

# The Legacy of James Langston Hughes

“Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair,” Langston Hughes wrote in one of his most celebrated and frequently recited poems, “Mother to Son.” Indeed, from his nomadic childhood when he was shuffled from one mid-Western city to another, to his career as a poet, when he crisscrossed the country and travelled the world, the carpet of Hughes’s life had many an upturned tack in it—“splinters, / And boards torn up, / and places with no carpet on the floor—Bare.” Despite the many flourishes in his life, his great fame, and myriad friends, Hughes never became a rich man. Far from it, his career was underwritten in part by the beneficence of white patrons, especially the philanthropist Charlotte Osgood Mason, who he referred to as “godmother,” and by his many fellowships, such as the Guggenheim and Rosenwald.

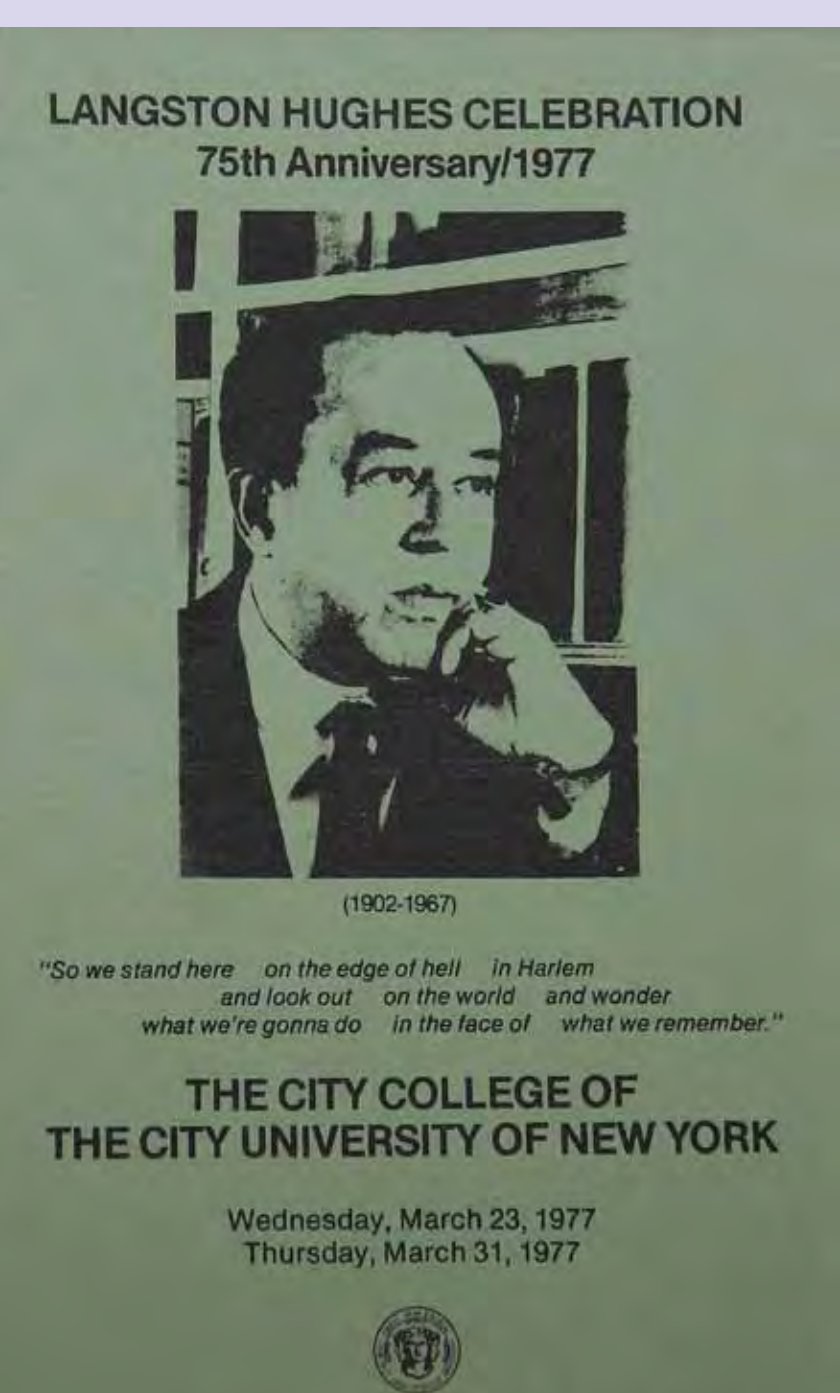
Ignoring his poverty, Hughes worked constantly, producing several acclaimed volumes of poetry, novels, short stories, plays, two autobiographies, and a famous newspaper column that regaled his readers with the stories of one “Jesse B. Semple.” Translated into many languages, Hughes’ literary output travelled the globe as a representative of American art and culture. The vitality of Hughes’ voice may have come from the mid-western soil of his early upbringing and his remarkable family pedigree.

