

**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

---

**From the Selected Works of James E. Smethurst**

---

Fall 2002

"Don't Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat":  
Langston Hughes, the Left, and the Black Arts  
Movement

James E. Smethurst, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/james\\_smethurst/7/](https://works.bepress.com/james_smethurst/7/)



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## "Don't Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat": Langston Hughes, the Left, and the Black Arts Movement

James Smethurst

Callaloo, Volume 25, Number 4, Fall 2002, pp. 1-14 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/cal.2002.0172



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cal/summary/v025/25.4smethurst.html>



**Langston Hughes with Gwendolyn Brooks**

Photo courtesy of the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; The Gwendolyn Brooks Estate; and the Langston Hughes Estate, represented by Harold Ober Associates. All rights reserved.

---

---

**“DON’T SAY GOODBYE TO THE PORKPIE HAT”  
Langston Hughes, the Left, and the Black Arts Movement**

*by James Smethurst*

If one looks to uncover linkages between the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the earlier radicalisms of the 1930s and 1940s, the work of Langston Hughes as a writer, editor, and cultural catalyst during the 1950s and 1960s is a good place to start. Not only was his writing a crucial forerunner of Black Arts poetry, drama, essays, and short fiction, but Hughes tirelessly promoted the careers of the young (and sometimes not so young) militant black artists then, providing practical, moral, and emotional support and encouragement. At the same time, Hughes constructively criticized both the new black writing and the responses of some of the artists, activists, and intellectuals of his generation, reminding the younger artists of a long tradition of black radicalism in the arts while chiding older artists and intellectuals for their own cultural amnesia about their radical youth.

Of course, there is still a tendency to view Langston Hughes’ relationship to political radicalism and the organized Left as growing more attenuated during the 1940s with a sharp break after his testimony before the McCarthy committee in 1953. In this view, Hughes’ testimony before the committee, his subsequent reluctance to be publicly associated with Left causes, and his failure to include explicitly Left poetry in his *Selected Poems*, is viewed with greater or lesser sympathy as a sort of opportunism. Similarly, his engagement with Black Power in *The Panther and the Lash* is seen by some critics as a careerist attempt to cash in on a new market.<sup>1</sup>

While these views have a certain power, Hughes maintained a considerable connection with the Left through the Cold War era and was, like Margaret Burroughs, John O. Killens, Ishmael Flory, Dudley Randall, Ernest Kaiser, Esther Cooper Jackson, Alice Childress, Louise Thompson Patterson, William Patterson, and John Henrik Clarke, a crucial bridge between the radicalisms of the 1930s and 1940s and the Black Arts activists of the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, Hughes’ political evasiveness and circumlocution, especially outside of the African-American community, typified African-American radicals, and U.S. leftists generally, during the Cold War era—and beyond. Hughes’ well-known and well-documented generosity toward and promotion of younger black writers had a political component that was rooted in the African-American Left stance that Hughes had developed over the previous four decades.

**“something underneath like a—”: Hughes and the Left During the McCarthy Era**

The notion that Hughes’ work during the 1950s was marked by a political quietude has been overstated. Hughes’ “Simple” stories published in the 1950s in particular engage the Cold War from a Left perspective, both directly and more obliquely. For example, among the many texts, events, cultural artifacts, and Harlem political, cultural, and religious figures that Hughes references in the story “Temptation,” Jesse B. Semple’s apparently goofy take on Genesis, is the 1946 anti-nuclear weapons gospel song, “Atom and Evil” by the Golden Gate Quartet, a fixture of Popular Front cultural events.

“Temptation” also directly and indirectly invokes the fools and clowns of Shakespeare, particularly the gravedigger-clowns of *Hamlet* and *their* comments on Adam. (A connection that was further drawn in a militant “Simple’s Soliloquy from ‘Hamlet’” which Hughes sent as a typescript to old friend and Communist Party activist Louise Thompson Patterson in 1961.)<sup>2</sup> Like Shakespeare’s clowns and fools, Simple’s associative, stream of apparently *unconsciousness* verbal riffing frequently makes disturbing sense in the context of political and cultural politics during the high Cold War, slipping from “apple” to “atom” in his account of temptation and fall. Of course, Simple could often be more direct. Even after his experience before the McCarthy committee, Hughes continued to lampoon the anti-Communist investigators, as in the story, “The New Dozens,” collected in the 1957 *Simple Stakes a Claim*, where Simple asserts that white people have created a new dozens, saying “They used to ask about your mama in bed. Now they ask was your mama red?”

