

Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)
is the institutional research repository for
Goldsmiths, University of London*

Citation

Blinder, Caroline. 2018. Looking for Harlem: The absent Narrator in Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes' The Sweet Flypaper of Life (1955). CoSMo - Comparative Studies in Modernism(13), ISSN 2281-6658 [Article]

Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/27260/>

Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: gro@gold.ac.uk.

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: gro@gold.ac.uk

Looking for Harlem: The Absent Narrator of Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes' *Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955).

Looking at a few sequences in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* from 1955, Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava's much neglected photo-textual collaboration, it becomes clear just how different the documentary impetus was in the post-war era compared to previous documentary studies of Harlem from the 1930s. ¹Although a response to Roy DeCarava's photographic studies of Black neighborhoods in the 1940s, Langston Hughes' accompanying text; a meandering memoir voiced by Sister Mary of her life and the various travails of her extended family - thus narrated solely from the perspective of an elderly African American woman - positions itself in a non-man's land - literally and at times photographically. This is not to say that DeCarava doesn't photograph African American men, nor that the book overall contains more images of women, simply that the aesthetic feel of the photographs with their tendency to frame occupants at some distance and with relatively few close ups, is at some remove from the intimate voice of Sister Mary. In this sense, although the narrative provides a series of anecdotes and situations indicative of African American life during the period, it refuses to solidify or make corporeal the distinct nature of Sister Mary's voice until the very end of the book. ² It is

¹ *The Harlem Project* by The Photo League, Richard Wright's *10 million Black Voices* etc.

² According to Sonia Weiner in *Narrating Photography in The Sweet Flypaper of Life*: "The images, it appeared, had no market. In representing the daily life of family and community in Harlem in an artistic and humane way, they dramatically

not until the very last page that a medium sized portrait of a woman smiling directly at the camera with the underlying caption: this is me, here I am, that a direct alignment between image and statement can be presupposed. In a complete reversal from documentary procedures of the 1930s where quotes (even if unattributed) and accompanying narrative was established to contextualize the social conditions and regional affiliations of the subjects documented (Dorothea Lange and Paul Stryker's work exemplified such an ethos), DeCarava and Hughes' poetic homage to Harlem in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* unashamedly playfully – or so it appears – utilizes images of actual residents together with Hughes's invented narrative – to render homage to the resilience and beauty of an African/American neighborhood in the face of economic adversity.

For this, and other reasons – amongst them an understandable reticence from DeCarava regarding how to market his photographs in an overwhelmingly White photographic climate - the politics of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* are far from transparent. On one hand, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* uses the African/American vernacular of the first person narrator as a way to fuse text and imagery into a poetic vision of togetherness in the face of urban and racial discord and life. On the other hand, it complicates the dynamic between writer and photographer that the photographs both occupy the same space as the narrator and visually stand apart. In a two page sequence where Sister Mary

departed from the general public's embedded conceptions of black Americans instilled by previous photographic efforts. As such, they were deemed politically subversive and far too liberal. Publishers felt that mainstream America was not yet ready to see these pictures. Only after Hughes supplemented the photographs with a fictional text, turning them into what DeCarava called "a marketable package" (Stange 78), (3) did Simon and Schuster agree to publish the book. Even then, to keep costs down and minimize economic risk, the book was printed on relatively cheap paper in a small format size and sold for only one dollar." (4)

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

just as Hughes allows the female voice of his chosen narrator to compete with his own authorial presence and vice versa. As I hope to examine, the respective politics and aesthetic backgrounds of Hughes and DeCarava are crucial for an understanding of how *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* shares an ambivalent love affair with Harlem and its fictional vernacular narrator, the elderly African American woman Sister Mary Bradley. Instead of moving towards a liberating vision of the African American voice as based on the desire to break out of its environment, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* paradoxically seems to place its faith in an exploration of interiors, both spatial - the domestic - and psychological through the interior monologue. These contradictions, in turn, are complicated by the documentary focus on the domestic spaces of DeCarava's photographs and the use of facades, stoops, windows and doors as liminal spaces both geographically and in terms of racial politics.

The Sweet Flypaper of Life featured 140 of DeCarava's photographs selected, sequenced, and stitched together with a continuous written text over a hundred pages.⁴ His collaborator was another veteran artist, the Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes, who realized how well these pictures might lend themselves to a folksy narrative of the kind he had perfected in his humorous "Simple" stories.

