



Stonequist's Concept of "The Marginal Man" in Langston Hughes' Play *Mulatto*

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Abstract

Born with the inception of the slave trade, interracial mixing has always been a moot point throughout the history of the United States. In America's racist climate, the mulatto offspring of every interracial relationship was deemed by the dominant white society to be born of transgression and thus was marginalized and disenfranchised as an alleged taint of white "pure blood" and a threat to the societal system of structural positions. Facing discrimination and injustice like black Americans, white-black mulattoes also suffered from not belonging to a definite racial group. This duality of a mixed-blood's life has grabbed the attention of many scholars including Everett Verner Stonequist who discussed the fragile subalternized status of the "marginal man" in an antagonistic environment while he rejects and craves for both of his racial ancestries at the same time. Envisioning a three-phase life-cycle for a mulatto, Stonequist maintained that the mulatto has either to conform to the status quo and survive or defy the power structures and embrace, mostly unfavorable, consequences. This paper aims to apply Stonequist's concept of "marginal man" to Langston Hughes' play *Mulatto* (1935) and tries to show how the alienated and rootless protagonist is inevitably precipitated into death and destruction.

Keywords: Interracial Mixing, Marginal Man, Racism, Subalternity, Mulatto

1. Introduction

Interracial mixing has been an inseparable element of American history since the first European colonizers disembarked on American land. In 1619, the first African slaves were imported to Virginia to toil in tobacco plantations and afterwards, miscegenation was frequently practiced between the imported black slaves and white indentured servants. From the onset, miscegenation was deemed by the white ruling-class as a bestial and morally repugnant act because they believed that mixing with the allegedly heathen, barbaric and savage black slaves would "taint" the purity of white blood. However, in spite of the increasing number of anti-miscegenation laws, white men regularly practiced it. It was especially in the Southern plantation network of the antebellum period where interracial sex occurred more than any other time and place in American history due to the close physical proximity of white plantation owners and their black slaves (Khanna, 2011).

During this time, the dominant belief regarding the mulatto status in the United States was regulated by the tacit "one drop rule" which categorized white-black biracials, or anybody with "one drop" of black blood, exclusively as black. The advocates of this rule, greatly influenced by the popular vogues of Social Darwinism and eugenics,



maintained that “the result of the mixture of two races, in the long run, gives us a race reverting to the more ancient, generalized, and lower type... . The cross between a white man and a negro is a negro” (Doyle, as cited in Gubar, 1997, p. 205). Though mulattos were for the most part subjected to the same sociopolitical injustices as blacks and were deprived of basic civil rights, they sometimes received a special treatment from the dominant white society due to their white ancestry and thus were given privileges unavailable to monoracial blacks. As a result of their advantageous status, white-black biracials often allied with whites and separated themselves from blacks, a tendency that gave rise to a three-tiered racial system and introduced them as a “buffer class” between white and black races in some parts of the South (Khanna, 2011).

Nevertheless, there were times in American history when mulattos’ relationship with whites cooled and they, alienated and rootless, gravitated toward the black race. This especially happened after the Civil War when the advantages they enjoyed began to vanish and they inevitably formed alliance with blacks and, being more educated and prestigious than ordinary negroes, served as the leaders of the black race in its quest for civil rights (Alexander & Rucker, 2010). What seems of note regarding the mulatto status in American society was the ubiquitous presence of what Kerry Ann Rockquemore and David Brunson call “push” and “pull” factors that caused white-black biracials to fluctuate between their two racial ancestries (as cited in Khanna, 2011, p. 65). This paper aims to analyze this sense of ambivalence and rootlessness addressed by Everett Verner Stonequist in his famed concept of “the marginal man”.

1.1. *The Concept of “The Marginal Man”*

The most obvious type of marginal man is the person of mixed racial ancestry. His very biological origin places him between the two races. Generally he has distinctive physical traits which mark him off from both parent races. He also frequently possesses some characteristics of manner, thought and speech which are derived from both lines of his ancestry. Because of these peculiarities the mixed blood presents a special problem for the community: what is to be his place in the social organization? As he matures he too will become aware of his problematic and anomalous social position. He will become the target of whatever hostile sentiments exist between the parent races. Thus his problem of adjustment will be made more acute. (Stonequist, 2004, p. 65)

The concept of “the marginal man” was first introduced by Robert Park (1864-1944), a Harvard sociologist, in 1928. He used the term to refer to the individual who was “condemned by fate to live in two antagonistic cultures” (Park, as cited in Tizard & Phoenix, 2005, p. 43) “sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples, never quite willing to break ... with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now seeks to find a place” (Park, as cited in Stonequist, 1935, p. 3), and thus was inflicted with a divided self. Though Park generally addressed the predicament of all individuals marginalized in diverse ethnic, racial, religious and traditional environments, he believed that “the typical marginal man is a mixed blood, Eurasian, mestizo, or mulatto, i.e., a man who by the very fact of his racial origin is predestined to occupy a position somewhere between the two cultures represented by his respective parents” (as cited in Cheng & Lively, 2009, p. 65).

