essay by Frazier, who uses books by Ellwood (1910) and Dow (1920) to expose the spectrum of ideas:

According to Ellwood, [...] the socially superior race should have good will and assist the socially inferior race on the other side of the fence. [...] Dow thinks that White teachers should not be employed because of the possible tendency toward social equality. White teachers from the North did more harm than good. [...] Northern people do not understand Negro nature. (267)

While the Colonel agreed to send his children to school, he clearly holds the same idea as Dow. When Sallie is taking a bit too long to get ready for his liking, he says ‘Schools for darkies! Huh! [...] they do’ em more harm than good.’ (23) When Sallie is talking to the Colonel about wanting to become a teacher, he ignores it completely and replies with ‘Do they teach you in that school to have good manners [...] and to respect White folks?’ (25) The Colonel enacts the fear for social equality that Dow called out in the quote above. In the few lines Sallie herself gets to say in the play, the difference with William’s subservient behavior mostly appears through the stage directions. For example, before leaving, Sallie addresses the Colonel and thanks him for letting her attend school up North, but Hughes added ‘*[the girl continues in a strained voice as if making a speech].*’ (25). While her words look like she made amends with her social position as well, Hughes wanted the audience to see that, for her, it is more of a challenge to keep up appearances to the Colonel. This first hint of social aspiration and rebellion is solidified in a later scene between Cora and Robert. Cora reveals that ‘[Sallie]’s studyin’ de typewriter, too, at de school, but yo’ pappy don’t know it. I knows we ain’t s’posed to study nothin’ but cookin’ and hard workin’ here in Georgy.’ (41). Sallie is trying to change her fate of being a cook or colored worker by studying in secret. While this is a huge risk, she wants to increase her living conditions, as opposed to William. Her sister Bertha shows the same determination. According to Cora, ‘She [Bertha] ain’t workin’ in no hotel kitchen like de Colonel thinks. She’s in a office typewriting.’ (41). Bertha takes it a step further and already took on a secret job that was out of reach for colored women in the South.

We only get to know about Bertha through dialogues. The only thing that is ever said about her, apart from the fact that she is secretly working as a typewriter, is when Cora uses

her to persuade Robert to calm down with his rebellious behavior: ‘This ain’t up North – and even up yonder where we hears it’s so fine, yo’ sister has to pass for White to get along good.’ (41). Despite not physically appearing in play, embodies the same ideas as her sister Sallie. Furthermore, Bertha might actually be even closer to the figure of Robert. Soto describes Bertha as a ‘symbolic ‘transition of status-sequence’ in a nominally- and gender-transformed sibling.’ (265). In other words, Soto describes Bertha as an example for Robert. The fact that Bertha does not actually appear in the play and is only referred to as being up North might be an allusion to the position Robert wants to be in. Just like the audience can only imagine what Bertha looks like, Robert can only imagine what it could be like to live freely in the North, without having to answer to his White, dominant father and the other Whites in the county. However, I would argue that Bertha only acts as an example in the eyes of Cora, but definitely not in the eyes of Robert himself. Especially the notion of ‘passing’ seems to be an internal struggle for Robert. Sollors dedicated a chapter to the term ‘passing,’ in which we read that passing can be used in the sense of crossing different social groups, but in particular it is used to refer to colored people pretending to be White. Passing, Sollors argues, is ‘particularly a phenomenon of the [...] first half of the twentieth century,’ because that was the time in which (social) mobility became easier, allowing colored people to shroud themselves more in anonymity and pass for White in new cities where no one knew them or their ancestors. (247-248). While Bertha uses this strategy to increase her social and economic position, Robert often switches his stance on the subject, as we will see in the next chapter. He might be dreaming of the freedom and social position Bertha occupies, but he surely will not simply pass for White.

### **2.1.3. The Character of Robert**

He is the son or daughter of a Southern White aristocratic gentleman and one of his favorite slave mistresses. [...] his life is fraught with tragedy. What privileges and opportunities he may enjoy are short-lived; for he is inevitably a slave. [...] The indomitable spirit of his father rises up within him, and he rebels. If he is successful in escaping to freedom he becomes a happy, prosperous, and reputable citizen in his community. But even if his revolt against slavery fails, he meets his tragic death nobly and defiantly. (79)

This quote from Bullock about the Mulatto in American fiction could be a literal summary of Robert. Because Robert is the main character of the play, I will briefly repeat his storyline.

Robert is home from school up North when the play opens, and he is shown constantly spreading his rebellious ideas and mindset. He acts reckless as well, ‘entering through the front door’ for example. His actions uptown, where he made a fuss about a broken radio tube, caused his father to reprimand him. The discussion between the two of them gets heated and when the Colonel pulls a gun on Robert, the latter disarms him and chokes his father. Pursued by a White lynching mob, Robert escapes through the swamp, makes it back home and commits suicide before he is caught.

Robert is undoubtedly the most rebellious character in the whole play. The main motif regarding his rebellion is the front door of Norwood’s plantation. Robert’s first appearance in the play immediately addresses the symbolism of the front door. When Cora and William hear Robert approaching, Cora tells William to ‘run out to de back door and tell him I wants to see him.’ (36). It is expected for Robert to enter through the back door, but then we read in the stage descriptions that ‘*the front door is flying open with a bang and ROBERT enters.*’ (36). When William returns because he cannot find Robert, he gets upset about Robert’s entry as well:

WILLIAM: Where’s Bert? He ain’t come round back – [*Seeing his brother in the room.*] How’d you get in here?

ROBERT [*grinning.*]: Houses have front doors. [...] What’s a front door for, you rabbit-hearted coon?

WILLIAM: Rabbit-hearted coon’s better’n a dead coon any day. (37)

William’s surprise shows that the front door is not even considered to be an option anymore. It is associated with death and punishment, so Robert’s logical view of front doors does not find resonance in William and Cora, who see the front door for what it is: to be used by White people only. When we take a look at the scene between Robert and the Colonel in which Robert kills his father, it becomes clear that the dramatic ending was caused by the front door as well. After their discussion, the Colonel demands that Robert leave the state, but he ‘motions towards the door, left.’ Robert does intend to leave, but he will only leave through the front door. That causes the Colonel to lose his temper and point the gun at his son. Even for the remainder of the play, Robert always uses the front door. He leaves to run for the swamp, escaping the White mob, through the front door and returns home for his final scene, in which he commits suicide, through the front door as well. The theme of the front door is a regular one in the works of Hughes. He explained in an essay (1956) that the front door is a theme for equality in his

writing (311). With that information, the scenes discussed here get a more symbolic value. William and Cora, to begin with, do not believe in equality. Even worse, William associates the front door, and thus equality, with death. The pursuit of equality is a hopeless case, and not only for Robert himself. Cora tells him that the White people ‘ain’t gonna stand fo’ yo’ sass. Not only you, but I ‘spects we’s all gwine to pay fo’ it, every coloured soul on this place.’ (39). In Robert’s quest for equality and respect, he is endangering the whole plantation. Similarly, in the scene with the Colonel, the latter does not agree to letting Robert leave with the dignity of equality. If he allows Robert to leave, it has to be through the back door, showing his inferiority. Both of these scenes are perfect examples of how Hughes describes the race relations in the Jim Crow era with everyday motifs, like using the front door. The aspiration of Robert, the fear of William and Cora and the Colonel’s iron determination to prevent equality show the tension that lived in the South during the interbellum period.

The Colonel’s death scene and Robert’s suicide will be discussed on their own in later chapters. At this moment, I will only focus on his behavior regarding his own status, especially the theme of color and Robert’s relation to the colored people as well as the White characters. First, we will situate Robert in the group of the colored people. Elam Jr. *et al* point out in their essay that Robert’s rebellion is ‘not a way out of Blackness, but out of niggerdom – a way towards colored manhood.’ (95). Robert is not looking to be White, he is trying to become a ‘real colored man.’ He admires those ‘real colored people, who don’t have to take off their hats to white folks or let ‘em go to bed with their sisters.’ (38). Robert’s attitude shows the influence of the New Negro idea that floated around at the time of Hughes’ writing. We read in “Enter the New Negro”, an essay by Black author Alain Locke in 1925, that

The Negro today is inevitably moving forward under the control largely of his own objectives. What are these objectives? Those of his outer life are happily already well and finally formulated, for they are none other than the ideals of American institutions and democracy. Those of his inner life are yet in process of formation, for the new psychology at present is more of a consensus of feeling than of opinion, of attitude rather than of program. [...] Up to the present one may adequately describe the Negro’s “inner objectives” as an attempt to repair a damaged group psychology and reshape a warped social perspective. (3)

Repairing the damaged social perspective is a recurring theme in the dialogues of Robert and other characters. Robert addresses this theme to his White father, but also tries to get his fellow Black people at the Norwood plantation on board with his social reform ideas. One of his main arguments is that he does not want to conform to the life he has been given by White society. He tells William that ‘back here in these woods maybe you and mama and everybody’s got their places fixed for ‘em, but not me. Nobody’s gonna fix a place for me.’ (38). With those words, he explicitly challenges the social position that was given to people of color in the South, as well as William’s ‘ethics of the oppressed,’ which make the latter accept that position without hesitation.

To analyze Robert’s position regarding White people, the notion of passing I introduced in the chapter about Bertha comes in handy. In the line following Cora’s mentioning of passing, we read that Robert responds ‘*bitterly*.’ (41). Bienvenu argues that

he responds bitterly- not from any disapproval of what Bertha is doing but from the fact that she has surpassed him on the color and social scales. His uncharacteristically terse response, "I know it" (18), indicates embarrassment: He, the true heir of Colonel Thomas Norwood, has not been able to achieve what a female Lewis has; he is too yellow to pass for white, too rusty at the elbows, as Norwood will remind him in their climactic confrontation (23). (347)

While this surely seems a possibility, I do not agree with this explanation. The instances in which Robert mocks the Whites, or shows his disgust of White people, are more abundantly present than those in which he expresses his desire to be one. When he talks about the incident at the radio store, for example, he proudly declares that the clerk ‘had to call all the White loafers out in the square to get me through that door.’ (39). In this excerpt, he even places himself above the White people, at least in a physical way. Another element that makes me disagree with Bienvenu is that Robert always describes himself as ‘half-White’. To his brother William, for example, he says things like ‘I’m gonna act like my White half, not my Black half’ (37). If he were trying to pass for white, why would he hold on to his mixed ancestry even in the middle of his rants to other people of color? As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, he was almost star struck by the ‘real colored people’ he encountered up North. Therefore, a second and, in my opinion, more fitting possibility is that Robert becomes bitter because of the fact that his sister has to ‘pass’ to achieve some results in society. He is looking to become one

of the real colored people, not a White man. His aversion to passing coincides with Hughes' view as expressed in his famous essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* in 1926, published almost ten years before *Mulatto* was first staged. In his essay, Hughes criticizes 'the urge within the race toward Whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.' Robert does show racial pride about his Black half, for example right after he kills his father and ecstatically shouts that 'the White man is dead. [...] Niggers are living. He's dead' (49). Ironically, he does refer to himself as a nigger when he kills his father who he has been opposed to for years. When Robert kills his father, he is momentarily invincible. He, as a colored man, killed the White oppressor. In a few chapters, we will analyze this moment in more detail. One last element in the discussion about Robert's place in the calculus of color is the notion of sameness. At the start of the chapter on the mixed characters, we used a quote from Elam Jr. *et al* to explain that the Mulatto was an extra problematic figure because he can invoke sameness regarding his White ancestry. For example, when Cora once again tries to calm down her son, we get the following conversation:

CORA: [...] Talk like you was coloured, 'cause you ain't White.

