Memories of Langston Hughes 1902-1967
Author(s): Arna Bontemps
Published by: African American Review (St. Louis University)
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041236
Accessed: 09-04-2018 01:13 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

African American Review (St. Louis University) is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Negro American Literature Forum
Because the Negro American writer is the bearer of two cultures, he is also the guardian of two literary traditions. If he wants to be a poet, he must know about Dunbar and Toomer, Tolsen and Hayden, but also about Whitman and Dickinson, Frost and Lowell. There can be no question of approaching Negro literature in the spirit of black nationalism, as if it were sealed off hermatically from the history of American letters. There are always the most profound connections between a Negro writer’s work and the American literary tradition. Nor does the time dimension alter this relationship in any way: it was true of nineteenth century Negro writing and is true of contemporary Negro writing as well.

(3) The literary quality. Here I must confess to a certain uneasiness with Professor Lawry’s line of questioning. For he seems to be suggesting a double standard for the critical evaluation of Negro American writing. I should not want to apply the same aesthetic standards to a blues lyric and a Milton sonnet, but that is a question of distinguishing between pre-literature and literature; between folk art and high art, if you will. But I should hesitate to make the same distinction where a sonnet of Robert Hayden’s is concerned, no matter what folkloristic elements it might contain. For here is a poet of high seriousness, who asks no more nor less than to be judged on the same basis as his peers.

As for the confusion of sociological and aesthetic criteria, that is precisely what must be avoided at all costs. Anyone familiar with the history of Negro American writing will understand that this confusion has served to thwart the emergence of a mature criticism. No: the charge of Uncle Tomism or Black Muslimism is not a legitimate aesthetic charge. There is a large body of critical literature dealing with this problem, notably the work of Welles and Warren and other so-called New Critics. Suffice it to remark that images are not ideas; that the business of artists is with images; and that to judge an artist on the ground of his ideas is to denigrate the imaginative faculty which it is our task, as literary men, precisely to exalt.

(4) Summary. We are attempting to demarcate a field of study. The three words Negro, American, and literature are all essential to this demarcation. We are concerned with the literary expression of an ethnic group. The substantive, literature, denotes the kind of group expression in which we are interested. The adjectives Negro and American denote the ethnic group.

Robert Bone
Teachers College
Columbia University
New York, New York

May I suggest that readers having previously-released but difficult-to-obtain articles or speeches in Negro American Literature might consider mailing two copies of these to Bernard O’Donnell, NCTE/ERIC, 508 South Sixth Street, Champaign, Ill. 61821. These materials could then become available to scholars.

Marguerite P. Archer, Librarian
Mamoroneck Avenue School
Mamoroneck, New York

Even a dependable memory sometimes plays tricks, and often enough I have had to call mine to task. This has never been true, I hasten to add, when the subject was the life and works of Langston Hughes. Even his adolescent poems were unforgettable. His personal history, as one picked it up from fragments in newspapers and magazines, had begun to read like a legend long before he finished college.

I seem to be the member of the Harlem literary group of the twenties elected to hold in trust a certain legacy of recollections, and the first of these is that he was our bellwether in that early dawn. The first poems by Langston that I read appeared in the Crisis in the summer of 1924. That magazine had been publishing articles, stories and poems by him for several years, but being away at a college that did not subscribe to such periodicals, immersed in the reading of the “Chief American Poets” and collections of British poetry of the Victorian era, I had missed the earlier Hughes works as well as most of the other American Negroan of that period. Lines like “We have tomorrow/ Bright before us/ Like a flame” and “I am waiting for my mother/ She is Death,” as they appeared in that book, struck me with such surprise, seemed so quietly disturbing, they immediately convinced me I had been missing something important, something I needed.

But I was rushing away to New York as I made the discovery, and it was not ’till I arrived in Harlem that I was able to go to the Public Library and look up back issues of the Crisis and Opportunity and other periodicals hospitable to the work of Langston Hughes and his contemporaries of that period. I did not have to be told, as I browsed, that I had been short-changed in a significant area of my basic education. So many lights began flashing all around me, I could not fail to get the message. I eagerly set about trying to correct the omissions and perhaps repair some of the damage to dreams and aspirations that should have normally flourished in school and college days.

That winter I met Langston himself. He returned to Harlem from seafaring and sojourning, and the word was passed up and down the Avenues that the Poet was back. He had been seen. I heard it first from one of the librarians in the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library. Then I heard it in a rather strange way in the parsonage of the Salem Methodist Church on Seventh Avenue. I had gone there by appointment to meet another young poet whose foster father was
the church minister, and it was the Rev. Cullen who opened the door to me. Without even pausing to speak to me, he spun around and shouted up the steps toward the second floor, "Countee! Countee! Come here! Langston Hughes is back!"