The degree to which Hughes withdrew personally and organizationally from the Left has been often overstated also. While Hughes was cautious about being publicly identified with the Communist Party in the way that he had been in the 1930s, he participated in the activities of a range of Left and Left-influenced organizations and institutions, such as the Afro-American Committee for Gifts of Art and Literature to Ghana, Chicago’s Afro-American Heritage Association, *Freedomways* magazine, and San Francisco’s Negro Historical and Cultural Society (an affiliate of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in which the Communist Left played a leading role).

In fact if one looks at Hughes’ correspondence in the James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale’s Beinecke Library and in the Louise Thompson Patterson Papers in the Woodruff Library at Emory, one sees a typical pattern of locution for a Cold War-era leftist. Prominent (and not so prominent) radicals of that era generally assumed that their correspondence was being read at least occasionally by various intelligence agencies ranging from local “Red squads” to the FBI. Often a sort of rhetorical and ideological striptease would go on in which the correspondent would make a small unveiling gesture so as to affirm his or her political identity while maintaining plausible deniability.

This sort of gesture can be found in letters between Hughes and Ishmael Flory, a well-known and popular African-American Communist in Chicago who was the leader of the Afro-American Heritage Association. In 1959, Flory invited Hughes to appear as part of an Association program for Negro History Week in 1960. Hughes accepted and ultimately participated in two programs, one on the South Side and one in the newer African-American neighborhood on the West Side. Flory also asked

Hughes to participate in a similar event in 1961—an invitation that Hughes had to decline due to a scheduling conflict. There are a couple of notable aspects to this exchange. One is the obvious familiarity between the two men. Hughes' letters begin with "Dear Ish." Another is found in Hughes' response to Flory's 1961 request. In that letter, Hughes asks Flory if he has seen the new poem on Little Rock by Hughes' old friend, the radical Cuban writer Nicolas Guillén. While Hughes did not elaborate on this query, within the context of the domestic and international political situation he was affirming his connection both to his older radical politics as well as to the new anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist radicalism of the post-Bandung Conference world with a gesture that Flory would clearly recognize.<sup>3</sup>

Hughes made many other such gestures during the Cold War. He attempted to interest the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in reviving his Popular Front-era revolutionary poetry-musical *Don't You Want to Be Free* in 1962—an effort that contradicts the notion that Hughes consistently tried to play down or even suppress his "Red" writing during the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> In 1964 he wrote Communist leader William Patterson, thanking him for a copy of Patterson's *We Charge Genocide*. In the same letter Hughes mentioned that he was glad to see former *New Masses* editor and Communist activist Joe North at the masthead of a magazine (*American Dialog*) again. Hughes said he sent North "a poem that grew out of the riots" ("Final Call").<sup>5</sup>

As seen in this letter to Patterson, when the Cold War diminished somewhat and the African-American freedom movement grew in power in the 1960s, Hughes became far more willing to associate himself with institutions openly connected with the Communist Left, such as *American Dialog* (which saw itself as a sort of hipper successor to *New Masses* and *Masses and Mainstream*) and the journal *Freedomways* (which was originally conceived by veteran black leftists Edward Strong, Louis Burnham, Esther Cooper Jackson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Shirley Graham Du Bois as an engaged cultural journal continuing the project of Paul Robeson's *Freedom* and of *The Crisis* under W.E.B. Du Bois's editorship within the context of a revived Civil Rights Movement and the increasingly successful liberation struggles of Africa, Asia, and the Americas). In short, Hughes was a typical Cold War African-American radical artist, rather than former Leftist, in his occasional evasiveness and denials. The examples of Robeson and Du Bois in their open and vehement affiliation with the Communist Left in the face of McCarthyism were exceptional—and perhaps cautionary to other Left artists and intellectuals who wished not only to preserve their careers, but also their political effectiveness. Radicals such as Margaret Walker, Margaret Burroughs, John O. Killens, John Henrik Clarke, Ernest Kaiser, and Esther Cooper Jackson were also often evasive about their precise political affiliations past and present even when their ideological positions had not changed all that much. This was not cowardice but a sense that they had no obligation to make the red hunters' jobs easier. They, like Hughes, were important bridges between earlier black radicalism and that of the 1960s, not only as sorts of role models, but also in such crucial proto-Black Arts/Black Power institutions as the Harlem Writers Guild, *Freedomways*, the Ebony Museum (later the DuSable Museum), the Afro-American Heritage Association, and the Phillis Wheatley poetry festivals that Margaret Walker organized at Mississippi State.

