

**New Jersey State Conference of the National
Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**

**HAPPY BIRTHDAY LANGSTON HUGHES
READ-A-THON**

FEBRUARY 1ST

**All of the Children's "Dream Keepers"
Reading Everywhere We Can !**



Since 2005, the New Jersey State Conference of the NAACP has invited the community to join **THE HAPPY BIRTHDAY LANGSTON HUGHES READ -A-THON** on February 1st. Members of the New Jersey NAACP Family, their friends and supporters have begun Black History Month by reading the works of Langston Hughes to students in their local schools. During the 2005 pilot program, members of the New Jersey NAACP greatly enjoyed reading the work of our late NAACP member, Langston Hughes, to children in selected schools throughout New Jersey. Langston Hughes' work is very accessible in local libraries, at bookstores, and on-line. Since the New Jersey NAACP began its Read-a-thon, Hughes foremost biographer, Dr. Arnold Rampersad, edited a very special anthology in the series, *Poetry for Young People: Langston Hughes*, which features wonderful illustrations by the late African American artist, Bennie Andrews.¹ **THE HAPPY BIRTHDAY LANGSTON HUGHES READ -A-THON** on February 1st is becoming a cherished tradition.

¹ Hughes, Langston. *Poetry for Young People: Langston Hughes*. Edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. New York: Sterling Publishing 2006.

If you have an existing relationship with a school where you wish to read to a targeted age group for one or two hours, the New Jersey NAACP State Conference Education Committee is providing you with this brief biography of Langston Hughes featuring his special connections to New Jersey, and also some recommended selections of Hughes poetry, prose and theater that are age-appropriate for your students.

The New Jersey NAACP cannot let young people in our state forget or fail to fully appreciate the life and works of Langston Hughes. In 2007, an important education report was released by the United States Census Bureau, entitled, "A Child's Day," which reviewed some important statistics about family members reading to children.

Throughout his long and productive career, Langston Hughes had such a multi-faceted and complex relationship with the NAACP. He was first published by an early Literary Editor of *CRISIS Magazine*, Jessie Redmon Fauset, in 1921. He was greatly inspired by Dr. W.E.B. DuBois and his relationships with officials like Walter White were such that his biographer, Dr. Arnold Rampersad, described America's oldest civil rights organization as Hughes' ". . . oldest organizational ally." Rampersad quotes these lines from Langston Hughes' speech at the 1959 NAACP Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration:

"For most of my life I have been a member of the NAACP, but sometimes when funds were low, or I was out of the country, my membership lapsed. However, whenever I have had a dollar or two, I renewed my membership in one branch, or another throughout the country."

A BIOGRAPHY OF LANGSTON HUGHES

CREATED FOR THE NEW JERSEY NAACP STATE EDUCATION
COMMITTEE'S INAUGURAL "HAPPY BIRTHDAY LANGSTON
HUGHES READ-A-THON" FEBRUARY 1, 2005 (REVISED 2007 & 2009))

The prolific African American writer, Langston Hughes, was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri and died on May 22, 1967 in New York City's Harlem. His block of East 127th Street was renamed "Langston Hughes Place."¹ He was prolific because he produced a great amount of wonderful literature during the nearly 50-years between his first publications in the early 1920's and his death in 1967. Best known for the art form through which his genius first appeared -- poetry -- Langston Hughes writes in all forms of literature, or across the literary genres. He wrote about every subject and event in the Black community, or about every nuance of the Black experience.

The Langston Hughes postage stamp was issued by the US Postal Service on February 1, 2002, the poet's centennial, at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. "Langston Hughes used the collections of the Schomburg Center throughout his career. He donated part of his papers to the Center and his remains are interred in the atrium of the Center's Langston Hughes Auditorium . . . This 25th anniversary edition of the Black Heritage Stamp Series is a fitting tribute to the centennial of Hughes' birth. The Schomburg Center is pleased to host the First Day of Issue Ceremony," said Howard Dodson, Director, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.²

Although Langston Hughes will always be a great cultural symbol for the Harlem community, New Jerseyans in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) have discovered four very special relationships that the poet had to people and places in their state. Jessie Redmon Fauset; the township of Westfield; his fellow-student at Lincoln, Dr. James Dorsey, and the first Black woman elected to the New Jersey Senate, Dr. Wynona Moore Lipman all connect Langston Hughes to New Jersey.

Young Langston spent his boyhood in Kansas mostly with his maternal grandmother, or his mother's mother -- Mary Sampson Langston. He was an only child and Langston Hughes never forgot this lonely childhood. Langston's mother and father were separated. His mother, Carrie Hughes, had to travel around to find work and his father, James Hughes, moved to Mexico.

Sometimes Langston lived with his mother, but he usually lived with his grandmother and he loved her very much. When Langston was twelve, or thirteen years old, his grandmother died. Langston moved to Lincoln, Illinois to live with his mother, who had remarried and started a new family. It was at grammar school in Lincoln, Illinois that Langston Hughes first became a poet. He writes in the first of two autobiographies, *The Big Sea (1940)*:

I was the class poet. It happened like this. They had elected all the class officers, but there was no one in our class who looked like a poet, or had ever written a poem. There were two Negro children in class, myself and a girl. In America, most white people think, of course, that all Negroes can sing and dance, and have a sense of rhythm. So my classmates knowing that a poem had to have rhythm, elected me unanimously – thinking, no doubt, that I had some, being a Negro.”³

Having rhythm was always important for Langston Hughes. According to the literary experts, or those people who know the most about the way that people write, Langston Hughes' poetry is special, or unique because he uses the rhythms of Black music. This is called his poetic meter and it sounds like the beat that we hear in blues, jazz, spirituals, or gospel.