After Park’s influential study, the marginal man theory turned into one of the most widely used theoretical frameworks for the analysis of the experiences of biracial and multiracial individuals. One of the scholars who addresses the predicament of mulattos is Everett Verner Stonequist (1901-79), an American sociologist, who applies the concept of the marginal man to “the Eurasians or Anglo-Indians of India, the Cape Coloured of South Africa, the Mulattoes of the United States, the Coloured people of Jamaica, the Indo-Europeans of Java, the Part Hawaiians, and the *Métis* of Brazil” (Stonequist, 2004, p. 66) and analyzes the way immigration, colonization and religious conversion could create and expedite the process of cultural hybridization. Stonequist believed that there were bi-cultural or multi-cultural situations “in which members of one cultural group are seeking to adjust themselves to the group which possesses greater prestige and power”. These social situations engender “the marginal type of personality” best captured in “persons of racially mixed ancestry” (Stonequist, 1935, p. 3). According to Stonequist, the mulatto marginal man experiences “double consciousness” since he is “placed simultaneously between two looking-glasses, each representing a different image of himself. The clash in the images cannot help but make the individual somewhat conscious of the process” (Stonequist, 1935, p. 7). In other words,



in looking at himself from the standpoint of each group he experiences the conflict as a personal problem. Thus his ambitions run counter to his feelings of self-respect: he would prefer recognition by the dominant race, but he resents its arrogance. A sense of superiority to one race is counter-balanced by a sense of inferiority to the other race. Pride and shame, love and hate, and other contradictory sentiments, mingle uneasily in his nature. The two cultures produce a dual pattern of identification and a divided loyalty, and the attempt to maintain self-respect transforms these feelings into an ambivalent attitude. (Stonequist, 1935, p. 6)

The result is a mulatto marginal man inflicted with “increased sensitiveness, self-consciousness, and race-consciousness, an indefinable *malaise*, inferiority and various compensatory mechanisms” (Stonequist, 1935, p. 6).

Stonequist maintains that the marginal man undergoes a three-phase life-cycle which includes introduction to two cultures, crisis and adjustment. In the first phase, the introduction to two cultures “is often an unwitting process in which the individual does not realize he is taking over two cultures. At this period he is not conscious of a personality problem; usually this stage is confined to childhood” and the individual is not aware, or only slightly aware, of his differences from the dominant race; that’s why he is inclined to identify himself with the so-called superior race (Stonequist, 1935, p. 10).

In the second phase, a crisis takes place: “... the individual, through one or more defining experiences, becomes aware of the cultural conflict”. The influence of these “defining experiences” is so detrimental that “[T]he typical traits of the marginal man arise out of the crisis experience and in response to the situation. The individual’s life-organization is seriously disturbed”. The result is “confusion, ... shock, restlessness, disillusionment and estrangement” on the part of the marginal man who is forced from then on to take “the attitude of the two groups toward each other and toward himself and becomes something of a divided personality” (Stonequist, 1935, pp. 10-11). In other words, through experiencing some act of rejection, the mulatto comes to know that he is marginal and that in the eyes of the dominant white group with whom he partially identified, he belongs to an inferior and abhorred race; the consequence is mulatto’s psychological maladjustment.

The third phase consists of the individual’s responses to the crisis. The marginal man employs a number of strategies in order to escape from the excruciating state of subalternity. According to Stonequist, the marginal man “may continue toward the dominant group and perhaps eventually succeed in becoming an accepted member. ... ‘Passing’ is a more uncertain solution. Another possibility lies in moving in the other direction, throwing one’s lot with the subordinate group ... The marginal individual’s dual contacts may give him an advantage, making him a leader” or a “conciliator, reformer, teacher”. He may also endeavor to extricate himself from his marginal status by escaping to another land, as in the case of “American Negroes” who “profess to find France as a haven of refuge from race prejudice”. In case the process of marginal man’s adjustment fails, “disorganization ... finds expression in ... delinquency, crime, suicide and mental instability” (Stonequist, 1935, pp. 11-2). This paper tries to apply Stonequist’s concept of the marginal man and his three-phase life-cycle to Langston Hughes’s play *Mulatto*.

