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BLACK NATIVITY: A SEASON FOR CHANGE

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SPOTLIGHT ON THE PLAYWRIGHT

The Literary Education of Langston Hughes

When Langston Hughes was a boy, all over the country black people were being swept up by a patient, observatory, well-considered well of criticism aimed at the project of democracy that was the United States. Slowly but surely, movements toward independence and decolonization gained momentum as European powers lost their grip on a world wide net of colonies. The proprietors of the world's most powerful governments faced serious and steadily amplifying criticism. The proliferation of this revolutionary language through the literary periodicals of the time managed to knit together a vastly dispersed culture. Reading the papers and writing essays and articles were civic duties critical to the advancement of peoples of color world over.

While the circulation of these publications was nowhere near the capacity we can imagine today with modern technology, there was still a voracious following. In the far corners of the country, rural areas and frontier towns, readers would wait eagerly for months before new issues reached them. This was a time wherein black towns dotted the belt of land stretching along the west side of the Mississippi River, areas of land that had not yet been deemed valuable by the white populace, too desolate, tough or too well protected by Native Americans. Such towns sprung up in the middle 1800s in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri, steeled against the protestations (and worse) of whites in the region. They had governing systems in place with democratically elected officials, schools, doctors, stores, anything one would expect to find on a larger scale in more established cities. Folks would wait for someone to travel north to Chicago, or east to Cleveland, and return with the *Chicago Defender* or the latest issue of *Crisis* or *Opportunity*. These documents would land eventually at the small libraries or schools in these towns where they would pass from hand to hand, dog-eared, pages softened from wear.

Hughes spent the majority of his childhood in one such town with his grandmother, Mary Hughes. Founded in 1854, blacks hoping to leave the terror and injustice of the South migrated to Lawrence, Kansas in steady numbers. It was home to pioneers, folks who would pack up their meager belongings and move rather than buckle under the pressures of a racially stratified society. The town was

an enterprise in Abolition by a party of settlers, sponsored by the New England Emigrant Aid Society, who had swept across the Missouri River . . . just ahead of pro-slavery forces. . . Lawrence became a center of ant-slavery radicalism; John Brown first made his name when he and

Hughes remembers “through my grandmother’s stories 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.”

his sons killed five pro-slavers on the banks of the Pottawatomie River during guerilla warfare in the Kansas territory.¹

The spirit of Lawrence in its early years was one of community; neighbors would help newcomers as they struggled to put down roots. A stone's throw from Fort Leavenworth, Lawrence was steeped in a rich tradition of military service; many of the families had settled there because a husband, brother or father had served in the US Cavalry after the Civil War. They were known as the buffalo soldiers.² The legacy these proud men left behind stoked a strong sense of racial pride, of bravery and certainly the sense of a consummate right to claim full citizenship of the United States of America. What began as an effort toward peace and racial tolerance, however, was short-lived. The egalitarian environment deteriorated as the land became more valuable to whites. By the time of Hughes' childhood, the town was segregated.³

Beyond Lawrence were rocky bluffs and dangerous outcroppings, wind-blown prairie land that stretched as far as the eye could see, land that buffalo once ran in vast numbers. This was by no means an elegant or cosmopolitan town. Life was rugged. Still, continuous efforts were made to establish a modern, informed system of education by way of the cultivation of churches, schools and a library. Young Langston spent the first thirteen years of his life in and around Lawrence. Rampersad notes that the small town library and the few books his grandmother kept, including the Bible and an edition of Grimm's fairy tales, provided the boy with a diversion from life confined by the austere home of his grandmother and bleak landscape that would become vital to him.

Then it was that books began to happen to me, and I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books—where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas. And where almost always the mortgage got paid off, the good knights won, and the Alger boy triumphed.⁴

This world of emotive fiction ran contrary both to Hughes' experience (his grandmother struggled almost constantly to pay the mortgage) and to the stories his grandmother told him

¹ Rampersad, *ibid* 8.

² Instrumental in securing the land west of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, their reputation is still awe-inspiring. During what would become known as the Indian wars, America waged its campaign against the Native American peoples of the Great Plains, who were desperate to keep the throngs of the "modern" world at bay. As history dictates, the men of the 9th and 10th Cavalries were some of the most courageous and dedicated soldiers this country has claimed within its ranks; no one assumed they would ride against the indigenous defense forces and live.