One of Langston Hughes' earliest literary influences was reading the essays of Dr. W.E.B. DuBois in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) *Crisis Magazine*. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes' first published poem was written when he was only eighteen years old. It appeared in the *Crisis* in 1921 and continues to be one of his most popular poems. During the last trip that Langston Hughes made to visit his father in Mexico, as the train crossed the bridge over the Mississippi River, young Langston took only ten or fifteen minutes to write "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." As soon as his thoughts came to him, he captured them by writing his poem on an envelope that he had in his pocket. Langston Hughes wrote in *The Big Sea*, " . . . for poems are like rainbows: they escape you quickly." ⁴

After a very unhappy year in Mexico with his father, Langston Hughes came to New York City. His father sent him there to attend Columbia University, but Langston really came to New York to see Harlem. Langston stopped attending Columbia University, but he got involved with the poets in the Harlem Renaissance – like Jessie Redmon Fauset and James Weldon Johnson. Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882 – 1961), although usually associated with Philadelphia, was actually born in Frederickville, or Snow Hill, an all Black section which was long ago incorporated into the Borough of Lawnside in Camden County.⁵ Since 2004, the Lawnside Historical Society has observed a Jessie Redmon Fauset Day. Ms. Fauset left New Jersey as a young child and grew-up in Philadelphia, but returned to live in Montclair, New Jersey from 1939 - 1958.¹ When Langston Hughes became an established writer, he was known to call Jessie Fauset, “the mid-wife of the Harlem Renaissance.” She was an accomplished poet and novelist, who was recruited by Dr. DuBois to be the literary editor for *Crisis Magazine*. She first published two of Hughes’ pieces in *The Brownies’ Book*, the NAACP publication for children. On New Year’s Day in 1921, Langston sent “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” to Jessie Fauset. Later that year, she published Langston’s poem in *Crisis Magazine* – facilitating the birth of his legendary career. Having his artistic development influenced by this Camden County native was Langston Hughes’ first connection to New Jersey.

In 1923, Hughes traveled abroad as a seaman on a freighter to the African Countries: Senegal, Nigeria, the Cameroons, Belgium Congo, Angola, and Guinea. Then he traveled to Italy, France, Russia and Spain. Later, he would also spend a considerable amount of time in Cuba and Haiti. These experiences gave Langston Hughes a world view that was, indeed, multicultural. Traveling the world as a seaman and learning many languages, Hughes translated the works of Mexican, Cuban, Chilean, Haitian and Spanish writers such as Federico Garcia Lorca and Guillen . One of the things he enjoyed most, whether outside of the United States or in Harlem, was sitting in the clubs listening to blues, jazz and writing poetry. Through these experiences the rhythms unique to his writing intensified, or became stronger, and a series of poems such as "The Weary Blues" appeared. He returned to Harlem, in 1924.

By 1925, Hughes was an emerging voice in the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was the period of time after World War I until about 1930 when the migration of Blacks from the South made Harlem the largest urban center of Blacks anywhere in the world. Literature and the arts flourished, or grew very successfully in Harlem, and Black artists all over the nation focused on Harlem. James Weldon Johnson, the Harlem Renaissance poet who wrote the words to the Black National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” was also an official in the NAACP. He was a revered poet and mentor for Langston Hughes. During 1925, James Weldon Johnson publicly recited Hughes’ poem, “The Weary Blues” and this event led to the publication of Langston Hughes first book in 1926. As Langston Hughes participated in the Harlem

Renaissance, he experienced a growing desire to complete his college education at an historically Black college or university.

Langston Hughes received a scholarship to Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania, where he received his B.A. degree in 1929. During his time at Lincoln, he enjoyed a friendship with another student, James Dorsey, who would later become an important educator in New Jersey. In the Rampersad biography's chapter on Langston Hughes at Lincoln University, the author describes another student who called himself, "Lord Jim Dorsey," and was the leader of the University's quartet. Langston Hughes traveled with this quartet reading his poetry to a Black teachers' association in Trenton, New Jersey. Hughes and the quartet also performed for Black churches in towns nearby the campus, such as Cheney and Bordentown.⁷ "Lord Jim Dorsey," as Dr. James Dorsey, taught at Lincoln for many years, and in 1961 he became the first Black professor at Kean University (formerly Newark State College). Kean University is New Jersey's oldest publicly funded higher education institution and teacher training institution. Dr. James Dorsey from Lincoln University taught at Kean University as a Professor of Music until he retired in the 1976. Dr. Dorsey died in 1981.

Another connection between Langston Hughes and New Jersey is the fact that he lived in Westfield, New Jersey after he graduated from Lincoln University. While attending Lincoln University, during one of the many trips he made back to New York City and the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes met a very old and very rich woman named Mrs. Charlotte van de Veer Quick Mason. She was the widow of a prominent psychologist and physician, Dr. Rufus Osgood Mason. She was one of many wealthy white Americans who were so supportive of Black art that they became patrons who gave money to individual artists. Mrs. Mason was so generous and kind to Langston Hughes that he called her "Godmother." Mrs. Mason was concerned that Langston might not be able to concentrate on his writing amidst all of the social excitement in Harlem, so she suggested that he move to the quiet little town – Westfield, New Jersey. So in 1929, Langston Hughes took a room at 514 Downer Street, in the home of an elderly Black couple, Mr. and Mrs. J.V. Peeples. The Peeples' home happened to be very near the A.M.E. Zion Church Paul Robeson's father pastored earlier in the century. For a period of time, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes' friend and another Harlem Renaissance writer who enjoyed the sponsorship of Mrs. Mason, was also convinced to live in the quiet little town of Westfield, New Jersey.⁸