Born James Mercer Langston Hughes on February 1, 1902, in Joplin Missouri, Hughes was originally named after his father, James Nathaniel Hughes (1871–1934) and after his maternal granduncle, John Mercer Langston (1829–1897). It remains a mystery why Hughes discarded his granduncle’s name; and while Hughes had a rocky relationship with his father, this may not fully explain why he dropped his father’s name as well. Freeborn, John Mercer Langston was appointed, among other high profiled positions, as Minister to Haiti, and his brother Charles Henry, Hughes’ grandfather, also held several appointed posts and was a U.S. congressman from Virginia. Both men were also deeply involved in the abolitionist movement and in post-Civil War activities to alleviate the plight of Blacks in America. Long before his birth, his family had already

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Charles Henry Langston. Like her husband Charles, Mary Leary was among the first to attend Oberlin College. Her first husband, Lewis Sheridan Leary (1835–1859), had become famous in his own right as one of the men who died in John Brown’s celebrated abolitionist raid of the U.S. Arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. Caroline’s marriage to Langston’s father ended in divorce, after which the elder Hughes immigrated to Mexico. After the divorce, Langston spent his childhood in Lawrence, Kansas, with his grandmother before moving on to Lincoln, Illinois, and Cleveland, Ohio, where he attended a mostly white high school.

established a distinguished legacy upon which Langston Hughes could stand. Langston Hughes’ mother, Caroline Mercer Langston, was born to Mary Patterson Leary and her second husband,



Shortly after visiting his father in Mexico, Hughes wrote his celebrated first poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” on his way east to Washington, D.C. and New York. While in New York, he attended Columbia University though he dropped out early to complete his college education, figuratively speaking, on the open seas. Not until 1929, after he had published two landmark books of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), would he graduate from Lincoln University, the United States’ first degree-granting historically Black university, located in Oxford, Pennsylvania.

Langston Hughes’ creativity proved path breaking. As early as 1926, he departed not only from traditional poetic forms with their rigid rhythms and formulaic rhyme schemes but also from the dialect poetry adopted by African American writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar. After nearly three-quarters of a century, Hughes’ work is still relevant and testifies to his eminence as a major singer and seer of the American condition. The range of Hughes’ works extends from his initial embrace of the poetic style of that quintessential American poet, Walt Whitman, to poems that came to be ever more tightly associated in style and content with African American music. Not only did Hughes blaze a new path in African American writing by breaking away from the Victorian style verse associated with his Black contemporaries, but he also established a new African American poetic tradition with his insistence that Black artists look to African American music as the spiritual lodestone of African American artistry and culture. As he wrote in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” “jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America.”

As a midwife of the New Negro Movement of the 1920’s, Hughes befriended the most distinguished principals of the Harlem Renaissance, including W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston and Wallace Thurman. The last two, along with painter Aaron Douglas and the all around artist Bruce Nugent, produced, along with Hughes, the one (and only) issue of the magazine *Fire!!*, infamous for its treatment of sexually taboo themes and frank depictions of lower class Black life.