### Hughes and the New Black Writers

By the 1940s Hughes was Harlem's most famous permanent (if perpetually touring) resident writer. However, the cultural attachment of Harlem to Hughes came more from the central place the neighborhood's literary landscape occupied in his work than the location of his mailing address. Obviously, the notion of Harlem as the ur-urban landscape of black America was maintained in a wide range of 1940s and 1950s texts, including Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). For that matter, during the 1950s and 1960s the Harlem Writers Guild maintained "Harlem" in its name despite the fact that many of its members lived in Brooklyn, where the group generally met in John O. Killen's home, or on the Lower Eastside.

However, it was the work of Hughes that in no small part maintained Harlem as an iconic black landscape. The Simple stories and the poetry sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) were crucial in maintaining Harlem as a literary site where the somewhat conflicting figurations of the neighborhood as a place of refuge, home, and prison intersected. This intersection was a hallmark of Popular Front era representations of the neighborhood as seen, for example, in Hughes' 1936 poem, "Air Raid Over Harlem."

It is worth noting the ideological range of venues in which the Simple stories appeared during the 1950s and 1960s. Though the institutional home of the stories was Hughes' "Here to Yonder" column in the *Chicago Defender* (with a relatively brief tenure at the *New York Post* in the last years of the column), the column and the stories were syndicated widely in the black press, from the most conservative papers to the Nation of Islam's *Muhammad Speaks* (which was generally edited by black leftists, such as Richard Durham and Joe Walker). In short, beyond the general audience reached by the Rinehart, Simon and Schuster, and Hill and Wang collections of the stories was a broad, non-elite African-American audience who regularly read the transposed black vaudeville dialogue of the southern-born, proud Harlem everyblackman Simple and the generally un-named narrator in an archetypal Harlem lounge. Amiri Baraka, for example, recalls reading Hughes' work regularly in the black press when he was a child. As Baraka notes, Hughes (and the Harlem landscape of his sketches) was something that a black reader and writer of his generation could assume as his or hers (Baraka "Langston"). Similarly, though it has not, until recently, begun to receive the critical attention of his earlier poetry, the lyric sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1952) contains a number of Hughes' poems best known to the general reading public, including the ubiquitous "Harlem" and its "dream deferred" with its famous string of similes. It is not surprising that when John Henrik Clarke put together a special Harlem issue of *Freedomways*, he sought out Hughes to help in its planning.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Hughes' poetry, stories, essays, and drama continued to inspire the sense of so many early Black Arts activists in the northeast (and elsewhere) that Harlem was, as Baraka said, "home," despite the fact that few of them were from Harlem and even fewer lived in Harlem for any length of time before the middle 1960s. Dynamic Black Arts centers eventually emerged elsewhere in New York, notably the community center and performance space The East in central Brooklyn. Nonetheless, when the young black artists living on the Lower Eastside in the early 1960s wanted to, as David

Henderson (one of the few native Harlemites among those artists) recalls, “get washed in blackness,” they did not usually go to Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville, or South Jamaica, but took the subway uptown to Harlem (Thomas). This immersion by ascent narrative was not primarily a result of slightly more convenient mass transit options. Rather it marked the persistence of a complex cultural myth Hughes helped keep alive and vital. The symbolic, and often actual move of Baraka, Askia Touré, Calvin Hicks, and other African-American artists and intellectuals from Greenwich Village and the Lower Eastside to Harlem to work in such institutions as the Uptown Writers Group, the Monroe Defense Committee, and Black Arts Repertory Theater and School (BARTS) gained much of its power from the work of Hughes.