In 1947, Langston Hughes made another important connection with New Jersey. He spent a semester at Atlanta University as a Visiting Professor of Creative Writing. He was quite a well established writer and his accommodations in Atlanta were very comfortable. While teaching at Atlanta University, he met a lovely young woman who was teaching French at Morehouse College – her name was Wynona Moore. She would remember to

her friends years later that Langston Hughes was not always accepted into conservative Georgia society, but she really liked him. Wynona Moore, the young scholar from La Grange, Georgia, would not only teach the late Maynard Jackson and tutor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but she would become a formidable and historic force in New Jersey politics. Young Wynona Moore would become the Honorable Dr. Wynona Moore Lipman, New Jersey State Senator from 1971 until her death in 1999. Langston Hughes returned to his beloved Harlem, and a short time later, Wynona Moore also moved to the Morningside Heights section of Harlem where she received a Ph.D. in French literature at Columbia University and lived at the famous International House near the campus. A Fulbright Scholar, Wynona studied in Paris at the Sorbonne. Langston Hughes and Wynona Moore, some twenty-one years younger, found themselves again living in the same city and sharing a great love and knowledge of languages.⁹

Throughout his long and productive career, Langston Hughes had such a multi-faceted and complex relationship with the NAACP, officials like Walter White, and its *Crisis Magazine* that his biographer, Dr. Rampersad, described America's oldest civil rights organization as Hughes' "... oldest organizational ally." Rampersad quotes these lines from Langston Hughes' speech at the 1959 NAACP Convention which was also its Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration:

"For most of my life I have been a member of the NAACP, but sometimes when funds were low, or I was out of the country, my membership lapsed. However, whenever I have had a dollar or two, I renewed my membership in one branch, or another throughout the country."¹⁰

Hughes received the Spingarn Award in 1960. The Spingarn Medal represents the highest honor that the NAACP gives to an African American of great achievement. It is named for and was instituted, or begun by Mr. Joel E. Spingarn in 1914. Mr. Spingarn was both Chairman of the Board of Directors and President of the NAACP for many years. Just a few of the African Americans having received the Spingarn Medal are: Dr. Ernest E. Just (the first in 1915), Head of Howard University's Department of Physiology and one of the Founders of Langston Hughes' Fraternity, Omega Psi Phi; Dr. Carter G. Woodson (1926), historian and founder of African American History Month; Dr. William H. "Bill" Cosby (1985), humorist, artist, educator and philanthropist; Rosa L. Parks (1979) renowned community activist; Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1957), civil rights leader; Maya Angelou (1994) poet, author, producer, educator, historian; Oprah Winfrey (2000) actress, producer, educator, publisher, humanitarian. In July 2004, at the 95th NAACP National Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the 89th Spingarn Medal was presented to Judge Robert L. Carter. Judge Carter was second in command to Justice Thurgood Marshall as the NAACP won the victory of Brown Vs. Board of Education in 1954. Judge Carter came to New Jersey from Florida as an infant and he grew up in Newark and East Orange, New Jersey. On November 20, 2006, New Jersey named its State Education Building in Trenton in honor of Judge Robert L. Carter.

Joel Spingarn and his wife, Amy, were always supportive friends who spent lots of time with Langston Hughes. In 1941, Langston Hughes felt great envy when his fellow writer, Richard Wright, received the prestigious, or greatly admired Medal. In 1942, the NAACP asked Langston Hughes to sit on the Spingarn Committee. In August of 1958, Langston Hughes asked his dear friend and fellow writer, Arna Bontemps, to nominate him for the NAACP Spingarn Award.¹¹ Langston Hughes was very happy

when he received the 45th Spingarn Medal on June 26, 1960, during the 51st Annual NAACP National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. The Medal was presented to him as "the poet laureate of the Negro Race" by Arthur Spingarn, the brother of Joel, who was then President of the NAACP, at a ceremony on the campus of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. A few days before, on June 22, 1960, Langston Hughes received a telegram from his longtime friend, Amy Spingarn, the widow of Joel, which stated:

"Warmest congratulations! It has long been my ardent wish that you receive the Spingarn Medal – and I am delighted, and overjoyed that it has at long last been awarded to you.¹²

Whether he is being praised as "the Negro Poet Laureate," or what former New Jersey Poet Laureate Amiri Baraka called, "the jazz poet," the New Jersey NAACP and the young people that it touches must not ever forget or fail to fully appreciate the life and works of Langston Hughes. In 2005, the Education Committee of the New Jersey State Conference of the NAACP conducted its inaugural campaign to have school communities in New Jersey begin African American History Month with "Happy Birthday Langston Hughes Programs!" Students from all cultures must be introduced to the work of Langston Hughes. On February 1, 2005, the New Jersey NAACP State Conference Education Committee hosted a statewide Langston Hughes Birthday Read-A-Thon, which also focused on the 86th Anniversary of his first publication in *Crisis*, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers,"(1921) and the 81th Anniversary of the publication of his first book, *The Weary Blues* (1926). Educators throughout the NAACP continue to work to make this an annual tradition!

Janice Harris Jackson
New Jersey NAACP State Conference Education Committee
January 2005
January 2007
December 2009

New Jersey NAACP STATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE (JANUARY 2008): Janice Harris Jackson (Chair Emeritus), *VOICE: (908) 753-3920*; Janice Morrell (Vice Chair); Thomas Puryear (Vice Chair); Kathleen Witcher; Steve Moore; James Waters; Jacqui Greadington; Sandra Davis; Vanessa Jenkins-Echevarria; Dr. Leslie Agard-Jones

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NOTES

1

U.S. Postal Service Celebrates 25th Anniversary of Black Heritage Stamp Series: WRITER/POET LANGSTON HUGHES HONORED IN BLACK HERITAGE COMMEMORATIVE STAMP SERIES, January 3, 2002, www.usps.com (Click on News and Events then Philatelic News)

2

Ibid., page 1

3

Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1940), page 24

4

Ibid., page 56

5 Lurie, Maxine N., and Marc Mappen, ed. [Encyclopedia of New Jersey](#) (2004), p. 267.

6 Moses, Sybil E., [African American Women Writers in New Jersey, 1836 – 2000](#) (New Brunswick, N J Rutgers University Press, 2003) page 45

7 Arnold Rampersad, [The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume I 1902 – 1941: I, Too, Sing America](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), page 128

8 Ibid., pages 174 & 182

9 Conversations between Janice Harris Jackson and Senator Wynona M. Lipman via "Friends of Wynona Lipman" activities, 1979 – 1999

10 Arnold Rampersad, [The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II 1941 – 1967: I Dream A World](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) , page 275

11 Charles H. Nichols, Editor, [Arna Bontemps - Langston Hughes: Letters 1925 – 1967](#) (New York, Dodd, Mead, 1980) (pages 375 –6)

12 Arnold Rampersad, [The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II 1941 – 1967: I Dream A World](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) , page 311

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APRIL RAIN SONG

**Let the rain kiss you.
Let the rain beat upon your head
with silver liquid drops.
Let the rain sing you a lullaby.**

**The rain makes still pools on the sidewalk.
The rain makes running pools in the
gutter.
The rain plays a little sleep-song on our
roof at night.**

And I love the rain.

