Hughes, Langston (1902-1967)

**<Portrait of Langston Hughes> Caption: Portrait of Langston Hughes, 1942. Photo taken by Jack Delano for the Office of War Information.**

Langston Hughes is one of the most accomplished, influential writers of the 20th century. Influenced by the inclusive “I” of Walt Whitman and the musical-styling of Carl Sandburg, his innovative poetic syncopation of the blues, jazz, and Negro spirituals became an emblem of the Harlem Renaissance, for which his poetry collections *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) are pioneering texts. Hughes was first and foremost an American writer, in the truest sense of the word: his involvement in the Leftist cultural resistance to overthrow racial oppression, along with his immensely popular works in translation, made Hughes hugely significant in Latin America for artists and intellectuals like Nicolás Guillén and Claude McKay. Hughes later became a world writer: travelling and advocating for socialist causes across Europe and, controversially, the Soviet Union and Soviet-controlled Central Asia as an ambassador and artist. Together with his unparalleled collections of poetry, Hughes was prolific as a novelist, a short story writer, a children’s author, a translator, and a playwright (including sixty-three authored or co-authored scripts).

**<Image of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” sheet music> Caption: Hughes’s poetry, deeply influenced by blues, jazz, and Negro Spirituals, was itself a form of music and often put in musical notation. © New York: Handy Brothers Music Company, Inc., 1942.**

Hughes spent his childhood with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas, before spending his high school years in Cleveland, Ohio, with his mother. Though the Harlem Renaissance would be marked as an urban aesthetic movement, Hughes often integrated his country background into his art practice, including his first short story collection *Not without Laughter* (1930) based largely on his childhood in Kansas. For more than a year, Hughes lived in Mexico with his estranged father, which was extremely formative not only for his growth as a writer, but also his sense of “ethnic pride, not chauvinist but international, in opposition to North American and European Chauvinism” (*Life of Langston Hughes,* 48). Hughes spent a short, tenuous time at Columbia University, struggling to finance his college career with erratic support from his father. However, this time was important for his social connections, as he met W.E.B. Du Bois and the business manager of the national magazine *Crisis* Augustus Granville Dill, who would publish Hughes’s first poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in 1921. Hughes turned his deep ambivalence from this period about the racial isolation experienced at Columbia with the rich culture and cosmopolitanism of Harlem into one of his most widely read poems, “The Weary Blues” (1922). This poem illustrates how Hughes couples formal poetry with what was considered lowly, the Blues, to capture the “in-betweeness” of black life in white America. Hughes would be criticized throughout his life, and afterwards, for this disregard of formalism, including by the novelist Ralph Ellison, who saw Hughes as a “hack.” Hughes moved on from Columbia to the historically black Lincoln University, Pennsylvania. Here, he penned the essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” which laid out a manifesto for black artists to be emboldened by racial pride rather than the promise of integration. Amongst Hughes’s closest contemporaries, comrades, and collaborators when this manifesto was put into practice were Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, and Arna Bontemps.

**<Audio of Langston Hughes reading “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”> Caption: Listen to Langston Hughes read “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” his first published poem in W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Crisis* magazine. © Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings 1995**

Inspired by Du Bois, Hughes often negotiated a radical social and political agenda in his poetry. During the 1930s, he published a number of essays in *New Masses,* the magazine of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), and he was integral in protests about, among others, the famous Scottsboro case in Alabama (1931), including the one-act play *Scottsboro Limited*. In 1932, Hughes travelled to the Soviet Union with a cohort of actors, writing to fellow traveller Louise Thompson, “hold that boat ‘cause for me it’s an Ark” (*Life of Langston Hughes Vol.1,* 241). There, the cohort was to participate in a Soviet-funded project titled *Black and White,* a critique of race relations in the United States. The movie would fall through, but the time spent in the Soviet Union would turn into one of his most productive, including bulk of his short stories in *The Ways of White Folks* (1934)*.* During the Spanish Civil War, Hughes spent four months in Spain and also contributed poetry, essays, and journalistic writing, including the poem “Song of Spain” (1937), in support of the Leftist government. Primarily evinced in his contributions as a columnist to the African-American newspaper the *Chicago Defender,* Hughes’s coverage of the Bolshevik Revolution suggests that, though he ultimately distanced himself from the American Communist Party, he saw in the Marxist tradition the best solution for ending racial oppression. His work as a columnist, including his serial Jesse B. Semple stories, contributed to an ascent in his popularity and renown particularly among an African-American reading public in the 1940s-50s. He furthered this community-based agenda through his work as a writing teacher and children’s author (*First Book of Rhythms*)through the Chicago Laboratory School (1949), in which he practiced a socially and politically-inflected pedagogy. His radical poem “Goodbye Christ” famously incensed religious and conservative organizations, causing Hughes subsequently to suppress some of his more radical socialist poetry (*Collected Poems*, 4). Of this, Hughes said, “For the poet, politics in any country in the world had better be disguised as poetry…Politics can be the graveyard of the poet. And only poetry can be his resurrection” (*The Life of Langston Hughes Vol. II*, 385).

