

Advocacy Ashamed

By Susan Huetteman

The circumstances of my beginning to write were curious... The possessive, terrifying elderly woman in "The Lovely Lady" seemed in some ways so much like my former Park Avenue patron that I could hardly bear to read the story, although it brought cold sweat and goose-pimples to my body... maybe I could write stories like his about folks in America. I wonder.

Langston Hughes began to turn over in his mind a story he had been told about a very pretty colored girl in Kansas, who became pregnant, had an abortion, and died. "...but nothing happened. She was just buried."

"When I sat down at my well-traveled typewriter and began to write my first short story, 'Cora Unashamed,' the material of the factual narrative...changed into fiction."

Langston Hughes, **I Wonder as I Wander 1**

Langston Hughes made a life choice for Cora Jenkins and for all decent, hardworking, suppressed people. He chose to write of the oppressed, struggling in the shadow of derelict authority--a presence not always visible or accountable. He would be the voice of the silenced; he would speak so their strength could be heard.

The Negro Mother

**Children, I come back today
To tell you a story of the long dark way
That I had to climb, that I had to know
In order that our race might live and grow.
Three hundred years in the deepest South:
But God put a dream and a song in my mouth,
God put a dream like steel in my soul.
Now through my children, I'm reaching my goal.
Now through my children, young and free,
I realize the blessings denied to me...
I nourished the dream that nothing could smother
Deep in my breast, the Negro Mother....**

Langston Hughes, **I Wonder as I Wander 2**

Throughout his life Hughes straddled a wall that separated his world: an enriched family history that provided him with middle class experiences and a mixed ancestry that was denied acceptance by an empowered white world. Where did he belong? Was he a middle class black? What should he feel about his ancestry? Why not live an integrated and a financially secure life in Mexico with his father? **3**

Unable to earn a living in the States, and despite his father's prejudice against his own race, Hughes was compelled to join his father. In Mexico he didn't experience racial prejudice and was a successful tutor, but he felt a deeper call. He must find his own way and establish his own identity. It was a poet's search to find his place in the world and in time--a struggle against the ignorance of oppression.**4**

To You

**To sit and dream, to sit and read,
To sit and learn about the world
Outside our world of here and now--**

**Our problem world--
To dream of vast horizons of the soul
Through dreams made whole,
Unfettered, free--help me!
All you who are dreamers, too,
Help me to make
Our world anew.
I reach out my dreams to you.**

Langston Hughes, **Good Morning Revolution 5**

In the midst of near poverty, he became the protégé of a wealthy white patron, Charlotte Mason. She was devoted, compassionate and respectful of his art. He believed that she supported his belief in telling the story of the disenfranchised Negro. Although she solved his problem of financial security and the freedom to write, he soon found their relationship was not evolving with a shared purpose.

**You don't know,
You don't know my mind--
When you see me laughin',
I'm laughin' to keep from cryin'.**

Langston Hughes, **The Big Sea 6**

She wanted him to continue the story of a folk culture and he wanted to write about the growth of human courage and emancipation. He expressed his frustration with her bias in his short story, "Slave on the Block."

**They were people who went in for Negroes . . .
Leave them unspoiled and just enjoy them. . .
Certainly, the last thing they would do would be to interfere with the delightful simplicity of
Negroes.**

Langston Hughes, **Short Stories 7**

In leaving his patron Hughes never intended disrespect. He was grateful for her support and it troubled him deeply to defy her. To be true to his vision, he must portray the truth of his people--just as Cora had to expose the truth surrounding Jessie's death, defying her life long allegiance to the Studevants.

Choices were made for Jessie by her parents, choices that were beyond Cora's authority and control. But she could not accept their lies. Cora loved Jessie as her own, a love that deserved the truth be known. Like Langston Hughes, Cora Jenkins imposed her own consequence for her actions. He left. She left.

Authority is imposed and choices are made. Some of it is just and welcomed. Some is unjust and compromising. The road to justice is too often detoured by unyielding preconceptions and prejudice. When attitudes discriminate and basic human rights are not honored, someone must stimulate others to care, to unite, and develop a collective advocacy.