³ In 1863, Confederate William Quantrill and his followers entered Lawrence and slaughtered every man they could find, burning business and homes in their wake. This was their revenge for the "loss" of the town, including the Fort, to black settlers. The enforced segregation of the town would soon follow. "By the time of Langston Hughes' childhood, all blacks were barred from formerly open churches, hotels, restaurants, and other social establishments." (Rampersad, *ibid.*, 8)

⁴ Hughes, 16.

as well, “through my grandmothers stories 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.”⁵ Of Hughes’ literary education Rampersad writes,

. . . Du Bois’s magnificent essays on black life and culture in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and his stern articles as editor of the *Crisis* magazine, published first in 1910. The stirring poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, of whom Mary Langston approved, could not have been far behind. Then came novels: all of Zane Grey and Harold Bell Wright, and early work by Edna Ferber as well as *The Rosary* and *The Mistress of Shenstone* by the inspirational British writer Florence L. Barclay. He read everything he could find on Haiti, where John Mercer Langston had lived and to which Mary Langston had been invited; he leafed through Charles Langstons’ main legacy to his family, a collection of speeches. But Hughes was gripped by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and a first reading of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* so thrilling that he remained a lifelong admirer of Mark Twain. Always he returned to Dunbar, the true fireside poet of the black American home; thanks to Mary Langston and Auntie Reed, the Bible was never far away; and, week after week, racial and harrowing, came the black *Chicago Defender*, with sensational details of lynchings and gallant exhortations to the race.⁶

Hughes was thus intellectually, politically and emotionally educated through literature, introduced to the world through the pages of books and journals as opposed to a more communal, empirical maturation.

Coming into Consciousness: Racial Awareness and Heritage

Hughes recalls that his grandmother, Mary Langston, whose ancestry was largely Native American, “could lay claim to Indian land,” but would not because “she never wanted the government (or anybody else) to give her anything.”⁷ Throughout his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, whenever Hughes makes reference to his grandmother he mentions two traits that seem to sum up her spirit from his childhood memories of her: Indian and proud. In Hughes’ mind, the

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two seem equitable, mutually reinforcing; one comes from and explains the other. A light-skinned woman with straight hair that she wore in two long braids, Mary Hughes represented only a portion of the ancestry of mixed-bloods that Hughes would embody. On both the paternal and maternal sides of his family there was black,

Native (Cherokee), Scotch and French (white) blood.⁸ Throughout his family, people mediated race differently. While Mary Hughes could have easily passed as Native as opposed to black, which some people did, she devoted herself whole-heartedly to the liberation, education and

⁵ Hughes, 17.

⁶ Rampersad, 19.

⁷ Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*. (New York: Thundermouth Press, 1940) 12.

⁸ Hughes, *ibid.*, 11-12.

improvement of black people. Langston Hughes' father, on the other hand, was comparably darker, and Hughes repeatedly remarks that the man despised black people, particularly those who were economically disenfranchised or uneducated. Hughes also had a white grandfather who spent his life living with a black woman.⁹ He then went against societal pressure and social mores to leave his entire will to their children, which was rarely done; though mixed race children abounded in the South, rarely did their white parent acknowledge them legally or financially. Early on, then, Hughes learned that while we might attempt to make assumptions, there is really no predictability in terms of the correlation between physicality and identity on an individual basis.

Over time, Hughes would develop a modern concept of race and race relations, expressing a patient though protective approach.¹⁰ Largely influenced by the fact that his grandmother's home was one of just a handful in their white neighborhood, the boy also attended an almost entirely white school. Hughes greeted white people with relatively moderate suspicion, "I learned early not to hate *all* white people. And ever since it has seemed to me that *most* people are generally good, in every race and in every country where I have been."¹¹ While Hughes describes an early ability to assess individuals rather than generally relying on hearsay, the experience of continued exposure to white people and their culture also isolated him. Rampersad explains that

. . . Langston had grown up in virtually all-white neighborhoods . . . a major source of his sense of isolation and loneliness, as well as of a consciousness steadily dividing between the world of the Langstons, on the one hand, and of the masses of blacks on the other. The white world represented a third force, entirely beyond his control but perhaps associated, in his mind, with the values of Mary Langston.¹²

Hughes' early immersion into a white world sparked his romance with black culture, a need to be near it, to explore it, to steep in it like a long, dark, river.