POEM

**I loved my friend.
He went away from me.
There's nothing more to say.
The poem ends,
Soft as it began –
I loved my friend.**

SEA CALM

**How still,
How strangely still
The water is today.
It is not good
For water
To be so still that way.**

SAILOR

**He sat upon the rolling deck
Half a world away from home,
And he smoked a Capstan cigarette
And watched the blue waves
tipped with foam.**

**He had a mermaid on his arm,
And anchor on his breast,
And tattooed on his back he had
A blue bird in a nest.**

SEA CHARM

**Sea charm
The sea's own children
Do not understand.
They know
That but the sea is strong
Like God's hand.
They know
But that the sea is sweet
Like God's breath,
And that the sea holds
A wide, deep death.**

*IN THE SECTION OF THE DREAM KEEPER
THAT HUGHES TITLES "DRESSED UP," HE INCLUDES
"A NOTE ON BLUES." ". . . five poems in this section
. . . are written in the manner of the Negro folk
songs known as Blues. The Blues, unlike the
Spirituals, have a strict poetic pattern: one long
line, repeated, and a third line to rhyme with the
first two. . . . Unlike the Spirituals, the Blues are not
group songs. . . . Whereas the Spirituals are often
songs about escaping from trouble, going to heaven,
and living happily ever after, the Blues are songs
about being in the midst of trouble . . . The mood of
the Blues is almost always despondency, but when
they are sung people laugh.*

HOMESICK BLUES

**De railroad bridge's
A sad song in de air.
De railroad bridge's
A sad song in de air.
Ever time de trains pass
I wants to go somewhere.**

**I went down to de station.
Ma heart was in ma mouth.
Went down to the station.
Heart was in ma mouth.
Lookin' for a box car
To roll me to de South.**

**Homesick blues, Lawd.
'S a terrible thing to have.
Homesick blues is
A terrible thing to have.
To keep from cryin'
I opens ma mouth an' laughs.**

BOUND NO'TH BLUES

**Goin' down de road, Lawd,
Goin' down de road.
Down de road, Lawd,
Way, way down de road.
Got to find somebody
To help me carry dis load.**

**Road's in front o' me
Nothin' to do but walk.
Road's in front o' me,
Walk . . . and walk . . . and walk.
I'd like to meet a good friend
To come along an' talk.**

**Hates to be lonely,
Lawd, I hates to be sad.
Says I hates to be lonely,
Hates to be lonely an' sad,
But ever friend you finds seems
Like they try to do you bad.**

**Road, road, road, O!
Road, road . . . road . . . road, road!
Road, road, road, O!
On de No'thern road.
These Mississippi towns ain't
Fit fer a hoppin' toad.**

THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS

I've known rivers:

**I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.**

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

**I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the Pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its
muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.**

I've known rivers.

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

SUN SONG

**Sun and softness
Sun and the beaten hardness of the earth,
Sun and the song of all the sun-stars
Gathered together –
Dark ones of Africa,
I bring you my songs
To sing on the Georgia roads.**

MY PEOPLE

**The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.**

**The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.**

**Beautiful, also, is the sun
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.**

MOTHER TO SON

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it kinder hard.
Don't you fall now---
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

STILL HERE

I've been scarred and battered.
My hopes the wind done scattered.
Snow has friz me, sun has baked me.

Looks like between 'em
They done tried to make me

Stop laughin', stop lovin', stop livin---

But I don't care!
I'm still here!

In 2004, "P. Diddy" made his Broadway debut in a play. The title of that famous play is taken from the Langston Hughes' poem titled "Harlem.." that he published in 1951.

HARLEM

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore---
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

PERSONAL

In an envelope marked :

Personal

God addressed me a letter.

In and envelope marked:

Personal

I have given my answer.

FROM THE BIG SEA (First Autobiography 1940) Pages 24 & 25

“ . . . The day I was elected, I went home and wondered what I should write. Since we had eight teachers in our school, I thought there should be one verse for each teacher, with an especially good one for my favorite teacher, Miss Ethel Welsh. And since the teachers were to have eight verses, I felt the class should have eight, too. So my first poem was about the longest poem I ever wrote--- sixteen verses, which were later cut down. In the first half of the poem, I said that our school had the finest teachers there ever were. And in the latter half, I said our class was the greatest class ever graduated. So at graduation, when I read the poem, naturally everybody applauded loudly.

That was the way I began to write poetry.

It had never occurred to me to be a poet before, or indeed a writer of any kind. But my mother had often read papers at the Inter-State Literary Society, founded by my grandfather in Kansas. And occasionally she wrote original poems, too, that she gave at the Inter-State. But more often, she recited long recitations like “Lasca” and “The Mother of the Gracchi,” in costume. As Lasca she dressed as a cowgirl. And as Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, she wore a sheet like a Roman matron.

On one such occasion, she had me and another little boy dressed in half-sheets as her sons---jewels, about to be torn away from her by a cruel Spartan fate. My mother was the star of the program and the church in Lawrence was crowded. The audience hung on her words; but I did not like the poem at all, so in the middle of it I began to roll my eyes from side to side, round and round in my head, as though in great distress. The audience tittered. My mother intensified her efforts, I, my mock agony. Wilder and wilder I mugged, as the poem mounted, batted and rolled my eyes, until the entire assemblage burst into uncontrollable laughter.