Published by Simon & Schuster in an inexpensive pocket-sized format, the book was a great success, selling out its initial print run of 25,000. Gilbert Millstein, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, immediately saw its potential for reaching across the color line, commenting that “it could accomplish a lot more about race relations than many pounds of committee reports.”⁵ Yet by 1970, *Village Voice* photography critic A. D. Coleman was berating the white arts establishment and white photographers in general for failing to recognize and support DeCarava.

The reasons for this seem to be predominantly due to the general neglect of African American artists but it is also, possibly, because DeCarava’s visual aesthetic renders a more subtle variation of several urban themes that were already photographic tropes by the 1950s. Like Weegee, DeCarava has an astute command of the metaphorical potential of the urban landscape, the ways in which light points toward the presence of lines and divisions framing and structuring the built environment, works both as a metaphor for the limited perspective afforded to the citizens of those areas and for the camera eye’s attention to the borders of everyday life, the stoops, doorways, window frames and other areas where an insight into the private and the public is made evident.³

³ The similarities between DeCarava and later meta-documentary work is noted by Richard Ings in ‘And You Slip into the Breaks and Look Around’: Jazz and Everyday Life in the Photographs of Roy DeCarava, chapt. 13 in *THE HEARING EYE Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, Edited by GRAHAM LOCK and DAVID MURRAY (Oxford University Press, 2009), p.330.

? in: *the sound i saw* should be set alongside those other photographic narrative tours de force: Walker Evans’s *American Photographs* and Robert Frank’s *The Americans*.¹² Evans’s use of “sequencing and discourse,” Jane Livingston argues,

DeCarava's freelance career following the publication of *Sweet Flypaper*, he opened a photography gallery, later taught at Hunter College, and became city university distinguished professor of art in 1989.

Despite these professional accolades, Stange points to the consistent tendency to read DeCarava as predominantly a documentary photographer of Black life, rather than an artist in the same modernist vein as for instance Levitt or Evans. What is neglected, as Stange points out, is the fact that: "Using the most verisimilitudinous of mediums and always referential rather than nonobjective, DeCarava nevertheless makes form, rather than subject alone, convey his meanings".

The idea that form, rather than subject alone, is instrumental in DeCarava's particular aesthetic renders a different sense to the structure of *Sweet Flypaper* as well. If Weiner argues for an inherent duality between the images as sophisticated complex renderings of an internal African American life, and the seemingly stereotypical mammy narrative, then the form that their interaction takes is perhaps the most accurate entry into the book's deeper meaning?

The Hallway print in *SweetFlypaper* – what is the accompanying text given that Stange references this image as the turning point for Decarava, 'based in part on the dissonance in the image between formal beauty and mundane subject matter' (283)."

The question haunting the Black aesthetic thus lay in the "dilemma, should the artist continue to document American black life and injustice in a ... social realist style, or

meant that "for the first time, photography could be consciously approached as a continuum or set of continuums within the single oeuvre."¹³

should he or she engage more fully the formal experiment and innovation animating European Modernism” – Like Levitt, DeCarava references Henri Cartier Bresson as a formidable influence.

Although *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* appears a rather insulated narrative in terms of its geographical location, and the steadfast way in which Sister Mary generates the description throughout, it is entirely symptomatic of the 1950s as a time when the idea of documentary veracity was under scrutiny. If previous chapters have examined how the intersections between collective and private anxieties begins to take precedence in work expressly designed to question what it means to live in an American democracy in the Cold War era, *Sweet Flypaper of Life* provides a vernacular vision that seems as much marked by the earlier more regionalised focus deemed so crucial in the 1930s and 40s. In this respect, it marks something much more stationary in its ethnographic focus of one community than *The Americans* - in which the documentary focus is redirected outwards on a much more transient and mobile vision of America.

Roy DeCarava

For Sherry Turner DeCarava, DeCarava’s consistent photographs of Black urban life in the 20th century “show an inward eye trained on an outer reality, ... a personal vision that finds resolution that finds more in the realm of metaphor than in the photographic particular”.

