Dreams Deferred:
Growing Up Black and Blue in Langston Hughes’ Lawrence

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Students of Midwestern culture tend to focus on the prefix of this geographical adjectival designation.1 Midway between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, between the North and the South, the region known as the Midwest is situated not only at the center of the United States but it also combines geographical and cultural antitheses. Its resulting character, which, according to James R. Shorridge, is “enigmatic and contradictory,”2 has consequently created for its inhabitants ambiguous and unsettling social circumstances. Perhaps nowhere are these terms more applicable than in the tension and anguish of the Midwest’s racial politics.

Among Midwestern states, Kansas may be considered paradigmatic of the peculiar and painfully contradictory way in which race relations have played out historically. As a border state prior to the Civil War, Kansas was torn between proslavery and antislavery factions, becoming popularly known as “bleeding Kansas.” However, the political dominance of the antislavery faction led Kansas to fight on the side of the North, ultimately suffering the highest rate of fatal casualties in the war of any state in the nation.

When European settlers originally come to Kansas, they sought fulfillment of the promises of the American Dream,3 and the African Americans who followed them after the Emancipation Proclamation, sought the same dream—liberty, equality, and justice, on the one hand, and material prosperity, on the other. In the decades of the 1870s and 1880s, between 16,000 and 40,000 Exodusters arrived in Kansas. Fleeing the economic depression, the sharecropping system, and the racial inequities of the Reconstruction South, they regarded Kansas as the home of John Brown and of dedicated abolitionists, as a state more hospitable than others to African American settlement4—a land where the dream of both political freedom and economic opportunity might be realized. An eye-witness account in the Topeka Commonwealth for May 16, 1879, for example, reported that African Americans, assembled in Nashville in preparation for their departure to Kansas, “shouted at the very top of their voices,... for... the idea of Kansas, which to the colored man of America, is the grandest, greatest, and freest of all the States of the Union.”5

By the early decades of the twentieth century, however, Kansas’ promises of freedom and equality for African Americans had been compromised institutionally, legally, and socially. Although the American Dream remained an ideal, racism persisted as a contradictory, daily reality, creating a tension that Mary W. Burger identifies in the writings of black Midwesterners as a “profound sense of in-betweenness.” She contends that “the uneasy tolerance of middle America,” “its benevolent racism, its patronizing exploitation” is more evident in these narratives than in those of African Americans from other regions of the United States.6

Langston Hughes’ only novel, Not without Laughter (1930), provides a valuable opportunity to examine the mixed and arbitrary signals generated by a society representative of the country’s middle states in the early decades of the twentieth century, a society characterized by “benevolent racism” and “patronizing exploitation.” A coming-of-age narra-
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tive, *Not without Laughter* tells the story of Sandy, a young black boy struggling to discover his identity as he grows into a teenager in Stanton, the pseudonym Hughes chose for Lawrence, Kansas, his own boyhood home. Exacerbating this confusing and difficult time period in the growth for any individual—even confusing and difficult even in the most propitious of circumstances—is the uncertainty of the racial climate in this Kansas town, its "profound sense of in-betweenness."

Reflecting the seven years of growth Hughes spent in Lawrence, Sandy's story begins when he is nine years old and concludes when he is sixteen. Although Hughes himself lived in Lawrence between 1907 and 1914, he has pushed his protagonist's years in Stanton ahead to occur between 1911 and 1918. There are several possible reasons for Hughes' having made this change in dates for his imaginative recreation of his life. It might have helped him, in the process of creating Sandy's story, to distance his protagonist from himself. It also allowed Sandy's story to coincide with the World War I years. Such a strategy would alert his readers to the failure of the dream that this war, in which many black American men, including Sandy's father, participated, made "the world free for democracy." As Sandy's Aunt Harriet exclaims, "This white folk's [sic] war for democracy ain't so hot, nohow!" (300).

A comparison of Hughes' autobiographical account of his Lawrence boyhood in *The Big Sea* (1940) with Arnold Rampersad's monumental biography of Hughes (1986) reveals that although Hughes creates an idealized family for his fictionalized self in *Not without Laughter*, he represents the anguish of racism more accurately in his novel than he does in his autobiography. However, although his novel demonstrates the painful difficulties in the black Kansan boy's search for identity in a racist society, Hughes also describes the nurturing effects of the wisdom, the vision, and the culture of an African American community and family. *Not without Laughter* consequently documents both the persistence of racism in Kansas and the persistence of black Kansans in their efforts to survive and prevail despite the state's ambiguous and arbitrary racial politics, in their efforts to reinterpret the American Dream based on their experiences in a racist society.

Like the majority of Kansas' European settlers, many African Americans came to Kansas to farm with high expectations. Like other Kansas farmers, African Americans found that their engagement with soil, weather, and insects challenged their initial idealism. In what has become almost a cliche of Kansas Studies, the image of Kansas as garden repeatedly confronts the image of Kansas as desert. From the outset of his narrative, Hughes places his young protagonist in a contradictory natural setting; in this setting his attempt to understand reality begins. Hughes' novel suggests, however, that for the African Americans who settled in Kansas, the contradictions manifested by nature were not as devastating to their dreams as those manifested by a racist society. *Not without Laughter* represents nature's destructive actions as unpredictable and uncontrollable, but nonetheless morally neutral, affecting all races, classes, and characters, whereas society's destructive racism, while also unpredictable and uncontrollable, is immoral, targeting black Americans, the poor, the struggling, the vulnerable.

In acknowledgement of nature's decisive role in the lives of most Kansans, Hughes gives the lay of the land in the opening chapters of *Not without Laughter*. Like Frank Baum's classic Kansas story, *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), and Gordon Parks' novel, *The Learning Tree* (1963), which also concerns a young black boy's coming of age in a Kansas town, *Not without Laughter* opens with a description of a tornado's destructive power. Not only does the storm emphatically establish the Kansas setting at the novel's outset, but it also serves as a correlative for the young protagonist's psychological state at the beginning of the novel. As the storm wrecks its havoc, Sandy, temporarily separated from his mother, Annjee, and his beloved grandmother, Aunt Hager, is terrifyingly alone. In his distress and disorientation, he loses his sense of reality: he sees "a piano flat on its back in the grass. Its ivory keys gleamed in the moonlight like grinning teeth, and the strange sight made his little body shiver" (8). The storm forces him to
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face nature’s destructive power as well as the possibility of death as he imagines that his mother “might have been carried off by the great black wind” (10). Hughes’ color imagery in describing the storm implies that for the nine-year-old Sandy, race is not yet a concept, for the white piano keys and the black wind are equally terrifying. Given that the tornado here discriminates neither among races nor classes—an elderly white couple is killed, while Sandy’s grandmother loses her front porch, and a neighbor loses her trees—Hughes suggests from the novel’s opening a common human vulnerability.