Sometimes advocacy can be as simple as an act of kindness, one person to another. Sometimes it is the bravest thing we've ever done. But someone **has to care** and, like Cora, feel pride in an advocacy unashamed.

I, too, sing America.

**I am the darker brother.
They send me
To eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.**

**Tomorrow
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.**

**Besides,
They'll see
How beautiful I am
And be ashamed.**

I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes, **I Wonder as I Wander 8**

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For a lesson directed at this essay and "Cora Unashamed" [click here](#).

Read the extensive Endnotes below on Hughes, the poems, and the references made in the text.

Click here for the Bibliography.

ENDNOTES

A word about the ethnic language used in this document. Hughes preferred to refer to himself and noncaucasians as "coloreds." However, during his lifetime (1902-67) society freely referred to African Americans as "coloreds", "Black", "Negro" and various slurs. Hughes utilized the common usage of his time in his works.

1. During Langston Hughes' travels in Russia, he read D. H. Lawrence's short story "Lovely Lady." Written in 1927, the dowager Pauline Attenborough enjoyed possessing her son Robert and her niece Cecilia. "I suppose I shall rebel one day," Robert said, recognizing she had "sucked up" his "essential life." Upon her death, Paulina left little inheritance to them, despite their total obedience and submission to her authority. Instead her Will formed the Pauline Attenborough Museum. (From *The Lovely Lady* by DH Lawrence, NY: The Viking Press, 1933, pp.3-31 and "Strange Women with White Hair: old age and some Late Lawrence stories" by Neil Reeve. Nottingham University School of English <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/english/research/dhlawrence/reeve.htm>)

Although Hughes was a well-recognized poet and was in Russia with American production crew working as a screenwriter, he had not written a short story. "Cora Unashamed" was his first venture. Cora was inspired by a story told to him by Loren Miller about a young Kansas colored girl who attracted the amour of the town Negro doctor, undertaker, and minister. She became pregnant and the doctor performed the

abortion, the undertaker buried her, and the minister preached at her funeral. "All three mean were present, but nothing happened. She was just buried." (From **I Wonder as I Wander** by Langston Hughes, p.213-214)

2. "Imagine," (Langston) said, "a black woman of old in her starched white apron and bright bandanna." To earn a living, Hughes toured the south reading his poems at colleges, libraries and any room where people could gather. At Meridian, Mississippi "a kindly old white gentleman in the audience came up and said gently, "I just want to warn you that you shouldn't be reading those race-equality poems in Meridian, and you'd better be careful selling your books. There are folks in this state who wouldn't like what you say." . . . Some years later when I asked Carson McCullers, the Georgia writer, why white people in the South behaved so badly toward Negroes, Mrs. McCullers said, "Their hind brains don't work." (From "Warning in Mississippi" **I Wonder as I Wander** by Langston Hughes, p.50-54)

3. "You see, unfortunately, I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family." His paternal side was "dark brown" and his mother's "olive-yellow."

Langston Hughes was born to an illustrious African American, Native American, and Caucasian ancestry. His ancestry was a dichotomy of slavery and recognized achievement. His great-great grandfather was Sam Clay, a Scotsman and relative of Henry Clay. One great-grandmother was a free woman with papers whose father was a French trader and her mother a Cherokee Indian with Head Rights, but she never claimed her land, because she "never wanted the government (or anybody else) to give her anything"--a legacy inherited and practice by Lang.

He grew up hearing stories told by his college educated grandmother. Her first husband, Sheridan Leary perished in John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry--his mother was a slave and his father a descendant of Francis Quarles, the Jacobean poet. His grandmother remarried Charles Langston and moved to Kansas. Charles Langston's brother was John Mercer Langston, an author, congressman from Virginia, U.S. Minister to Haiti, and Dean of the first Law School at Howard University. (From *The Big Sea*, by Langston Hughes, pp.11-13.)