2. Discussion: The Inevitability of “Explosion” for Hughes’ Eponymous Mulatto

White mens, and colored womens, and little bastard chilluns—that’s de old way of de South ... Them de ways o’ de South—mixtries, mixtries. (Hughes, 2002, p. 46)

The themes of miscegenation and the marginalized status of the mulatto in a white-dominated society have always been of interest to both white and black writers from the antiquity and the Middle Ages through to the Renaissance and the present. Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1603), Tennyson’s *Locksley Hall* (1842), Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894), Chesnut’s *The Wife of His Youth* (1899), Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), O’Neill’s *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* (1924), and Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) are all among the large reservoir of literary works which have employed the interracial theme in their fabric.

One of the African American writers who was deeply interested in the mulatto theme was Langston Hughes. Having a white great-grandfather himself, Hughes frequently addressed the uncertain position of mulattos in the United States, and especially in the South. Besides his famed poems “Cross” and “Mulatto”, his play *Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South* (1935) is also among his memorable mulatto works. Having a classical tight



one-setting, one-day structure, the play, written in the early 1930s, was first staged on Broadway in 1935 and established a record for the number of theatrical performances of a play by a black American (Poquette, 1998).

Set in the Southern state of Georgia in the Depression era of 1930s, the play is the story of Robert, a “light mulatto with ivory-yellow skin and proud thin features like his father’s” (Hughes, 2002, p. 18), who has returned home after having spent several years away at school. Home is a plantation where his mother, Cora, is the Negro housekeeper and also the long-standing mistress to Colonel Thomas Norwood, the white plantation owner, local big shot and Robert’s father. Cora has three other children by Colonel, William, Bertha and Sallie, all of whom have learned as mulattos the strategies of survival in the racist atmosphere of the South. However, Robert, who much resembles his father, fails to reconcile his desire for achieving the power and agency of a white man with his marginalized status as a mixed-blood. Frequently belittled by the dominant white society and more agonizingly by his father for his being non-white, Robert becomes engaged in a series of conflicts with both whites and blacks which ends up in a climactic violent verbal exchange with his father in Act II, Scene I: when Colonel Norwood ruthlessly denigrates Robert and facing his defiance, threatens to shoot him, Robert loses his temper and strangles his father. Finally coming to accept his subalternized and disenfranchised status in the racist South, Robert commits suicide at the end of the play in order to avoid the white mob that aims to lynch him.

Robert is the epitome of marginal man and his life best reflects the three-phase life-cycle which Stonequist posited. As already discussed in the previous section, Stonequist holds that the marginal mulatto is not aware in his childhood of his differences from the dominant racial group and thus identifies with the powerful white race (Stonequist, 1935). His theory is applicable to Robert who, as the favorite child of Colonel Thomas Norwood, felt confident enough to announce publicly his blood relationship to the most illustrious white man in the region, while at the same time disowning any connection with blacks, calling, for instance, his mother *Cora* instead of *Ma*. However, the crisis occurred exactly at the very time when Robert was most sure about his position and identity. This “defining experience”, as Stonequist called it, happened when the seven-year-old Robert “Went runnin’ up to Colonel Tom out in de horse stables when de Colonel was showin’ off his horses ... to fine white company from in town ... and yelled right in front o’ de white folks’ faces, ‘O, papa, Cora say de dinner’s ready, papa!’ ... And Colonel Tom knocked him right backwards under de horse’s feet” (Hughes, 2002, p. 29). Norwood’s public rejection of any paternal relationship with Robert and his extreme brutality in beating the boy in the presence of white people filled Robert with intense indignation and frustration and left an indelible traumatic impression on his psyche (Beinvenu, 2007).

Stonequist believes that the third phase of the marginal man’s life is determined by his responses to the “defining experiences” (Stonequist, 1935), which in Robert’s case fail to bring about any reconciliation with the realities of the racist world and thus cause his downfall; indeed, the tragedy mentioned in the subtitle of the play stems from Robert’s psychological maladjustment after the crisis. Compelled by the dominant race to obliterate any traces of whiteness from his consciousness, Robert still refrains from changing his self-concept as a white person. As his brother William states: “Bert thinks he’s a real white man himself now” (Hughes, 2002, p. 30), and thus claims all the rights a white man enjoys and rejects all the restrictions the racist society has imposed on him. Declaring himself in the company of whites and blacks to be the heir to Colonel Norwood, he cannot bring himself to tolerate a system that continuously robs him of his basic rights and capabilities and relegates him to a sub-human status. Considering himself superior to blacks, Robert repeatedly denigrates blacks in the play (“I’m gonna act like my white half, not my black half” (Hughes, 2002, p. 30), “I might stay here awhile and teach some o’ you darkies to think like men” (Hughes, 2002, p. 32), “I’m a Norwood—not a field-hand nigger” (Hughes, 2002, p. 34)), and in this way separates himself from the black community and therefore loses its support, affection and acceptance. What aggravates the situation is the fact that Robert is not welcome into the white race either and this brings about the interminable conflict of his life. Even though Colonel states in different situations that to him Robert is “no more than any other black buck on this plantation” (Hughes, 2002, p. 20), Robert refuses to conform to the status quo and calls himself “Mister Norwood”, thus braving the fact that he is an illegitimate child of Colonel (Beinvenu, 2007).