Although Hughes uses nature to project an egalitarian human perspective, as Not without Laughter evolves, it becomes apparent, however, that race and class determine how social groups interact with nature. Although nature itself may be neutral, poor African Americans in a Midwestern town, such as Stanton, can not be indifferent to nature. Thus Hughes describes Aunt Hager’s home, the primary setting for twenty-two of the novel’s thirty-three chapters, as integrally related to nature. If the setting of the small garden outside Hager’s home occasionally takes on pastoral overtones through descriptions of varied colorful flowers, bees, sunlight, and fresh air (16, 56), Hughes also makes it evident that her family is dependent on the chickens, vegetables (corn and peas), and apples also grown there. In addition, Sandy and his father, Jimboy, supply fish for supper from the nearby river, “a languid sheet of muddy gold” (59). Hager’s backyard also provides space for her to hang out the washing she does for white families, a play area for Sandy and his friends, and an arena for Jimboy and Harriet to sing and dance, while in the evenings her front porch is the communal gathering place for stories. At night in Stanton, Sandy focuses on the stars, by which Hughes appears to sanctify his struggle.

Hughes qualifies the pastoral possibilities of life in Stanton, however. A train interrupts the quiet that Sandy and Jimboy experience fishing on the river, “pouring out a great cloud of smoke and cinders and shaking the jetty” (59), and the flour mills, visible a mile and a half away, suggest that the town, shifting from its quasi-agrarian basis, is becoming increasingly industrialized. Hughes’ most revealing description of nature’s impact on the lives of his characters occurs in Chapters 12 and 13, “Hard Winter” and “Christmas,” in which winter’s severity causes economic hardships that prove psychologically and physically debilitating to Sandy and his family. Hager expresses her distress during this troubled time, implying that the coming of winter affects poor black women in particular, “‘[W]e ain’t gwine have no money at all. Ain’t no mo’n got through payin’ my taxes good, an’ de interest on ma mortgage, when Annjee get sick here! Lawd, I tells you, po’ colored womens have it hard!’” (135). Sandy is aware of and humiliated at his family’s impoverished condition when he is forced to wear his mother’s shoes to school and when he receives, not the longed-for Golden Flyer, but a crude, homemade sled for Christmas. In these chapters depicting nature’s role in intensifying the economic difficulties of Sandy’s family, Hughes makes nature appear an active antagonist, emphasizing the racial as well as the class inequities maintained in Stanton. He describes Sandy on Christmas Eve passing

... the windows of many white folks’ houses where the curtains were up and warm floods of electric light made bright the cozy rooms. In Negro shacks, too, there was the dim warmth of oil-lamps and Christmas candles glowing. But at home there wasn’t even a holly wreath. And the snow was whiter and harder than ever on the ground. (148)

Racism increasingly becomes a reality in Sandy’s narrative as he struggles to attain a sense of identity and as his struggle shifts from the Kansas landscape to Kansas society. As portrayed in Not without Laughter, small-town Kansas society in the early decades of this century is characterized by a degree of demographic fluidity among racial groups, a fluidity that promises equality and freedom in principle and denies these ideals in fact. Randall B. Woods’ conclusion to his discussion of the “color line” in Kansas towns at the end of the nineteenth century seems applicable to both Lawrence and Stanton in the early part of the twentieth century: “For most white Kansans... a rigid system of Jim Crow was unnecessary. African Americans did not constitute enough of a political or economic threat to warrant total ostracism. Whites were certainly anxious to control the black population, but exclusion or pervasive segregation seemed unsuited to the state’s particular history and circumstances.” Woods thus argues that
whereas “blacks enjoyed a relatively high degree of physical and psychological freedom,” the discrepancy between white Kansans’ awareness of their anti-slavery history and their abstract belief in equality and freedom and their practice of racial prejudice created a racial climate that was “hardly egalitarian” (171).

In Not without Laughter, Hughes reflects the reality of his own boyhood experiences living in the mixed neighborhoods of Lawrence: Sandy and his grandmother in their humble three-room home, as well as his Aunt Tempy and her husband in their much grander abode, live in close proximity to whites. Moving to the Armstrong District of Kansas City, Kansas, as a boy in 1923, Kansas’ first black district court judge, Cordell D. Meeks, indicates that his “playmates included Blacks, Mexicans, Irish, Chinese, Italians, Croatians, Indians, Germans and Jews.... it was common for the multi-racial and multi-national residents, young and old, to visit in each others homes, play and eat together.” Hughes, however, portrays Stanton’s ghetto, “Black Bottom,” which is home to poor blacks, gamblers, and prostitutes, ironically as the only section of town where such equality prevails:

Revealing the anxiety that the proximity of whites in Stanton neighborhoods caused blacks, Hughes describes Hager as cautioning Jimboy and Harriet against playing music “‘larmin’ de white neighbors.’” However, he implies the undeniable vigor of such music, sarcastically hinting at the absurdity of racial barriers in American communities: “the sun had scarcely fallen below the horizon before the music had begun to float down the alley, over back fences and into kitchen-windows where nice white ladies sedately washed their supper dishes” (46). Although Hager lives across the street from white families, Hughes, in controlled understatement, explains that as the children of these families “were frequently inclined to say ‘Nigger,’” Hager forbids Sandy to play with them. Harriet’s childhood experience in playing with white neighbors results in her keen “discomfort in the presence of whiteness,” a profound distrust of them, and an unmitigated hatred and anger toward them:

From the beginning of Not without Laughter, Hughes makes his readers conscious of race as a social construct, which he, as writer, determines to undermine. In the opening pages, he refers to “black Aunt Hager and her brown grandson” (6), shortly afterwards describing Buster, “a small ivory-white Negro child” (16), Jimboy, a “yellow fellow” (17), Willie-Mae, a “coal-colored little girl” (18). In continuing to assign each character in Not without Laughter a color categorization, Hughes appears to be replicating the behavior of an American readership that relentlessly judges and classifies people racially. Hughes deconstructs the rigidity and ranking of these color classifications in several ways, however, thereby demonstrating the impossibility of monolithic racial categories of black and white and insisting throughout his novel on the diversity of individual people within ethnic groups.