Also, Hughes was obviously an influential model for those artists and intellectuals imagining what a “Black Art” might be. For decades Hughes had theorized, polemicized for, and practiced in his work broadly defined, but distinctly African-American literary forms, for decades drawing on a broad range of folk and popular genres: jazz, the blues, gospel, r & b, toasting, badman stories and songs, tall tales, black vaudeville humor, the dozens and other forms of “signifying,” street corner and barbershop conversations, sermons. Many of the younger black artists and intellectuals—particularly such East Coast intellectuals and artists as Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, the poets of the Umbra Workshop in New York (including Tom Dent, Askia Touré, Ishmael Reed, Calvin Hernton, and David Henderson), and the members of the Muntu group in Philadelphia (which included writer, visual artist and musician James Stewart, playwright Charles Fuller, and Larry Neal)—posited a continuum of African-American culture from Africa to the U.S. present, including folk, popular, and avant garde elements. Hughes had promoted the notion of such a continuum since the 1920s. His famous 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” imagined a convergence of Bessie Smith, Paul Robeson, Rudolph Fisher, Jean Toomer, and Aaron Douglas. With a few changes in terminology, this essay would not have been out of place in Baraka and Neal’s seminal 1968 anthology *Black Fire*. Such lists which linked the folk to the popular, the “high” to the “low,” and mass culture to the avant garde, remained a feature of Hughes’ poetry, notably in the poetic sequences *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and *Ask Your Mama* (1961).

In addition to the influence of Hughes’ writing and of his role as a model of an engaged black artist were his practical efforts to promote younger black writers—many of whom would become leaders of the Black Arts Movement. As the editor of important anthologies and special journal issues of black poetry, particularly the 1964 anthology *New Negro Poets: U.S.A.*, Hughes made the publication of new, and often formally radical, poetry by young writers a priority. This priority often led to considerable and difficult negotiation between Hughes, the publisher, and the artists in order get the work into the anthology which was aimed in part for use in the schools.<sup>7</sup> Hughes both wrote and solicited others to write recommendations for grants, fellowships, and other sorts of institutional support for young black writers, such as Amiri Baraka, Ron Milner (who would become one of the most significant Black Arts playwrights), and the Cleveland concrete poet Russell Atkins as well as for older writers who would play significant roles in the Black Arts Movement, such as Margaret Danner (who was an important figure in the upsurge of Detroit writers and artists that would lead to the establishment of Broadside Press, among other institutions).<sup>8</sup> Hughes



also made it a point to meet with groups of these local African-American writers on his reading trips across the country, often accepting manuscripts. These meetings frequently inspired young writers, as can be seen from the enthusiastic responses of Margaret Danner, Oliver La Grone, and Naomi Long Madgett (founder of another important black press, Lotus Press) to Hughes' trip to Detroit in 1964 (Smith 107–11).

Hughes provided more informal though often vital support for developing artists during the 1950s and 1960s. As he had for decades, he constantly introduced writers and intellectuals to each other at social gatherings, extending circles of acquaintance and interest in a seemingly offhand way. He generously responded to the queries of the many aspiring authors. He also sent young writers letters or cards congratulating them on new publications—often in obscure venues. As Amiri Baraka recalls, one aspect of these letters is that they revealed the wide range of Hughes' reading—belying the notion of Hughes promoted by Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and others that Hughes remained in an intellectual and artistic rut in the 1950s and 1960s (Rampersad 286; Baraka "Interview").

In the Hughes Papers in the Beinecke Library, one finds an extremely friendly exchange of letters and cards between Hughes and Baraka dating back to the late 1950s. A few things are notable about the exchange. One is the intense interest of Hughes in Baraka's writing and editorial projects, such as the avant garde journal *Yugen*. Hughes jovially chides Baraka about not receiving the most recent issues of *Yugen* (which he calls "you-all gen"); he also submits poetry to the new journal. Another is his persistent effort to advance Baraka's career. He says in a March 29, 1960, letter that Arna Bontemps would like to have a drink with Baraka, and he urges Baraka to follow up since Bontemps is on a Whitney fellowship selection committee. Finally, one sees a political side to Hughes' relationship with Baraka. For example, in a March 17, 1960, letter to Baraka, Hughes describes his first-hand observations of the Atlanta sit-in movement. In the same letter, Hughes mentions that he promoted *Yugen* to the academic crowd of the complex of historically black schools of University Center. In this letter one can get a sense of the full range of Hughes' multiple aesthetic and political missions. Later Hughes would be a supporter of BARTS, agreeing to appear at a BARTS event when time allowed—though it is not clear (to me at least) whether a time was ever found during the relatively short life of BARTS.<sup>9</sup>

