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BLACK NATIVITY: A SEASON FOR CHANGE

**By T. Mychael Rambo
and Lou Bellamy**

**Directed by Dominic Taylor
Presented by Target**

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The Revolutionary Spirit: Priming a Poet

For four centuries these United States functioned as a terrorist regime. Plantation slavery required a strictly enforced system of brutality. Planters campaigned together to promote fear and obedience amongst their slaves. The need to exact immense, overabundant pain and anguish upon the noncompliant black body was a critical component of the Southern plantation system as well as the imperial projects in the Caribbean and South America. The historical record is littered with examples of elaborately designed punishments intended at the time for public consumption. For example, self-liberated slave Nathaniel (Nat) Turner, who led the August 1831 slave uprising in Virginia wherein a reputed fifty-five white planters and members of their families were killed, was tried and then sentenced to death by hanging in a public arena. After the execution, his body underwent scores of abuses. His asphyxiated corpse was beheaded, then skinned, drawn and quartered and distributed amongst the bystanders and his captors as souvenirs of the momentous occasion.¹ This very public process was not uncommon in the Caribbean, on sugar plantations, nor in the American South. Such spectacular violence was typically reserved for unruly slaves whose repeated disobedience, though less grand than Turner's, encouraged rebellious behavior and threatened disruption of the slave system. Often, after an attempted rebellion, white mobs attacked any blacks they could find. Frantic and fearful, their brutality was unspecific and went largely unchecked by the government. The government neither sanctioned nor suppressed white mob violence, and relied on its ability to "scare people straight," into behaving like the docile, complacent creatures they expected rather than proud, independent human beings. In this world, two institutions were of grave importance to the survival of blacks as a people and to the creation and preservation of their Creole culture: *faith* and *literacy*. Neither a spiritual nor a cognitive life can be threatened by corporeal violence; both withstand any attempt to mutilate, degrade or disassemble the human body.

This was the world into which the sensitive poet Langston Hughes was born, the legacy to which he was heir. Harsh, complicated and illogical, the injustice young Langston saw unsettled him deeply. His family boasted a rich history of activism, courage and racial pride. Hughes' grandmother, Mary Langston, lost her first husband in the fray at Harper's Ferry when John Brown and his men attempted to overtake the federal arsenal and arm the slaves to overthrow the plantocracy.² Both worked to bring slaves north along the Underground

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p1518.html>

² For further reading see Louis A. Decaro's *Fire from the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002); or, for an assessment of the excessive corporeality of the decay of the South and the plantation system through the cadavers of the Civil War era, see Franny

Railroad and had met and been married in one of the stronghold cities of the Abolitionist movement, Oberlin, Ohio. In his biography of Hughes' life, Arnold Rampersad reveals that Mary Hughes frequently wrapped her sleeping grandson in the bullet-ridden and blood-stained blanket that had cloaked her slain husband's shoulders.³ While the gesture expresses rare tenderness from the rather stern woman, bearing the symbolic weight of such reputed gallantry as a young boy was likely overwhelming. Regardless, it serves as a powerful metaphor for the centrality of activism within this family and their legacy of responsibility to "the race." Rampersad writes, "[m]uch was expected by his ancestors. They demanded, from the moment his elders recognized the boy's unusual intelligence and began to talk to him about Duty and The Race, that he had a messianic obligation to the Afro-American people, and through them to America."⁴ Here Rampersad brings to light a significant idea, namely a symbiotic vitality connecting black people and the nation. Such an obligation to the country is in dire straits today. Since the majority of black people do not feel a significant measure of influence within the project of democracy, naturally the inclination to participate has tapered. Times were different in the not too distant past, however. Though poor, Hughes was born into a kind of aristocracy; a courageous clan of people who seemed determined with each generation to best one another in terms of accomplishment and advocacy in a concerted effort to improve the country.

Part of the project toward social activism and democratic participation was the cultivation of dispersed but highly prolific black literati whose ranks included W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Charles Chesnutt. As the young poet came of age, literary activism was at an unprecedented high. The editors of these magazines were forward looking objectors who regarded their work and the words of the black poets, intellectuals, journalists and educators as critically important efforts of activism. Black papers and periodicals were read not just by the intellectuals of the day, but those who considered it part of their civic duty as Americans to remain connected to a larger, dispersed, literary black community.⁵ Revolution was in the air. The education of the black masses spread like wildfire. People were eager to learn

Nudelman's *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Culture of War*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

³ Rampersad writes, "A friend brought [Lewis Sheridan Leary's] blood-stained bullet-riddled shawl home to Mary in Oberlin. Despite her loss, she always revered the memory of John Brown. 'His soul is marching on,' she wrote with a shaking hand late in her life; 'I am proud that he and his followers are not forgotten who braved death for Liberty to an oppress race.' Lewis Leary's shawl remained a symbol for her of his martyrdom; she still wore it fifty years after his death, or used it to cover her young grandchild, Langston Hughes, while he slept at night." (*sic*) See Arnold Rampersad's *The Life of Langston Hughes Volume I: 1902-1941 I, Too, Sing America*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 6.

⁴ Rampersad, *ibid.*, 4.

⁵ This is a clear distinction from the latter movement toward expatriation urged by Marcus Garvey and the more militant and aggressive efforts toward social change ushered in during the late sixties and early seventies.

from that which had been kept from them for so long and they mastered quickly. The fact that literacy spread as swiftly as it did from person to person during a time wherein blacks were prevented from learning to read or write by pain of death, speaks volumes about the tenacity and spirit of the early freedom-fighters.

If the link between revolution and literacy seems a stretch, consider for a moment the Haitian Revolution.⁶ In Saint Domingue colony (present-day Haiti), the education of the *gens du couleur*, a class of mixed race peoples, was in part responsible for the proliferation of news of the progress of the French Revolution and its philosophies throughout the colony. The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) took up the same tenets which drove the masses in France as they stormed the Bastille. *Liberté, égalité et fraternité* (freedom, equality and brotherhood) became the battle cry for unified forces made up of slaves and the *gens du couleur* for whom these ideals had direct implication within their racially stratified society. Together, they overtook the prosperous colony.⁷ Thus literacy at the time offered a window into a shifting political world that defined the inexorable rights of man, rejected the tyranny of despotism, and articulated an emergent sense of independence that ironically included, by virtue of its exclusion of blacks, the enslavement of some even as it outlined the freedom of others. In fact, it is likely as a result of the system of slavery that the concept of freedom was born to its full meaning and took on such mighty weight.

⁶ The importance of the Haitian Revolution to early black activism in the United States should not be underestimated. During the Harlem Renaissance, Haiti was often used as a point of reference to describe a revolutionary spirit, the power of unification, and the triumph of good over evil. Indeed, Langston Hughes repeatedly refers to Haiti with a kind of reverence and curiosity.

⁷ For further reading on the Haitian Revolution see the detailed account offered by C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. (New York: Random House, 1963).