Above all, he seeks to subvert a monolithic cultural concept of “blackness,” reveling throughout Not without Laughter in a kaleidoscopic variety of African American skin tones. At the dance hall, for example, Hughes describes “a patent-leather black boy,” “a brown-skinned girl,” “the fat orange-colored man,” “a biscuit-colored little girl,” “a mahogany-brown boy,” “a slick-haired ebony youth” (84–87); later “a little autumn-leaf brown with switching skirts” calls to “a dark-purple man grinding down the center of the floor with a yellow woman” (88); he addresses, “you high yallers, you jelly-beans, you pinks and pretty daddies, among you sealskin
browns, smooth blacks, and chocolates-to-the-bone,” and notes “Faces like circus balloons—
lemon-yellow, coal-black, powder-grey, ebony-black, blue-black faces; chocolate, brown, orange,
tan, creamy-gold faces” (90–91). Hughes reserves pejorative color associations for those self-
righteous and authoritarian African American characters in his novel, such as Sandy’s Sunday
School teacher, who has a “roach-colored face” (117), and Mr. Siles, who is “a paste-colored
man” (238). He is also conscious that Stanton’s African Americans, having internalized America’s
derogatory racial classifications, participate in perpetuating them. Thus Hughes describes not
only Hager’s fear that dark-skinned Annjee will be abandoned by lighter-skinned Jimboy (17),
but also the brutal rejection of a black woman by a “mustard-colored man” for a “girl of
maple-sugar brown” (95–96). The racist folk-rhyme—”‘High yallers, draw nigh! Brown-skins,
come near! . . . But black gals, stay where you are!’” (89) sung out at the dance hall—proves
particularly painful to black women in Hughes’ novel.

Through the character of Buster, Hughes suggests the absurdity of racial categorization
based on skin color and genetic features. Sandy’s playmate has “straight golden hair . . . eyes
blue and doll-like and he in no way resembled a colored youngster; but he was colored” (16).
As he grows up, Buster’s mother complains that she has “‘the hardest time keeping that boy
colored! He goes on just like he was white’” (168), and Buster himself anticipates toward the
end of the novel that he intends to be “‘in some big town passing for white, making money,
and getting along swell. And I won’t need to be smart, either—I’ll be ofay!’” (259).

Buster’s final words indicate Hughes’ consciousness of the social construction of white-
ness: it appears a social given that whites are rich and powerful. “White folks,” similarly per-
ceived by Jimboy and Harriet in the novel, are consequently the source of all oppression and
injustice. Annjee, who slaves as a domestic for white Mrs. Rice, generalizes more gently: “‘White
folks sure is a case!’” (62). The hatred, anger, and disdain of these poor blacks for white
people is contrasted with middle-class Tempy’s adulation of whiteness, however; she believes
that “Colored people certainly needed to come up in the world . . . up to the level of white
people—dress like white people, talk like white people, think like white people—and then
they would no longer be called ‘niggers’” (240). In Hughes’ narrative, although his sympathy
clearly lies with the sufferings of his lower-class characters as a result of racism, his representa-
tion of multiple perceptions of whiteness and white people suggests that like blackness, it, too,
is a fluctuating category. Thus Not without Laughter demonstrates that neither whiteness nor
blackness is an absolute; as social constructs, both are permeable and variable. Consequently
the racial fluidity of Stanton provides Hughes with a site from which to bring his readers, black and
white, to consider such racial constructions as Sandy ponders: “Buster was white and colored
both. But he didn’t look like he was colored. What made Buster not colored?” (173).

Growing up in Kansas where society presents him with contradictory and confusing racial
information, Sandy thus struggles to discover his own racial identity. In a lengthy sequence,
Hughes presents the quandaries of his protagonist regarding his racial identity as well as the
possibility of assigning values to race: Sandy

. . . wondered sometimes whether if he washed and washed his face and hands, he would ever
be white. Someone had told him once that blackness was only skin-deep. . . . And would he
ever have a big house with electric lights in it, like his Aunt Tempy—but it was mostly white
people who had such fine things, and they were mean to colored. . . . Some white folks were
nice, though. Earl was nice at school, but not the little boys across the street, who called him
“nigger” every day . . . and not Mrs. Rice, who scolded his mother . . . Aunt Harrie didn’t like
white folks at all. . . . But Jesus was white and wore a long, white robe . . . How ugly African
colored folks looked in the geography—with bushy heads and wild eyes! Aunt Hager said her
mother was an African, but she wasn’t ugly and wild; neither was Aunt Hager; neither was
little dark Willie-Mae, and they were all black like Africans. . . . And Reverend Braswell was as
black as ink, but he knew God. . . . God didn’t care if people were black, did He? (172–73)

Even as Hughes destabilizes absolute racial categorizations through Sandy’s questions, his ques-
tions simultaneously embody the boy’s growing understanding of the difficulties of asserting
absolute racial categories as well as his growing socialization to accept and embrace himself as
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In addition to recognizing the absurdity and the injustice of racial categorizations in *Not without Laughter*, Hughes reflects on the realities of an endemic racism in Stanton. The novel verifies Woods’ assertion that “In social organizations and institutions regarded as nonessential to the individual’s health and safety, white Kansans tended to draw the color line rigidly” (166). Churches, the YMCA, swimming pools, restaurants, hotels, and movie theaters are represented as emphatically segregated in *Not without Laughter* as they were in Hughes’ Lawrence. Rampersad writes that

By the time of Langston Hughes’s childhood, all blacks were barred from formerly open churches, hotels, restaurants, and other social establishments. In one restaurant, blacks ate at the end of the lunch counter furthest from public view, blocked off additionally by a wooden barrier. At the theater they were restricted to the back of the balcony—“Coon Hill,” or the “Buzzards’ Roost,” or “Nigger Heaven.”

The only nonsegregated institution in Lawrence during Hughes’ boyhood was the Carnegie Library, which led him to discover, as he explained in his autobiography, “the wonderful world of books—where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas.” In *Not without Laughter*, Sandy’s discovery of books comes late in his coming-of-age saga when he is living with his Aunt Tempy and attending junior high school. Although he has read fairy tales as a child, it is not until Chapter 24, “A Shelf of Books,” that he begins to read Shakespeare and Melville at school as well as Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and W. E. B. Du Bois at home. Swayed by Tempy’s enthusiasm for Du Bois but unable to forget his grandmother’s endorsement of Booker T. Washington and impressed by *Up From Slavery*, which he checks out from the library, Sandy concludes that “they are both great men” (245).

For Sandy, school is a particularly painful part of his coming-of-age experience. For white boys, such as Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield, who have come of age in American fiction, educational authoritarianism is also traumatizing. However, for a black Kansas boy, such as Sandy, who, unlike these white characters, actually enjoys studying, the experiences of racism in the classroom exacerbate the problems of self-discovery. As Sandy’s family considers education to be the means by which not only he as an individual will prosper, but also the means by which all African Americans will advance, the pressure to succeed at school is particularly intense for him.

In 1879, a Republican legislature in Kansas, responding to popular sentiment, gave legal status to segregated schooling, allowing school boards in first-class towns and cities (those with populations of at least 15,000, such as Lawrence) to establish separate elementary schools for black children while prohibiting segregated secondary schools. Paul Wilson points out that because most African Americans “lived in cities of the first class and most black students who went to school did not go beyond the elementary grades[,]” “this . . . legislation permitted the racial segregation of most of the blacks who went to school . . . That 1879 law remained the law in Kansas until 1954, when it was struck down in *Brown v. Board of Education.*”

When Sandy leaves his segregated elementary school for an integrated fifth grade, in a school with no black teachers and only a few black students, for the first time he encounters institutionalized racism. In a scene echoing an incident from Hughes’ own life, Sandy’s new teacher, after seating the white children in the class, demands that Sandy and the two other black children take seats in the back of the classroom. Although Hughes himself was enraged by this plan of segregated seating, he represents Sandy as being grieved: “he was ashamed of crying because he was no longer a small boy. But the teacher's putting the colored children in the back of the room made him feel like crying” (126). Hughes allows the mother of one of the black girls in the novel to express his own rage: “‘Look at ma chile settin’ back there behind all de white ones,’ screamed the sulphur-yellow woman. ‘An’ me payin’ as much taxes as anybody! You treats us colored folks like we ain’t citizenzens—that’s what you does’” (158).

