

REVIEW ESSAY

LIVING AMERICAN HISTORY LANGSTON HUGHES AND TEACHING HISTORY

A REVIEW ESSAY

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Arnold Rampersad. *The Life of Langston Hughes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986-88. Volume I: *I, Too, Sing America (1902-1941)*. Pp. 485. Volume II: *I Dream A World (1941-1967)*. Pp. 512. Cloth, \$24.95 each.

It is no irony that an African American such as Langston Hughes can be seen as representative of all that is Afro-American and American history. His life, which spanned over six decades of the twentieth century, is perhaps rivalled only by his contemporary, W.E.B. DuBois. Yet unlike DuBois, whose vast intellectual achievements set him apart from the masses of Black people, Hughes's life was a continual striving to become one with Afro-America in its daily struggles to become American.

Langston Hughes's birth and lineage, as described by Arnold Rampersad in Volume I, testifies to the rich history that emerged among Black people during the Reconstruction period. While Hughes had slave ancestors, he also had white forebears, a situation that Hughes wrestled with during his early years. At a time in American history when racial classifications were ordered according to the quantity of white blood in one's system, Hughes would have been close to being a mulatto. However, he chose to eschew that label, accept his origins, and emphasize his Africanness. This bold action, which would be a mainstay in his life, was overshadowed in the late 1960s as the rhetoric of Black Power and the aesthetic of "Black is Beautiful" overtook most if not all of Afro-America. But the beauty--the genius if you will--of Langston Hughes was that he never succumbed to the intense racial bitterness that black militancy espoused. Not that he was never angry; a superficial glance at his poetry or his early essays eliminates that notion. Nor as he aged did he become an accommodationist. Langston Hughes embraced the Black world and articulated what many could not or would not see: the rich, vibrant, and diverse group that ever struggles to be American and yet retain its unique identity as diasporic Africans. Brooding as some of his work might have been, overall Hughes celebrated Afro-America's existence and experience.

Arnold Rampersad's splendid two-volume biography of Langston Hughes most probably will not be used in an undergraduate classroom. Together the two books come close to a thousand pages. Such a likelihood, however, is profoundly tragic. For at a time when Black scholars, educators, and commentators bemoan the fact that Black males are an endangered species; when young Black people are in desperate need of authentic historical role models; and when all Americans have need of real heroes, the life of Langston Hughes stands out as a perfect choice for counteracting these grim affairs.

The questions, then, are why have we not taught Hughes in our classes? Why have not young blacks and whites read his poetry or heard the stories of Jesse B.

Semple ("Simple")? And finally, why have some people, in attempts to define what goes into our school textbooks, immediately questioned Hughes's patriotism and honor?

Most of the answers can be discovered in Rampersad's second volume of Hughes's life. But throughout the reading of both volumes it becomes clear that Langston Hughes's life was so full of experiences, so detailed in activities in and out of Afro-America, that it seems stunning that he is ignored today. Hopefully and thankfully that won't be the case now that Rampersad's biography is completed. However, Hughes was in many respects a person far ahead of his times.

The young Hughes, who travelled the world visiting Africa, Central America, the Caribbean, the newly formed Soviet Union, and China, made friends, kept journals, soaked up the cultures, and learned how wonderful/tragic it was to be an Afro-American. Growing to prominence during the 1920s' Harlem Renaissance, Hughes was nurtured (and it could be argued patronized) by various wealthy whites and white publishers enthralled with the discovery of urban Afro-America. As perceived by these probably well-intentioned people, Afro-Americans were exotic and primitive. That was supposed to be complimentary then, given the state of America after the "Great War" and in the decade that was attempting to return to normalcy.

Hughes represented anything but normalcy. His poetry was at the forefront of the era of the "New Negro;" his travels had imbued him with an international perspective; and his politics were progressive. Although the latter would eventually cause him much anguish through his life, shaping his craft so as to provide an articulate and precise view of Black people would prove even more agonizing for Langston Hughes.

Rebuffed from writing screenplays in Hollywood, jerked here and there on Broadway, his plays censored on radio (for which he professed a profound and prophetic contempt), Hughes was forced to make grueling tours throughout the country reading his poetry and delivering speeches. For a long time that was his only means of income. Yet he enjoyed the tours through the South (except for the Jim Crow restrictions), reading to students in high schools and colleges. Almost everywhere he went Hughes was well received. And although he backed away from some of his more leftist-oriented poetry, he was always genuinely horrified at the rancorous response it generated in some people.