ROBERT [*angrily*]: And I'm not Black, either. Look at me, mama. Don't I look like my father? Ain't I as light as he is? Ain't my eyes grey like his eyes are? (41)

Apart from reinforcing his position in between White and Black people, by not claiming to be one or the other, he uses his physical appearance to claim his rightful social position. In the crucial scene between Robert and the Colonel, in which the Colonel ultimately gets killed by his son, the Colonel demands that Robert 'talk like a nigger should.' Robert again combines the theme of color with the sameness between him and his father by saying he's 'not a nigger, I'm your son.' The term 'nigger' is again almost equalized to the notion of being colored, because a few lines further in the discussion the Colonel uses Robert's color to underline that he is, in fact, a 'nigger.' He asks Robert 'how come your skin is yellow and your elbows rusty? How come they threw you out of the post office today for talking to a White woman? How come you're the crazy young buck you are?' (47). Ironically, the Colonel here uses color to counter the sameness that Robert has been constantly mentioning. The Colonel not only calls Robert out for being 'yellow,' but also proves that he is just a colored man in the eyes of all Whites, who will treat him as a colored man in all situations. Hughes himself intervenes in this

argument on two occasions. In the descriptions of the characters at the start of the play, Robert is described as ‘a light Mulatto with ivory-yellow skin and proud thin features like his father’s; as tall as the Colonel, with the same grey-blue eyes, but with curly Black hair instead of brown.’ (20) A second stage direction where Hughes comments on the similarities between the two characters happens when Robert and the Colonel have their first clash. Robert tries to intimidate the Colonel and ‘[draws himself up to his full height, taller than the old man and looking very much like him, pale and proud.]’ (42). Just like in his essay *The Negro and The Racial Mountain*, which we saw a few paragraphs back, Hughes takes the middle ground in both cases. He does not stimulate Robert’s impulsive want to be White, yet he also describes the differences, in a way that evoke pride. It looks as if Hughes is convincing Robert to accept his mixed position, and the whole question of sameness remains unresolved in the play, just like Mulattoes could never settle in definitively in the early twentieth century’s society.

In the previous paragraphs, I have introduced the Mulatto characters in Hughes’ play. As the title suggests, they are the central characters in the whole work. Therefore, now that the characters have been introduced more thoroughly, there is one more theoretical framework that I would like to apply to *Mulatto*. In literature, the term ‘Mulatto’ has further transformed into a proper literary device, often called the Tragic Mulatto.

#### **2.1.4. The Tragic Mulatto Theme**

The term ‘Tragic Mulatto’ was coined in 1933 by Black literary critic Sterling Brown, two years before Hughes’ publication of *Mulatto*. The device had been developing in literature over the decades but only in the early twentieth century did it receive a theoretical framework. The Tragic Mulatto device thus acts as a literary stereotype of the race relations during the time of *Mulatto*’s writing process. Sollors identified six crucial elements of the literary device in the comments of Brown (223-226). A big part of those elements can be found in Hughes’ work, despite the little time in between Brown’s theories and Hughes’ script, which shows the universality of the device. The Tragic Mulatto gives us a more in-depth background on which to deconstruct the mixed characters in *Mulatto* and find out what Hughes did to make his Mulatto character so revolutionary. The Tragic Mulatto device was arguably the most widespread factor in the representation of Mulatto characters in American fiction or even in worldwide fiction, with appearances as far as French fiction. In the following chapter we will

analyze in detail how the Tragic Mulatto device can be applied to one or more of the mixed characters through the theories of Brown and Sollors.

A. *The Mulatto as a lost and woebegone abstraction*

This first element, the stereotype classification of the Mulatto as doomed character, is heavily criticized by Brown who argues that this representation of the Mulatto renders him or her ‘clichéd, unrealistic, non-individualized and unoriginal.’ (223). The only ‘woebegone’ character in *Mulatto* is Robert. In the previous chapter, we mainly observed his rebellious behavior and place in between White and Black society. However, in this chapter the focus will be on Robert’s representation as a woebegone figure through other characters. On various occasions, others comment on his dangerous behavior in a way that makes it look like Robert’s ideas have gone too far to reason with. Especially Cora and William make this kind of claims. When they hear about Robert’s use of the front door and him shaking the Colonel’s hand, Cora tells William that she is ‘scared to death’ for Robert and doesn’t know what to do. She hopes that the Colonel can calm him down because otherwise ‘the White folks’ll kill him around here.’ (35-36). Throughout the play, there is a number of prophecies towards Robert’s fatal destiny. Even Mr. Higgins, the Colonel’s White friend who appears in only one scene, refers to Robert’s fate. Higgins warns the Colonel that ‘he’s not gonna be around here long – not the way he’s acting. The White folks in town’ll see to that. [...] The White folks at the Junction aren’t intending to put up with him much longer.’ (28) At the end of the play, it is because of the mob of White people that Robert decides to commit suicide. Similarly, Cora talks about a dream she had, in which she ‘seed de moon all red with blood [...], a path o’ living blood across this house.’ (36). This line is remarkable in two ways. On the one hand, Cora expands the prophecy expressed by Higgins. The latter only referred to the role of the White people in Robert’s demise, but Cora places all conflict inside of the house. She not only foresees that Robert will die in the house, it also looks like she feels the Colonel’s death as well by ‘filling’ the house with blood in her vision. On the other hand, her description almost exactly matches the stage descriptions in between the death scene of the Colonel and Robert. When Robert is leaving for the swamp, ‘[the sunset streams in like a river of blood.]’ (49). Even though the stage descriptions appear more than ten pages after Cora’s dream explanation, the spectator can link both events. Robert’s, and the Colonel’s, demise has been announced on a few occasions through the play, which fits Robert into the woebegone figure that is the Tragic Mulatto. However, I would not argue that Robert is ‘lost.’ Throughout the play, he repeatedly

makes his intentions clear in his dialogues. He is determined to become one of the 'real colored people' and to claim his name as a Norwood. In other words, Robert is a character with clear objectives and goals. The lost figure is more present in the form of William, who already gave up on social emancipation. He accepted his inferior place and nowhere in the play does he make any effort to rise above his status as a colored worker, not even in his speech.

It has to be mentioned that, while Robert and William partly coincide with Brown's first element of the Tragic Mulatto, Hughes included other mixed characters who do not fit that well. Especially Sallie and Bertha seem to stand out. They have a steady job and/or education up North and are able to pass for White. The first element of the Tragic Mulatto thus seems to be split between William and Robert, while the two sisters show a second option, next to the Tragic Mulatto stereotype.

#### *B. Loss of representational content*

Brown regrets that writers often avoid more serious social issues and more representative characters by focusing completely on the figure of the Tragic Mulatto. (223) While this characteristic does not entirely fit into *Mulatto*, it is true that Robert is the central point of the whole play and even functions as the topic of conversation in all scenes in which he does not appear. In fact, the only time when Robert is not the subject of the dialogue is at the very start, when the Colonel and Cora are talking about Sallie, and Sallie's subsequent conversation with the Colonel. For the remainder of the play, all actions and dialogues are based on Robert. When Robert is being chased by the White mob, eager to lynch him, it gets a bit tricky. We never see Robert being chased, we only get stage directions indicating the sound of shouting and footsteps. Instead, the chasing scene overlaps with Cora's three soliloquies to the Colonel's dead body. The soliloquies, which I will focus on in a later chapter, again mostly revolve around Robert and his unfortunate destiny. So, while Robert is being lynched and still is the center of all spoken interaction, there is no commentary or elaboration on the act of lynching. Brown would want to see the lynching practice denounced as a more central aspect on stage, but Hughes continues to focus on the figure of Robert and not on the White mob chasing him. Even at the end of the play, when Robert has been driven to suicide, the play ends without any repercussions or comments on the White lynching mob. We never get to know

what is going to happen to Norwood's plantation after his death or what will become of Cora and William; Robert's end signals the end of the play as well.

However, Hughes does insert other themes as well. In the upcoming chapters, we will discuss the themes of interracial violence and Black suicide, two prominent themes in *Mulatto*. In the chapter on Colonel Norwood, we will also elaborate on the theme of paternity and familial ties are a main feature in the play. Apart from those two, I have already mentioned the one-drop rule, which is used throughout the play by both White and colored characters. Brown also mentions the absence of the 'all-Black rebel' and the 'workaday life of the average slave.' There are three all-Black characters in the play: Cora, the Colonel's servant Sam and Mr. Higgins' chauffeur Mose, which we will analyze in the second part of the part on the calculus of color. While they do not rebel to the degree that Robert does, there are traces of rebellion in Cora, as we will see.

### *C. The Gender Division*

In the third place, Brown draws attention to the gender division within the stereotypes surrounding Mulatto characters. Again, Hughes partially fits into this criterium. Brown describes the male Mulatto as a figure more tragic in their enslavement because they are portrayed as more intelligent and militant than their all-Black counterpart. (224). We have seen that Robert is by far the most militant character in the play, far above his brother William. His situation does appear more tragic, but that is mostly because of the other characters treating him as a 'woebegone' character, as we saw in the first element in Brown's framework. William shows no sign of militancy, so the stereotype of the male Mulatto is portrayed only through Robert. The female Mulatto characters, on the other hand, are traditionally 'exceptionally beautiful but often doomed,' Brown notes. (224). The main difference between male and female characters, while they are both doomed, is that the male Mulattoes have some degree of militancy whereas the females are just an object of beauty. This is where Hughes deviates from the criterium. As we saw, both Bertha and Sallie are up North secretly educating themselves and working to be typewriters. Never in the play is there a focus on their exceptional beauty, instead they are described as militant and revolting characters who change their own destiny by breaking the social expectations set by the Colonel, which is to become a cook or

house worker, as Cora describes (41). Of course, there is also a feminist aspect to Hughes' decision to give the female Mulattoes a more militant role as well.<sup>14</sup>

#### *D. The role of racialism*

As a fourth element, Brown signals the racist undertones, even in more progressive representations of the figure. (224) It is important to note that racialism is not to be confused with racism. While racism uses race to claim that one group is inherently better than others, racialism is a theory that merely uses race as a defining element for human traits.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, Brown notices the trend of attributing intellectual strivings to White blood, while emotional urges and savagery stems from Black ancestry. This makes the struggle of the Tragic Mulatto a biological one. (224). While Brown is writing from an observing point of view, the most striking examples of racialism in *Mulatto* come from Robert himself. He makes a strict distinction between White behavior and Black behavior. When William is warning him not to use the front door, Robert answers by saying he is going to 'act like his White half, not the Black half.' (37). In this line, it becomes clear that Robert attributes different actions and behavior to different skin colors. Being subservient and using the back door, like William does, is what constitutes the 'Black half,' but Robert is looking to act like his White half, using the front door and being free to leave the plantation and become autonomous.