⁹ Hughes, *ibid.*

¹⁰ In regard to Hughes' cool-headed, largely observational approach to racism Rampersad writes, "Hughes's sense of balance was maintained by at least two factors. One was his precociously developed rational sense. Which kept his judgement under control. He could reason and watch where others rushed toward danger, just as he learned to govern his sexuality with apparent ease. The other factor was his sense of himself, fostered by his grandmother, his mother, the Reeds and other striving blacks, as a little prince—even if he was almost a pauper. For Hughes, this sense of aristocracy would have little to do with money; its values were essentially those of radical Abolitionism tempered with strong racial pride. With John Brown, Lewis Leary, Charles Langston, and John Mercer Langston behind him, he nursed a sense that he was obliged within his lifetime, in some way, to match their deeds. Because of these men and, above all, his grandmother, no one could convince the boy that he was intrinsically inferior. His greatest psychological wound had been inflicted not by racism but by parental neglect; he would measure all future hurts against this primary wound and find them, on the whole, easier to endure." (Rampersad, *ibid.*, 18).

¹¹ Hughes, 14.

¹² Rampersad, 18.

Later, in a high school that was also almost entirely white, Hughes describes his introduction to the complexities of racism,

from the students I learnt, too, that lots of painful words can be flung at people that aren't *nigger*. *Kike* was one; *spick*, and *hunky*, others. But soon I realized that the kikes and the spicks and the hunkies—scorned though they might be by the pure Americans—all had it on the niggers in one thing. . . . employers would *not* hire Negroes.¹³

Elsewhere, after having encountered more of the world and having seen the traumas white colonialism had exacted upon Africans, especially children (for whom Hughes had a true affinity), little wharf-rats or prostitutes. Here Hughes describes a fear and mistrust of whites:

'The white man dominates Africa,' Hughes would write. 'He takes produce, and lives, very much as he chooses. . . .And the Africans are baffled and humble. They listen to the missionaries and bow down before the Lord, but they bow much lower before the traders, who carry whips and guns and are protected by white laws, made in Europe for the black colonies.'¹⁴

Perhaps nothing informed his understanding of race more than his visit to Africa as a young man.

But it was the early immersion into a white world that did not include but rather only tolerated the boy that sparked his romance with black culture, a need to be near it, to explore it, to steep in its movement and depth like bathing in a long, dark, river.

At thirteen, Hughes probably already viewed the black world both as insider and, far more importantly, as an outsider. The view from the outside did not lead to clinical objectivity, much less alienation. Once outside, every intimate force in Hughes would drive him back toward seeking the love and approval of the race, which would become the grand obsession of his life. Already he had begun to identify not his family but the poorest and most despised blacks as the object of his desire to please. He would need the race, and would need to appease the race, to an extent felt by few other blacks, and by any other important black writer. This psychological craving was a quality far more rare than race pride or merely defensive antagonism against whites; it originated in an equally rare combination of a sense of racial destiny with a keen knowledge of childhood hurt.¹⁵

Later, as a poet, Hughes felt at once part of and outside the blackness he sought to represent in his writing. His words were a constant reach from a revelatory distance; one of Harlem's most gifted poets wrote from a place of awe and respect and sadness and only marginal belonging from a body and soul encompassed by that very world.

¹³ Hughes, 32.

¹⁴ Rampersad, 78.

¹⁵ Rampersad, 22.

The Spiritual Education of Langston Hughes

As a child, Hughes developed a relationship with the Reeds, a childless couple with whom he frequently stayed when his grandmother would lease out her home to renters.¹⁶ The Reeds became extended family to Hughes and by his own account he loved them very dearly. Auntie Reed taught Sunday school at the Methodist Episcopalian church. She often carried young Langston, even as he occasionally respectfully grouched, along with her. Uncle Reed, on the other hand, never went to church, in spite of his wife's pious dedication to the salvation of her and other souls. Hughes describes an important and unique lesson he learned from the couple at quite an early age, one that would undoubtedly temper his approach to people throughout his life, ". . . both of them [the Reeds] were very good and kind—the one who went to church and the one who didn't. And no doubt from them I learned to like both Christians and sinners equally well."¹⁷ The connectedness between the Episcopalian and Baptist churches in town made for a forum wherein black townspeople gathered weekly along with

