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YEARS

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My Dear Boy

CARRIE HUGHES'S LETTERS TO LANGSTON HUGHES, 1926–1938

Edited by
Carmaletta M. Williams
and John Edgar Tidwell

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO

Our Dear Mothers

The Late Doris Rebecca Grant

The Late Verlean L. Tidwell

AND

Our Dear Boys

Dwight "Chief" Williams

Jason John Williams

Nicholas A. Elias

Leverett Tidwell

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FOLLOWING LANGSTON

A Foreword

Late summer 1967. Sumter, South Carolina. *Jet* magazine has just arrived as it does each and every month. Mama sits in her chair reading through the current Black history news, holding the tiny *Jet* pages by their corners and reading aloud in her most operatic voice. She includes in her reading news of any deaths she believes should matter to us children, whether we recognize the names called out or not. She wants us to know that both things and people come and go. Mama and Daddy are lifetime members of the NAACP. They believe in supporting Black cultural institutions. They treat Black publications like modern-day North Stars. *Jet*, *Ebony*, *The Crisis* all arrive and take their proper place on the main coffee table like Black constellations—shining up at us. Until we can read for ourselves, we are read to every day of our young lives. I learn very early that there are Black people who must never be forgotten.

James Mercer Langston Hughes died when I was ten years old. The facts were surely read aloud: *Joplin. Grandmother. Kansas. Class Poet. Dream. Harlem. Jazz. Race Pride.* Mama called him a “poet of note,” reminding me that I had recited some of his poetry once, “A Dream Deferred” and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” at Emmanuel Methodist Church for Black History Month. I do not remember this moment as much as I have been reminded of this moment.

Langston Hughes followed me around like a great light. In my neighborhood Langston Hughes was called some variation of the Poet Laureate of the Negro Race. For me—he was exactly that. As a young Black girl of the segregated, then begrudgingly integrated South, he might as well have been the first poet of the whole wide world.

In seventh grade, I started keeping a journal and writing poetry. It would be several years before I would read somewhere, and marvel, that Langston Hughes had been the class poet of his own eighth grade. *The Crisis* magazine that kept arriving long after Hughes was dead was one of the places I began to check the pages of—looking for more from Langston Hughes’s many worlds: essays, librettos, plays, autobiography, children’s books, jazz histories, solo poems especially. Long after Langston had gone there were other things that kept him alive in me: reading *The Big Sea* and “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in college, finding *Fire!!* in the Schomburg stacks one summer between graduate school sessions. I followed the life and work of Langston Hughes from discovery to study. I never knew quite where his bright words might lead me. I just knew I had to walk strong into the light.

I was a curiously sensitive, indeed sometimes melancholy Black girl living in the Civil Rights South. I *belonged* to the wide wicked world of the South yet I wanted to know more than anyone seemed to want to tell me. I listened to Daddy’s jazz records and wanted more. I listened to Mama read about the Black world out and beyond and wanted to know more. I had questions about the physics of life: Who got to move through the world with their head up all effortless and easy? Who had perfected the act of walking while bowed and bent and looking down? Who got to etch their initials into things like silver cups and write letters on cotton paper made with silk thread? Who wrote and hid their stories on paper bags and napkins? Who only had time to wash and wax? Who had to move on through the world with a sack of sorrow on their shoulders? Who got to dance and be the movie star? Who always died younger with the expected broken heart?

During my search for how to become the poet that I didn’t know how to become, the poetry and life of Langston Hughes guided me from all four directions of the universe. I found in James Langston

Hughes's life a horizon line, a clear path—stepping stones to get from here to there. Here was a poet born and raised in another small town in America—just like me, from a politically charged family—just like me. A poet raised primarily by his grandmother, who had instilled in him an everlasting sense of race pride—just like me. Here was a poet who had found velocity in books and paper, who had been the class poet at a young age, who wrote dutifully and prolifically from that childhood forward, a poet who had found his way to a historically Black college, who kept honing his Afrocentric landscapes and portraits. Hughes was a poet who jumped freighters and wrote about laziness and labor, who left home and couldn't always be what his mama or his daddy or his people wished, but nevertheless wrote proudly all the way to the end, as a Negro artist. All along the way Langston Hughes picked up and moved mountains around—inside one little Black girl born in the segregated, now integrated South, who held pencils as close as if they were candy canes. Langston Hughes was a blazing light in my wilderness.