#### *E. White prejudice as the reason for existence*

The fifth element Brown mentions is the big influence of White prejudice in the figure of the Mulatto. He takes it even further and names this White prejudice as the whole reason for the existence of the Tragic Mulatto figure. While this is a statement I do not disagree with, Hughes cleverly turned around the whole view that is engraved in White prejudice and thus reversing another stereotype. Brown argues that, for White readers, the full-blood Negro is not an interesting subject in a tragedy, mainly because of the racialism we discussed a few lines back. The Mulatto is the true rebellious character, because he is caught in between two races: he worships the Whites but is despised by them, while despising and being despised by the Blacks too. (48). While there are some resemblances, Robert does not fit into that description.

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<sup>14</sup> In this study, I will not concentrate on the role of (colored) women and feminism. However, there are studies on the feminist aspects of *Mulatto*, for example Soto (2000)

<sup>15</sup> Definitions taken from Webster Dictionary.

The following conversation between Robert and the Colonel captures Robert's stance perfectly:

ROBERT: I'd like to kill all the White men in the world.

NORWOOD: Niggers like you are hung to trees.

ROBERT: I'm not a nigger.

NORWOOD: You don't like your own race? Yet you don't like White either?

ROBERT: You think I ought to? (47).

In the first place, Robert does not worship White people at all. Even though he has expressed his desire to 'live like his White half,' that does not make him a White person. He refers to White people continuously as 'crackers.' Webster Dictionary shows that cracker is a pejorative for White, southern people, and specifically residents of Florida and Georgia. Robert cannot hide his disgust for White people, because they are the ones that keep him from being treated equal. On the other hand, Robert does not hate Black people. It is interesting to note that when Robert says he is not a 'nigger,' the Colonel equalizes that to him 'not liking his race.' In Robert's character analysis, I briefly mentioned a quote by Elam Jr. *et al* in which they claimed that Robert's struggle is not with Blackness but with 'niggerdom.' Here, we see the same mechanic. For Robert, colored people are not the problem, he even admires the 'real' colored people he encountered up North, as we saw a few paragraphs back. This shows Robert's aspirations more clearly: he does not want to become a White man but he hopes to become a respected colored man. The difference between worshipping White society and the ideal of a respected Black society is what divides Hughes from White prejudice as defined by Brown. Hughes' vision of the Black community coincides with his essay *The Negro and the Racial Mountain* that I already discussed a few chapters back. Hughes is advocating for Black pride instead of envying the White man. This idea lies at the core of the Civil Rights Movements, with figures like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X also advocating for Black pride, but Hughes was the first author to get the idea out onto Broadway.

The sixth element in Brown's theory deals with the cases of Tragic Mulatto devices used by White American writers. I will not elaborate on this last element since it does not apply to the discussion about *Mulatto*.<sup>16</sup> The discussion of the five other elements concludes the

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<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, it is still an interesting read and can be found in Sollors' book on pages 225-228.

chapter on mixed characters in *Mulatto*. The inclusion of the Tragic Mulatto device has served to give a first impression of the revolutionary nature of the play. Hughes broke out of the mainstream device by giving his colored characters a more humanized background and by including other social issues apart from their individual struggles. In terms of gender division, Hughes shows the aspiration of both men and women in his play. Of course, there are some elements in which he coincides with the Tragic Mulatto device, like Robert's inevitable demise. Nonetheless, with this chapter I have argued that Hughes redefined the possibilities of racial pride and social aspirations. The next part will offer a closer look at the all-Black characters in the play, because they too show the social reform that Hughes tries to bring about.

## **2.2. Black Characters**

There are three all-Black characters in the play: Cora, the Colonel's servant Sam and Mr. Higgins' chauffeur Mose. The character of Cora has been mentioned a few times already but, in this chapter, I will analyze her evolution more in detail. The analysis of Cora will be built up around her soliloquies. However, those soliloquies all take place after the Colonel's death, which reduces the traces of rebellion in Cora to something she only shows when she is alone, never to be seen by (White) others. Sam and Mose, the servants, appear in marginal roles only. They do exactly what they are told and never doubt anything said by their White masters.

### **2.2.1. Cora**

Before we get into the analysis of Cora's character, it is important to note what the reigning stereotypes surrounding Black women were. In the early twentieth century, there were two main representations of colored women in American art. One of them was the Mammy stereotype. Professor of sociology David Pilgrim defines the Mammy as 'an obese, coarse, maternal figure. She had great love for her white "family," but often treated her own family with disdain. Although she had children, sometimes many, she was completely desexualized. She "belonged" to the white family. [...] She had no black friends; the white family was her entire world.'<sup>17</sup> The second prominent stereotype was the Jezebel, named after the biblical Queen Jezebel of Israel, associated with prostitutes. This stereotype started out as an excuse for the mass rape of slave women. The Jezebel stereotype 'gave the impression that Black

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<sup>17</sup> As written in an online Ferris State University article (2000)

women could not be rape victims because they always desired sex.’ (West 294). The reason for pointing out these two stereotypes is to prove that Hughes, just like with the Tragic Mulatto, ignores stereotypes and creates his own, humanized characters. Cora is another example of that statement.

As I have mentioned in the chapter on William, Cora is a character with some degree of rebellion as well. Cora’s character development is marked by the soliloquies she delivers. A core definition of the soliloquy is given to us by John Freeman: ‘a public display of private speech, the soliloquy enacts the mental disposition of the speaker.’ (152). Next to that, we read in a study of Ruby Cohn that a soliloquy distinguishes itself from a monologue. While in a monologue a character is speaking for an extended time, ‘a true soliloquy is one in which a character, believing himself to be alone, talks aloud under stress.’ Thus, in order to enable a soliloquy, we read in Freeman’s essay, ‘the soliloquizer requires the other characters to ‘waive their access rights’ in ceding the stage so that an uninterrupted speech can unfold.’ (135). In the soliloquies, Cora’s true thoughts and feelings are on display.

The biggest part of the play, the part before the soliloquies, serves as the starting point of Cora’s character development. To get a better view of Cora’s initial position, we have to turn to the text of a soliloquy, ironically. In that text, she gives an account of the history between her and the Colonel:

CORA: Thirty years ago, you put your hands on me to feel my breasts, and you say, ‘You a pretty little piece of flesh, ain’t you? Black and sweet, ain’t you?’ And I lift up ma face, and you pull me to you, and we laid down under the trees that night. [...] Then I cried and cried and told ma mother about it, but she didn’t take it hard like I thought she’d take it. [...] She said it was better than marryin’ some black field hand and workin’ all your life in de cotton and cane. Better even than havin’ a job like ma had, takin’ care o’ de white chilluns. Takin’ care o’ you, Colonel Tom. (58)

Like William, Cora settled in the role that was given to her by both Black and white society. She took the role of her own mother in the upbringing of her children, correcting Robert and stimulating William to stay low. This shows traces of the Mammy stereotypes, but the important difference is that Cora is taking care of her own children, not the White children of the slave owner’s family, which are non-existent in *Mulatto*. Furthermore, she sacrifices her

own freedom and ‘goes down to her knees for the Colonel’ in order to secure an education for her children, she tells Robert. (40). If we continue with the definition of the Mammy stereotype, it states that the Mammy shows disdain for her own colored children in favor of White society. Again, Cora strays away from that description. In other words, Cora is the protective and regulating mother-figure. Elam Jr. *et al* define Cora as the ‘gatekeeper.’ She is the one living with the Colonel in the Big House and the one who decides what the other workers, and specifically her children are (not) allowed to do (101). Her role as mediator between the Colonel and their children has been addressed in my study in previous paragraphs. But she is more than that. In the first confrontation between the Colonel and Robert, the former already draws a gun on his son who is leaving through the front door. We read that Cora ‘overtakes him, seizes his arm, stops him.’ (42). While she always tries to mediate between him and her children, her love for Robert made her step in and stop the Colonel while he is holding a gun, putting her own life in danger. It is in moments like this that we see Cora as a decisive factor in the play’s development, becoming a director and deciding who gets to perform which action. Soto argues ‘that it is Cora who has for the most part determined the movement of characters into and out of spaces and thresholds (268).’ Especially after the death of the Colonel, Cora becomes the center of power.

The death of the Colonel signifies the disappearance of the only figure above Cora, and she seems to realize that. When the White undertaker comes to take away the body, she refuses to pour him a drink. Her subservient behavior disappeared completely when the Colonel died, and the final scene is completely dominated by her presence. Robert is up in her room with a gun when the White mob enters. Cora ‘bars the way with outspread arms’ and tells them to stay away and wait. When the gunshot is heard, she clears the way. A White man slaps Cora out of frustration but ‘she does not move. It is as though no human hand can touch her again.’ (61). That stage direction is the final sentence of the play. Hughes has put Cora in an almost godlike position at the end, which has been building up throughout her last soliloquy. While she is scolding the Colonel for ignoring his children and declares that ‘after you beat that chile [Robert], then you died, you been living dead a long time,’ Hughes writes in his directions that ‘her voice rises above the nearing sounds of the mob.’ (59). Cora is single-handedly taking away all the attention from the White lynching mob and using it to denounce openly what Hughes had been critiquing implicitly: the paternal rejection of the Colonel and the violence towards Robert.

The position of Cora is thus somewhere in between William and Robert. She has accepted her position in the social order of the South, but she still revolts to a lesser degree than Robert. The main difference between her and Robert is that Cora does not handle out of self-interest. Robert is always trying to improve his own life conditions, looking for his place as a colored man. Everything Cora does, she does to protect her children. While Robert is the most rebellious character, it is Cora who is able to stand up to the White mob.

### 2.2.2. Sam & Mose

A few chapters back, I introduced the notion of Uncle Tom-figures. Sam and Mose are extensions of this stereotype as they behave even more subservient and do everything they can to please the White majority. Just like Sallie, Sam and Mose have not been the subject of a study on the play yet. Nonetheless, their small roles are crucial to the development of the plot. For example, in the first few pages, Sam tells on Robert to the Colonel: “SAM [*evilly, in a cunning voice*]: I’s seen Robert usin’ de front door – when you ain’t here, and he comes up from de cabin to see his mammy.” (24). This statement by Sam is one of the first triggers for the Colonel to confront Robert. Apart from this scene, Sam does not appear in the play until after much later, after the Colonel’s death. When the Undertaker comes in to move the Colonel’s dead body, Sam becomes even more nervous and submissive. His eagerness to please the White Undertaker is shown in his speech, as he shouts ‘Yes sah!’ almost three times per line. He establishes his inferiority as a Black worker to every White person in the play out of fear to be held responsible for Robert’s act.