In a sense, I considered this my official welcome, under mistaken identity, into the Harlem literati. I promptly explained the situation and introduced myself. Langston remained cordial (albeit 冷淡) and assured me that they could not tell one of us from the other by sight, so much did we look alike in those years. A night or two later I was both included in a small group invited to the apartment shared by Regina Anderson Andrews, the librarian, and Ethel Ray Nance, an editorial secretary in the office of Opportunity, welcoming the real Langston Hughes home and to his first book. A few weeks later Langston sent me from Washington, D.C., manuscript copies of these and other unpublished poems in which I had written aboard the ships on which he worked and more recently in the kitchen of the Grand Duke night club in Paris.

One of the poems he read that night won the first Opportunity poetry prize soon after, and then became the title poem for The Weary Blues, his first book. A few weeks later Langston sent me from Washington, D.C., manuscript copies of these and other unpublished poems in which I had expressed interest. So it becomes an enormous satisfaction to one who has watched his bibliography grow over an arch of more than forty years to see it now compiled in manuscript form and awaiting publication.

It would be much too casual to merely observe that Hughes has been prolific. He has been a min-strel and a troubadour in the classic sense. He has had no other vocation, and he has lived by his writing since that winter evening we met in Harlem in 1922. A night or two later I was back, and the lean years and the full years considered, this has required versatility. Hughes has worked competently in all the literary forms. As a man of letters he has done or been done to, by short stories, novels, sketches, articles; plays, pageants, revues; autobiography, books for children, and adult non-fiction. But nothing he has written has been out of tune with his first poems. Almost any biographical piece about him could appropriately be called "The Negro Who Spoke of Rivers." And his repeated use of the word soul in the refrain of his first widely published poem represents something more than a kind of "Negro" quality in certain areas of American self-expression and culture.

Arna Bontemps
University of Illinois at Chicago Circle


WORKING WITH LANGSTON HUGHES

It took only a day for visitors, like myself, to learn the first rule of Langston Hughes' household--don't call before noon! Close friends knew the second rule--have a good reason to call before 3:00! Langston was a night worker. To him, the hours between midnight and 6:00 a.m. were the most productive.

I was a mere visitor in New York in the winter of 1961 with a travel grant that enabled me to spend some time with Langston Hughes. Several years of correspondence about his bibliography, which I had in progress, indicated an affable personality, but I was somewhat on edge at the prospect of meeting the man himself. The bell of a neat Harlem brownstone one morning in March, Mrs. Emerson Harper, landlady and friend, explained that Mr. Hughes was not in, that he "was down with his publisher." This, I later learned, was a fiction and a standard technique used to discourage early callers.

In the evening I tried again and this time Mrs. Harper directed me up three flights of narrow stairs to Langston's quarters. The layout was geared to comfort and hospitality--a large book-lined, memento filled room, an overflowing desk in one corner, easy chairs and a long couch in the middle. From the main room one could see a small kitchen, a bedroom and an "office" with bulging cabinets of contracts, manuscripts, letters and notes. Birthday cards and gifts covered the mantel. February I, had been remembered by many friends.

He was an easy man to talk with and an easy man to like. The conversation swirled around the several people in the room and carried above the phonograph blasting out a variety of blues and bop. It was good talk, mostly for fun, and Langston led it with an effortless panache, not simply keeping his hand in with a joke or a sharp opinion.

"What about my work--the bibliography? Would I want to include his foreign publications, his readings for phonograph records? Would I like to spend some time in the basement, where, he said, I could find a whole array of unsorted journals and books? A truck came regularly from Yale University Library, but a great backlog remained, waiting for the careful organization and listing Langston liked to devote to all his papers." He was, he said, "a librarian at heart."

"As we talked Langston moved rapidly around the room, cigarette ashes falling in all directions, looking for a bibliography of Carl Van Vechten. I told him I had seen the copy of THE WEARY BLUES he had inscribed to Van Vechten, "For Carl Van Vechten who made this book possible and said call it Weary Blues," in the Rare Book Room of the New York Public Library. "He's getting old," Langston said.

"When did I want to work? Anytime before 3:00 was out--but after that "come on up, bring your typewriter, use the bedroom, I'll put the books in there." I was on my way down the stairs when he asked me back, "Hey, Dickinson, how about a drink to the bibliography?" We launched it in good style.

For the next week and a half I worked at the Schomburg Collection in the morning and at Langston's in the afternoon and evening. When I stopped work at midnight or 1:00 a.m., the music and the talk in the adjoining room had also quieted, but he was beginning his night's work. The result was unbelievable. "Simple" columns, a speech to a group of Spanish teachers on translation, an editing job on a new collection of poems, a review, a play in progress, and letters to friends all over the world. The desk was well organized, air-mail paper in one section, post cards in another. Letters were precise and full of detail--the name and address of his Dutch publisher, a list of recent anthologies in which his work appeared, or contemptuous underlined lines with green ink. A secretary handled some of the letters, but the personal touch was always there.

I spent the last day of my visit in the basement sorting through piles of magazines, newspapers, and books. After several hours I was glad...