*Not without Laughter* also demonstrates that, in addition to schooling, work was a neces-
sity for a black boy, especially one whose family was poor. Woods points out that at the beginning of the twentieth century all types of skilled and unskilled labor were available to black Kansans although they were excluded from white-collar jobs (167). Only white men in Not without Laughter can command positions at all levels. Throughout his novel, Hughes depicts Sandy as working at a variety of jobs, first helping his grandmother by collecting and delivering white families’ laundry, then as a newsboy, a barber-shop sweeper, a hotel errand boy, a shoe-shine boy, a bookstore stock boy, graduating in the conclusion to become an elevator boy in Chicago. Each of these jobs Sandy perceives as an advancement and as a means for supplementing his family’s scanty income. Hughes makes it clear, however, that although Sandy was able to make incremental moves ahead, many African American men were locked for a life-time working in the position of “boy.”

In a hotel shining shoes, Sandy experiences raw racism for the first time alone in the novel. Surrounded by a group of white men who have been drinking and telling obscene jokes about black women, he is confronted by a Southerner who demands that he dance:

“O, you’re one of them stubborn Kansas coons, heh? . . . You Northern darkies are dumb as hell, anyhow! . . . Now down in Mississippi, whar I come from, if you offer a nigger a dime, he’ll dance his can off . . . an’ they better dance . . . Up here you-all’ve got darkies spoilt, believin’ they’re somebody.” (213–14)

Not only does Sandy refuse to dance to the white man’s tune, but he throws his boot-black box in the red-neck’s face and escapes. If he loses his pay, the job at the hotel, and his equipment, he nonetheless achieves a sense of identity through his assertion of self. No longer a boy, he will not be degraded as a coon or a Jim Crow figure. If he comes to dance, it will be to his own personal music or to the music of the African American community.

At the end of the novel Sandy’s elevator job is a powerful metaphor for the lives of most black men; he goes up, only to come down,

up-down—up-down—up-down interminably, carrying white guests. . . . The same flow of people week after week—fashionable women, officers, business men; the fetid air of the elevator-shaft, heavy with breath and the perfume of bodies; the same doors opening at the same unchanging levels hundreds of times. (291)

Yet when the black boy becomes a man in Kansas, there are not even opportunities for employment as steady as the suffocating and monotonous work in the elevator shaft. For most of the black men in Not without Laughter education has not been an option, and hope of prospering economically is limited. Jimboy has difficulty both finding and holding jobs and is hence either dependent on his wife’s wages or compelled to leave Stanton to search for employment in metropolitan areas. His unemployment is explicitly correlated with the historical fact that newly arrived immigrants competed with African Americans for jobs and that white unions in Kansas kept African Americans out of work (74). Despite being a skilled bricklayer, Jimboy is bumped from his job, and although he continues to seek employment, he is represented to his young son by his grandmother as epitomizing a restless, lazy, irresponsible black man.

Some black men in Not without Laughter are self-employed as handymen or barbers, which gives them a modicum of economic independence. Sandy’s uncle, Mr. Stiles, a mail-clerk for the railroad, who owns several rental properties on the side, is the most successful African American man Sandy knows. Yet Hughes implies that his success is achieved at a cost, for he is depicted as a social climber, a slumlord, and a capitalist in the making, who has separated himself from the African American community. Sandy feels definitively that he “wouldn’t want to be like . . . [his aunt’s] husband, dull and colorless, putting all his money away in a white bank, ashamed of colored people” (292–94). Not without Laughter also makes it clear that in Kansas, when economic depression strikes, poor people in general are affected, with African American men—no doubt the last hired and first fired—most hard hit; as one character says, “so many colored men’s out o’ work here, wid Christmas comin’, it sho’ is too bad!” (133).
Although Sandy's identity becomes increasingly associated with his educational achievement and with his subsequent opportunities for employment, for women in *Not without Laughter* racist practices make education a dead end and work endless. The black women of Hughes' novel are represented as competent, conscientious, sensitive, and, above all, as cultural and spiritual centers, but only Sandy's Aunt Tempy has completed a high-school education, and all have menial jobs serving whites as washerwomen, waitresses, factory workers, cleaning ladies, secretaries. Hughes' young protagonist seems especially conscious of the back-breaking work Hager does at the washtubs and ironing board, and he is infuriated to hear his hot, hard-working mother reprimanded by the tall, cool white woman in whose kitchen she serves. Hughes makes it evident that Hager's labor causes the exhaustion that contributes to her death, a climactic moment in Sandy's life.

Although Tempy reads extensively and appreciates the works and principles of Du Bois, under the illusion that by doing so she elevates her people, she uses her learning primarily to imitate the white middle class and to mock African American culture and the African American community in Stanton. Only Sandy's Aunt Harriet refuses to do the white world's work. She leaves school, and after trying several underpaid and humiliating jobs as a domestic, an assembly-line worker in a canning factory, and a waitress at Stanton's white country club, she becomes a prostitute in the Bottoms and a singer and dancer for a travelling show. Although Hughes describes Harriet as a determined and gifted performer and indicates that the vaudeville shows, cabarets, and black entertainment circuits did provide opportunities for African Americans to succeed as entertainers, he converts Harriet's story into an economic fairy tale by transforming her at the end of his novel into the "Princess of the Blues," an acclaimed and successful Chicago entertainer.

Thus in Hughes' Stanton, employment opportunities for African American men and women prove bleak indeed. Although Sandy may admire his hard-working elders, he does not want to be bound by their limited options. Thus rejecting his father's refusal to work, on the one hand, and his uncle's compulsion to work, on the other, Sandy determines to leave his elevator job and return to school. Hughes emphasizes, however, that while education may help Sandy, without Harriet's financial assistance, made possible by her success as an entertainer, Sandy would be unable to resume his education.

Confronted with racial discrimination in education, in employment, in social institutions, in public facilities, and on a daily basis in his Kansas community, how does a young black boy such as Sandy develop a healthy sense of self? As in many African American autobiographies, this self-discovery is contingent upon his evolving awareness of himself as belonging to a community, a community that has a knowledge of the past, an aesthetic for the present, and a vision for the future.