Mose does not even have any lines but is shown only when he is called by the Colonel to assist Mr. Higgins to his car. When the Colonel jokingly says that Mose is probably hanging out with ‘his women’ out back, Mr. Higgins condescendingly replies that Mose is ‘trained to stay in his place.’ (32). Mose’s role is more of an unspoken example, a reversal of Bertha. Whereas the latter served as an example of a colored person being successful up North, Mose is used as an example by Higgins to show the Colonel how he should deal with his workers. Sam and Mose are both stripped from any acts of rebellion and still their roles are reduced to a minimum. We do not get a view of their life, as Brown commented upon in his second criterium, but only get to see them in a heavily submissive context.

The importance of the two servants is of a subtler type. Whereas the character of Robert serves as a sign of aspiration, the characters of Sam and Mose function more like William, they hold up a mirror to Black society. H. Miller quotes DuBois who argues that Black people fear(ed) seeing themselves as human, they are so used to having their every move turned to make it seem like they are inferior that they only want to see themselves as glorified characters on stage. (50) Hughes chose to portray the servant-like behavior of Black workers to contrast them more heavily with the rebellion of Robert. Ironically, he does this by making use of a common stereotype of the time: the Uncle Tom figure. If Sam and Mose would not have been present in this form, Robert would come across as too much of an ideal. The presence of the two all-Black workers makes the setting more realistic, showing that the change Robert is pursuing might be, or become, attainable. After Cora, Sam and Mose, the last racial group that needs to be discussed in the theme of color is the White society, which will serve as the closing chapter of this part.

### **2.3. White Characters**

Hughes' representation of White characters has been the subject of some criticism. Miller argues that "in Hughes' version of the play, Colonel Norford (sic) is little more than a stick-figure racist." (107). In this chapter, I will argue that the Colonel is in fact much more than that, by looking at how his character acts autonomously and the influences that make him look more like a stick-figure racist. The main influence, as we will see, is the character of Mr. Higgins, the other main White character, as I believe that he is the real 'stick-figure racist' and plays a big part in the development of the Colonel.

In a quote by Hughes himself, as cited by Poetry Foundation<sup>18</sup>, he claims to believe that most people are inherently good, regardless of race and/or country. This conviction seems to be the reasoning behind the character of the Colonel as well. For example, we read in the play that the Colonel is the only man in the county who lets his 'darkies' go to school. That shows the inherent goodness of his character, which I believe Hughes wants us to see in the first place. Additionally, the main reason why I do not perceive the Colonel as a 'stick-figure racist' is a story that Cora tells us fairly early on in the play:

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<sup>18</sup> Poetryfoundation.org/poets/Langston-Hughes, date of publication is not shown, nor do they cite the source.

CORA: [Robert] went runnin' up to Colonel Tom out in de horse stables when de Colonel was showin' off his horses to fine White company from town. [... Robert] yelled right in front o' de White folks' faces 'O, papa, Cora say de dinner's ready, papa!' [...] And Colonel Tom knocked him right backwards under de horse's feet. [...] I thought sho' he were gonna kill ma chile that day. (34-35)

The emphasis on the presence of other White people in this story gives away the crucial element of the Colonel's more racist nature: he needs to keep up appearances to fellow White townsmen. It becomes even more obvious when Cora adds that Robert had been the Colonel's favorite up until that event (35). The breaking point in the relatively stable relation between the Colonel and Robert was a public embarrassment caused by Robert, exposing the Colonel as the father of a colored child. The theme of peer pressure between White people continues in the present of the play.

Higgins visits the Colonel to inform, but mostly warn him for Robert's behavior. Higgins explains the incident in the radio store, where Robert was thrown out for making a scene about a broken tube. For Higgins, Robert's behavior is problematic for three reasons. The first reason is that it is 'ruinous to other niggers hearing that talk' and that 'the whole county suffers from a lot of impudent bucks who take lessons from your crowd.' (30). In other words, Robert is challenging the reigning social order. Through the character of Higgins, Hughes shows the reluctance of the White society to allow that change. Hughes continues his nod to the tumultuous social relations in the interbellum period by making Higgins say 'All this post-war propaganda on the radio about freedom and democracy – why the niggers think it's meant for them!' (30). There was a dominant idea, as described by Frazier, that colored people were not made to adapt to the complex, White society. (267). In that sense, Higgins is trying to keep Robert's ideology of equality away from the rest of the Black society, simply because in his view it will lead to social unrest. More importantly, Robert is already being referred to as the whole 'crowd.' That assimilation leads to the second reason in Higgins' warning: Robert's behavior is ruining the reputation of the Colonel. Higgins cunningly mentions that Robert might be the reason why the Colonel did not get nominated as committee man (30). This argument draws out a remarkable reaction in the Colonel, which clearly shows how Higgins is getting through to him. He starts to pace up and down the room while shouting different racial slurs and, maybe more to himself than in response to Higgins, agrees with the latter's reasoning.

In one of Cora's closing soliloquies, she gives the audience an even more intimate example of this element:

CORA: [...] I 'members that time they hung Luke Jordon, you sent yo' dogs out to hunt him. The next day you killed all de dogs. You were kinder, soft-hearted. Said you didn't like that kind of sport. Told me in bed one night you could hear them dogs howlin' in yo' sleep. But de time they burnt de courthouse when that po' little cullud boy was locked up in it cause they said he hugged a white girl, you was with 'em again. Said you had to go help 'em. (55)

The Colonel shows an inherent reluctance to participate in the White mob's actions, but he has to in order to keep his social prestige high. To completely finish off the Colonel's doubt, Higgins gives him advice on how to deal with his workers: 'Don't ever show Black folks they got you going, though. I think sometimes that's where you make your mistake. Keep calm, keep calm – and then you command.' (31). In this line, Higgins seems to be foreseeing how the story will develop. After all, the Colonel gets choked by Robert exactly because he lost his temper and drew a gun on his son. The fact that the Colonel died by doing the diagonal opposite of what Higgins advised him to do is a key element in the argument that the Colonel is not inherently a bad character. He tried to follow the White majority but got killed in the process of trying to fit the White stereotype, by a colored boy trying to break the stereotypes. Hughes' social reform is once again being shown in the relation between the characters, just like Robert and William representing the old image of the colored man in conflict with the post-war ideals. The prophetic element in Higgins' speech returns in the last reason. He warns the Colonel that Robert is going to get himself killed if he keeps it up like this. However, this is only marginally mentioned in one line, in between Higgins' complaints about the ideas Robert is giving the other Black folks. This shows that Higgins does not actually care if Robert should get killed, but he is using it as bait for the Colonel. Robert is still his son, so there has to be an emotional reaction to hearing that kind of threat. In any case, Higgins' warning comes true as Robert's death concludes the play.

While the Colonel might not be as inherently racist as the White majority of Georgia, there is a severe problem regarding the theme of paternity and interracial family. Robert's struggle, as we have seen, is mostly about finding his place as a colored man, but the paternal rejection is a big theme as well. The spectator notices the problematic relationship between the

Colonel and his children even before Robert is mentioned for the first time. When Sallie is leaving for the North, she thanks the Colonel by saying that he has been ‘mighty nice to your – I mean to us coloured children.’ (25). There is a deliberate equivocation in Sallie’s line, in order to introduce the theme of familial bonds. At the start of this chapter, we saw how the Colonel favored Robert up until the point when the latter called him ‘papa’ in front of his White guests. Cora uses that event to warn her grandchild, William’s son Billy, who only appears for a few lines. He talks about the Colonel as his White grandfather, which infuriates William and Cora, who send him away to the kitchen before discussing the matter of not mentioning the relation between the Colonel and his children. In other words, while the Colonel is not the strictest landowner in terms of race, he has set strict rules regarding the familial bond, which should never be mentioned. Moreover, I mentioned in the previous paragraph that the Colonel died because of losing his temper in the conversation with Robert. More specifically, he did so because Robert kept calling himself a Norwood and kept insisting on their father-son relation. Robert’s desire to be recognized by his father is made clear through him referring to himself as ‘a Norwood’ on multiple occasions in the play, not limited to the conversation with his father. Despite the hatred he feels for the Colonel, he desperately tries to adopt his name in an attempt to be treated the same way. While Hughes portrays the struggle of Robert trying to become a Norwood, or at least be referred to as one, he has put the name ‘Robert Lewis’ in the character descriptions at the start of the play. This strengthens the tension between Robert and his father, because Hughes already gives away the impossibility of reconciliation in the framework of the play. The tension leads to a homicide, a chasing scene involving a lynching mob and ultimately Robert’s suicide. Those elements are part of the second theme in *Mulatto* that I will be discussing, after the first big one which was the theme of color and the related social status.

### **3. INTERRACIAL VIOLENCE**

Up until here, we talked about the calculus of color in *Mulatto* as a response to racial stereotypes of the early twentieth century. A second theme in the play is interracial violence, and it goes both ways. In this chapter, we will first discuss the death scene of the Colonel, who got killed by Robert, and follow up with the lynching mob chasing Robert. Neimneh argues that the depiction of interracial violence in the art of the Harlem Renaissance, by Black writers, is a form of social protest. Instead of ignoring the collective oppression suffered by Black society, and in doing so giving in to the expectations of the Black audience, which is looking

for glorification of the Black man, Harlem Renaissance writers used it to call attention to the historical injustice. (28). However, that inclusion of violence happened almost exclusively in poetry or prose. In fact, Bigsby mentions that *Mulatto* was ‘the first time that the full horror of the racial situation in the U.S. appeared on the Broadway stage in a powerful and compelling form’<sup>19</sup> While this chapter will be considerably shorter than the one on the theme of color, the aspect of violence cannot be ignored since it was a daily occurrence in the South of the 1930s, and Hughes was one of the first playwrights to bring it into mainstream Black theatre, and thus broke the silence surrounding that injustice. In *Mulatto*, there are three cases of violence I want to discuss. The first one will be Black-on-White violence, the murder of the Colonel. Next to that, I will discuss White-on-Black violence, the lynching mob chasing Robert. Even though they do not actually get to lynching him, the inclusion of the practice carries a heavily symbolic meaning. The third element is Robert’s suicide. This is less a case of violence than the previous two but in *Mulatto* it is closely tied to the lynching act, as we will see.