In "African Morning," which Lang felt was "one of my best stories" (ibid,104), he retells of a "mulatto" boy he encountered in an African port and the prejudice he experienced--he was neither white nor black. The boy, Edward, had no friends in his village and begged Lang to take him to England where his father was. In the short story, Edward became Maurai who "thought curiously how the whites had built a fence around themselves to keep the natives out--as if black people were animals."

He wondered why he was "the color of gold? Why wasn't he black or white--like his mother or like his father.." (From *Short Stories* by Langston Hughes, pp.145-148) A question Lang never resolved for himself and spent his entire literary life trying to understand.

When Langston toured the South reading his poetry and found his audiences growing restless, he would pull out a poem called "Cross." It made "anybody, white or black, sit up and take notice. I would read in a loud voice:

**My old man's a white old man...
My old mother's black...
But if ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.**

**If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.**

**My old man died in a fine big house,
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black.**

Langston Hughes, **I Wonder as I Wander**, p.58

4. Langston Hughes documents his life-long search for emancipation and accountability in his poems, stories, and plays. His works closely retell specific experiences in his life and are indicated in throughout his autobiographical works. His first autobiographical work was divided into two books: **The Big Sea** (1902-31), considered by many as his finest writing, and **I Wonder as I Wander** (1931-38).

In **The Big Sea**, Hughes "does not allow much bitterness to creep in" . . ."because it is true and honest"..."sensitive and poised, candid and reticent". With an absent father, the only person Lang ever "hated," and "infrequent" mother, Lang lived with his grandmother and with friends, Mary and James Reed in Lawrence, Kansas.(Introduction by Arnold Rampersad). From his youth as a teenage poet to his candid frustrations with the educational systems and inability to find work befitting an educated person, Lang frequently neared starvation and his choice to go to sea was both desperation to work and desire to understand his world--a journey that would span Africa, Paris, New Orleans and always returning to his beloved Harlem.

Harlem, a section of New York's Manhattan, was just "three square miles, (and) drew nearly 175,000 African Americans, turning the neighborhood into the largest concentration of black people in the world." (From Rowen and Brunner, "Black History Month Great Days in Harlem." Harlem was **the** African American literary center, where W.E.B. DuBois' *The Crisis* published Langston Hughes and a literary Renaissance inspired Hughes and his friend and collaborator Arna Bontemps.

In **I Wonder as I Wander**, developed for publication in 1954, Hughes journey reveals his search for equality through political and social reform. He traveled to Cuba where racial distinctions were more "subtle," to Russia and integrated communism, and subsequently to Asia and Spain. He saw the demise of dictators through a journalist's eyes. In his travels in the United States, he continued to feel the pain of segregation at home American citizens died at the doors of the white hospitals that refused to admit coloreds.

Although he wondered where his home really was and where he belonged, Hughes always returned to the blues culture of Harlem. It was New Year's Eve and he wondered where he would be next. There were wars and Hitler was rising in power.

"Would civilization be destroyed? Would the world really end? . . . 'Not my world,' I said to myself. 'My world will not end.' But how could I be so sure? I don't know. For a moment I wondered."(p.405)

In *Good Morning Revolution*, the uncollected writings of Langston Hughes permit frank and gripping insights into the depths of his search for equality and acceptance of his people--an unending challenge.

A spontaneous and generous side of Langston Hughes is seen in the Charles H. Nichols edition of Arna Bontemps. Langston Hughes. *Letters 1925-67*. We feel their mutual respect as they struggle in search of recognition as authors.

5. The poem originally appeared as a caption for a picture of young people reading in a library. (From Langston Hughes, *Good Morning Revolution*, pp.171-2)

6. Author Wallace Thurman told Hughes that he needed to "know how to write, as well as how to feel bad." Hughes responded that "every so often, the blues just naturally overtook me, like a blind beggar with an old guitar." (From Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, p.238)

7. "Slave on the Block," from Langston Hughes, *Short Stories*, pp.32-39

8. From "Making Poetry Pay," Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, p.60