The historical memory of the family and the African American community in *Not without Laughter* is long, encompassing slavery and Reconstruction as well as the insults and injustices of the present. This memory, transmitted through story, becomes a basis for affirming the community as well as educating its young members. A significant pause in the novel's linear movement and Sandy's growth occurs whenever Hughes presents an elder's recollection of an episode from the past. Harriet chants a litany of grievances, revealing the cumulative effect of racial injustices. In one painful memory, she recalls a school excursion to the theater to see an educational film on the undersea world; deeply immersed in "the strange wonders of the ocean depths" (77), she is brought back to Stanton's racial reality by an usher's insistence that she move to the back of the theater and by the subsequent indifference of her teacher and classmates to this inequity. Sis Johnson's memory of an African American community's terrifying torching by whites envious of the blacks' increasing prosperity and the blacks' subsequent flight occurs early in the novel in Chapter 7, "White Folks"; its moral is provided by Harriet, who testifies:

"So that's the way white people feel. . . . They wouldn't have a single one of us around if they could help it. It don't matter to them if niggers have only the back row at the movies. It don't matter to them when they hurt our feelings without caring and treat us like slaves down
South and like beggars up North. No, it don't matter to them. . . . White folks run the world, and the only thing colored folks are expected to do is work and grin and take off their hats as though it don't matter. . . . O, I hate 'em! . . . I hate white folks.” (78)

Harriet’s and Sis Johnson’s stories, however, are balanced by Hager’s diverse recollections.

According to Hughes’ account of his boyhood in The Big Sea (1940), his grandmother told him stories in which “always life moved, moved heroically toward an end. Nobody ever cried in my grandmother’s stories. They worked, or schemed, or fought. But no crying.” The stories through which Hager teaches, however, suggest a greater variety of genres and more diverse opportunities for heroism: “Slavery-time stories, myths, folk-tales like the Rabbit and the Tar Baby; the war, Abe Lincoln, freedom, visions of the Lord; years of faith and labor, love and struggle filled Aunt Hager’s talk of a summer night” (177). The only one of Hager’s stories that Hughes gives us in detail is centrally positioned in the novel in Chapter 16, “Nothing But Love.” Rather than a story of physical heroism, it concerns the grief, insanity, and suicide of Hager’s young white mistress during slavery and emphasizes the necessity of an emotional heroism. In stark juxtaposition to Sis Johnson’s story of arson and pillage and the stories he hears from his father and his Aunt Harriet, which evoke anger and hatred of whites, Hager’s story concludes that “there ain’t no room in de world fo’ nothin’ mo’n love. I knows, chile! Every’thing there is but lovin’ leaves a rust on yo’ soul” (182). She summarizes her moral vision, with an apology for slavery’s atrocities, prefatory to telling the story to Sandy:

“...These young ones what’s comin’ up now, they calls us ole fogies, an’ handkerchief heads, an’ white folks’ niggers ‘cause we don’t get mad an’ rarin’ up in arms like they does ‘cause things is kinder hard, but, honey, when you gets old, you knows they ain’t no sense in gettin’ mad an’ sourin’ you’ soul with hatin’ peoples. White folks is white folks, an’ colored folks is colored, an’ neither one of ‘em is bad as t’other makes out. . . . They talks ‘bout slavery time an’ they makes out now like it were de most awfullest time what ever was, but don’t you believe, it chile, ‘cause it weren’t all that bad.” (177–78)

Hager’s story thus demands a heroism based on endurance, faith, and tolerance.

Sitting on his grandmother’s porch, Sandy listens to members of his family and friends recall episodes of racial discrimination and interaction in their personal lives, each responding to the pain of their experiences in a different way. Consequently, the stories-within-the-story convey multiple messages to Sandy. Through his elders’ stories, Sandy is prepared for the racism he will encounter in school, in work, and at nearly every social turn. Thus, when he and a group of African American children are prevented from entering a newly opened amusement park, despite dressing up in their finest clothes and despite free admission for all Stanton children having been widely advertised, his elders have several responses—outrage, ironic laughter, resignation. Sandy’s simple response, expressed to his grandmother, is simply an accurate identification of Kansas’ endemic racism: “I guess Kansas is getting like the South. . . . They don’t like us here either, do they?” (200). That this clear-sighted recognition of the betrayal of democratic ideals should be the basis for a boy’s growth, Hughes’ narrative implies, is necessary, but appalling. As Sandy acquires a knowledge of the horrors of racial injustice, however, he also learns of his people’s triumph and survival through diverse strategies, including their determination to remember their complex history through story. The vivid language in which the tellers communicate their tales and their vivid presence as they tell their tales are testimony to Sandy and to the reader of their strength and survival.

In addition to stories, music and dance in Not without Laughter also provide Sandy with an aesthetic for survival. In Stanton, music is diverse, appealing to various groups in the African American community, and always life-sustaining. Throughout his novel Hughes refers to the significance, not only of the gospels and the spirituals of the African American church, but also of rag-time, jazz, and the blues and of the dances this music inspired. Repeatedly, he indicates their interplay in African American cultural history as well as in Sandy’s growing awareness. Thus, he describes August evenings in Stanton when “the mourning songs of the Christians could be heard rising from the Hickory Woods while the profound syncopation of the minstrel
band blare from Galoway’s Lots, strangely mingling their notes of praise and joy” (99–100).

Hager may regard the blues as the devil’s own music, but Hughes explains that when Jimboy “took his soft-playing guitar and picked out spirituals and old-time Christian hymns on its sweet strings, Hager . . . sang and rocked with the rest of them” (32). Hughes stresses that Hager’s spirituals share harmonics with the blues and have similar effects on both singer and listener. The spiritual she sings to Sandy as an answer to his question about white hatred, following his rejection from the amusement park, leads the two of them to identify with the suffering of all African Americans and with their capacity to survive: “Sandy, as he stood beside his grandmother on the porch, heard a great chorus out of the black past—singing generations of toil-worn Negroes, echoing Hager’s voice as it deepened and grew in volume: There’s a star fo’ you an’ me, / Stars beyond!” (200).