This focus on the realm of metaphor rather than documentary veracity allows is indicative of the postwar sense of photography's abilities; intersecting with the photographic particular is something more poetic, an acknowledgment that the photographic process can be both political and personal, and more importantly that the two can be shown to exist simultaneously. DeCarava sought consistently to not be pigeonholed as a documentary photographer or as a Black photographer per se, but his use of the external landscape of New York is always recognizably of its time and place and it bears witness to an insider's perspective, in other words to his own circumstances and experiences.

DeCarava started his career as a painter but by the late 1940s he was taking copious photographs of Harlem and other neighbourhoods for various small projects, both journalistic and personal. As with Wright Morris and later Robert Frank, DeCarava's application for a Guggenheim grant was based on (Reference to grant application?) and he was the first black artist to receive one in 1952. The photographs that he took funded by this grant money is what turned into Sweet flypaper.

The first book length project that DeCarava was involved in was Sweet Flypaper of Life, a photo-textual fictional story about a Black family in Harlem seen through the first person narrator an elderly Black woman.

For Sara Blair – “the changing contract between the documenting camera and its subjects, particularly in Harlem ... promised a newly iconic Harlem, at once metonymic of America's modernity and revelatory of its social failings.” (p.5)

Symptomatic of how in the post war era the ontology of the photographic image was altered to render something beyond national fears and ideological chisms, as the 1930s – comparing DeCarava’s images of African Americans to those of Ullman seems to indicate an perspectival change far surpassing the 25 years or so that lies between them – thus providing a genuine sense of how different the documentary eye had become in the interim period. Here the response to political disenfranchisement and social marginality is done through a combination of fictional experimentation and documentary experience (not dissimilar to that of Peterkin and Ullman but still vastly different in what it ultimately represents). If Peterkin and Ullman are creating a vision of an already lost pastoral and feudal version of African American life, DeCarava is set on making the contemporaneous come alive, to illustrate how alive it actually is). Thus Harlem becomes a site for a variety of encounters: an encounter between two seemingly disparate or incongruous forms of media, an encounter between a photographer reticent to put himself forward as a visual spokesperson for the African American urban experience, and a writer adept at self-promotion, eager to take on the mantle of a literary spokesperson for a Harlem seldom seen.

“Throughout the 1940s and 50s and beyond, for socially conscious, photojournalistic, and experiemental photographers alike, Harlem remained a special provocation, a site that afforded charged visual opportunities, spectacles, evidence, found objects, and decisive moments.” (p.8)

As Blair points out: “it is startlingly evident that virtually every African American writer of national significance during the post-war period engaged directly with the effects of documentary photography (Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Richard Avedon in *Nothing Personal* 1964)”

Aesthetic concerns that differ from earlier documentary work: how to deal with what Blair calls ‘the problem of the look and the look back’. In racialised terms, DeCarava is aware of how their subjects are both cloaked in anonymity and figures of a spiritualised power – even more problematic perhaps is the fact that Hughes then takes the central figure of spiritualised power and makes her an old Black woman. Thus, on the one hand, the narrative of *Sweet Flypaper* insists on the realism of the topic at hand, and it does so by not sugar-coating the domestic and familiar patterns that mark the hardships of Harlem life. The grandson is at risk, according to the grandmother, the conventional set up of the nuclear family already torn asunder by various social and economic demands. In this sense, Sister Mary – as the one who articulates the realist terrain verbally - is both implicated and yet unable to mediate on the social implications of their surroundings. Hughes walking a tightrope between the empathy we feel for her as believable, with all of the attendant tendencies to downplay the economic circumstances of her life that this representation brings, and at the same time wanting to give her voice a certain gravitas and solidity. The question of how one inscribes this schism into the text itself is fundamental to the tensions and creativity of the project. Perhaps there is something inherently patronising in the exercise itself, as though removing his own

voice to another generation, another gender provides a safer distance for observation?

Hughes – in looking closely at the intimacy and immediacy of DeCarava's images, may have felt that this schism could be visualised without resorting to heavy handed symbolism and allegory, precisely because the vernacular voice would be tempered by the images just as the photographs would be given a narrative through the accompanying voice?

For Weiner: "Like a smoke screen, the words of Hughes's narrator provide a way of reading the images without actually seeing their subjects in all their complexity, paving the way for the book's publication. However, to read the text only on its literal level is to overlook a crucial aspect. Hughes's narrator presents a double-edged text."