university students . . . to sing and play classical music, recite poetry, read original essays and other compositions, and discuss the affairs of the day, especially as they affected The Race. What fascinated Langston was not the decorous forum, but the drama of black religion, with its fiery sermons, inspired responses, and passionate, skilled singing. . . . the Warren Street Baptists drew a poorer, more "down-home" Southern congregation [in contrast to the Episcopal church]. The sight of black-skinned worshippers captured by the Holy Spirit, their ecstatic groans and cries, fired young Langston's imagination. Here was high drama enacted by people of his race but well beyond his grandmother's world, people with sin glistening dark as jet (far darker than that of pale Langston's), ancient women with colored rags around braided hair, old men with gnarled black hands, some of whom must have been born in slavery. The boy felt both at home and utterly apart, at no time more so than when he watched Auntie Reed herself transported by religious ecstasy while he, impenetrable, watched in wonder.¹⁸

It was the drama that stirred Langston Hughes; the passion of this very uniquely black expression of faith that inspired him to chase after it. It was the theatricality, the music, the life of the church that for the poet embodied the best and brightest of the black folks he cherished so dearly but from whom he felt perennially isolated.

Throughout his life Langston Hughes expressed both interest in, and respect or admiration for, people of faith though he himself was quite decidedly secular. His spiritual education was largely based largely in cultural exposure and exploration; he appreciated the customs surrounding a particular faith as columns of cultural continuity. He was particularly fond of Jewish people, and as an adult his friends included Muslims, Bahians, Christians,

¹⁶ Rampersad, 15.

¹⁷ Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1940) 18.

¹⁸ Rampersad, 16.

Episcopalians, Baptists and atheists. Hughes was a remarkably well-traveled individual. By the age of twenty-two he had seen much of middle America, the East coast, Mexico, much of the western coast of Africa, and Europe. His experiences abroad enriched him and his writing became infused with a truly cosmopolitan understanding of the world.

Perhaps nothing, save his isolated childhood, informed his understanding of race and the diaspora more than his visit to Africa as a young man. Like many black Americans, Hughes harbored a somewhat overzealous romance for Africa. He was both disappointed and captivated by his experience there. Hughes was surprised when the black Africans he encountered did not receive him as one of their own. Taking review of his light skin and his relatively straight hair, they called him a white man, something the poet found deeply disturbing. He clearly had wanted to be received in Africa as the Native Son returned. Instead he found he did not fit.

The next day we moved on. And farther down the coast it was more like the Africa I had dreamed about—wild and lovely, the people dark and beautiful, the palm trees tall, the sun bright, and the rivers deep. The great Africa of my dreams! But there was one thing that hurt me a lot when I talked with the people. The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro.¹⁹

In protest he explained that he was not a white man.²⁰ Keenly aware of distinctions of color under the colonial regime, the Africans replied, you are not black either.²¹ Rampersad explains that this prompted a pan-African consciousness in the work Langston created.²² His travels also introduced him to the particulars in the cultural underpinnings of spirituality in the West Indies including two incredibly rich Creole religions, *vodun* (Haiti) and *Santeria* (Cuba). He spent time amongst the devout Catholics of Mexico.²³ He was raised in a region steeped in the strong,

¹⁹ Hughes, 11.

²⁰ Hughes seemed to find the navigation of his mixed heritage tiresome, “You see, unfortunately, I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word “Negro” is used to mean anyone who has any Negro blood at all in his veins. In Africa, the word is more pure. It means *all* Negro, therefore *black*. I am brown. My father was a darker brown. My mother an olive-yellow.” (Hughes, *ibid.*, 11). While always regarding himself as a person of color, a black person, he would occasionally toy with passing while traveling abroad. As a young man, in his late teens and early twenties, with light brown skin and only loosely curled hair, Hughes often passed as a Mexican when traveling back and forth from the States to Toluca. (See Rampersad, *ibid.*, pp. 38-49).

²¹ Rampersad, 78.