Ragtime, jazz, blues, and dance, however, belong to the twentieth-century present that Hughes depicts in Not without Laughter. At the turn of the century several talented musicians were composing and playing ragtime in St. Louis and Kansas City, with Kansas City increasingly becoming a center for African American music. Commenting on the growing importance of Kansas City in the early twentieth century to the development of African American music, Ross Russell writes:

There was more music in Kansas City than had been heard in America since the gilt palaces and funky butt dance halls of the Storyville section of New Orleans closed their doors at the beginning of World War I. You heard it on the sidewalks from blues singers, fresh in from one of the cities of the Southwest and self-accompanied on a twelve-string guitar, and from blind gospel shouters jingling their coins to four-four time in a tin cup nailed to a white cane. . . . Kansas City was a storehouse of vintage jazz talent . . . . There were more jobs for musicians than anywhere else in America, and more bands . . . . A remarkable feature of music in Kansas City was that nobody told the musicians what to play or how to play it. Jazzmen were free to create as the spirit moved them. So long as the music was danceable and lively and the visiting firemen were satisfied, the gangsters who ran the clubs did not interfere. As the result of favoring conditions—steady work, isolation, a concentration of talent, and almost total lack of commercial pressures—Kansas City had developed a jazz style of its own.25

Ben Sidran argues that Kansas City became “the blues capital of the world” during the period between 1927 and 1938 because “unlike the cities of the urban North, [it] was both geographically and sociologically close to the origins of black oral tradition.”26

Kansas City was close to Southern juke joints, where in the early twentieth century, according to Lynne Fauley Emery, “despite the ban of the church and the chagrin of the civic leaders, the Negro continued to dance.”27 New music and dance styles spread from the South to the Midwest and West through travelling tent shows, such as Hughes describes in Chapter 9, “Carnival.” These shows featured African American music and dance performances along with minstrel and vaudeville shows. The Theater Owners’ Booking Association (TOBA—also known as Tough On Black Asses) arranged for African American groups, according to a 1921 Chicago Defender account, to play on stage and in dance pavilions “from Galveston to Jacksonville and from Cleveland to Kansas City.”28 Hughes explicitly indicates that Jimboy, home from his wanderings, teaches Harriet, home from the work she despises, the music and dance he has learned in the South and brought to Kansas:

he would amuse himself by teaching her the old Southern songs, the popular rag-time ditties, and the hundreds of varying verses of the blues that he would pick up in the big dirty cities of the South. . . . He taught her the parli me lá, too, and a few other movements peculiar to Southern Negro dancing, and sometimes together they went through the buck and wing and a few taps. (50)

Hughes’ description of “BENBOW’S FAMOUS KANSAS CITY BAND” in Chapter 8, “Dance,” reveals his awareness not only of the Southern origins of Kansas City jazz—Galveston, Houston, Birmingham, Atlanta, New Orleans—but also of the ragtime origins of jazz, “an exaggerated rag-time” (94).
Just as Hughes might have first learned about African American music and dance from personal connections in his Lawrence neighborhood, Sandy’s appreciation for African American music and dance originates from the evenings spent at home with his father playing the guitar and Harriet singing and dancing. Despite his Baptist grandmother’s attempt to discourage him, the boy insists on watching and listening. In “Dance,” when Sandy accompanies his music-struck and dance-crazy aunt to the dance hall, Hughes indicates that the boy’s understanding of both African American music and dance are deepened. Placing “Dance,” immediately after “White Folks,” he proposes that music and dance, because of their pulsating, vitalizing, even ecstatic, appeal, are aesthetic responses to desperation, weariness, and loneliness if not solutions to the debilitating effects of racism.

In this chapter, Hughes heaps up adjectives, phrases, questions, and shifting tenses, interrupting his extraordinary exposition with blues lyrics and onomatopoeic expressions to describe the impact made by Benbow’s jazz band “in a hot, crowded little dance-hall in a Kansas town on Friday night” (94). The reader, like the young Sandy, consequently experiences the contradictory and complex rhythms of the dance and music:

Wah! Wah! Wah!... The cornet laughed with terrible rudeness. Then the drums began to giggle and the banjo whined an insulting leer... while the cynical banjo covered unplumbable depths with a plinking surface of staccato gaiety, like the sparkling bubbles that rise on deep water over a man who has just drowned himself. (92)

Four homeless, plug-ugly niggers, that’s all they were, playing mean old loveless blues.... Playing the heart out of loneliness with a wide-mouthed leader, who sang everybody’s troubles until they became his own.... And for a moment nothing was heard save the shuf-shuf-shuffle of feet and the immense booming of the bass-drum like a living vein pulsing at the heart of loneliness. (94–95)

Although the lyrics of “Easy Rider,” “St. Louis Blues,” as well as other blues songs, which Hughes quotes in his narrative, evoke loneliness, cruelty, and grief, Hughes attempts to suggest through his own poetic language that the music’s transcendent and life-sustaining power balance the words.

Toward the end of Not without Laughter, Sandy ponders the validity of his uncle’s, Mr. Stiles’, observation that blacks will be enslaved by poverty and racism as long as they remain “clowns, jazzers, a band of dancers.” He quickly recognizes the distortion of his uncle’s logic and concludes that blacks are clowns, singers, “dancers because of their poverty;... because of their suffering;... [because they are] captured in a white world” (293). He then extends this perception of music and dance as a reaction to poverty and racism to a recognition of the liberating potential of music and dance: blacks are “Dancers of the spirit, too. Each black dreamer a captured dancer of the spirit” who might consequently dance “far beyond the limitations of their poverty” (293). Thus, in Hughes’ vision of a black boy’s coming of age in Kansas in the early decades of the twentieth century, story, music, and dance provide not only a creative response to the destructive power of racism but also a cultural and communal affirmation.

In Sandy’s growing up, the role of black men, while influential, is secondary to that of the women in his family. His father, Jimboy, is largely absent. When he does return home, he is associated primarily with easy times—fishing and carnivals, singing and sexuality—although his stories do introduce Sandy to the difficulties of an African American man’s finding work, and his music introduces him to its affirming possibilities. On one occasion, Jimboy takes a more direct hand in his moral and social education, disciplining him for lying, placing his lesson in a specifically racial context: “White folks get rich lyin’ and stealin’—and some niggers gets rich that way, too—but I don’t need money if I got to get it dishonest, with a lot o’ lies trailing behind me, and can’t look folks in the face. It makes you feel dirty!” (119–20).

Although Jimboy vanishes except as a memory for Sandy, as he grows, he finds father surrogates in the male communities of Stanton’s African American barber shop and pool hall. Here, through the rhetorical styles of discussion and the variety of subject matter, Sandy’s
knowledge of the division between genders in the African American community as well as his sense of the world and the power of words are extended. Of the particular masculine vitality of the barber shop and its “man-talk,” Hughes writes:

the barber-shop then was a man's world, and, on Saturdays, while a dozen or more big laborers awaited their turns, the place was filled with loud man-talk and smoke and laughter. Baseball, Jack Johnson, racehorses, white folks, Teddy Roosevelt, local gossip, Booker Washington, women, labor prospects in Topeka, Kansas City, Omaha, religion, politics, women, God—discussion and arguments all afternoon and far up into the night. (186–87)

At the pool hall, these discussions are framed rhetorically as “arguments...—boastings, prov-ing and fending; or telling of exploits with guns, knives, and razors, with cops and detectives, with evil women and wicked men; out-bragging and out-lying one another, all talking at once” (251). Here, in the phrase that Hughes takes for his novel's title, he learns that “No matter how belligerent or lewd their talk was, or how sordid the tales they told—of dangerous pleasures and strange perversities—these black men laughed... no matter how hard life might be, it was not without laughter” (251). He learns from the rhetoric and laughter of these men, as he does from the stories he hears at home and the music and dance he has come to cherish, the necessity of discovering a means for addressing the contradictions of his life as an African American in Kansas.