My mother, poor soul, couldn't imagine what went wrong. More fervently than ever, she poured forth her lines, grasped us to her breast, and begged heaven for mercy. But the audience by then couldn't stop giggling, and with the applause at the end, she was greeted with a mighty roar of laughter. When the program was over and my mother found out what happened, I got the worse whipping I ever had in my life. Then and there I learned to respect other people's art. . . .”

FROM I WONDER AS I WANDER (Second Autobiography 1956)

Pages 8 – 10 (excerpts) 26 – 28 (excerpts)

(CUBA) “. . . A group of young business and professional men of Havana once gave a rumba party in my honor. It was not unlike an American fraternity or lodge smoker---except that women were present. . . .

The party was held at a large old Spanish colonial house, presided over by a stout woman with bold ways. It began about four in the afternoon. At dusk, dinner was served; then the fiesta went on far into the night. It was what the Cubans call a cumbancha. Spree, I suppose would be our best word.

. . .

Now various couples, one or two at a time, essayed the rumba in the center of the court as the rest of the party gathered to watch. I could not make out whether it was a dance contest or not, and my hosts were slightly tipsy by then so not very coherent in their explanations. But when the dancing couples seemed to tire, others took the floor. . . . Tirelessly the Negro band played. Like a mighty dynamo deep in the bowels of the earth, the drums throbbed, beat, sobbed, grumbled, cried, and then laughed a staccato laugh. The dancing kept up until it was quite dark and the first stars came out.

Glass after glass was thrust in my hand as I sat looking and listening with various friends around me. The after a while, a little tired of sitting still too long, I got up and moved to the other end of the courtyard. As soon as I rose, the music stopped. People began to drink and chatter, but there was no more exhibition dancing. Later I learned that, I, as the guest of honor, controlled that part of the entertainment. By rising, I had indicated a lack of further interest, so the rumba stopped. . . . “

(HAITI) “. . . THE Citadel* is in ruins. But it is one of the lustiest ruins in the world, rearing its husky shoulders out of the mountain with all the strength of the dreams that went into its making more than a century ago.

The immensity of the Citadel, towering on a mountain peak whose slopes would create a problem for modern builders, is beyond belief. A hundred years ago, when motors and machinery were lacking, the transporting of its gigantic stones from the plain below, and the rearing of its walls, was one of the great feats in the history of human energy and determination. The fact

that beauty as well strength went into its making is cause for further wonderment, for the Citadel is majestic, graceful in every proportion, with wide inner staircases, and noble doorways of stone, curving battlements, spacious chambers, and a maze of intricate cellars, dungeons, terraces and parade grounds.

Dessalines began the Citadel, and it was sixteen years in the building. In 1804, standing before his troops with the tricolor of blue, red and white in his hands Dessalines tore the French flag into three parts and let the white part fall to the ground. Haiti, he said, would never again be dominated by whites. When Dessalines was killed, Christophe carried on the building of the Citadel. Three thousand feet above sea level the fortress rose stone by stone, cannon by cannon, passed by hand up the steep slopes. When Christophe died, Haiti became a republic. . . . “

** The Citadelle, (which Hughes spelled Citadel) built by King Henri Christophe at the beginning of the 19th century to defend against invaders, is the largest fortress in the Western Hemisphere. It is Haiti's most revered national symbol -- of brilliance in its building but of cruelty in the forced labor that cost up to 20,000 lives. France's inability to defeat the slave revolts in Haiti led directly to Napoleon's decision to sell French holdings in North America to the United States in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase.*

From Arna Bontemps - Langston Hughes: Letters 1925 – 1967 (pages 375 –6) Selected and Edited by Charles H. Nichols (New York, Dodd, Mead, 1980)

From 1925 to 1967, Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps exchanged about 2300 letters, 500 of which are included in this text. Hughes fellow Black poet, anthologist, children's writer and academician, Arna Bontemps, was born in Alexandria, Louisiana also in 1902 and died in 1973. Like Hughes, Bontemps' poetry first appeared in Crisis Magazine (1924). Bontemps was the librarian at Fisk University for more than 20 years and is also associated with the University of Illinois and Yale University. Arna Bontemps is best known for his books, Anyplace But Here, Frederick Douglass, 100 Years of Negro Freedom, and Black Thunder. The following letter from Langston Hughes on August 30, 1958 suggests that Bontemps was also involved in the NAACP as a member of the Awards Committee. Langston Hughes was very happy when he received the 45th Spingarn Medal on June 26, 1960, during the 51st Annual NAACP National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. The Medal was presented to him as "the poet laureate of the Negro Race" by Arthur Spingarn, the brother of Joel, who was then President of the NAACP, at a ceremony on the campus of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

**20 East 127th Street
New York 35, N.Y.
August 30, 1958**

Dear Arna:

The New York Omegas, who last year awarded me their Manhattan MAN OF THE YEAR plague, now wish to nominate me for the National Award at the coming conclave. In getting together information for them (as you can see from the enclosed cartoon) I recalled that last year you were kind enough to suggest nominating me for the Spingarn Award, and I asked you to hold off until my *Selected Poems* were published. Now that they will be coming out in January, and I think that it is in late January or February that the NAACP Awards Committee begin their deliberations (as I recall from once being a member of the Committee myself) if you would like to make the nomination within the next few months, I'd say go to it. And (if you want to work at it that hard) get a few other folks around the country to also send in nominations: maybe Ivan Johnson in California, Truman Gibson (who's a great Simple fan) in Chicago, and C.V.V. in New York, or others if you think of them.

I suppose the categories of achievement to consider would be, among others:

ARNA BONTEMPS - LANGSTON HUGHES: LETTER (8/30/1958), CONTD.

POETRY: 9 books, and almost 40 years of magazine publication, beginning with *The Crisis* in 1921.

PROSE: 15 books on my own, not including collaborations, such as our *Poetry* or *Folk Lore*.