Eventually, Hughes became an itinerate poet who travelled not only around the United States but also throughout the world, including Japan and Russia. Perhaps because

of his command of Spanish, he developed an intense affiliation with Spanish speaking intellectuals and artists. He covered the Spanish Civil War for the *Baltimore Afro-American* in 1937, for example, and befriended Nicolás Guillen, poet laureate of the Republic of Cuba. Also a French speaker, Hughes conversed with Jacques Romaine, Haiti’s poet laureate, during his trip to that country. Hughes’s love of these languages points back to the multi-lingual tradition of his granduncle John Mercer Langston who, among his other appointments, had also served as Minister to the Dominican Republic.

By the late thirties and into the early forties, Hughes, now back in the States, expanded his artistic interests and founded several theater companies in cities such as Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. In the meantime, he also wrote the novel *Not Without Laughter* in 1930, and short stories, as collected in the volume, *The Ways of White Folks*. But it was not until 1951 that he published his next most notable book of poetry, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, with its intense focus on the Harlem community. “What happens to a dream deferred?” asked Hughes: “It explodes.”

His reputation was somewhat marred by his appearance before Senator Eugene McCarthy’s Committee on Un-American Activities. Hughes kept his good humor, however, as later reflected in his newspaper columns, collected and published in 1954 as *Simple Takes a Wife*. To re-energize his writing career, Hughes published a second autobiography, *I Wonder As I Wander* (Rinehart, 1956), and *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (Knopf, 1961), a landmark, book-length poem that reinvigorated Hughes’ career-long experiment of combining poetry and Black popular music.

Hughes’ career was capped by his election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1961 and to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Six years before his death, he was awarded the Spingarn Medal from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for outstanding achievement by a Black American.

More poetry would follow as well as translations, musicals, and newspaper columns until his death in 1967 in Harlem. He was stricken with prostate cancer while living in his brownstone home on East 127<sup>th</sup> Street, an edifice that has been converted into a national landmark. Since his death, it has also served as a destination for various organizations and people who come to honor the spirit and humanity of James Mercer Langston Hughes, the “Black poet laureate” of America.

Professor Raymond Patterson of City College started the Langston Hughes Festival to honor Hughes’ memory and to celebrate great Black writers that followed in his path.



Congratulating Langston Hughes Festival Medallion recipient jazz poet Jayne Cortez (2001) includes previous director, Victoria Chevalier, the 11th President of the City College of New York Gregory Williams, and Professor James de Jonge of the City College of New York. Source: The City College of New York Archives

The Poet and His People  
For Langston Hughes

When we learned that he was dead,  
One old saint I heard declare:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

When the sad word spread abroad,  
Someone sang it sweet and fine:  
Three parties on my party line -  
But that third party,  
Lord, aint' mine!

Jazzmen, bluesmen, through their horns  
Drew a breath to ease his dying,  
Rhythmically they shook their heads:  
Laughing to keep from crying.

Dancers, now your music plays,  
Will you grieve when night is done?  
Me an' ma baby's  
Got two mo' ways,  
Two mo' ways to do de Charleston!

Turn, O turn the lights down low,  
Mourn for him, you easy-livers,  
Whispers from the blue-black glow:  
I've known rivers.

Beautiful people, how will you see  
Your beauty now his eyes are blind?  
Passing, they answer: Simple Speaks His Mind.

Cities of faces haunting his streets,  
Where is your sorrow? What has it stirred?  
Coldly, they answer: What happens to a dream deferred?

Bowed down with heartbreak, do not forget!  
He lifted the spirits of downcast men.  
Someone is shouting: Let America be America Again!

Lovers, he loved you, He above others  
Praised the dark beauty evening unfurled,  
Sigh all dark lovers to their beloved, I dream a world...

Only you, children...if you remember  
Works that he fashioned, setting you free...  
But racing ahead, they laughed and they shouted: The Big Sea!

Raymond R. Patterson  
Founder: The City College of New York  
Langston Hughes Festival

A poem in tribute to Langston Hughes by Raymond Patterson, founder of the Langston Hughes Festival  
Source: The City College of New York Archives



Langston Hughes founder Ray Patterson and former director of the Choral Speaking Festival Jeanette Adams together for the last time before Patterson's death in 2001.  
Source: Jeanette Adams Papers