The element of Black-on-White violence has been discussed in a few sociologic essays. I will combine the aforementioned Neimneh, who focused more on the period of the Harlem Renaissance, with Gold, who wrote a more theoretical analysis of homicide. Gold immediately leads off his essay with the argument that the choice for homicide is always stimulated by the social position of the aggressor, and more specifically that the lower-status characters opt more often for homicide (651). This theory can be applied to Robert as well, especially when we see him frantically shouting ‘the White man’s dead. Niggers are living!’ (49). He uses the term that White society uses to make colored people feel inferior after he killed the dominant White figure in his own life, as to give an ironic reverse of the roles. In a literal sense, Robert is finally the one standing above the body of his father, he is the dominant figure on stage. However, there still have to be reasons why it is specifically the lower-status character who opts for homicide. For that framework, we turn to Neimneh. He argues that oppression and internalized racism – emotional violence in general – are direct causes of ‘counterviolence’ or ‘self-defense.’ (5). In Robert’s case, the latter is the case: he defends himself from the gun that was drawn on him. That gun was a direct consequence of Robert’s response to the emotional violence caused by his father, and by the whole society in general. In the first place, for not accepting him as a legitimate Norwood and, in the second place, not letting him leave through the front door and treating him as a lesser being. Even Cora attributes, albeit unwillingly, to his

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<sup>19</sup> Description of *Mulatto* on the back cover of *Three Negro Plays* (1969)

emotional state. We discussed how Cora mentioned Robert's sister Bertha, who passes as White to get by up North, as an example. To Robert, that is just another sign that he will never be accepted as a respectable colored man, but he does not want to be a White man. When Robert keeps fighting that oppressive behavior, the Colonel completely loses his temper and draws a gun, thus making it a case of physical violence.

The shift from emotional to physical violence signals the end of the Colonel, because physical violence is the one thing that Robert can win. Earlier on in the play, Robert already boasted about his superior physical strength as opposed to White people. He proudly announces to Cora that they had to call all the White men in the radio store to kick him out, and still it was an even match. (39). We also briefly discussed how, in the first confrontation, Robert 'draws himself up to his full height, taller than the old man.' (42). In the previous chapter, we used that quote to show the sameness between both characters, but here the focus is on Robert's physical superiority. The same goes for the final confrontation: he quickly disarms the Colonel and chokes him to death, seemingly without too much effort. When the Colonel dies, Robert goes into some kind of shock and keeps repeating the same mantra while laughing maniacally: 'Why didn't he shoot? He was the White man, why didn't he shoot then?' (49). Once again, Robert ironically reverses the roles, but now he does so on two levels. In the first place, he shows that while White society takes the emotional and psychological high ground over the Black workers, on a physical level the Black population has the upper hand. In the second place, he takes revenge for the beating he received when he was a small boy. We have discussed the flashback in which the Colonel 'hit Robert under the horses' for calling him papa in front of the White guests. In this scene, some 10 years later, the Colonel still does not acknowledge his son, but this time Robert has the physical superiority to fend off his father's attempt at hurting him, while shouting 'why don't you shoot, papa?' (48). Hughes carefully planned the death scene of the Colonel, giving the spectator a history of each character first. We almost sympathize with Robert, as was the main trend in depicting interracial violence. Neimneh explains that most writers did not want to show their colored characters as initiators of violence, out of fear of strengthening the stereotype of the Black brute, but showing them as humanized victims of injustice. (28). Hughes is not the first Black writer to include patricide in his work. In fact, a short story called *Le Mulâtre* (1837) by author of color Victor Séjour also revolved around a Mulatto character committing patricide and suicide. While the story follows a similar path of violence, it did not focus on race relations the way Hughes does. Additionally, in *Le Mulâtre* the protagonist kills himself because of the patricide, he only discovered afterwards

that he killed his father. (Sollors 165-167). The oedipal style of Séjour's work did not get transferred to *Mulatto*. Hughes placed the patricide and suicide in a more representational light, and included a lynching mob to completely place the story in the South of his time. The lynching mob that chases Robert becomes a tragic manhunt in which the spectator is almost rooting for the Mulatto boy.

The element that caught my eye the most in the lynching scene is that none of the White, or colored, people seem to care about the dead Colonel. The whole focus shifts to the chase of Robert and his nearing demise. Even the Undertaker, who discovers the body and links the dead man to Robert who he just saw running for the swamp, is only marginally shocked by the discovery before switching his attention to the running Mulatto boy. He even makes time to ask servant Sam for a drink, and starts provoking Cora:

Well, so you're the Cora that's got these educated nigger children? Hum-m! Well, I guess you'll see one of 'em swinging full of bullet holes when you wake up in the morning. They'll probably hang him to that tree down here by the Colonel's gate [...] Or maybe they'll burn him. How'd you like to see him swinging there roasted in the morning when you wake up, girlie? (54).

When Cora refuses to give him a drink, he threateningly says that 'we'll burn a few more of you if you don't be careful.' (55). It seems like, just like Higgins predicted, the majority of White folks was just waiting to have a reason to lynch the colored workers of the Colonel's plantation, the educated bunch. By including a White mob eager to lynch Robert, Hughes touched upon one of the most widespread acts of violence in the years prior to *Mulatto*. Between 1865 and 1920, at least 3500 lynchings took place. However, there is not much to compare Hughes' representation to, since the 1930s were the beginning of lynching representations in African American art.<sup>20</sup> After World War II, most lynchings happened in concealed communities, but before the war lynchings were a public spectacle. Victims were killed in a highly ritual manner, meant to establish the power of white supremacy, often claiming that it was done to restore the social order when a Black man stepped out of line (R. Miller 275-279). Klotman elaborated on the meaning of lynching and concluded 'it was an initiation ritual in reverse, a warning that White society would not allow, in fact forbade, the

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<sup>20</sup> As found in *Black Agenda Report*

passage of the Afro-American from boy to man.” (56). In the previous chapters I have already shown that *Mulatto* follows Robert’s search to become a respectable colored man. Elam Jr. *et al* argue that by killing his father, Robert has already taken his rightful place as heir and new man of the house (100). Following that thought, the lynching mob is trying to take the acquired manhood from Robert. Here, his suicide comes into play. Barely outrunning the mob, Robert makes it back home and goes to hide in Cora’s room where he shoots himself. Just like he has been denied any paternal acceptance by his father, he now denies the mob their satisfaction of stripping his manhood from him. Davis argues that ‘the suicide is not only a way of cheating the mob. We sense that with the death of the colonel, the bottom has really dropped out of Bert’s world, and he kills himself proudly.’ (200). He defines the death of the Colonel as the irreversible turning point in Robert’s tragic fate. In my opinion, Robert’s course of actions show the colored spectator that they have the capability of making their own decisions without having to ask consent from White overseers. Robert did not want to kill the Colonel originally, he only did so out of self-defense when held at gunpoint for wanting to exit through the front door. In other words, Robert was willing to kill – and die – for his beliefs and aspirations.

James Baldwin famously wrote that ‘not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.’<sup>21</sup> Hughes was one of the first artists to bring interracial violence on stage from the perspective of colored people. Therefore, he opened up a new field for Black artists. The representation of violence in *Mulatto* is closely related to racial emancipation. Both Robert’s homicide and his suicide are, from my point of view, instances of his attempts to escape White domination. The homicide carries with it the additional load of the paternal rejection we have seen throughout the play. In killing the Colonel, Robert dealt with both White supremacy on the plantation and the negation of his ancestry. The lynching and the mob in between are of significance because they criticize the most widespread form of White-on-Black violence. By letting his most rebellious character escape the lynching mob and take his own life in a last act of self-determination, Hughes made a point for Black autonomy and independence from White dominance.

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted from *Kinfolk*

#### 4. THE EVOLUTION OF *MULATTO*

In this final chapter, I will consider two last elements. Firstly, the evolution of the play within Hughes' literary work. *Mulatto* is generally accepted to have two predecessors in Hughes' literary corpus: the poem "The Mulatto" and the short story "Father and Son." I will analyze the differences in these works because they show what choices Hughes has made in the process of writing *Mulatto*. All three of the works were written within a mere 8-year period: 1927 ("The Mulatto"), 1930 (final draft of *Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South*) and 1935 ("Father and Son"). Because of this, the social background on which they were written remains the same. In all of the above, we have discussed Hughes' ideas and vision within *Mulatto*. This closing chapter will serve to consider what the alternatives were and how his particular choices gave the play its current form. Secondly, I will briefly consider what *Mulatto* has set in motion in terms of the Black theatrical tradition. For this analysis, I will mainly be using the controversial manifesto called "The Revolutionary Theatre" by famous Black author and activist LeRoi Jones. In that essay, published in 1965, he describes what Black revolutionary theatre should look like. Jones' idea of revolutionary theatre paved the way for the Black Arts Movement. I will argue that Hughes incorporated a lot of those elements, 30 years earlier.

##### 4.1. "Mulatto" in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927)

In 1927, Hughes published *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, his second poetry collection, which received heavy criticism from (black) reviewers, while at the same time being praised as his best collection by others. The name refers to a popular saying at the time of its writing, referring to the common practice of selling one's clothes to mostly Jewish-owned pawn shops when one needed money (Nazel 140). Ironically enough, Hughes used a stereotype as the title for his collection. I would like to speak about one poem in the collection in particular, namely "Mulatto", as that one forms the basis for the play of the same name. For the sake of the following chapter, I will include the poem in its entirety here. I am using the version that was published in 1957, since that version is the one that was used by Hughes when he read the poem publicly. The only difference with the original 1927 edition is that the latter did not have line 11 'What's a body but a toy?'

*I am your son, white man!*

Georgia dusk  
And the turpentine woods.  
One of the pillars of the temple fell.

*You are my son!*  
*Like Hell!*

The moon over the turpentine woods.  
The Southern night  
Full of stars,  
Great big yellow stars.  
What's a body but a toy?  
Juicy bodies  
Of nigger wenches  
Blue black  
Against black fences.  
O, you little bastard boy.  
What's a body but a toy?  
The scent of pine wood stings the soft night air.

*What's the body of your mother?*  
Silver moonlight everywhere.  
*What's the body of your mother?*  
Sharp pine scent in the evening air.

A nigger night,  
A nigger joy,  
A little yellow  
Bastard boy.

*Naw, you ain't my brother.*  
*Niggers ain't my brother.*  
*Not ever.*  
*Niggers ain't my brother.*

The Southern night is full of stars,  
Great big yellow stars.  
O, sweet as earth,  
Dusk dark bodies

Give sweet birth  
To little yellow bastard boys.

*Git on back there in the night,  
You ain't white.*

The bright stars scatter everywhere.  
Pine wood scent in the evening air.

A nigger night,  
A nigger joy.

*I am your son, white man!*

A little yellow  
Bastard boy.

(Hughes, 1957)

In the first place, the formal aspect of the poem stands out. Hughes deliberately chose for free verse, as he explained in a 1927 essay: ‘Certainly the Shakespearean sonnet<sup>22</sup> would be no mold in which to express the life of Beale Street<sup>23</sup> or Lenox Avenue<sup>24</sup> [...] I am not interested in doing tricks with rhymes, I am interested in reproducing the human soul, if I can.’ Hughes openly criticized colored poets who used a classical form, like Countee Cullen with his collection *Color* (1925). Arnold Rampersad, a renowned Hughes scholar, defines his use of free verse as a protest against the doctrine of white poetry rules and the coinciding white societal power that lay behind it. (146). In most of the online poetry databases<sup>25</sup>, Walt Whitman is being credited for the spread of free verse. In those same databases, it seems like Hughes was one of the first African American poets to use free verse in his poems. In later years, more specifically around the 1950s, there was an outburst of Black artists using the free verse, with artists like Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks. I have already mentioned that Hughes’ *Mulatto* was a pioneer on Broadway, but his poem also brought new possibilities for colored artists. The preoccupation with the formal aspect of the poem coincides with the theme of color

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<sup>22</sup> This is most likely a reference to contemporary poet Claude McKay who also wrote a poem called “Mulatto” but wrote it completely in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet.