The visual insistence on a taut proximity to the subjects, a very tactile aesthetic enabled by DeCarava's incredible nuanced use of black and white. (quote from articles on his ability to render Black skin and tonal nuances etc)

Maren Stange points out how DeCarava's use of "the picture frame serves to strengthen the compositions's overall structure; vantage points do not monumentalize or dramatize in ways made familiar by the work of an earlier generation's documentary style." ('Illusion Complete within Itself: Ray DeCarava's Photography' in *A Modern Mosaic*, 279)

According to Blair: "DeCarava evaded the programmatic thrust of postwar cultural politics centered in Harlem. Drawing on realism and expressionism, referentiality

and abstraction, formalism and vernacular codes, he ... expanded the possibilities for the camera as an instrument of cultural response” (p.50)

Did DeCarava think of the camera as an instrument of cultural response? Or, did he realise that the camera is also inevitably responding to particular cultural moments?

The collapse between one and the other signals a desire to posit him as primarily interested in authenticating black experience – of – bearing witness in some way to issues that would change/become unrecognizable ? The concept of ‘sound visualisation’ is one that DeCarava returns to; the idea of ‘seeing in the same way that one listens’

In his 1951 application for a Guggenheim (successful) the language employed rather than scientific or ethnographic is rather configured in the language of a poetic indexicality: “ Morning, noon, night, at work, going to work, coming home from work, at play, in the streets, talking, kidding, laughing, in the home, in the playgrounds, in the schools, bars, stores, libraries, beauty parlors, churches etc. “ “Embracing the rhetoric of universalism that marked the broader postwar turn to abstraction, Decarava aims to ‘reveal the roots from which spring the greatness of all human beings” at the same time that he offers a hermeneutic objects for those bound experientially by racial history” (Blair, 51) The rhetorical flourish of DeCarava’s application did not exist in a vacuum but was informed by his familiarity at this point with other photographers and perhaps as importantly the wider artistic New York community.

Having studied painting and lithography for two years at Cooper union, he went uptown and continued to study art at the Harlem Art Center in the mid 1940s. Here partly subsidised by the Works Projects administration, DeCarava embraced the opportunities of the New Deal arts programmes, did free lance work for various foundations; in other words, DeCarava would have a sense of the institutionalisation of documentary photography, in journals and elsewhere. The fact that this own entry, to some extent, was facilitated by MOMA curator Edward Steichen's purchase of three prints in 1950 with their subsequent inclusion into The Family of Man exhibition in 55, is thus not insignificant. Sweet Flypaper came out the same year and thus concurrently part of a body of work distinctly tied to the community of Harlem and yet presented simultaneously to a much larger international audience. As Stange reminds us "the book sold out its first printing, won two awards, and went on to appear in two subsequent editions". (281).

Thus a double bind exists at the very heart of the representational mode in SFofLife – on the one hand – the confines of a racially segregated sphere are deliberately established and the humanity of the subjects described in such a manner that readers unfamiliar with the territory may understand it. On the other hand, the authenticity of the vernacular voice is also to some extent dependent on this segregated sphere as precisely that, as a place made by and for African Americans. In addition, the subjects shown in DeCarava's photographs are individualised in ways that are essential for the lyrical tenor of the project as a whole, if they remain purely representational their inherent humanity risks being subsumed in the aesthetics of the project. Here, on the other hand, Sister Mary's narrative seems

designed to both move them beyond their regional identities and situate them geographically.

This awareness of the potential of the photo-text as a way to render both a humanist universal vision of daily life and something specific to a local population, inevitably provides a link to some of the earlier photo-texts in this study. For White (full reference?) his report on the Sweet Flypaper takes the notion of the a fusion between words and pictures in book form as exemplified in Strand and Newhall's Time in New England and Wright Morris's The Home Place. However rather than posit Sweet Flypaper as a piece of art in a longer line

According to Blair, DeCarava initiated the 1955 project by contacting Hughes who was already a well known poet and writer. More than 35000 copies sold to mostly African Americans? To what extent is this because of Hughes' text which fictionally creates a narrative by an imaginary protagonist sister Mary Bradley – Hughes sequences the images so that they conform not to a sociological study of various sections or classes in Harlem but to an ideal of extended family life, a life complicated by racial issues and domestic conflict but nonetheless persistent in its domestic outlook.