TRANSLATIONS: by myself and other writers: 3 books – *Gabriella Mistral*, *Jacques Roumaine*, and *Nicolas Guillen* and numerous poems and short stories from the Spanish and French.

LECTURES: This season will be my 8th Cross Country tour, not counting hundreds of other engagements covering practically all of the major American colleges, and a great many high, grammar and even kindergarten schools, penitentiaries, and hospitals. Most Negro U.S.O. Clubs during the war and many Army Camps.

PLAYS, MUSICALS AND OPERAS: 12 from the Karamu Theatre to Broadway—*Mulatto*, *Street Scene*, *Troubled Island*, *The Barrier*, *Simply Heavenly*. *Mulatto* has been performed in Italy, The Argentine, Brazil, and currently in Japan. *The Barrier* is being given a major production on the Rome radio in November for which Meyerowitz is flying over.

TEACHER OF CREATIVE WRITING: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago; Atlanta University

BOOKS PUBLISHED ABROAD: in every major language, including Japanese, Chinese, Bengali, and Hindi.

UTILIZATION OF NEGRO FOLK MATERIAL: In poetry, prose (*Simple*) and song. Our *Book of Negro Folk Lore*.

Enough! Gracias!

Sincerely yours,
Lang
Litt.D (Um-huh!)

SPECIAL AWARD: P.S. Have lived longer than any other known Negro *solely* on writing—from 1925 to now without a regular job!!!! (Besides fighting the race problem)!!!!

FROM *LANGSTON HUGHES AND THE CHICAGO DEFENDER: ESSAYS ON RACE, POLITICS AND CULTURE 1942 – 1962* (PAGES 101-2; AND 187-8) Edited by Christopher C. DeSantis, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995)

For twenty years, from 1942 to 1962, Langston Hughes wrote a column for the legendary African American newspaper, The Chicago Defender. Even the most devoted readers of Hughes' poetry and prose are often unaware of these political essays.

Suggestions to White Shopkeepers (Excerpt)

August 21, 1943

Since you who are white shopkeepers in Negro districts usually do not live in our neighborhoods, but make your income from our neighborhoods, I would suggest that you take a greater interest in the problems of the colored people who are your customers.

As things stand now, you seldom take part in our efforts to better our community. You do not serve on our citizens committees trying to wrestle with the problems of delinquency, poverty and high rents. Often you collect the rents, but you do not live with us. You live in less ghetto-like sections of the city where the garbage is taken up every day and there are parks and playgrounds for your children.

I am glad you do not have to live where we do, but I suggest that nevertheless you take an interest in our problems. I suggest that you join the Urban League, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, both of which accept white members and whose programs are based on cooperation with white people. These are national organizations having local branches, so I would suggest further that you join the purely local neighborhood groups or committees seeking to deal with specific problems in the very block where your shops are.

I would suggest also that you form a Neighborhood Chamber of Commerce with colored shopkeepers as full members. In other words, I suggest that you become a part of the community where you do business, even though you may not live there.

If you would show your customers in actions rather than words that you care about them, that you will hire them when you need clerks, that you are interested in their problems, that you are trying your best to get decent

Suggestions to White Shopkeepers (Excerpt), Contd.

garbage collection for their neighborhood, playgrounds for their kids, the anti-lynching and anti-poll tax bills through Congress, and that you are also against Jim Crow in the armed forces and police brutality toward soldiers and civilians of color, and that you are not interested in simply making money from Negroes, then I think that even the hoodlums would know about your reputation and help protect your property against mobs. Certainly those of us who are not hoodlums would like for you to be a little more friendly in a community way. Why not? If our world explodes, yours does, too.

THE ACCUSERS' NAMES NOBODY WILL REMEMBER, BUT HISTORY RECORDS DU BOIS

October 6, 1951

If W.E.B. Du Bois goes to jail a wave of wonder will sweep around the world.¹ Europe will wonder and Africa will wonder and Asia will wonder, and no judge or jury will be able to answer the questions behind their wonder. The banner of American democracy will be lowered another notch, particularly in the eyes of the darker people of the earth. The hearts of millions will be angered and perturbed, steeled and strengthened.

They will not believe that it is right, for Dr. Du Bois is more than a man. He is all that he has stood for over eighty years of life. The things that he has stood for are what millions of people of good will the world around desire too---a world of decency, of no nation over another nation, of no color line, no more colonies, no more poverty, of education for all, of freedom and love and friendship and peace among men. For as long as I can remember, Dr. Du Bois has been writing and speaking and working for these things. He began way before I was born to put reason above passion, tolerance above prejudice, well-being above poverty, wisdom above ignorance, cooperation above strife, equality above Jim Crow, and peace above the bomb.

¹ The Desantis text states in its endnotes on page 249, "W.E.B. DuBois was indicted in 1951 for being a sympathizer. Although he was acquitted, the incident led many people to consider him a traitor."

THE ACCUSERS' NAMES NOBODY WILL REMEMBER, BUT HISTORY RECORDS DU BOIS, Contd.

Today the books of W.E.B. Du Bois are on the shelves of thousands of libraries around the world, translated into many languages, known and read by scholars everywhere. The work of his youth, the monumental *Study of the African Slave Trade* is still the authoritative book on that nefarious traffic. His *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Dark Water*, and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* are among the most beautiful and stirring of volumes about democracy's color problems ever written. Through these books in the first decades of this century the consciences of many young Americans were awakened.

As a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Dr. Du Bois gave America one of its greatest liberalizing organizations whose contributions to democracy through legal test cases and mass unity, history will list as invaluable. As the founder of the Pan-African Congress, he linked the hand of Black America with Africa and Asia. As a teacher and lecturer in the colleges and forums of the nation, he has had an immeasurable influence for good upon young minds. As editor of *The Crisis* for many years, he developed the first distinguished, lasting journal of Negro opinion in the Western World. Dr. Du Bois is the dean of Negro Scholars. But not only is he a great Negro, he is a great American, and one of the leading men of our century. At the age of eighty-three he is still a wellspring of knowledge, a fountain of courage, and a skyrocket for the great dreams of all mankind.