<sup>23</sup> Located in Memphis, Tennessee, Beale Street has been the epicentre of American Blues music for decades

<sup>24</sup> Also called Malcolm X Boulevard, this is the main north-south route through Harlem

<sup>25</sup> I have searched the big databases of poets.org, poetryfoundation.org and Britannica.com

in the play. In both cases, Hughes is pulling the reader or spectator away from the established rules of the past and pointing them towards the future. In the play, Robert actively challenges the dominant order regarding the calculus of color, as I discussed in a previous chapter. He criticizes William for not breaking out of the inferior social position he was put in while at the same time proclaiming his distrust of White people. Robert is looking towards a new figure, the respectable colored man. In his poetry, Hughes is also looking for a new direction to guide the black art into: he does not want to follow the established, classical White poetry forms but wants to establish the Black artist as a potent, innovative power by choosing to join the developing style of free verse.

Content-wise, the poem is straying away from the heavily loaded play. It focuses on the scene which forms the turning point in the play: the confrontation between father and son. In a 1988 journal article, titled "Poetry and the Audience," Michael Ryan claims that 'the poet's idea of his audience (which may or may not be accurate) is fused to his idea of his cultural role (which may or may not be realistic) and thereby influences and sometimes even generates his poetry.' (8). While Hughes himself was the son of two colored people, both of his grandfathers were White. For many colored readers this poem will have had a strong personal resonance. In an essay on being a social poet, Hughes himself referenced situations like these:

Some of my earliest poems were social poems in that they were about people's problems - whole groups of people's problems - rather than my own personal difficulties. Sometimes, though, certain aspects of my personal problems happened to be also common to many other people. (205)

There are no names used in the poem, which places it much closer to Hughes than the play. As a social poet, Hughes saw the need to empower other colored people in an oppressed situation who did not have the strength to improve their situation themselves. In the poem, Hughes does this mainly through a sense of racial pride. The multitude of colored people in situations of miscegenation is addressed directly in the poem, in the lines 'The Southern night is full of stars, / great big yellow stars. / O, sweet as earth, / Dusk dark bodies / give sweet birth / To little yellow bastard boys.' Throughout the poem, the Mulatto population is described multiple times as 'great big yellow stars.' Hughes chooses the term 'stars' in his naturalistic description of Georgia, but it also carries the connotation of empowerment. The notion of plurality makes

sense as there often were multiple Mulatto children with one and the same biological white father, as is the case in the play *Mulatto*. In a more poetic way, the narrator is giving the Mulatto children a mental boost, they have the potential to break free of their oppressed position. Additionally, Hughes encourages them to be proud of their colored self. The last lines consist of a repetition of the opening line, 'I am your son, white man!' and a repetition of 'a little yellow bastard boy,' which is used multiple times to describe the protagonist of the poem. However, in this last case, it looks like the protagonist is using the words himself, finishing the poem with a strong sense of self-esteem about his race. In that sense, the protagonist of the poem resembles Robert. In *Mulatto*, he too tries to become a respectable colored man, instead of passing for white. But while the racial pride of the poem and the play coincide, the second theme, paternal rejection, is relatively short-lived in the poem. While *Mulatto* shows the tension between Robert and the Colonel about their unspoken familial bond and ultimately the death of both characters because of those tensions, the protagonist of the poem seems to accept the rejection in favor of racial pride. Even though the father figure in the poem insults the protagonist's mother and directly denies his fatherhood, the protagonist does not react as passionately as Robert. He does repeat his initial claim to familial recognition but does not try to fight the ideas of his father, instead it looks like he is at peace with believing in it himself instead of trying to convince his father to acknowledge the relationship. In that sense, the protagonist of the poem is somewhere between Robert and William: determined to invoke his ancestry but settling down in a dominated position.

Nonetheless, in the opening of the poem Hughes points to the significance of the protagonist's opening line: 'One of the pillars of the temple fell.' While there is no other reference to a temple in the poem, it makes sense to look at this temple as a representation of the social structure of the early twentieth century in the South, since there are multiple instances in the poem where the social structure indeed seems to be falling apart. The opening line was not the usual way in which a Black or Mulatto boy addressed his White biological father. In the 1920's, especially in the South, black people were still seen as inherently inferior to white people. A black man claiming to share the DNA of a white man would thus surely spark a heavy conflict, just like it did in *Mulatto*, where Robert got a heavy beating for calling the Colonel 'papa.' In other words, the opening line is a strong instance where the social temple is shaking, even before it is mentioned. Another striking observation is the temporal element in the line of the temple. Hughes chose to use 'fell', not 'is falling' or 'will fall.' This choice implies that the social structure already took the blow at the very start of the poem. This shows

the fragility of white power in a time of social changes. The fact that a black boy could call out their father took away the stronger position of white men right away. This notion of irreversibility is found in the play as well. In the chapter about the Mulatto as a woebegone character, I have mentioned the instances where Robert's fate was already announced by other characters. The death of both the Colonel and Robert were events that could not be avoided, and the whole tension of the play culminated in their confrontation. In a similar way, the poem conveys the tension that has been created by the protagonist's address to his father.

Often called 'the most important Negro poet,' Langston Hughes left a huge poetical legacy. One of the elements he is known for the most is his blues poetry, especially in poems like the famous *Weary Blues* of 1925. In *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, the collection in which "Mulatto" is featured, the blues is an important theme as well, both formally and content-wise. While "Mulatto" does not seem like a blues poem at first, there are multiple indications that Hughes took the blues conventions and twisted them around in the creation of this poem.

In his 1976 essay on the regulatory function of the blues, Robert Springer mentions 'the therapy of the blues' which, he claims, lies at the heart of the black blues tradition. Originally a music form, the blues served as a call and response system between performer and audience. (278). The blues is primarily an oral tradition, drawing upon audience responses to strengthen the content of the song – or poem. The poem "Mulatto" has been read aloud by Hughes, but sadly enough there is no recorded performance where audience responses can be heard<sup>26</sup>. However, Hughes weaved the call and response theme from the blues into his poem by giving it the form of a dramatic dialogue to which a narrator is added. The dialogue is shown through the use of italics and indentation. During a live reading of some of his poems, Hughes himself said that 'one of the dramatic ways of expressing the race problem, I have found, is to express it through the eyes of a child, and I have done this in both stories and poetry.'<sup>27</sup> American scholar Philip Royster elaborated on the blues theme in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. He points out that 'the blues-singer is both priest and scapegoat whose individuality arises from his suitability for embodying, bearing and expressing the conditions of the masses of oppressed blacks.' (121). I mentioned a few paragraphs back that Hughes was of mixed ancestry himself. By writing about his personal experiences, he has written a poem that speaks to a whole

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<sup>26</sup> I used this reading by Hughes: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4\\_6Z1\\_3btQ8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_6Z1_3btQ8)

<sup>27</sup> Transcribed from a Spotify podcast titled "In My Poetry (Commentary)" from the collection *This Is Langston Hughes*

community of colored people. Even those who do not have their familial ties denied feel the Black unity expressed through blues poetry. As Royster notes:

Each individual, more or less isolated from his fellows initially, gains this awareness for himself. This individual awareness is transformed into a community of experience. [...] Stimulated by the symbolic recreation of his own experience, a black person, who has not denied or been cut away from his roots, responds immediately [...] to express his recognition of the fidelity of the creation. (122).

While this quote mainly covers the blues music, the same happens with poetry and even the play. When this poem is being read or listened to, the reactions in the audience cause the black audience members to stick together in a sense of sameness.

The narrator, one of the four voices in the poem, is a central figure in the blues theme of “Mulatto”. As Springer puts it: ‘the general tendency of the blues is to record facts, not to protest about them – at least not openly.’ (285). The lack of protest by the protagonist I described at the start of this chapter, as opposed to Robert, can thus be attributed to the blues tradition. In “Mulatto”, however, the absence of protest goes further than the protagonist’s behavior. The voice of the narrator remains particularly stoic when he speaks about the rape of black women by their white slave-owners: “Juicy bodies / Of nigger wenches / Blue black / Against black fences.” While this represents a horrific experience that many black people in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century might even have experienced themselves, the narrative voice leaves the judging part to the reader (or listener). Whereas the narrator functions as the call, the audience hearing or reading the poem functions as the response by, for example, making faces or shaking their head in disgust at the rape scene in the poem. The absence of judgment on the narrator’s part gives the whole poem a negative undertone. His descriptive stance throughout the conflict might be an indication that the narrator wants to remain cautious in his approach of the situation. While ‘one of the pillars of the temple fell,’ the temple itself is still standing. The white men are still in power. Throughout his essays and lectures, Hughes has described several instances where he got censored by white authorities, lectures he was not allowed to give, places he could not go without a mob appearing, ... The white man was still able to keep black men at bay. Furthermore, by repeating the first line at the end, Hughes gives the poem a cyclical nature, showing that while there are instances of social progress, in the end the race relations are still mostly where they started at without any real long-term change. This same sense is

dominating the scene at the end of the play as well, but throughout the plot, Robert revolted in many ways, as we saw in previous chapters.

However, while the narrator of the poem seems to bow down to the white supremacy by not interfering in the conflict, there are hints of his hopefulness. In his description of the conflict, he uses a lot of terms out of nature to describe the actors in the conversation. The White man is seen as ‘the moon.’ (Lamb 142). Moreover, the moon is positioned ‘over the turpentine woods.’ Turpentine is a ‘yellow to brown oil harvested from pines.’<sup>28</sup> In his naturalistic description, Hughes creates the image of the White man at the head of a plantation, the forest where ‘pines,’ the colored workers, are being used to create the luxury product turpentine. This description points towards the act of slavery, of course, but also to the act of miscegenation. The moon looks out over the pine woods, which are being harvested for turpentine, just like the Mulatto in the sense of Robert and the protagonist of the poem is an ‘artificial’ creation in which the White slave owner in most cases raped one of his Black mistresses. This forms another great difference between the poem and the play: the presence of rape. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, “Mulatto” contains a nod to the violent conception of the Mulatto protagonist in the lines ‘Juicy bodies / Of nigger wenches / Blue black / Against black fences.’ The bodily harm caused by the rape is described here, and is followed by ‘What’s a body but a toy?’ This crude representation of the rape of Black mistresses remains absent in the play. In *Mulatto*, Cora muses about her first encounters with the Colonel, including the times they slept together, as we saw in the chapter about her character. While the racial and familial tensions between Robert and the Colonel are taken to a higher level than those between father and son in the poem, the history of the relationship between the Colonel and Cora does not seem to be as violent as the one in “Mulatto.” Apart from the miscegenation, racial tension is also portrayed through natural scenery. ‘The scent of pine wood stings the soft night air,’ we read. This coincides with the fallen pillar of the temple: the Mulatto son is pecking away at the established social order. Like in the play, the White society is still the reigning one: ‘silver moonlight everywhere.’ Despite the White superiority that seems to be unbreakable, Hughes includes another naturalistic reference to the valid position of Mulatto characters. Both at the beginning and at the end of the play, he uses the word dusk. At first it is used to describe the setting of the poem, at the end he uses it to describe the skin color of the colored population. He opposes the previously mentioned artificial

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<sup>28</sup> Definition from Webster Dictionary

creation turpentine to the natural mix of day and night. Hughes is proving that Mulattoes should not be seen as outcasts since in nature itself these amalgamations of white and black occur. Doing so, he continues the trend of racial pride.