Critics may see Hughes' insistence on recreating a believable fictionalised narrator as an attempt to mimic the documentary vernacular first person accounts of earlier sociological studies, but this presupposes that Hughes is attempting to render something essentially ethnographic and sociologically sound. The assumption is not so far fetched. According to Weiner: "the fact that Hughes had engaged with the documentary genre in the past enhanced the inclination to read his text as factual

and grant credibility to its narrator. Hughes's Jesse B. Semple (often spelled Simple) sketches appeared as a column in the Chicago Defender and blurred the distinctions between "fiction and the kind of vernacular reportage associated with WPA fieldwork" (Blair 52). (15) Furthermore, Hughes collaborated with photographer Griffith J. Davis, with whom he produced short photojournalistic pieces for Ebony, and was also involved with compiling a volume titled A Pictorial History of the Negro in America (1956) with the acclaimed children's writer Milton Meltzer." In addition, he had "implemented visual images in his collection of poems One-Way Ticket (1949), with Jacob Lawrence's black-and-white illustrations".⁴

What Hughes is really interested in – not dissimilarly to DeCarava's jazz aesthetic (reference DeCarava's later 1996 book on Jazz musicians where the spontaneity of the unposed portraits is grounded by the descriptors inserted by DeCarava himself) is the performative aspect of the vernacular. By ventriloquizing Sister Mary, Hughes is performing a version of Black identity that is not his own, as if the repositioning of the African American perspective might render something ordinarily hidden, or something unaccounted for, certainly something rarely empowered. Again, the idea of visualising black culture cannot co-exist without some accompanying sound -

Insert material from the interviews

⁴ According to Stange, it was the Jesse B. Semple sketches that made DeCarava contact him, the 'humorous conversations between two harlemites, one educated and northern and one southern and 'semple.'" (290) – a version of the double consciousness that marks African American life but also perhaps a forerunner of Sister Mary's rendering of Harlem life.

Is something akin to a vernacular tenor, it is the rhythm of speech, intonation and pace that sets the tone for the photographs just as much as vice versa. Obscuring the boundaries between reportage, documentary study and fictionalisation Hughes is both breaking with his earlier work for Ebony and other projects as a WPA employee but he is also following the gist of the times, namely towards a desire to draw in the viewer/reader through emphatic devices that prove the lyrical potential of the artists' collaboration. Rather than focus on the embedded status of the artists within the community – as we saw with Dorothea Lange and Margaret Bourke White – Hughes takes as the artist's prerogative the ability to mask the documentary voice. (for more on Hughes' attempts to collaborate with Marion Palfi etc. see Blair, p.54-55)

To add to the experimental sense of the project, DeCarava's use of photographic techniques bears many similarities to the concerted efforts during the same period by Robert Frank, efforts that are much more commonly analysed and read as the beginning of an anti-documentary aesthetic. From the beginning of his photographic career, DeCarava was committed to not using flash – like Frank, the idea of to explore social and public situations in a more intimate way, without the sense that subjects were posed or lit for specific purposes, the diametrical opposite to Margaret Bourke White's use of flash in her 1930s documentary work.

Asked by Miller 'Would you comment on your use of lighting, which is so striking in your work', DeCarava responds:

For example, I don't try to alter light, which is why I never use flash. I hate it with a passion because it obliterates what I saw.

When I fall in love with something I see, when something interests me it interests me in the context of the light that it's in. So why should I try to change the light and what I see, to get this "perfect" information laden print? I don't care about that. The reason why my photographs are so dark is that I take photographs everywhere, light or not. If I can see it, I will take a picture of it. If it's dark, so be it.

I take things as I find them because that's the way I am and that's the way I like them. When I went to a jazz club it wasn't lit up like a T.V. studio. It was dark. I accept that.

MILLER: Is an awareness of darkness part of the black aesthetic?

DeCarava: I don't think so. There may be some black photographers who think in that one to one relationship, but I don't.

My subject matter dictates how I print. When my subjects are dark, I have to be concerned about showing that. I tend to work toward a softer tonality. Not only for practical reasons, but because I like soft tones. I am not a contrasty printer. A lot of photographers like this sharp, brilliant, aggressive kind of printing. But I do not.