Hughes' relationship with Baraka was not unique, but replicated with many other of the most important younger black cultural activists of the Black Arts Movement. Again, these relationships were not only artistic or professional, but also political. For example, Tom Dent, a key figure (really the key figure) in the proto-Black Arts Umbra group in New York City and probably the most influential Black Arts activist in the South during the late 1960s and 1970s, wrote Hughes in 1965 describing his return to his native New Orleans. The focus of the letter is Dent's new activities with the Free Southern Theatre, and his hopes for a new revolutionary African-American cultural movement in the South. Dent says, "For the first time, we have an organization with the potential of a *cultural revolution* for theater, art, that deals with how we should live our lives, not the mechanics of money and power. This is all pretty new for the South, especially for New Orleans, so the theater has found a hard way to go." Hughes responds enthusiastically to the letter.<sup>10</sup>

The case of the important avant garde poet Russell Atkins particularly reveals the range of Hughes' support for young writers. In the 1940s Atkins first wrote Hughes an unsolicited letter seeking advice and encouragement without any other introduction. What followed was an artistic relationship that continued until Hughes' death. In the course of this relationship Hughes gave practical writing advice, inspiration, written and verbal recommendations, and publication of Atkins's work in various venues.<sup>11</sup> While it is impossible to say that Atkins would not have emerged as a writer without Hughes' aid, it is clear that Hughes was essential to the trajectory of Atkins's literary career. In short, in the correspondence between Hughes and Baraka, Dent, and Atkins, we see Hughes as an artistic *and* a political confidant and parental-figure.

Some Black Arts activists did sharply criticize Hughes and his basic commitment to integrationism as well as his use of popular culture. John O'Neal, the leader of the Free Southern Theatre, ferociously attacked Hughes for falling into what he called the "coon trap" of integrationism. Since O'Neal's attack appeared in an essay included in Addison Gayle's widely read anthology, *The Black Aesthetic*, if one doesn't have a sense of the broader movement, one might conclude that Hughes' reputation in the Black Arts Movement was basically mixed, even negative. However, the many, many positive mentions of Hughes in memoirs, introductions and dedications to volumes, poems by such leading Black Arts activists as Amiri Baraka, Askia Touré, Larry Neal, Etheridge Knight, Ted Joans, Dudley Randall, Tom Dent, and Woodie King, to name a few, tell a different story, a story of the power of his work over more than forty years and his formal and informal support of younger writers, and his tireless effort to build and extend networks of black artists and intellectuals.

#### **"Did I Ever Live Up Your Way": Hughes' Later Work and the Black Arts Movement**

Like that of a number of the most politically engaged older black writers and intellectuals, such as Margaret Burroughs, Margaret Walker, John O. Killens, and Melvin Tolson, Hughes' work in the 1960s initiated a dialogue of criticism, self-evaluation, and support with the emerging Black Arts and Black Power movements. Like the new black cultural radicals from Oakland to the Lower Eastside, Hughes was transfixed by the student movement that swept the South following the 1960 sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, led by North Carolina A&T students. As was also the case with the new radicals, Hughes was equally galvanized by the revolutionary nationalist anti-colonialist movements sweeping Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Of course, Hughes' writing had long linked the struggles of African Americans with anti-colonialism, particularly, though not exclusively in Africa. But, starting with the 1961 poetic sequence, *Ask Your Mama*, this linkage took on a radical anti-imperialist cast not seen that overtly in Hughes' work since the 1940s, invoking, among others, the names of Cuba's Fidel Castro, Guinea's Sekou Touré, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Congo's Patrice Lumumba, and Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta. *Ask Your Mama* often features a sarcastic anger in lists that resemble such "revolutionary" anti-colonialist poems of the 1930s as "Wait" and "Always the Same":

---

---

## CALLALOO

---

---

THE COCOA AND THE CANE BRAKE  
THE CHAIN GANG AND THE SLAVE BLOCK  
TARRED AND FEATHERED NATIONS  
SEAGRAM'S AND FOUR ROSES  
\$5.00 BAGS A DECK OR DAGGA  
FILIBUSTER VERSUS VETO  
LIKE A SNAPPING TURTLE—  
WON'T LET GO UNTIL IT THUNDERS (Hughes, *CP* 480)