In conclusion, the main difference between the poem and the play is the implicit and explicit form of protest they advocate for. The setting of the poem is a seemingly quiet forest in Georgia, but the deeply metaphorical meaning equalizes it to the plantation setting of *Mulatto*. Through naturalistic descriptions, Hughes touches upon the motif of protest and Black rebellion in “Mulatto,” but it does not reach the extremes that are present in the play. The status quo is not really challenged in the poem, although racial pride is a strong motif, including in the ending. In the play, the ending is marked by two deaths, both father and son. The poem does not reach that extreme level of tension, but it functions as a stepping stone in the direction of the play. It shows the theme of protest, racial pride and paternal rejection in a more subtle, subliminal way. In the next chapter, I will analyze how the short story “Father and Son” fits into the evolution of Hughes’ plot.

#### **4.2. “Father and Son” in *The Ways of White Folks* (1934)**

“Father and Son”<sup>29</sup> was written in 1934 and published in a collection called *The Ways of White Folks*, a collection centered on the collision between White and colored people. The story uses the same characters and plot as the play, but the differences are sharp. There are two highly significant additions to the short story, and they appear at the beginning and at the end. Before we reach those added scenes, there is a first big difference to be discussed, which is of course the title. Whereas the play focuses on the theme of color, the short story draws the attention to the familial bonds between the characters in the play. The short story is a tale of the Colonel and his son, in which race seems to be a secondary element, but the play is a tragedy about a colored man searching his place in society, with the added theme of paternal rejection. The switch in focus allows Hughes to tell the story from both perspectives and makes them complement each other. The complementary nature of the short story and the play become clear in the first scene of the short story, a scene that does not appear in the play. The opening lines read: ‘Colonel Thomas Norwood stood in his doorway at the Big House looking down the dusty plantation road. Today his youngest son was coming home. A heavy Georgia spring filled

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<sup>29</sup> I took all citations from the short story out of the online version on <https://msdavisflowers.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/father-and-son.pdf>

the morning air with sunshine and earth-perfumes. It made the old man feel strangely young again. Bert was coming home.’ (1). The image of the Colonel immediately becomes much more humane than it does in the play. In the chapter on the Colonel I did discuss the fundamentally good nature of the character, but in the story there is almost no doubt that the Colonel likes his son and even shows hints of pride. This trend continues as Robert’s arrival draws nearer:

The Colonel entered the small room where he kept his books and papers of both a literary and a business nature. He closed the door. He did this deliberately, intending to let all the Negroes in the house know that he had no interest whatsoever in the homecoming about to take place. He intended to remain in the library several hours after Bert's arrival. Yet, as he bent over his desk peering at accounts his store-keeper had brought him, his head kept turning toward the window that gave on the yard and the road, kept looking to see if a car were coming in a cloud of dust. (1-2).

The Colonel is holding up a front of indifference but, in reality, cannot wait to see his son after years of being at school away from home. The narrator squeezes in a line saying that Robert is not the Colonel’s real son, because a real son would have to be a white heir to his plantation, and Robert is not that. (1). By making this a line of the narrator, in a stand-alone paragraph, Hughes increases the distance between the Colonel and this statement. Similar to the play, this ideology seems to be forced upon the Colonel by external actors, in this case the narrator, rather than him believing it himself. There are two more instances which make the Colonel seem like a victim of White expectations regarding racial status. In the play, the beating of the seven-year-old Robert is told by Cora to William. In the story, the Colonel reminisces on that beating himself, and he admits guilt. Not only that, he admits to being ashamed about it, ‘but his temper got the best of him.’ (2). Hughes made the Colonel realize the exact thing that I mentioned as the main cause for his death in the play: his temper. However, while the Colonel in the play is getting more and more riled up, the Colonel in the story actively regrets losing his temper and beating up his small son, a feeling we never get explicitly get from the play. Next to his remorse surrounding the beating, the Colonel admits to being very much alike to Robert. (2). Again, this is a statement that is far away from the play, in which the Colonel actively denies any resemblance to Robert. The fact that the Colonel admits his similarity to his son, not only in looks but also in behavior, acts as a complete reversal of the sameness I talked about earlier on. The play deals with Robert’s aspiration to sameness, whereas the story opens with the

Colonel admitting the existence of that very sameness. The last noteworthy difference in the figure of the Colonel happens in the first confrontation between him and Robert. Both in the play and in the story, that confrontation ends with the Colonel drawing a gun on Robert, who is already leaving and thus does not notice he is held at gunpoint. In the story, the Colonel ‘suddenly became strengthless and limp and sank into his chair holding the gun.’ (13). In the play, however, the Colonel is not flinching. He only lowers the gun when Cora hysterically throws herself around him screaming he is about to kill their son. In conclusion, the character of the Colonel is being humanized even more in the story. While he seemed like an inherently good man in the play, the story draws him as a compassionate and somewhat proud father from the beginning. Kirby published an essay on political theatre<sup>30</sup> in which he claims that “many political plays intentionally use childish, crude, or simple techniques and thought.” (134). A short story leaves more space to develop the internal world of a character, whereas a play relies on spoken word to advance the plot. Therefore, it is a logical choice to focus the story on the familial theme, which requires these interludes on the Colonel’s consciousness.

Apart from the Colonel, the character of Robert differs in both realizations of the story. In the first chapter of the story, when the Colonel comes to greet Robert, the latter returns the opening greetings ‘quickly, politely and almost eagerly.’ (3). In the play, Robert is never shown to be eager to meet or talk to his father. Robert’s militancy is not as strong in the beginning of the story as it is in the play. Again, this has to do with Hughes’ choice to focus the story on the paternal relation between Robert and the Colonel. We read that Robert does not miss the plantation while he is away at school, but that he did wish he had a home and that the Colonel would treat him as a son (8). It makes sense to show Robert in a more shy and polite way towards the Colonel and to leave the militancy for the play. Nonetheless, Robert still becomes the militant figure later on in the story and he kills his father just like in the play, but the fragility in his character that we get at the beginning is an extra dimension as opposed to the play. The difference in Robert’s character also becomes clear through the incident at the post office. In the story, Robert simply tried to correct the cashier who gave him back too little change. In the play, Robert tried to return broken radio tubes. Elam Jr. *et al* explain how the tubes are a symbolic element, ‘a vital sign of Robert's desire to be part of new world order, for the radio represents an open, free space of communication, in contrast to the hermetically sealed world

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<sup>30</sup> Hughes’ *Mulatto* is generally accepted to be a political play and appears in anthologies like *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes* by Susan Duffy.

of the Southern plantation.’ (92). This element proves that the focus of the play is still on Robert’s search of his place as a respected and free colored man. The character of William remains fairly equal in both the play and the short story. The main difference is similar to the case of the character of the Colonel: Hughes gives us more of William’s psychological background. The analysis in this study, which tied William to the ethics of the oppressed, is being described in the play. When Robert arrives and begins to declare his racial pride and aspiration, William is said not to want anything to do with that. We even find out that William is afraid of Robert and ‘everything happening around Robert.’ (6). That last part of the description includes racial pride, social aspiration and the want for a better place for colored people. William is stuck in the old social division and is scared to see the known world change.

While the characters of Robert and the Colonel seem to be more moderated in the story than in the play, the ending of the story culminates in an outrageous criticism towards White society. The final confrontation between Robert and the Colonel goes down in almost the exact same way in both the play and the story, even a lot of the lines and (stage) descriptions are copied. The similarities carry on as we read about the Undertaker and Sam, and Robert who returns and commits suicide in his mother’s bedroom. However, this is where the story takes it to another level. The story ends with Cora holding her ground to protect the body of her dead son, and just like in the play, she waits until she hears the gunshot upstairs before stepping aside and allowing the mob to get to Robert. After that, Hughes added a last chapter of only a few lines. We read that Robert’s dead body was mutilated and hung publicly, even though he was already dead. Of course, the people in town did not necessarily know this. Additionally, the frustrated mob hung William as well, next to Robert. When reading this, the part about William being scared of everything that surrounds Robert turns into a sort of prophetic passage, just like the play had its own moments of foreseeing events. The reason for hanging William, we read, is that the fun with the dead body of Robert had been stale. (24). The story ends with a news article:

#### DOUBLE LYNCHING IN GEORGIA

A large mob late this afternoon wreaked vengeance on the second of two Negro field hands, the murderers of Colonel Thomas Norwood, wealthy planter found dead at Big House Plantation. Bert Lewis was lynched last night, and his brother, Willie Lewis,

today. The sheriff of the county is unable to identify any members of the mob. Colonel Norwood's funeral has not yet been held. The dead man left no heirs (24).

This ending contains three striking elements. The first one is that, by making the whole history end in a single news article, Hughes attacks the triviality of lynching. In the chapter about interracial violence, I mentioned that lynching was one of the most common forms of violence and that they mostly went unpunished. A lot of lynchings ended up in small news articles like this one. By giving us the whole story behind one of those articles, Hughes humanizes the lynching victims and counters the fact that they were often seen as 'a Negro,' partly because they were tortured beyond recognition. In the second place, the article reads 'murderers of Colonel Thomas Norwood.' William has instantly become one of the murderers, in order to justify the lynching. In *Mulatto*, Cora and William were talking about their fears that Robert's behavior would endanger all Black workers at the plantation, but that fear did not come true until this story. In the third place, Hughes shows how Robert's actions were in vain. Throughout the story (as in the play), he explicitly mentions how he is not and does not want to be subservient like William. He resists the old view that William follows and the inferior position he allows himself to be put in. However, in the end, they are both nothing more than mutilated corpses hanging in town to be looked at by White spectators, no matter how hard Robert tried to break the social pyramid.

In conclusion, the story has taken the play a few steps further. While "Father and Son" originally focused more on the familial bond between Robert and the Colonel, the added ending completely destroys all of the social aspiration in the play, as again no White man goes punished. The only thing left to consider is why Hughes did not take the play this far. That question will be answered in the next chapter, which talks about the revolutionary theatre of the 1950s and how Hughes anticipated that movement.