Langston Hughes's early embrace and later disengagement with the Left could make the foundation for an entire semester's study of Black America and its relations to radical politics. The 1930s alone could provide ample material to explore, ask, and analyze why it was that prominent Black artists and intellectuals were drawn so closely to the Soviet Union or the Communist Party, only later to break away and become enveloped in flag waving postures that would make some right-wingers look silly. Claude McKay, George Schuyler, A. Philip Randolph, and Richard Wright, all in varying degrees are prime examples. While Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison, and Zora Neale Hurston were cautiously sympathetic to progressive causes, they more often remained detached. Hughes, unlike Wright, never belonged to the Communist Party, but he did work with many left organizations, wrote for *The New Masses*, and visited the Soviet Union. Although he would dismiss early his radical poetry as youthful exuberance, he never really turned against the left.

Rampersad in Volume II refers to Hughes's "dance" with radicalism. When the dance became too intrusive on his art, Hughes moved to disengage. Hughes's major concern was with developing his artistic skills so as to better enable himself to be heard by the masses of Black people. And though he was conscientiously concerned about civil rights for Blacks, in his later years he tried to separate politics from his art. Nonetheless Black intellectuals and artists such as DuBois and Paul Robeson continued to grow in their radicalism and still retain a profound love and respect for Afro-Americans.

Hughes chose to emphasize Afro-America over radical politics. His "Simple" stories are all the evidence that is needed to substantiate that claim. Indeed, any introduction to Langston Hughes, aside from his poetry, could certainly begin with Jesse B. Semple. Rampersad's description of Simple's origins, what he represents, and how Hughes made him into one of Afro-America's most enduring and endearing folk legends is a delight to read. The Simple stories should be accessible to students, for they are an important source of understanding the Afro-American world.

When I have read them in class, students were quick to point out similarities of the ideas and feelings of Blacks in the 60s and 70s. Indeed, some thought that he was a creation of those times. Only when I inform them that he was created in the 1940s during the war years as a means of urging Blacks to support the war against Fascism both overseas and at home are they surprised. Without a doubt and tragically, many more students across the country may not even know that Simple's stories even exist or that Langston Hughes even existed.

Perhaps, as legacies of the Age of Civil Rights, our young people have become so accustomed to hearing of the March on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the struggle for integration that the culture and depth of Black America has been passed over. More certainly the appearance on television of Blacks (*The Cosby Show*, *227*, *Amen*, etc.) has provided the cultural context for many young people regarding Afro-America. Good as these shows may be, they don't come close to conveying the depth, diversity, and exhilarating intensity of Afro-American culture. In fact, probably the only show that came closest to doing that and having a real educative value was Tim Reid and Hugh Wilson's *Frank's Place*. That show, though critically praised, was never given a chance to develop an audience. It seems clear that if Langston Hughes were with us today, he would agree that Simple's stories would never reach prime-time television.

Another strength in teaching about Langston Hughes is the opportunity to show students how America was perceived through the eyes of a Black poet and writer who lived in the McCarthy era. Hughes's brush with the infamous House un-American Activities Committee was, as for anyone who had to endure it, a bruising and often humiliating experience. Hughes lived through those moments and it appears to have strengthened his resolve to articulate his dream of a better America.

Likewise, Hughes's deep encouragement of new Black writers (particularly Black women writers) demonstrates the generosity that so often is missing from our writers and teachers today. It is a tribute to Hughes that he was comfortable teaching in a variety of settings, be it in a Black college classroom or a predominantly white elementary school in Chicago. Hughes's kindness, warmth, and radiant smile was ever present.

But Rampersad's books are not just glamorous tributes. Hughes had a tendency to overreach himself, involving himself in too many projects at once. He was prone, as all of us are, to periods of self-doubt and depression. Yet he persevered and took on the challenges that face every artist/writer.

At his death in 1967, Afro-America was about to enter the age wherein the fruits of integration would blossom. The Black middle class that Hughes was so often contemptuous of was enlarged, affirmative action made some dents in the institutional structures of racism, and Afro-Americans moved slowly into the cultural spotlight via television, movies, and radio. Hughes would have been proud in some respects and dismayed in others. He most probably would have been distressed at the subtle dilution of the culture that he loved so well and wrote about so beautifully: the urban culture; the teeming streets of Afro-Americans from all walks of life; the presence of all varieties of churches, and the various Black-owned business establishments. These have all been replaced, as the new middle class went to the suburbs, by a menacing and tragic underclass whose dreams have been deferred so long that if we are not urgent and immediate in our response we may well find the entire American Dream of racial harmony and advancement threatened. Introducing our students to Langston Hughes is a small but important step toward rectifying some significant gaps in our history. And Arnold Rampersad's biography is the best place to begin.