²² As though his recurring affirmations of the strength of connection of all peoples throughout the Diaspora was part of his effort to make real the “homeland” of which Marcus Garvey back in America spoke. It is likely that his perception of black Africa and its customs and culture were internalized from revelatory and romantic distance similar to what Langston imagined and recreated in regard to poor black Americans, though the distance was surely greater abroad.

²³ “On the weekends in Mexico City he usually stayed with the three Patino sisters in their house behind the cathedral near the Plaza of the Constitution. Attending vespers and Sunday mass with them, he liked the gloomy interiors of the churches, the dolorous Virgins and crucifixes dripping with what looked in the dark, after the *corrida*, like real blood. As in the United States, the drama of religion appealed to him, not its dogma: Jesus was dead, ritual was alive. Latin culture, like black culture, seemed richly elemental compared to white Protestantism; Hughes felt very much at home in Mexico.” (Rampersad, *ibid.*, 47).

central heart of Baptist faith. In Africa he encountered Arab Muslims and the spiritual and ontological systems of the Yoruba and Kru peoples. All of this would inform his project to refashion the Nativity story through the gospel tradition.

His feelings about organized religion were shaped early on. Hughes recounts an experience at the age of about thirteen years old when he encounters the religious fervor of his Auntie and her community and, while his hopes had been high, finds himself deeply disappointed. Rampersad goes so far as to suggest that this moment was “the most harrowing episode of his childhood.” The following passage, while lengthy, describes a critical break from the religious atmosphere in which the boy was raised. It undoubtedly informed his perspective regarding the culture of gospel music, opening him to its musicality rather than its determinations. It also allowed him to balance the tension inherent in gospel music, that while stemming from traditional spirituals, it is also in dialogue with what the devout considered Devil’s music, namely the blues.²⁴ Rampersad writes,

As she had done many times before, Mary Reed had been taking him to an extended revival sponsored by her church. Every night, for what seemed like weeks, the rafters had rung with sermons, hymns, prayer and shouting as sinner after sinner was led to Christ. To conclude the revival, a special evening near the end was set aside for the youngest sinners. At home, Auntie Reed talked to him incessantly about the coming service and its importance to his life and, because she loved him, to her own. She assured Langston that, “when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! And Jesus came into your life! And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul.”

Imaginative and susceptible, Langston believed her. To a hypersensitive boy who had spent his conscious life waiting for his mother and hoping for his father, the notion of a savior coming who thereafter would be always by his side struck and sounded deep. On the children’s evening he went eagerly to church. As the preacher preached and the congregation amened, Auntie Reed hovered expectantly about him with several of the other enthusiasts. One by one, the children were saved, until only Langston and another boy remained. Finally, the boy whispered to Langston that he couldn’t wait any longer, he was going to be saved. Now only Langston was left. Auntie Reed knelt down beside him, praying aloud. The old folks in the amen-corner prayed aloud. “The whole congregation prayed for me alone, in a mighty wail of moans and voices. And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting—but he didn’t come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing!”

Then he could wait no longer. “And the preacher said do you love God? And I said yes. And the preacher said do you accept him? And I said yes. And I was converted.” The

²⁴ In Chicago, Hughes heard “the music of his Holiness and Sanctified churches—the storefront tabernacles ministering to southern blacks stunned by life in the north. The gospel music reminded him of the Baptists in Lawrence, but it possessed a far greater intensity in stepped-up rhythms driven by fierce handclapping and wild tambourines; in polyrhythmic sermons black ministers showed off all the gifts of great actors. Hughes never forgot one preacher who depicted the ascent of Calvary by climbing onto a piano stool, then up onto the keyboard, before finally planting himself on the piano top, arms extended as if crucified, preaching eloquently all the while.” (Rampersad, *ibid.*, 27)

church erupted in jubilation. Throwing her arms around him, Auntie Reed led him home in triumph. But Langston was not triumphant. That night, he would remember, he cried for the last time in his life but once. “I cried, in bed alone, and couldn’t stop. I buried my head under the quilts, but my aunt heard me. She woke up and told my uncle I was crying because the Holy Ghost had come into my life, and because I had seen Jesus. But I was really crying because I couldn’t bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn’t seen Jesus, and that now I didn’t believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn’t come to help me.” And elsewhere: “I had waited for Him and He hadn’t come.”

