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The Situation in Harlem: Langston Hughes' Poems as Psychogeographic Map

My current book project, *On the Map: Twentieth-Century American Poetry and Cartography*, examines the ways poetic structures, like cartographic structures, organize knowledge—how they can claim territory or order experience, while leaving openings for uncertainty and discovery. In each chapter, I pair the work of a poet with a specific understanding of or example of mapping. Four of the five chapters of this manuscript exist in draft form. My aim, in applying for LARC, is to spend the summer developing the remaining chapter, “The Situation in Harlem.” In this piece, I will focus on the poetry of Langston Hughes, arguing that his poems that name the streets of Harlem create a psychogeographic map of the neighborhood and of Hughes’ personal geography more broadly.

Psychogeography was championed by the Situationists, a mid-twentieth-century group of Parisian artists and urban planners interested in the ways in which human experience informs our sense of place and of cities in particular. As writers, film-makers, architects, and cartographers, they intervened into traditional means of representation—to challenge reified images of the city and recast urban spaces as dynamic processes, responsive to and generated by the movements, emotions, and perceptions of city dwellers. The maps they created—often dissected and reassembled collages made from conventional maps—reflected residents’ personal interactions with place.