Somebody in Washington wants to put Dr. Du Bois in jail. Somebody in France wanted to put Voltaire in jail. Somebody in Franco's Spain sent Lorca, their greatest poet, to death before a firing squad. Somebody in Germany under Hitler burned the books, drove Thomas Mann into exile, and led their leading Jewish scholars to the gas chamber. Somebody in Greece long ago gave Socrates the hemlock to drink. Somebody at Golgotha erected a cross and somebody drove the nails into the hands of Christ. Somebody spat upon His garments. No one remembers their name

Langston Hughes occasionally included short stories in his columns for *The Chicago Defender*. "Early Autumn" was featured on September 30, 1950.

EARLY AUTUMN

When Bill was very young, they had been in love. Many nights they had spent walking, talking together. Then something not very important had come between them, and they didn't speak. Impulsively, she had married a man she thought she loved. Bill went away, bitter about women.

Yesterday, walking across Washington Square, she saw him for the first time in years.

"Bill Walker," she said.

He stopped. At first he did not recognize her, to him she looked so old.

"Mary, where did you come from?"

Unconsciously, she lifted her face as though wanting a kiss, but he held out his hand. She took it.

"I live in New York now," she said.

"Oh"--- smiling politely. Then a little frown came between his eyes.

"Always wondered what happened to you, Bill."

"I'm a lawyer. Nice firm, way downtown."

"Married yet?"

"Sure. Two kids."

"Oh," she said.

A great many people went past them through the park. People they didn't know. It was late afternoon. Nearly sunset. Cold.

"And your husband?" he asked her.

"We have three children. I work in the bursar's office at Columbia."

"You're looking very . . . (he wanted to say *old*) . . . well," he said.

She understood. Under the trees in Washington Square, she was desperately reaching back into the past. She had been older than he then in Ohio. Now she was not young at all. Bill was still young.

"We live on Central Park West," she said. "Come and see us sometime."

"Sure," he replied. "You and your husband must have dinner with my family some night. Any night. Lucille and I'd love to have you."

The leaves fell slowly from the trees in the Square. Fell without wind. Autumn dusk. She felt a little sick.

"We'd love it," she answered.

EARLY AUTUMN, Contd.

"You ought to see my kids." He grinned.

Suddenly the lights came on up the whole length of Fifth Avenue, chains of misty brilliance in the blue air.

"There's my bus," she said.

He held out his hand, "Good-bye."

"When . . . " she wanted to say, but the bus was ready to pull off. The lights on the avenue blurred, twinkled, blurred. And she was afraid to open her mouth as she entered the bus. Afraid it would be impossible to utter a word.

Suddenly, she shrieked very loudly, "Good-bye," but the bus door had closed.

The bus started. People came between them outside, people crossing the street, people they didn't know. Space and people. She lost sight of Bill. Then she remembered that she had forgotten to give him her address----or to ask him for his---or tell him that her youngest boy was named Bill, too.

BAD MORNING

**Here I sit
With my shoes mismated,
Lawdy-mercy!
I's frustrated!**

FINAL CURVE

**When you turn the corner
And you run into *yourself*
Then you know that you have turned
All the corners that are left.**

In 1933, Langston Hughes published a collection of short stories that he titled, *The Ways of White Folks*. One must take great care in presenting this to students because Hughes explores a concept difficult to understand for today's young people in his short story, "Passing." This story is a wonderful illustration of Hughes' thinking on the hierarchy of identities for his community in 1933—"colored," "Negro" and "black." Fifty-years before today's celebrated writer, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes uses the letter to discuss a controversial, painful and culturally intimate subject. Indeed, Hughes influenced Walker and he was responsible for her first publication. In Hughes' December 20, 1966 letter to Arna Bontemps he says, "So glad you like Alice Walker. Everybody thinks she is an up-and-comer."

PASSING

*Chicago,
Sunday, Oct. 10*

Dear Ma,

I felt like a dog, passing you downtown last night and not speaking to you. You were great, though. Didn't give a sign that you even knew me, let alone I was your son. If I hadn't had the girl with me, Ma, we might have talked. I'm not as scared as I used to be about somebody taking me for colored any more just because I'm seen talking on the street to a Negro. I guess in looks I'm sort of suspect-proof, anyway. You remember what a hard time I used to have in school trying to convince teachers that I was really colored. Sometimes even after they met you, my mother, they wouldn't believe it. They just thought I had a mulatto mammy, I guess. Since I've begun to pass for white, nobody has ever doubted that I am a white man. Where I work, the boss is a Southerner and is always cursing at Negroes in my presence, not dreaming I'm one. It is to laugh!

Funny thing, though, Ma, how some white people certainly don't like colored people, do they? (If they did, then I wouldn't have to be passing to keep my good job.) They go out of their way sometimes to say bad things about colored folks, putting it out that all of us are thieves and liars, or else diseased—consumption and syphilis, and the like. No wonder it's hard for a black man to get a good job with that kind of false propaganda going around. I never knew they made a practice of saying such terrible things about us until I started passing and heard their conversation and lived their life.

But I don't mind being "white," Ma, and it was very generous of you to urge me to go ahead and make use of my light skin and good hair. It got me

this job, Ma, where I still get \$65. a week in spite of the depression. And I'm in line for promotion to the chief office secretary, if Mr. Weeks goes to Washington. When I look at the colored boy porter who sweeps out the office, I think that that's what I might be doing if I wasn't a light-skinned enough to get by. No matter how smart that boy'd get to be, they wouldn't hire him for a clerk in the office, not if they knew it. Only for a porter. That's why I sometimes get a kick out of putting something over on the boss, who never dreams he got a colored secretary.