If indeed Hughes never cried again but once in his life, his loss of faith was not only in Jesus but also in all those on whom he had waited in vain to save him from loneliness. Since he had seen Jesus come to old black men and women, even to Auntie Reed herself, then the fault, if Jesus now failed to come to Langston, must have been the boy’s own. Langston could not rest there; he oscillated between self-blame and rage at his parents—and at Jesus.²⁵

But Hughes was not without spirituality, a sense of something greater than himself and the world of human flesh; he was often awestruck by the bounty of the world, the earth he traversed inspired revelatory praise from the young poet. On his trip South to Mexico to see his father before going to college, Hughes wrote,

It is sunset and my car window frames a Maxfield Parish painting. Mexico’s great jagged mountains are bathed in yellow wine and honey. There are some old peaks far in the background that have wrapped a purple veil about themselves, and sit huddled like Indians, silent. But there in the foreground, sunset’s wonder colors of crimson and amber and gold change the dull gray mountains, these stark rugged mountains, into magic hills, the dream of mountains of childhood. Only God could paint such a picture and only Mexico could be the canvas.²⁶

Falling somewhere in between a general cosmic spirituality and his rejection of the organized religious experience he had as a youth, Hughes nonetheless felt deep reverence and passion for the culture from which gospel music came. Because of the writer’s secular beliefs, *Black Nativity* was more a project in capturing the cultural flavor of the gospel tradition and preserving, through the music, an important aspect of African American ethos.

To Harlem: Finding His Niche

Like the other prolific black writers of his time, Langston Hughes concerned himself sincerely with a quest to know and describe black people. Unlike the recognized poet laureate of Harlem, Countee Cullen, with whom Hughes shared

In the early 18th century Harlem, New York was a bustling, boisterous community that grew exponentially between 1910 and 1945.

²⁵ Rampersad, 20-1.

²⁶ Rampersad, quoting Langston Hughes, *ibid.*, 41.

a tenuous friendship, Langston Hughes was determined to write about black life from the perspective of those whose voices were rarely considered worthy of depiction. He wrote with the gifted ear of a poet, but in a language that seemed to spring organically from within black culture, infused with notes from Africa, the Caribbean, Mexico and the American South, anywhere black folks had been and put down roots, Langston Hughes paid attention. Cullen, on the other hand, was widely embraced by the black middle class and enjoyed a relatively strong white readership as well. Hughes was the poet celebrated more by his peers than his patrons for many years, writing poems that would be published in the black press and papers of the day, stalwarts such as *Crisis* and *Opportunity*.

Early in his career Langston Hughes took it upon himself to celebrate the vitality, the creativity and the resilience of black people in the United States. Working in Harlem, New York in the early 18th century, Hughes was part of a bustling, boisterous community that grew

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exponentially between the years of 1910 and 1945. Up from the southern states came black migrants in search of opportunity, eager to see for themselves the rumored black Mecca in America, this place called Harlem. Harlem is not a large neighborhood, and it was already quite well populated at the start of what became known as the Great Migration. Newcomers found housing not only short, but also very expensive indeed. Families already occupying flats uptown were eager to take on boarders, however, to ease the burden of their rent. Thus newcomers were acclimated via established families and extended kinship networks, creating tightly knit, interdependent pockets of folks. This unique situation allowed for an unparalleled experience; nowhere had black people, hailing from all over the United States, the Caribbean and Africa, lived free on American soil in such close proximity and with relative autonomy.

In Harlem New York Langston Hughes found himself in the company of a collection including the most prolific writers and thinkers of the day. Alain Locke, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois and the other prominent black scholars of the day wrote vociferously about the potential for radical change that Harlem represented, for social and political growth, for self-representation, at last, for sovereignty. Like a syringe, this

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centralized and cosmopolitan city would draw the best and brightest in the country. Eager to meet with one another and share ideas and new work, the black literati gathered in salons and cafés and the living rooms of the well to do such as A'Leila Walker, the daughter of the millionaire Madame CJ Walker who had created a virtual empire in her lifetime of black beauty products.

One should not underestimate the influence the cosmopolitan centers with their diverse medley of inhabitants; the most celebrated jazz and blues musicians, formidably talented dancers, actors and comedians, and the men and women of letters including journalists, lawyers, sociologists, anthropologists and other keepers of the cultural flame. In this environment young writers and thinkers flowered and felt a need to respond, to be at the table, so to speak. Langston Hughes was no different.