**<Flash Video, Hughes on Social Action’s Two Minds> Watch Langston Hughes discuss the deliberative vs. immediate direct social action. © The New York Center for Visual History, 1988**

In recent years, Langston Hughes’s sexuality has become a central, and polarizing, topic for debate among literary and cultural critics. Though his chief biographer, Arnold Rampersad, has argued that “no one could recall any concrete evidence for his reputation [as a homosexual]” (*The Life of Langston Hughes Vol. II*, 336), Hughes’s queerness has figured prominently in popular and academic discussions about his work, particularly following the controversial release of the film *Looking for Langston* (1988) which was disavowed by the Hughes estate. Some critics point to a poem like “Café: 3 a.m.” (1951), or the short story “Blessed Assurance” (1963), as literary evidence to support this biographical claim because of their overt references to homosexuality. However, as Shane Vogel argues, Hughes is central to debates on queer theory and African-American gay and lesbian history not because he can be proven to be or not be a homosexual, but because “[his] poetry archives spaces and temporalities that seek to escape empirical confirmation and refuse identity foreclosure” (“Closing Time,” 400).

Langston Hughes passed away in 1967, while working on the posthumously published collection of poems *The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times*. Drawing on even his early work, the collection attempted to bridge the gap between his generation of artists and authors of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts and Black Power movements of the 1960s. This topical collection aimed at social change through internal growth, which served as a contrast to the more incendiary writings of the early Black Aestheticians like Amiri Baraka. Hughes would remain a principal source of renewal and inspiration for artists, among the countless others he influenced: Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni.

**Selected Writing**

Poetry

*Weary Blues* (1926)

*Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927)

*The Dream Keeper* (1932)

*Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942)

*Fields of Wonder* (1947)

*One-Way Ticket* (1949)

*Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951)

*Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1959)

*Ask Your Mama* (1961)

*The Panther and the Lash (*1967)

Fiction

*Not Without Laughter* (1930)

*The Ways of White Folks* (1934)

*Laughing to Keep from Crying* (1952)

*The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955)

*Something in Common and Other Stories* (1963)

Drama

*Five Plays by Langston Hughes* (1963)

*The Political Plays of Langston Hughes* (2000)

Children’s Books

*Popo and Fifina* (1932)

*The First Book of Jazz* (1952)

*The First Book of Rhythms* (1955)

*First Book of Africa* (1964)

Biography and Autobiography

*The Big Sea* (1940)

*I Wonder as I Wander* (1956)

*Famous Negro Heroes of America* (1958)

Anthologies

*Poetry of the Negro* (1949)

*The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958)

Nonfiction

“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” *The Nation* (1926)

*Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP* (1962)

*Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment* (1967)

Translations

*Cuba Libre: Poems by Nicolás Guillén* (1948)

*Selected Poems by Gabriela Mistral*  (1957)

**Suggestions for Further Reading**

Harper, Donna Sullivan. *Not so Simple: The "Simple" Stories by Langston Hughes*. Columbia: U of

Missouri, 1995. Print.

Kutzinski, Vera M. *The Worlds of Langston Hughes: Modernism and Translation in the Americas*.

Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2012. Print.

Rampersad, Arnold, and David Roessel, eds. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York:

Vintage Classics, 1994. Print.

Rampersad, Arnold, and David Roessel, eds. *Selected Letters of Langston Hughes*. New York:

Knopf, 2015. Print.

Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes: 1902-1941, I, Too, Sing America*. Vol. 1.

Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.

----- *The Life of Langston Hughes: 1941-1967, I Dream a World*. Vol. 2. Oxford:

Oxford UP, 2002. Print.

Santis, Christopher C. De., ed. *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics,*

*and Culture*. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois, 1995. Print.

Scott, Jonathan. *Socialist Joy in the Writing of Langston Hughes*. Columbia: U of Missouri, 2006.

Print.

Tidwell, John Edgar., and Cheryl R. Ragar, eds. *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of*

*Langston Hughes*. Columbia: U of Missouri, 2007. Print.

Tracy, Steven C., ed. *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*. New York: Oxford UP, 2004.

Print.

Vogel, Shane. "Closing Time: Langston Hughes and the Queer Poetics of Harlem Nightlife."

*Criticism* (2006): 397-425. Print

© Vincent Haddad, Wayne State University

**Images:**

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” sheet music

Words by Langston Hughes and Margaret Bonds.

New York: Handy Brothers Music Company, Inc., 1942.

Sheet music.

[Music Division](http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/perform). (8-1)

*Courtesy of the Handy Brothers Music Company, Ed Sullivan Theater Building, 1697 Broadway New York, NY 10019*

Digital ID: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohtml/exhibit/aopart8b.html#0801

**Portrait**



**Digital ID:** (digital file from b&w film copy neg.) cph 3a43849 http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a43849

**Reproduction Number:** LC-USZ62-43605 (b&w film copy neg.)

**Repository:** Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

**Audio: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University**

http://brbl-archive.library.yale.edu/exhibitions/langstonhughes/av.html

I would really like the following to be included, if possible:

* “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” read by Langston Hughes, copyright held by Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings
* Video: “Hughes on Social Action’s Two Minds” copyright held by The New York Center for Visual History