DECARAVA: What happens is that the subject is reinterpreted through my printing. It is my particular view. The print is my attitude toward the object. The picture has something of me. The question is, "how much of me is there in the photograph?" And I try to get as much of myself as possible in it, because that's what it is about. It's not really about the object as much as it is my attitude toward the object. Sometimes this means I must work contrary to the rules of photography. For instance, I have printed a photograph that was taken in broad daylight, with sunlight streaming

down, and it now looks like it is night. I did that because that's the way it worked for me. It didn't work the other way. I kept printing it over and over, darker and darker, and the next thing you know, I had a night scene.

MILLER: So you alter the light only in the dark room?

DECARAVA: I alter not so much the light, but the image. Whatever is necessary for me to express the feelings I have, I do, for instance this hallway [in photograph]. If I were to print it lighter, it would be more factual, you would get more information. But the photograph isn't so much about the hallway, it was more about the light, and the kind of claustrophobic sense that one had in walking in a hallway like that.

Some of my students in the '60s thought that the darker tones were part of a black aesthetic, but I think that is a little simplistic.

Understandably, DeCarava's print technique would thus both have to make up for the darkness of certain subjects in terms of locations, bars, nightclubs etc. and allow him to experiment with shading and various tonal qualities. If we can thus talk of Decarava as one of the instigators of the post war meta-documentary form – as well as a response to the earnestness of prewar studies, he is also very much the only Black photographer to be included in the new canon of MoMA's established post war photographers. Just as Edward Steichen included a number of Frank's images in the Family of Man exhibition he also chose four of the Flypaper images for inclusion.

DeCarava has always in this sense been used institutionally as a proof of MOMA 's desired affiliation and promotion of Black artists - quote from the press release in 1996 -

“seeking to displace the documentary rhetoric of objectivity with an affective complexity understood as the product of subjective response” Blair (p.55)

the idea of Harlem as a boundary, a liminal space in terms of the New deal aesthetic that preceded it and the new civil rights era that was underway, so politically Harlem becomes a cipher for a boundary but it also becomes a testing ground for a significant change in photographic activity, between formal experimentation and social action. Like Levitt, the massiveness of the urban backdrop and the houses as stage props, directs the gaze to the more lyrical activity of the inhabitants placed before them.

We have the vantage point together with the photographer, and the focus on particular movements becomes purposeful, directed because we are watching events that aesthetically are established as mini dramas, as something existential and beyond the merely documentary.

DeCarava is able to capitalise on the same circumstances as Levitt, namely the demolition zones ostensibly targeted for urban renewal but in many instances left alone as space negotiated and owned by local children. But these places recognizable from the neighborhoods of Harlem are not the only contested sites, for in the book itself there is both an alignment and a desire for the photographs and text to co-exist in the same space . According to Blair :” During the production of Sweet Flypaper of Life, DeCarava wrote privately that ‘the time will come when

photography will cast aside its literary crutch ' ... and 'stand on its own feet as a legitimate means of expression' (p.60) DeCarava to Minor White 21 Nov. 1955, cited in Stange, *Illusion complete within itself* 80.

The ambivalence felt by DeCarava matched with Hughes's excitement over photography and other visual means, might make for a tension that seems unsolved, or even contradictory within the book. And in subsequent interviews DeCarava in particular articulates some of his anxieties regarding being defined 'purely' as a Black Photographer:

MILLER: Would you describe your work in terms of the "documentation of a community" versus the avenue you choose to present your perception of the world?

DECARAVA: A lot of people have identified me as a documentary photographer, because documentation uses a straight, honest approach. Well, I do have that straight approach, I do try to be honest, that is, basically true to myself and to the subject, but I'm not a documentarian, I never have been. I think of myself as poetic, a maker of visions, dreams, and a few nightmares.

MILLER: Is part of a black aesthetic awareness of community?

DECARAVA: Absolutely. There is a sense in the work that the needs of the individual have to be somehow answered. It is true that many black artists are now working in a formalistic European tradition. Abstract, minimalist, whatever the current trend is. But I dare say that those working in these traditions are having difficulty doing it. I don't think they do it well, with exceptions, of course. Other things seem to get in the

way: the need to express social perceptions in a personal way, a desire to reach out and say something, to speak the truth.

MILLER: How would you compare your notion of community survival with that of Walker Evans and other Farm Security Administration photographers who seemed concerned with community survival?