It is possible that Hughes harbored a tender hope that his parents would finally recognize and celebrate the talent and ingenuity of their child.

Though it was his tendency to take flight from time to time on ships, his reputation in Harlem nevertheless grew in spite of his absence from the social circles and parlors where the literati convened. It is likely that Langston had a keen clarity about his need to be lonesome, to long for Harlem and its people, his people, so that he could find the heart that missed them, and write from that place. Much of his work stands at a rather revelatory distance, melancholic or celebratory, but from afar. He enforced a kind of self-imposed exile so that he would write to find his way home. Home lived in his head and heart, in his memories of black hands clapping in the Midwestern churches, in the buoyant laughter of the Pullman porters in New York City and that of wash-women and laundresses gossiping while they worked like the tinkling of bells. It was in the shuck and jive of men playing cards and throwing dice, the streetwalker's stare, and in the wonderment of schoolchildren paging through books or playing hopscotch in the streets. Langston's world was rich indeed. He carried it with him wherever he went. It was a song that would romance him throughout his life, standing ever at the edges of his grasp; a tender thing that would wither and die should he try pin it down. But to let it be free, to live and exist all around and away from him, he could follow and long for it, seducing and being seduced, the project of a lifetime.

It is one of the quiet ironies of life that a play so deeply connected to family and genealogy would be written by a man whose own relationship with his parents was fraught with both neglect and disappointment.²⁷ By his own admission and via other accounts, it is clear that Langston Hughes felt largely abandoned by his parents. Throughout his autobiography, those

²⁷ 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). See especially chapter one.

resurfaced letters to his close friends and intimates, and in the principal biography of his life to date, Hughes muses that life might be better were it possible to be born without parents at all.

In Rampersad's account of Hughes life, we get the sense that this divorce from a real sense of parental support and love somehow stunted Hughes, leaving a large part of him that did not develop beyond the wounded child who grew up in the austere home of his grandmother Mary Langston.²⁸ Undoubtedly there was a correlation between Hughes' memories of his childhood and the maltreatment of the Christ child. Surely the deeply apologetic gospel songs that both praise the Lord Jesus Christ and recognize the abuse he suffered at the hands of those he had come to save resonated with Hughes. For example, in the honeyed, dark tones of "Sweet Little Jesus Boy" one feels both the pain of the martyr and the sorrowful regret of the mortal, though in the end the two are equitable, common, similar, sharing a unique bond forged out of the general meanness of life and their survival and eternal hope in spite of great odds:

Sweet Little Jesus Boy / Born not so long ago / Born in a manger child / . . . The world treat you mean Lord / Treat me mean too / But that's how it is down here / Where we didn't know who you was / Please Lord forgive us child / We didn't know who you was.

It is possible that Hughes, in his continual return to his mother and the pilgrimage he made to reconvene with his father, had harbored some tender hope that his parents would finally recognize and celebrate the talent and special ingenuity of their child. The heralded return of their son never fulfilled itself, however. Hughes came and left without the garlands of their praise or love laid upon his shoulders. Instead he was met with frosty indifference from his father, who was concerned only for the money his son should make and the practicality of the profession the young man chose, and his mother's disgruntled tolerance of Hughes' creative impulses which threatened the household income for steady, reliable pay.

Indeed, much of his life was spent scratching for a pittance. In spite of his growing reputation as a poet of great caliber, Hughes never made much money by way of his pen. What little money he did receive for his poems was continually supplemented by his work aboard ships, as a waiter, busboy, even a bouncer in Paris.²⁹ As Harlem became increasingly more

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²⁸ In an obviously Freudian interpretation of events, Rampersad locates the origination of any sexual ambiguity or anomaly Hughes exhibits in his deep sense of disappointment and alienation from his parents.