But, Ma, I felt mighty bad about last night. The first time we'd met in public that way. That's the kind of thing that makes passing hard, having to deny your own family when you see them. Of course, I know that you and I realize that it is all for the best, but anyhow it's terrible. I love you, Ma, and hate to do it, even if you say you don't mind.

But what did you think of the girl with me, Ma? She's the kid I'm going to marry. Pretty good looking, isn't she? Nice disposition. The parents are well fixed. Her folks are German-Americans and don't have much prejudice about them, either. I took her to see a colored revue last week and she though it was great. She said, "Darkies are so graceful and gay." I wonder what she would have said if I'd told her that *I* was colored, half-colored—that my old man was white, but you weren't? But I guess I won't go into that. Since I've made up my mind to live in the white world, and have found my place in it (a good place), why think about race anymore. I'm glad I don't have to. I know that much.

I hope that Charlie and Gladys don't feel bad about me. It's funny that I was the only one of the kids light enough to pass. Charlie's darker than you even, Ma. I know he sort of resented it in school when the teachers used to take me for white, before they knew we were brothers. I used to feel bad about it, too, then. But now I'm glad you backed me up and told me to go ahead and get all I could out of life. That's what I'm going to do, Ma. I'm going to marry white and live white, and if any of my kids are born dark I'll swear they aren't mine. I won't get caught in the mire of color again. Not me, I'm free, Ma, free!

I'd be glad though, if I could get away from Chicago, transferred to the New York Office, or the San Francisco branch of the firm—somewhere where what happened last night couldn't ever happen again. It was awful

passing *you* and not speaking. And if Gladys or Charlie were to meet me in the street, they might not be as tactful as you were—because they don't seem to be very happy about my passing for white. I don't see why, though, I'm not hurting them any, and I send you money every week and help out as much as they do, if not more. Tell them not to queer me, Ma, if they run into me and the girlfriend any place. Maybe it would have been better if you and they had stayed in Cincinnati and I'd come away alone when we decided to move after the old man died. Or at least, we should have gone to different towns, shouldn't we?

Gee, Ma, when I think of how Pa left everything to his white family and you couldn't legally do anything for us kids, my blood boils. You wouldn't have a chance in a Kentucky court, I know, but maybe if you'd tried anyway, his white children would have paid you something to shut up. Maybe they wouldn't want it known in the papers that they had colored brothers. But you was too proud, wasn't you, Ma? I wouldn't have been so proud.

Well, he did buy you a house and put all us kids through school. I'm glad I finished college in Pittsburgh before he died. It was too bad about Charlie and Glad having to drop out, but I hope Charlie gets something better to do than working in a garage. And from what you told me in your last letter about Gladys, I don't blame you for being worried about her—wanting to go in the chorus of one of those South Side cabarets. Lord! But I know it's really tough for girls to get any kind of a job during this depression, especially for colored girls, even if Gladys is high yellow, and smart. But I hope you can keep her home and out of those South Side dumps. They're no place for a good girl.

Well, Ma, I will close because I promised to take my weakness to the movies this evening. Isn't she sweet to look at, all blonde and blue-eyed? We're making plans about our house when we get married. We're going to take a little apartment on the North Side, in a good neighborhood, out on one of those nice, quiet side streets where there are trees. I will take a box at the post office for your mail. Anyhow, I'm glad there's nothing to stop letters from crossing the color-line. Even if we can't meet often, we can write, can't we, Ma?

With love from your son,
JACK.

In *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II : 1941 – 1967*, Dr. Arnold Rampersad describes the circumstances surrounding the poet's writing "NAACP." Rampersad recalls Carl Van Vechten, the somewhat controversial White patron of the arts, made a mocking comment to Langston Hughes that, "Thus do the outlaws . . . of one generation, become the conservatives of the next."¹ Langston Hughes wrote his poem, "NAACP," in 1942 upon the request of the organization's Executive Secretary, Walter White. Langston Hughes' politics were always left of center and he was regarded as one of the Harlem radicals. Walter White – born in 1893 and Executive Secretary to the very traditional NAACP from 1931 to 1955 – had often been at odds with Hughes about his extremist views. It was significant that Walter White asked his younger intellectual adversary to write the poem, "NAACP," that he hoped would bring some new excitement to the 1942 NAACP Conventions.²

In the concluding chapter of Rampersad's book, "Do Nothing Till You Hear from Me – 1966 to 1967," the preeminent Hughes' biographer shares the poet's reaction to a younger New Jersey poet's anger toward the NAACP Officialdom. Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones and in his thirties) poetically threatened Roy Wilkins – born in 1901 and serving as Executive Secretary/ Executive Director of the NAACP from 1955 to 1977. Wilkins had denounced the new political philosophy called "Black Power" because he thought that it undermined the integrationist philosophy of the NAACP. Langston Hughes was both shocked and amused by the hostile and aggressive rhetoric that one of the radicals from the sixties hurled at his old friend and contemporary, Roy Wilkins.³ By the end of his life in 1967, Langston Hughes may have become more traditional like the NAACP -- to which he always belonged and with which he often battled in his youth -- but the emerging poets like Amiri Baraka cherished him no less.

NAACP

**I see by the papers
Where the NAACP
Is meeting down in Houston
And I'd like to be there to see
What they intend to do
In these trying times today
Cause we need to take some solid steps
To drive Jim Crow away.
We need a delegation to
Go see the President
And tell him from the shoulder
Just why we are sent:
Tell him we've heard his speeches
About Democracy –
But to enjoy what he's talking about
What color must you be?
I'm cook or dishwasher in the Navy.
In the marines I can't be either.
The Army still segregates me –**

NAACP, Cont'd.

**And we ain't run by Hitler neither!
The Jim Crow car's still dirty.
The color line's still drawn.
Yet up there in Washington
There blowing freedom's horn!
The NAACP meets in Houston.
Folks turn out in force!
We got to take some drastic steps
To break old Jim Crow's course.**

1 Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II 1941 – 1967: I Dream A World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) , page 56

2 Ibid.

3 Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II 1941 – 1967: I Dream A World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) , page 411