It needs to be pointed out that Hughes here was not tailing after the young black radicals who would be the backbone of the Black Arts Movement. Instead, his poetry mirrored an ideological shift taking place among young black artists and intellectuals, but did so actually in advance of where, say, Amiri Baraka's work was in 1961. Similarly, Hughes' poem, "Lumumba's Grave," also published first in 1961 and later collected in *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), was not only one of the first (if not the first) poem marking the assassination of Lumumba in 1961 with (at least) CIA complicity, but was also a sort of gesture of literary solidarity with the black radicals and/or nationalists, including Baraka, Askia Touré, Calvin Hicks, Maya Angelou, Abbey Lincoln, Rosa Guy, and Aishah Rahman, who demonstrated outside the United Nations building and disrupted Adlai Stevenson's speech before the General Assembly in response to the United States role in Lumumba's murder.

The very structure of *The Panther and the Lash* (1967) created a dialogue between the Left of the 1930s and 1940s with the new radicalism of the 1960s, suggesting that the disjuncture between the two eras was not insurmountable. The collection included militant poems of Hughes written in the 1930s, the 1940s, the 1950s, and the 1960s. In this, Hughes was like a number of older writers, say Dudley Randall in such poems as "Abu" and "The Militant Black Poet," whose work often pointedly reminded the reader that black struggle for liberation did not begin in 1960. Hughes in fact sounds this note in the first poem of the collection, "Corner Meeting," where he claims that the revolutionary and/or nationalist Harlem street speakers of the 1960s are distinguished from the soap boxing Garveyites and Communists of the 1930s mainly by technology. (Of course, the careers of two of the fixtures of early 1960s Harlem street corners, Communist Benjamin Davis and nationalist "Pork Chop" Davis, both of whom spoke regularly at the intersection of 125th Street and 7th Avenue near the nationalist landmark of Micheaux's National Memorial African Bookstore, did in fact stretch back to the earlier era.)<sup>12</sup>

One aspect of this dialogue is a sort of self-criticism, and a self-evaluation of the radicals and former radicals of Hughes' generation, who were often ambivalent about, if not actively hostile to the young militants. In some poems dialogue is literally represented. In "Final Call," which, as mentioned above, first appeared in the Communist-influenced journal *American Dialog*, a strange conversation begins about a third of the way into the poem. Then a somewhat ironic litany of knights to the rescue of black people (and possibly the U.S.A.), so to speak, consisting of relatively innocuous (in a mid-20th-century U.S. context) heroes ranging from Robin Hood to Blind Lemon Jefferson is interrupted by a more radical choice (in the Cold War context): Lumumba. Lumumba's name is followed by "(GOD FORBID—HE'S NOT

---

---

## CALLALOO

---

---

DEAD LONG ENOUGH!).” From that point various Left and/or black nationalist heroes of the 20th century (Lenin, Trotsky, Garvey, Hamid Abdul Sufi, Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael) are similarly followed by bracketed ironic commentary that is not entirely ironic, but uses the sort of double-voiced Cold War style that Hughes perfected in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

Generally this commentary seems to be that of a timid Cold War liberal (“SEND FOR LENIN! (DON’T YOU DARE—HE CAN’T COME HERE!)”). A particularly telling exchange is “DuBois (When?)” suggesting that the turn-of-the-century Du Bois of, say, *The Souls of Black Folk* might be acceptable, but that the 1950s and 1960s Du Bois, persecuted by the federal government often with the assistance of former colleagues for his association with the Communist Left is too much. The immediately following “MALCOLM (OH!) SEND FOR STOKELY. (NO?)” indicates a similar timidity about radical nationalists in the present moment. The poem ends with an entirely bracketed line, but without the sort of visual shouting suggested by the previous uppercased lines and frequent use of exclamation marks, “(And if nobody comes, send for me.)” While the timid liberal (as well as those who wait for a hero) is lampooned, the brackets connect the upper-case Cold War and anti-nationalist fears with the calmer self-reliance of the final line. The speaker, then, mocks him- or herself, commenting on what Martin Luther King called “our obsessive anti-communism” at a meeting commemorating the legacy of Du Bois. This legacy includes the fears and self-repression practiced even by many of Hughes’ generation who were still basically radicals (including Hughes himself) and is seen as something to be surmounted—a point made more directly in another new poem in the collection, “Un-American Investigators.”