²⁹ Rampersad, 85.

popular, especially as it pertained to jazz music, stride piano and cabaret and swing dance, the talent within the neighborhood was instantly commoditized. The success of those Broadway shows that capitalized on black performers and black musical style offered a unique opportunity for composers and writers to make a profit for their work. Hughes was offered a commission to write a musical featuring gospel music. Unlike the previously successful “*Tambourines to Glory*” that included gospel songs, [Hughes] would attempt to make black gospel music the heart and soul of the drama, and not merely its adornment.”³⁰

The growth of Harlem distressed many of its early residents, Claude McKay lamented its decline, as the city began to take on a tone of seedy quality during the Prohibition era. Rampersad writes that, “[v]ery early, as the Jazz Age ripened in New York, Harlem was accepting the role forced on it—that of bookie, bootlegger, and bordello to white downtown.”³¹ Still Hughes found beauty, elegance and grace in even the toughest of these situations and the people that administered to the white patrons of uptown. The times uptown in Harlem were changing. “Gospel . . . [was] virtually exploding in popularity, with several of its finest exponents now performing with great success in nightclubs such as the Village Vanguard, the Blue Angel, and Birdland, where jazz had ruled alone.”³² Gospel music was the soul of the Civil Rights Movement. The deep moans, the rhythmic chants, the call to stand up, to rise to meet the swelling crowds and join them, was intoxicating, thrilling, stirring and perhaps even threatening because of its depth, its resonance, its insistence on survival. Rampersad describes Hughes understanding of gospel music as informed by

yet another aspect of black culture on which he would draw later as an artist and an individual. At an open air theatre on Independence Avenue, from an orchestra of blind musicians, Hughes first heard the blues. The music seemed to cry, but the words somehow laughed. The effect on him was one of piercing sadness, as if his deepest loneliness had been harmonized. . . . Between the church and the blues singers, . . . the world of black feeling and art opened before Langston. He neither felt religion nor could sing the blues, and yet both the religious drama and the secular music soothed and diverted him from his sense of solitude. They also alerted him to a power and a privacy of language residing in the despised race to which he belonged; approaching the church and the blues as an outsider, because of his grandmother’s own forbidding distance, Langston only respected them more.³³

Hughes found the music of black culture wherever he went; if it was hidden from him, he would seek it out, certain after experiences such as the one above, that it was always nearby, that it was necessary. Rampersad recounts a visit to Washington DC during which Hughes

³⁰ Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II: 1941-1967 I Dream a World*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 344.

³¹ Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes Volume I: 1902-1941 I, Too, Sing America*, 54.

³² Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II: 1941-1967 I Dream a World*, 344.

³³ Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes Volume I: 1902-1941 I, Too, Sing America*. 16-7.

encountered an insufferable black bourgeoisie that made him feel tremendously out of place. In search of the familiar, something to remind him of the blackness he knew, he hit the shadier area of town known as “Seventh Street.” Here, as Rampersad describes, people were poor, unapologetic, and lively. Hughes once again found the music he’d longed for, “ ‘ Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, . . . like the earth moving around the sun, night, day,—night, day—night, day—forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power.’ ”³⁴ It was here that Hughes embarked upon a new, most sincere journey to maintain a certain “vigilance about the need to find new ways, based on a steadfast loyalty to the forms of black culture, to express black consciousness—and, in so doing, to assist at its passage into the hostile modern world.”³⁵ According to Rampersad, Hughes was going through a period wherein he quite vocally expressed his frustration with the criticism of his work by white reviewers who, though they may have lauded his skill, understood little of the culture behind the work, the roots from which it sprang.

Black Nativity marked a major breakthrough in the gospel musical form. As with his evolving mastery of the blues in the 1920s, when he moved from a complete immersion in it—writing blues themselves, without mediation—Hughes now deliberately allowed black music and religion to overwhelm the traditional play form. Serving to link but also to liberate the vocal skills and religious emotions of a company of authentic gospel musicians, the narrator offers a few remarks here, a touching lyric invitation there. . . [but almost the entire bulk of the play contains] songs [that] were in the public domain as part of the religious music tradition.³⁶

The poet would redouble his efforts to depict the deep well of black life he knew, not writing for the critics, nor to compete with his peers. Hughes instead wrote in honor of those people who had loved him and protected him as a boy; for the poor, simple folks he knew in the Midwest, the South, in the hardened industrial cities of Chicago, Cleveland and Detroit, for those he knew in Harlem; he wrote for the black heart whose pulse rocked him like a lullaby, shook him to the core and beat ever-vigilant in his own breast.

³⁴ Ibid., 102.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rampersad, (*I Dream a World*) 345-6.