### **4.3. *Mulatto* as an Early Pioneer**

The last thing that remains to be analyzed, is what Hughes actually set in motion with *Mulatto*. In my introduction, I mentioned that *Mulatto* was the first Broadway hit by a Black author and that it planted a lot of ideas for the Civil Rights Movements of the following decades. We have observed the ideas and themes in the play extensively, so these last paragraphs will serve to prove that Hughes influenced a lot of activists, artists and humanists.

Most importantly, Hughes left a mark on the whole tradition of Black theatre. In a manifesto for Black revolutionary theatre by LeRoi Jones, the latter sums up what Black theatre should bring and what the future of Black theatre should be. His manifesto grew into the Black Arts Movement, ‘the single most controversial moment in the history of African-American literature—possibly in American literature as a whole.’ (*Time* 1994) A lot of elements are already overtly present in *Mulatto*, which premiered exactly 30 years earlier.

The first element that Jones mentions is that the revolutionary theatre should attack the social structure and all things wrong against Black people. It should do so because ‘it is a theatre of victims.’ (1). *Mulatto* is built around a structure of victimized characters. Robert is a victim of society and of paternal rejection. William is a victim of internalized racism and a constant sense of inferiority, and so on. In my opinion, Hughes even extends this victimization across the racial spectrum. As I mentioned in the chapter about the Colonel, Hughes portrays how the Colonel is heavily influenced by the other White men in his county. They make him change his behavior and relations with his colored family. In that sense, Hughes shows the Colonel as a victim of society too. While colored victims form the central focus of *Mulatto*, the figure of the Colonel shows that White people are also being forced into roles they did not necessarily choose for in the first place. Doing so, Jones might be advocating for the representation of colored victims, but Hughes already expanded that notion to White society as well. Jones continues on the subject of colored victims by claiming that the revolutionary theatre should show these victims so that ‘their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and that they themselves are victims.’ (2). Revolutionary theatre is meant to be representational so that colored victims might recognize their own situation and think about where they stand in society. This breaking of stereotypes is what I used as the starting point of my dissertation. To prove that Hughes tried to give a representation of all sorts of colored victims in order to make his play accessible, I can simply refer to my table of contents. Every character has been discussed separately, because none are alike. Each character struggles with their own demons and faces their personal problems. Race is the common factor but, in each character, there are other elements that they are dealing with. By creating such a diverse pool of characters, Hughes made sure that every colored spectator could at least find some resemblance to his own person and situation. Even though not all problems get solved, in fact very few do, it gives the audience the chance to at least view their problems from an external viewpoint. Jones commented on this as a crucial element of revolutionary theatre as well: ‘We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in

agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be.’ (2). In other words, both the diversity in Hughes’ characters and their relatability for colored audiences were a first at the time of *Mulatto*’s writing. The only element in which Hughes and Jones differ fundamentally is the degree of aggressiveness. Jones takes this to an extreme when he states that White men will back away from the revolutionary theatre because it hates them so much and that they will hate it because ‘it will be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real.’ (2-3). In *Mulatto*, there are instances in which Robert denounces White people in an equally severe way, but the final killing of his father happens out of self-defense. Overall, Hughes seems to hold back on the aggressiveness against White people. Again, the humanized way of showing how the Colonel became the person he is, allows this interpretation of the play. The last element in Jones’ manifesto is that revolutionary theatre should show human life as it is. Especially for the colored society, both playwright and spectator, this was a very difficult concept. The dominant artistic portrayal of colored people was the minstrelsy, as I talked about in the first chapter of my study. Revolutionary theatre needed to counter that stereotypical view of the always happy, idiotic, dancing Black man. Nonetheless, Black artists needed to find a way to make realistic theatre without glorifying the colored characters in an almost unconditional praise. Hughes found that middle ground by portraying all of his characters above all as humans. He gave the colored characters aspirations but flaws too. He gave the White characters a fundamental racist character, but humanized them nonetheless. In all of these ways, Hughes already started the movement around revolutionary Black theatre. That brings us back to the question I ended the previous chapter with: why did Hughes not take his play as far as his short story? The ending of the play as it has been published is an ending of rebellion, with Cora’s final stand. It honors the aspirations of Robert and his character as a whole, by leaving the body to rest after he committed suicide and died proudly. If the play would have taken the ending of the story, in which Robert – and William – are lynched nonetheless, Hughes’ play would have lost most of the revolutionary elements discussed in this chapter.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The material aftermath of the First World War was enormous, but in the U.S.A., the ideological aftermath was at least equally as big. As Wright puts it, the War woke up the

colored society and created an audience for a new movement and new social aspirations.<sup>31</sup> That movement arrived in the form of the Harlem Renaissance, in which Black artists attempted to give a genuine voice to the oppressed Black society. Langston Hughes, a prominent member of the Renaissance, brought the racial revolution onto Broadway and into mainstream African American art. He was not the first colored playwright, but he left one the biggest legacies. In this dissertation, I have studied the importance of *Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South* for the development of racial emancipation in the early twentieth century and its new ideals in a time marked by racial stereotyping. I have analyzed that legacy through the themes which *Mulatto* contains. In the first place, the theme of color has proven to be a big part of the play's message. Through an observation of Black, White and mixed characters, Hughes' renewing insights about racial pride found their way into this study. Next, I analyzed the theme of interracial violence. While the theme of color was a manifesto for the future of race relations, the violence theme was a critique on the social tension of his time, when lynching and torture were a daily news-item. In the last place, I have studied the evolution of Hughes' *Mulatto*, as well as the ideas it introduced and which found a way into the Revolutionary Theatre movement of LeRoi Jones.

With *Mulatto*, Hughes ended a decades-long trend of portraying the colored man as a Jim Crow figure in minstrel shows in mainstream works. White audiences sought to confirm their ideas about people of color in theatre while Black audiences wanted to see a glorified version of themselves. Hughes did not give in to one particular audience. Instead, as we saw through a systematic analysis, he included a wide range of characters, each with a different opinion on race relations and racial emancipation. H. Miller might have called them 'stick-figure stereotypes,' but in my opinion they show the Black – and White – audiences that there are options to choose from. There is no single racial identity, it is up to each individual to decide how to give meaning to him or herself. Hughes showed the racial aspiration that people of color could pursue, but he showed both the Black and the Mulatto characters as human figures with flaws, emotions and feelings. Most importantly, nowhere in the play does Hughes give us a hint of which character he likes most. He does not specify which choices he thinks are best, instead he gives the audience a wide range of possible interpretations of race relations, to show the alternatives.

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<sup>31</sup> Wright's essay was found in its entirety on <https://genius.com/Richard-wright-author-blueprint-for-negro-literature-annotated>

William is the character who compromised. He accepted his inferior position and does not challenge the status quo. We see in him the fear of White power and of his brother's behavior. He knows the classic ruleset for 'niggers' and is determined to follow them. Through William, as well as Sam and Mose, Hughes included the Uncle Tom stereotype, a basis for both White and Black audiences to hang to. Robert is the image for a new generation of colored adolescents. He does not want to be White, nor does he identify as a 'nigger,' with which he refers to the Black people of the old social order. Instead, he is trying to find his place as a respectable colored man, with the freedom and privileges of a White man but with racial pride. With Robert, Hughes broke free from the Tragic Mulatto stereotype. While he followed some of Brown's elements of the literary device, he went further than the limits of the Tragic Mulatto in his play. Whereas the classic Mulatto figure is a lost figure, Robert is a character with objectives. Even though his actions result in his death, he died with pride and decided on his own fate. Next to that, Hughes did not confine *Mulatto* to the figure of Robert. He opened the play up to include a wide range of social themes like violence, paternal rejection and the act of passing. He included female Mulattoes with social aspirations and a rebellious character, transcending the stereotypical representation in which they were only used for their beauty. Cora, the key figure in the play, is an example for colored women. With her, Hughes challenged both the Mammy stereotype and the Jezebel. While Robert could only stand up to White power in a physical way, Hughes made Cora rise above them in a psychological way. Next to that, he gives the White protagonist a background as well, giving the audience a way to sympathize with the Colonel too. He is the first Black artist who brought the toxicity of White pressure to the stage and in doing so, broke the stereotype of 'the White racist.' In conclusion, as Davis points out, Hughes' revolutionary merit lies in pointing out that the problem of color is not a biological one, but a personal one (203).

That personal nature can be found in the short story "Father and Son," which shares the plot of *Mulatto*. Whereas the poem "Mulatto" focused more on internal racial pride and empowering motifs through natural elements, the story focused on the relationship between the Colonel and Robert. Both were humanized even more in the story, and we saw a clear distinction between their own selves and the persona they create for the outer world. The play is a continuation of those tensions between personae, and we saw a lot of switching happening, for example in the character of Cora and the Colonel. The title of my dissertation is Robert's quote 'nobody's gonna fix a place for me.' Just like Robert did not want his place fixed, neither does Hughes fix a place for his other characters, but he gave them space to grow. Furthermore,

Hughes did not want his own place fixed in the American art scene and instead brought his own revolutionary ideas to Broadway. He wrote in between different (literary) stereotypes that White and Black audiences held, in order to hold up a mirror to both of those audiences and show them the flaws in the social order. He criticized the oppressor and the oppressed, while allowing us to sympathize for both. Hughes showed the audience that, in the end, each of us creates his or her own reality in the chaotic multiracial society that was – and still is – the U.S.A. In a time when Black art and the representation of the colored person was dominated by stereotypes, Hughes offered a way out. I started this dissertation with the intention to discover how Hughes resisted minstrelsy and the Jim Crow figure. The character analysis has shown that Hughes resisted a more varied array of stereotypes by creating humanized characters, both Black and White.

Last but not least, Hughes anticipated a lot of the elements to be found in later revolutionary art movements. In particular, the essence of *Mulatto* is an attack on the social order, built out of a collective of victims. By creating such a wide range of characters and victims, Hughes made *Mulatto* a representational play for a lot of spectators to identify with. Aside from that, it also offers the (especially White) audience an external point of view on the conditions of colored people in the South, in order to make them realize what is going on right in front of them. The only thing that Hughes has held back on is the aggressiveness towards White society, in my opinion.

My goal was to discover how African American art received the dominant position it enjoys today. By looking at the history of African American art, I stumbled upon *Mulatto*. Throughout this dissertation, I have named other works that have each started some aspect of the important themes present in Hughes' play. Grimké's *Rachel* (1916) included the motif of familial bonds and Black issues, Cole's *A Trip to Coontown* (1898) showcased a reversal of racial stereotypes and in Séjour's *Le Mulâtre* (1837) there was a special place for interracial violence. Hughes' play is the first to have combined all of these elements, and he did it in a Broadway hit. The Black Arts Movement, the Civil Rights Movements and the success of today's African American art may not all be the single merit of Langston Hughes, but he started a long-lasting fire in the U.S.A.'s mainstream Black art, shaking the established social order to its very core.

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