Such a self-critical dialogue can also be seen in “Stokely Malcolm Me” where the speaker addresses him- or herself to Kwame Ture, asking if he or she ever lived “up your way,” followed by an inverted pyramid of question marks. The phrase “up your way” has a sort of down home southern inflection. However, the speaker might not be in fact a Jesse B. Semple or Alberta K. Johnson-type black everyperson pointing out the distance between “the people” and the new militants who raised the call for “Black Power”—much to the chagrin and disapproval of the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins and other “race leaders” of Hughes’ generation. Rather the introspective voice of the question marks may be that of the older Hughes recalling a younger self and an earlier, more direct (and less ironic) voice. This younger self was, like the new Black Power advocates, impatient and critical of “elderly race leaders.” A clear example of this bitterness and implacable contempt on the part of the younger Hughes is seen in the poem “Elderly Leaders,” included in an earlier section of *The Panther and the Lash*, but first published in 1936 as “Elderly Race Leaders.” The connection between the vehemence of “Elderly Leaders” and the introspection of “Stokely Malcolm Me” is strengthened by the typographical mirroring of the inverted pyramid of dollar signs that ends “Elderly Leaders” and the previously mentioned upside down pyramid of question marks in “Stokely Malcolm Me.” In short, rather than simply lampooning Ture and his generation of militants for their extremism and lack of historical perspective, Hughes self-critically recalls an earlier revolutionary moment in such a way as to offer a genuine critique of his generation of activists, and himself. In this way, Hughes and his work was not simply a link between different political and

cultural eras in some simple sense. Rather he intended to provoke a sort of dialogue aimed at building community and continuity without silencing ideological and aesthetic difference, discussion, and self-examination.

Hughes is notable among his contemporaries not only for his distinguished efforts in so many genres over so many years, but for his life's project of negotiating, renegotiating really, changing cultural and political eras while remaining basically true to his core of writing of, from, and for black people. This project in fact forced Hughes' work to evolve while he attempted to retain within it a sense of the past. It is this drive to remain current while cognizant of the past along with a recognition of the need to rethink the relationship of his core values and poetics to the present moment that made Hughes' work so powerful and so popular with audiences beyond what is normally thought of as the market for "serious" literature. It was also his continuing identification with the Left and his radical past while attempting to navigate the challenges of the present cultural and political moment domestically and internationally that motivated Hughes' relationship with the younger cultural radicals, promoting them even as he engaged in a critical dialogue with them.

#### NOTES

1. The most influential articulation of the notion of Hughes' retreat from the Left is found in Arnold Rampersad's landmark *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II*. For a critical consideration of Hughes' late poetry as a sort of half-hearted careerism, see Ford.
2. Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Box 9, MSS 869.
3. Letter from Hughes to Ishmael Flory 10/7/59, Box 3, Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University; Letter from Hughes to Ishmael Flory 10/24/61, Box 3, Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
4. The San Francisco Negro Historical and Cultural Society used some of Hughes' work in a 1962 television script. In a March 26, 1962, letter, Hughes thanked them for the acknowledgement of his work and sent them a script of *Don't You Want To Be Free* with the suggestion that "it can be presented on the coast sometime" (Box 6, Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University). As with Hughes' remark about Guillén to Ishmael Flory, the proposal of staging a play from the 1930s that ended on a note of black and white working-class unity for the purpose of radical social change is as much a gesture of political filiation (if not affiliation) as a serious theatrical proposal. Of course, as Leslie Sanders observes, Hughes changed the ending of the play several times according to the political climate of the moment, sometimes downplaying or eliminating the class struggle aspect of the play. It seems likely that the version of the play that Hughes sent the Historical and Cultural Society was the one that urges the support of the NAACP and CORE. (Sanders 103–204) However, given the Left influence in the Historical and Cultural Society, Hughes' offer of a play with a well-known radical past (especially to the leaders of the society) can be seen as another example of the way in which Hughes acknowledges this past while addressing the present cultural and political moment.
5. Box 9, Folder 14, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Woodruff Library, Emory University. This letter was a part of a long relationship in which William Patterson served as a sort of political mentor to Hughes—a relationship that lasted until the end of Hughes' life. An example of the manner in which Patterson served as a sort of political conscience for Hughes can be found in a June 7, 1957, letter from Patterson to Hughes in which Patterson critiques Hughes' new musical "Simply Heavenly" both ideologically and formally. Hughes responded almost immediately, defending his play in a friendly way, but also showing clear respect for Patterson's criticisms (Box 9, Folder 14, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Woodruff Library, Emory University). And,