From the outset of Not without Laughter, Hughes makes it apparent that if Sandy comes to develop a masculine perspective in the course of his growing up, he not only begins his coming of age in a matrifocal setting, but the women in his family continue to have the dominant influence on him. In his autobiography, The Big Sea, Hughes explains that in writing Not without Laughter, he sought explicitly to counter his personal experiences of growing up lonely and isolated from others: “I wanted to write about a typical Negro family in the Middle West, about people like those I had known in Kansas. . . [however,] I created around myself what seemed to me a family more typical of Negro life in Kansas than my own had been” (303–304). Sandy's “more typical” Kansas family is comprised of four women: his grandmother, Hager, and her three daughters—Tempy, Annjee, and Harriet. Each of Hager's daughters cares for Sandy, the only grandchild, and seeks to nurture him according to her own values—Tempy, in assuming responsibility for him following Hager's death, insists on educating him not only to read, but also to recognize the superiority of white culture; Annjee, his mother, struggles to care for him physically, providing for him by working in several menial jobs; Harriet, the youngest sister, introduces him to the wonders of African American music and dance and through her work as a singer provides the financial means for his continued formal education. Challenged throughout Not without Laughter to learn from diverse and contradictory sources in his society, Sandy confronts an ongoing challenge within his own family, as represented by the divergent values and perspectives of his grandmother, his mother, and his two aunts. Hughes indicates that initially Sandy, who loves them all, with the exception of Tempy, keeps them separated in his life (105), but that in coming of age, he must come to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their different values and to reconcile them.

Above all, it is Hager's words and deeds, with which Hughes begins his narrative, that follow Sandy beyond her death and beyond Stanton. His memories of her values and vision give a shape not only to the collective past, but to his future and the future of the African American community as well. Hard-working, long-suffering, and deeply loving, she is represented by Hughes as the moral and spiritual center of the community and the novel. Her response to the ambiguities and arbitrariness of Midwestern racism is to hold on to the American Dream of equality, freedom, and prosperity for all. With an unwaveringly clear vision of justice, she herself manages to regard all human beings equally. Hughes implies that within her racially mixed neighborhood, despite her own experiences in slavery and Sis Johnson's, Harriet's, and Sandy's experiences with racism, she develops a rare capacity for forgiveness. If the realities of Kansas racism, as expressed by Sis Johnson, Harriet, and Jimboy, and as experienced by Sandy himself, prevent him from being unable to imitate his grandmother, the strength of her
vision nonetheless works to instill in him a sense of black identity with which to deal with the unsettled present and a sense of hope with which to face the uncertain future.

Hager is described in *Not without Laughter*’s opening chapter as a healer: “All the neighborhood, white or colored, called [Sandy’s] grandmother when something happened” (9). She tends to the distraught relatives of the wealthy white victims of the tornado as she had tended to her distressed slave mistress during the Civil War. (Hughes also describes “Old white Dr. McMillions, beloved of all the Negroes in Stanton” as crossing the color line to heal the sick [113].) She also cares for her elderly black neighbor, for orphaned children, and for Sandy during his boyhood illnesses. Hager’s generous spirit is further reinforced in the second chapter when she invites her neighbors in to dinner, saying, “‘Help yo’self! We ain’t got much, but such as ‘tis, you’re welcome’” (20). Jimboy raises her ire and criticism, but she nonetheless welcomes him into her home.

Crisis and change occur in Sandy’s life with the death of his grandmother, spelling both physical and psychological upheaval for him. Through her death, Hughes, on the one hand, implies the passing of an older moral order, which takes its strength in part from the African American church. On the other hand, he demonstrates that Sandy’s memory of his grandmother’s generosity and love as well as of her vision of equality and for his personal achievement are the basis for hope that allows the boy to overcome the confusions of Midwestern racism and to approach the future with confidence.

Throughout *Not without Laughter*, Hughes portrays Sandy as a “dreamy little boy” similar to the boy he himself was later remembered as being. Sandy dreams as he fishes, as he lies in bed, and in his dreams Hughes suggests that Sandy attempts to resolve the nagging contradictions in his life, beginning with a recognition of the differences between “the sad raggy music” of the dance hall and “a woman shout[ing] for Jesus in the Gospel tent” (114) and continuing with questions about race and sin (172–73). Deprived of his grandmother’s presence and guidance following her death, Sandy nonetheless becomes acutely and increasingly conscious of Hager’s dream for him and of his responsibility to fulfill it in the final chapters of *Not without Laughter*.

Central to Hager’s dream is the dual concept that he can, through education, become a good and great man, thereby, becoming “a credit to the race.” Referring to herself in the third person, Aunt Hager tells Sandy that “‘She’s gonna make a fine man out o’ you fo’ de glory o’ God an’ de black race. You gwine to ‘mount to something in this world’” (193). Hager holds up specific models of successful African American men for Sandy—Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Jack Johnson.

From Harriet Jacobs’ concluding statement in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1865) regarding the fact that her dream of a home remained unfulfilled to Hughes’ sequence of poems, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), Martin Luther King’s impassioned sermon, “I Have a Dream” (1963), and the monumental photographic exhibition of black American women *I Dream a World* (1988), black Americans have been engaged in reformulating their versions of the American Dream. With references to dreams proliferating in the conclusion of *Not without Laughter*, Hughes demonstrates that the American Dream, as it plays out in the landscape of Sandy’s Kansas boyhood, evokes conflicting responses. In Chicago, “the great center where all the small-town boys in the whole Middle West wanted to go” (278), Sandy is “vaguely disappointed. No towers, no dreams come true! Where were the thrilling visions of grandeur he had held?” (281). He remembers the confusing diversity of dreams that had guided the lives of his mother and her two sisters in his Kansas boyhood: Tempy’s pride, her desire not to be a “nigger” and her consequent pursuit of property and “white admiration” (240); Annjee’s obsessional love, her desire not to be rejected by Jimboy, and her consequent pursuit of him; Harriet’s assertion of self, her desire not to be enslaved by either religious doctrines or racism, and her consequent pursuit of pleasure and a successful career as singer and dancer. If he realizes some value in each of these alternative visions, he also realizes the overriding significance of his grandmother’s dream for him. Although Hughes emphasizes the antithetical attitudes of Harriet and Tempy regarding whites and blacks, Anglo-Saxon and African American culture, in the
The novel's conclusion, they both endorse Hager's dream for Sandy. Thus Harriet exhorts both Sandy and Annjee to recognize:

“This boy’s gotta get ahead—all of us niggers are too far back in this white man’s country to let any brains go to waste! Don’t you realize that? . . . You and me was foolish all right, breaking mama’s heart, leaving school, but Sandy can’t do like us. He’s gotta be what his grandma Hager wanted him to be—able to help the black race, Annjee! You hear me? Help the whole race!” (302–303)