DECARAVA: They were concerned too, but it was an issue of the time. Photography was just coming into its own. It was also a time of economic scarcity, people were hungry. When you're hungry it's very hard to be aesthetic. It's very hard to set aside time and money for materials, hard to think about "loftier" ideas. But to me there is no loftier idea than man itself, nature, and the relationship between the two. But that's another thing.

MILLER: Carrie Weems (photographer, critic) compared your work with Robert Frank's to illuminate a black aesthetic, especially in terms of dark and light tonalities. Do you think this is a fair comparison? Why or why not?

DECARAVA: The difference between Frank and DeCarava has nothing to do with tonality. That is secondary. Frank saw the U.S. as a white person. If I had gone through the same towns side by side with Frank I would have seen something entirely different than he did. He is incapable of seeing what I see. But I can see what he saw. Because I have this duality, I am like a person with two languages. Most black people are. The reason his work was so well received was it showed just what the curators and critics wanted to see. He was critical of America. But only slightly

critical. Not enough to upset the culture, just enough to show that his eyes were open. He reflected the surface quality of some aspects of American life, as opposed to a more fundamental perception.

Whereas there is no doubt that my work reflects life as it is in the black community. My work is critical of America's social values and the interpersonal relationships that grow out of those social values. Frank saw one America, I see another.

Interview Quotes from: "If It Hasn't Been One of Color": An Interview With Roy DeCarava, Ivor Miller , Callaloo, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 847-857

What American that DeCarava actually saw does not – however – necessarily tally with the way in which Hughes managed to get the book itself published. Arguing that “We’ve had so many books about how bad life is, what it would seem to me to do no harm to have along about now confirming its value” – seems to indicate that Hughes was aware that the photographs needed to be spun in an optimistic direction in order to be acceptable to Simon and Schuster in 1955. For this reason perhaps, DeCarava saw the book as ‘a slight detour in my development because I don’ like themes in terms of photography.” (as quoted by Stange, p. 289)

For Sonia Weiner, the shared aesthetic of the two artists is predominantly one of subterfuge and thus subversion from established norms of how African Americans are represented:

“In addition, the two media are linked and interrelated by a passion for subversion: the images created by DeCarava deviate from and subvert standard portrayals of

black Americans in the mainstream media, while the text created by Hughes resorts to trickster tactics, articulating a double-edged message of compliance and subversion.”

Weiner’s point takes as its starting premise that most if not all photographs of African americans by white photographers fall into the general pitfall of documentary photography as set out by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "the place of the documentary subject" is "given in advance," insofar as "a double act of subjugation" occurs, "first in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then re-presents" (176).

While Weiner’s invocation of Solomon Godeau acknowledges the ways in which Sweet Flypaper of life might counter such a repetition of the ‘regime of the image’, it cannot consider the possibility that such regimes of seeing might occasionally be reproduced internally by the African American artists themselves. In other words, the argument has to recreate the binary opposition in order to place all white representations of African americans at a predisposed disadvantage.

Again, invoking Solomon Godeau: The FSA's focus on "individual misfortune" tended to "eclipse or obscure the political sphere, whose determinations, actions, and instrumentalities are not in themselves visual" (Solomon-Godeau 179).

Furthermore, representations of black Americans tended to the stereotypical, as Nicholas Natanson points out, and presented the viewer with types such as the "Noble Primitive" (23), the "Colorful Negro (20) and the "Black Victim" (24).

Weiner by stressing that such things as migratory patterns and work relations are under-exposed by the FSA apparatus. Richard Wright's *12 million Black voices* (1945?) for instance, whilst it renders a vision of black American life that takes both rural and urban circumstances into consideration, nonetheless presents the African American population stereotypically as victims caught in cycles of economic and social destitution and as such undermines whatever point it wishes to make regarding equal rights.

Weiner's argument is thus that a clever 'conceit' runs through the structure of *Sweet Flypaper* a conceit that tries to counter some of the pitfalls outlined by Weiner and Natanson; an 'incongruity that implies that the text was read differently by different audiences. Dual readings were possible because Hughes crafted a dynamic text that accommodated two diverse audiences."

Such a reading can only work if the assumption is that white and black audiences read differently at the time, but it also presupposes that text will always somehow anchor particular meanings to the images and vice versa. In this sense, the argument can only work if the synthesis between the two media is a very deliberate and well thought out one.