---

---

## CALLALOO

---

---

- of course, Hughes' longtime friend, Louise Thompson Patterson, an indefatigable political and cultural organizer, whose work in the 1960s and 1970s ranged from local forums in Harlem to a leadership role in the Angela Davis Defense Committee, also helped keep Hughes in touch with what remained of older Left networks in New York and across the United States.
6. In a February 2, 1963, letter, Clarke thanked Hughes for talking to him about planning the *Freedomways* Harlem issue. Clarke also begged Hughes to contribute something (which he did) because "it is difficult for to conceive of a special Harlem issue of *Freedomways*, or any other magazine, without a contribution from you" (Box 41, Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University).
  7. The complexities of these negotiations can be seen in a letter to Tom Dent, where Hughes says that the poem "Nightdreams" is an interesting poem, but too racy in language for the anthology. Hughes continues that he is keeping the poems, "Come Visit My Garden," "Grape," "Love," and "Ode to Miles Davis" and resubmitting them, suggesting that the publisher, Indiana University Press, has already rejected them at least once even though Hughes, the editor, recommended them (Box 50, Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University).
  8. Box 6, Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
  9. For example, in 1965 Baraka invited Hughes to be on a BARTS panel called "Art and Revolution" which was to include Baraka, Cecil Taylor, Ossie Davis, Bob Thompson, Selma Sparks, and Steve Young. Hughes declined due to a scheduling problem, but in a July 27, 1965, letter agreed to appear at BARTS sometime in the fall (Box 10, Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University).
  10. Letter from Tom Dent to Langston Hughes, August 12, 1965, Box 10, Langston, Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
  11. Box 12, Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
  12. For a brief memoir of Harlem street speakers in the early 1960s, see Hicks (3–4). See also Neal, "New Space" (16–17).

### WORKS CITED

- Baraka, Amiri. *Home, Social Essays*. New York: Morrow, 1966.
- . Interview with James Smethurst. July 15, 2000. Newark, New Jersey.
- . *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*. Edited by William J. Harris. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991.
- . "Langston Hughes and His World: A Centennial Celebration." Yale University, February 2002. Unpublished lecture.
- Ford, Karen Jackson. "Making Poetry Pay: The Commodification of Langston Hughes." *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, Rereading*. Ed. Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996. 275–96.
- Hicks, Calvin L. *African-American Literary and Political Movements, 1960s, on New York's Lower East Side*. New York: Cultural Dimensions, 1994.
- Hughes, Langston. *The Best of Simple*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.
- . *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. New York: Knopf, 1994. References in the text abbreviate this title *CP*.
- . "Don't You Want to Be Free." *One Act Play Magazine* 2 (October 1938): 359–93.
- . *The Panther and the Lash*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967.
- . *The Return of Simple*. Ed. Akiba Sullivan Harper. New York: Hill and Wang, 1994.
- . *The Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Knopf, 1959.
- . *Simple Speaks His Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950.
- . *Simple Stakes a Claim*. New York: Rinehart, 1957.
- . *Simple Takes a Wife*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953.
- Neal, Larry. "New Space/The Growth of Black Consciousness in the Sixties." *The Seventies*. Ed. Floyd B. Barbour. Boston: Porter Sargent, 1970. 9–32.
- O'Neal, John. "Black Arts: Notebook." *The Black Aesthetic*. Ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. New York: Anchor, 1972. 46–56.
- Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II: 1941–1967, I Dream a World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

---

---

## CALLALO

---

---

- Sanders, Leslie Catherine. *The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadow to Selves*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.
- Smith, Suzanne E. *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Thomas, Lorenzo. "Tom Dent and the Umbra Workshop." American Studies Association Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, 2001. Unpublished conference paper.



Photo by Roy DeCarava

**Langston Hughes, two trees**

© Roy DeCarava, 2002. Photo courtesy of the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; the Langston Hughes Estate, represented by Harold Ober Associates; and the Roy DeCarava Archives. All rights reserved.