As mentioned in the previous part, Stonequist enumerated a number of survival strategies that the marginal man could employ in order to escape from the painful position of subalternity (Stonequist, 1935). Robert’s mother and his siblings had all learned how to come to terms with the status quo and survive the racist climate of the 1930s South. His mother Cora, named after the mythical Greek woman who was kidnapped and raped by Hades the god of the underworld (Gubar, 1997), and his sister Sallie, who serves as a direct foil for Robert, have diplomatically learned to remain “in their place” and assume the role of meek black servants in Colonel Norwood’s household. In this way, they were granted many of the privileges and luxuries that were usually the



prerogatives of white female aristocrats (Bienvenu, 2007). The same is true about Robert's brother William, who takes up the role of an obedient Uncle Tom and is derogatorily called by Robert a "rabbit-hearted coon", and his sister Bertha, who has passed for white in the North and works there as a typewriter (Soto, 2000).

Quite on the contrary, Robert, as arrogant and uncompromising as he is, never utilized the covert means to obtain privileges from the white race. Unlike his mother and siblings, he doesn't want to live in comfort by showing compliance and obedience toward Colonel; what he desires is the public recognition as a white person with inalienable rights. Obsessively sensitive to being racially abused and too yellow to pass for white, Robert finally opts for a militant behavior that in the racist climate of the South would eventually lead to, in Stonequist's words, "delinquency, crime, suicide and mental instability" (Stonequist, 1935, pp. 11-2).

Robert's hamartia was indeed his refusal, or inability, to adjust and conform, and this was what precipitated his downfall. During the climactic conversation between Thomas Norwood and Robert in Act II, Scene I, he is repeatedly reminded by his father of his blackness and alleged inferiority: "How come your skin is yellow and your elbows rusty? How come they threw you out of the Post Office today for talking to a white woman? How come you're the crazy young nigger that you are?" (Hughes, 2002, p. 39). In consequence, Robert suddenly came to feel his uncertain position in both white and black communities. Asserting that he would like "to kill all the white men in the world" and still believing that "I'm not a nigger" (Hughes, 2002, p. 39), Robert finally decides to kill his whiteness; that is, his father upon whom he has constructed his white identity. It is only after the perpetration of patricide that he owns up to his blackness. Knowing that as an alive mulatto, he will either be rebuffed by the black community or lynched by the white mob, he destroys what he has just identified as his black self (Bienvenu, 2007).

It is of great interest to note that the ubiquitous duality of Robert's life accompanies him even up to his death. Yearning all his life to live in the Big House, he ultimately succeeds to materialize his wish by dying in Colonel Norwood's manor; nevertheless, his death doesn't take place in the library or forward of the front door (both of them exclusively reserved to be used by whites and extremely forbidden for blacks), but on his mother's bedroom, a fact which underscores the dichotomous essence and the ineluctable doom of Robert's life as a mulatto (Beinvenu, 2007; Gubar, 1997). Robert, as a figure who possesses "structure-dissolving quality of liminality" (Victor Turner, as cited in Soto, 2000, p. 264), is successfully able to carry out several acts of self-assertion such as killing his father, escaping white mob's lynch or even committing suicide; however, he eventually shoots himself with his father's pistol, an occurrence which undermines the authenticity and validity of Robert's agency as a mulatto marginal man (Soto, 2000).

3. Conclusion

While monoracials could simply refer to the members of their own racial group as "we" and classify the members of the opposite racial group as "they", mulattos have to self-categorize as "somewhat we", a category indicative of a lack of a complete sense of wholeness which gave rise to the torturous feelings of psychological distress and an awareness of isolation, alienation and stigmatization (Hitlin et al., as cited in Cheng & Lively, 2009, p. 64). Stonequist's concept of "the marginal man" explores this dual minority status of mulattos through employing a problem approach. Stressing the restrictions and trammels imposed on the marginal man, he envisions a three-phase life-cycle which may end up in an unwholesome fate if the mulatto failed to reconcile his desires with the prevalent racism of the environment. And this is exactly what happens to the eponymous protagonist of Hughes' play. Unable to achieve the agency and recognition he so desperately yearned for, Robert finally explodes by killing both his father and himself. Too conditioned to get rid of the indelible impression of his childhood traumatic experience, Robert eventually transgresses the boundaries which the white-dominated society wishes to incarcerate him in. He manages to disrupt the red lines, yet the agency and recognition were still far from reach. Robert was doomed to explode due to his dreams deferred.

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