However, prior to Harriet’s exhortation, Sandy has come on his own to acknowledge the importance of Hager’s dream, and in the novel’s penultimate chapter he vows not to betray it (294). But Hughes insists that Sandy must also forge his own dreams in Chicago, drawing on his elders’ wisdom and the aesthetic traditions of the African American community. In the novel’s final chapter, Sandy attends a vaudeville show in Chicago, where he witnesses his Aunt Harriet’s artistic success as she performs a range of songs to great applause and where he later realizes her economic success as well. Yet in the chapter’s concluding paragraphs, as he returns to his room at night, he also hears the music of the African American church. “[W]e’ll understand it better by an’ by” (304), a line from the spirituals echoing the blues, which, according to Hughes, also raise unanswerable questions (90)—implies the ongoing struggle that Sandy will have in attaining the dream. African American culture, manifested in these marvelous music traditions, will sustain him in the struggle, but the contradictions raised by his experiences with the racism of Kansas are not resolved.

As Kansas weather and geography illuminate the contradictions of life itself, the experiences of growing up in small-town Kansas illuminate the particularly violent contradictions of the racial climate in Midwestern society for Hughes’ young protagonist in Not without Laughter. Although the stories, music, and dance he had come to appreciate provide a means for understanding the African American past and imagining a personal and communal future, although they provide a means for responding to racism and for confirming a sense of the integrity of the African American community, although his grandmother’s dream and his aunt’s success shape his sense of personal identity and create in him a pride as an African American to counter the curse of racial inferiority, Sandy must leave Stanton in order to seek fulfillment of the dream just as Hughes had had to leave Lawrence. Contradictions in Stanton between equality and oppression, justice and injustice, between friendly and hostile whites remain vivid for him. As Houston Baker has said of the African American slave narrative, “the authentic geography of the American imagination can only be mapped by first surveying slave territory.”32  the authentic geography of the American imagination must include a survey of the Midwestern territory of African Americans such as the Lawrence, Kansas, landscape of Langston Hughes’ Sandy.

Notes
1. This essay represents a revision of my earlier article, “Dreams Deferred: The Personal Narratives of Four Black Kansans,” American Studies 34, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 25–51. Whereas the previous essay focused on the experiences of growing up in Kansas as represented by Langston Hughes in Not without Laughter (1930), Gordon Parks in The Learning Tree (1963), Frank Marshall Davis in Livin’ the Blues (1993), and Grant Cushinberry in “God’s Little Half Acre” (1989), the present work represents an extended examination of only Hughes’ novel. References to Not without Laughter (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1969) appear parenthetically in the text.
4. Benjamin “Pap” Singleton promoted Black migration to Kansas after investigation into the possibilities of moving to other states such as Tennessee. See Nell Irvin Painter’s Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 112–15.
7. Hughes describes Sandy’s growing awareness of sexuality and romantic love through his observations of his mother and father as well as of his sexually active Aunt Harriet. In a lengthy meditation, he wonders, “And what made girls different from boys? . . . Once when they were playing house, Willie-Mae told him how girls were different from boys, but they didn’t know why. Now Willie-May was in the seventh grade and had hard little breasts that stuck out sharp-like, and Jimmie Lane said dirty things about Willie-Mae. . . . Where did babies come from, anyhow?” (173–74). When he becomes a teenager, he continues to learn about sexuality from the stories he hears from older men at the barber shop and the pool hall as well as from the quasi-scientific pamphlets given to him by his Aunt Tempy. In “The Doors of Life,” and Chapter 27, “Beware of Women,” he begins to think of his own sexuality. Chapter 28, “Chicago,” describes his unnerving encounter with a gay man (284–86).
9. In his descriptions of Hager’s garden, Hughes seems to be remembering his years with the Reed family in Lawrence. See Rampersad, 15.
10. Hughes’ description of the Kansas River, which runs along the north edge of Lawrence, echoes his description of the Mississippi in his first published and one of his best-known poems “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”: “I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln was down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.”
11. See Rampersad, 15.
13. See Rampersad, 8, 18.
15. Rampersad, 8.
17. Although Meeks, who attended racially segregated schools in Kansas City, Kansas, reports that race was never the cause of dissension at school, the racism in school for both Parks’ Newt Winger and for Davis proved excruciating.
19. Rampersad describes two incidents in which Hughes as a boy was placed at the back of a school room, one in a Topeka grade school, where after everyone else had been seated alphabetically, the teacher “installed the baffled child deep in a corner, at the end of the last row” (13), and again, when entering the seventh grade at the Central School in 1914, Langston passed into the care of a white teacher who decided to institute segregated seating in her class. She either compelled or induced all the black children to move to a separate row. Langston moved with the rest, but with mounting anger. . . . Printing cards that said JIM CROW ROW, Langston defiantly propped one on each black child’s desk. When she bore down on him, he flew into the schoolyard screaming that his teacher had a Jim Crow row, she had a Jim Crow row. (17)
21. Craig Werner, in "On the Ends of Afro-American ‘Modernist’ Autobiography," Black American Literary Forum 24, no. 2 (Summer 1990), explains that "As Henry Louis Gates, Robert Stepto, Christopher Miller, and William Andrews demonstrate, the primary significance of graphé for most black writers has been that it provides proof of a self capable of participating in the discourses—literary and political—that shape the lives of that self and the community from which it cannot be separated" (204).
23. The Big Sea, 17.
29. Although George W. Walker of the well-known Williams and Walker dance duo as well as all four sisters of The Whitman Sisters troupe "by far the greatest incubator of dancing talent for Negro shows on or off T. O. B. A."
from 1900 to 1943 (Stearns, 85)] would have left Lawrence by the time of Hughes’ boyhood, through their local and regional fame he nevertheless would have been familiar with them. Not only was Walker known as “the greatest of the strutters,” but his wife Ada’s “eccentric dancing... contributed largely to [the team’s] appeal” (Stearns, 122). Hughes’ awareness of her appeal is indicated in his reference to Harriet’s dancing when Jimboy applauds her, saying, “‘You got it, kid... You do it like the stage women does. You’ll be takin’ Ada Walker’s place if you keep on’” (48). I am very grateful to Joan Stone for helping me understand Hughes’ knowledge of African American dance in the early twentieth century and his allusions to Walker and the Whitmans.

30. Hughes’ poem “Minstrel Man,” published two years after Not without Laughter in his collection of poems The Dream Keeper and Other Poems (New York: Alfred F. Knopf, 1932), suggests that the concept that both African American music and dance conveyed a fundamental duality remained very much on his mind:

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
And my throat
Is deep with song,
You do not think
I suffer after
I have held my pain
So long?

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
You do not hear
My inner cry?
Because my feet
Are gay with dancing
You do not know
I die?

31. See Rampersad, 13.