As an example of the complex nature of this double-sided discourse, Weiner brings the voice of Sister Mary in line with that of the stereotypical Black mammy figure.

"The mammy's prose is perceived by such readers to be simple and unassuming and forecloses other possible levels of meaning suggested by the images. Contemplating the photo-text, the reader/viewer could privilege the surface level of words spoken by a stereotypical mammy over the possible meanings conveyed by the

accompanying images. Thus, the potential of the images to create affect, to be really seen, is diffused, and an entire dimension of the work is neglected or overlooked. This is compounded by the fact that the voice and tone of Sister Mary's narration is reminiscent of documentary oral histories of blacks, lending it credibility and contributing to its verisimilitude." (18)

Contradicting this tendency towards a form of pretend 'documentary verisimilitude' Weiner nonetheless also establishes the voice of the Mammy figure, that of Sister Mary, as carrying the distinct traits of

"the hyper-ethnicized narrator ... exaggerated to reflect a stereotype ... this exaggeration exists only to "further a positive representation" of their racial group and subtly engage in social critique. This is achieved through a technique of "refracted intention," whereby a clash exists between the outward statement, often made in vernacular dialect, and the inherent underlying complexity of meaning, typically illuminated through the observations of a foil character. The stereotype is evoked only to be refuted." If we think back to Margaret Bourke White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen their Face*, the clash between the outward statements of the dispossessed rural inhabitants and the theatricality or staginess of Bourke White's images has to be taken into account. Here, however, the white journalistic credentials of the two observers, Bourke White and Caldwell, seem to counter such a possibility. What we have then, is another example of the assumption that two Black artists would be able to engage in a social critique complex enough to be read as a form of 'refracted intention' whereas *YHSTF* because of the status of its creators cannot.

The problem with such readings is then that it links the racial credentials of the artists to the potential of the book in political terms. In the case of *Sweet Flypaper*, a complete disavowal of Sister Mary's voice as another instance of the placating Mammy voice, risks leaving the images unmoored, at risk of being similarly refuted as potentially sentimental, stereotypical and so forth, the very thing that DeCarava seeks to counter aesthetically. Weiner argues that this potential impasse, rather than accentuated by the presence of the trickster figure in the form of the Mammy is in fact questioned and subsequently used as a critical tool:

As Gates argues, "to revise the received sign ... is to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning" (47). When a black trickster talks, s/he inevitably engages in signifying, using a double voice that "always entails formal revision" (51), complicating any simplistic notion of meaning. To briefly go back to YHSTF, this mechanism could just as well be seen in operation in the discrepancies between the jocular naïve commentary by the local population and the horrors of regional poverty in evidence in the images. The chief difference, amongst others, is that the voices ventriloquized by Caldwell are multifarious, seeking to take in both Black and White, old and young alike.

In *Sweet Flypaper* on the other hand, Sister Mary engages in signifying practices, manipulating the text so as to suggest one thing and imply another. (19) While Sister Mary's vernacular dialect and outwardly unsophisticated, stereotypical observations might identify her as a mammy figure, familiarity with the trickster's

methods and signifying practices allows one to see into the ambiguities of her language. The narrator's words additionally engage with the images and count on them in the signifying process, inviting them to "have their say" as well. The images serve as a foil to her narrative, creating a space for the "refracted intention" to emerge. Rather than impose Sister Mary's narrative on the images in a limited way that only enables us to see what we already think we know is there, the text asks us to reconsider the words in light of the images.

Another way to put this would be to read Sister Mary's words as legitimising DeCarava's photos, a way to grant them the authority to speak."

Using examples of Sister Mary invoking various stereotypes of the downtrodden woman, the unreliable black man, Weiner goes on to argue that it is precisely the complexity of the portraits in *Sweet Flypaper* that the reading of Sister Mary's vernacular seemingly conformist rhetoric can take on additional meaning.

According to Rampersad, Hughes did not consult DeCarava regarding which images to include in the text from the 300 he had seen, nor did he wish to obtain any facts about them. Rather, Hughes sought to "meditate on the pictures, and write what came into his head" (Rampersad 244). The collaborative effort, therefore, is seemingly one-directional, the photographs constitute the starting point for a narrative that provides a fictional context for photographic material that was probably created under circumstances very different from those in the finished book.