Hughes's deep love of his own Blackness, in a world that suggested he be less Black or more anything else, situated me. Langston Hughes's deep love for his Blackness and his primal dedication to say the hard thing with great visual verve, unmasked the persnickety literary world with its constant and great warnings about color lines and political stop signs. Langston Hughes was unbowed. He wrote tirelessly about his affection for Black people. Black people were his study and his course in life. Through the prism of his pen, Langston Hughes taught me that Blackness held everything under the sun.

No poet can follow Langston Hughes, but, of course, many have come after. I count myself in that number. We poets-after-Hughes keep scribbling out here in the "big sea," hoping to give honor to our own, as well as to our great poet of note, who set so many of us sailing.

Nikky Finne
Lexington, Kentucky
November 10, 2013

PREFACE

October 29, 1926

I want you to help me this time and I won't bother you ever again. Dear, why don't you love me. Why aren't we more loving and chummy. Why don't you ever confide in me. I know I have no sense to help you in your work but I'd enjoy your confidence. Now Langston, I have no one else to talk to, you will agree with me and help me won't you if you can? Please don't be angry because I want to go, for I'd see everyone I ever knew so I am wild to go.

February 15, 1938

Yes, your mother is an actress at last, the dream I dreamed as a little child is very near realized. I am one of the principals in Hall Johnson's show "Run Little Chillun Run."

February 3, 1938

"I get out very little and am nearly crazy being so lonely, sometimes. But I can't stand it. Car fare is so high one can't go often now days. I have 6 months."

These epigraphs are snapshots framing the fascinating, albeit conflicted life of Carolyn "Carrie" Hughes Clark—mother of the renowned poet, fiction writer, playwright, and essayist Langston Hughes. Between 1926 and 1930, when Langston is in his twenties, she worries, cajoles, demands, and generally holds her son emotionally hostage. During the next few years, she flies high, feeling free and valued as a person, an artist, and a woman as she realizes her lifelong dream of performing onstage to an audience of adoring fans. Toward the end of the 1930s, she spirals downward into a lonely abyss of bad health, isolation, poverty, and death. When she writes her dutiful son in February 1938 about her sense of devastation and loneliness, she did not have six months to live—only four. She died June 3 in New York City, where her "dear boy" had taken her for care in the time she had remaining.

My Dear Boy focuses on an important but heretofore largely unexplored dimension of Langston Hughes. What is known about Langston has been nicely captured in a number of well-argued biographies and collections of his correspondence. A perfect complement to them, however, is available in the underused collection of extant correspondence written by his mother. Her letters are a treasure trove of ideas and information that shed new light on Langston, especially his family dynamics and aesthetic achievement. The perspective on their relationship that emerges from Carrie's letters to her dear son is often one of insensitivity, if not downright pain. But eliciting sympathy for traumatic family interactions is *not* the purpose of this book. The goal instead is to explicate Hughes family dynamics. Carrie's role in orchestrating the interrelationships of family members is crucial to understanding their effect on Langston, including his response to her many entreaties and how he embeds familial themes in the art he creates in the mid-1920s to the late 1930s—the period during which she corresponds with him. Her letters, then, force her out of the shadows and into the same light of those who have already been considered significant influences on his aesthetic development.

The letters in this book, which cover twelve years, 1926–38, are found in the Langston Hughes Papers in the James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale University's Beinecke Library. Why Carrie's

letters have received virtually no attention en masse is difficult to determine. One explanation may entail availability. Precisely when her letters were added to her son's voluminous archive at the Beinecke Library is uncertain. Prior to his death in 1967, Langston had been shipping boxes of his papers to the collection for nearly twenty years, and a large group was sent soon after his death. It is safe to assume that Carrie's letters were for a longtime simply included in his enormous body of papers with no special effort to identify or isolate them. Sadly, a record of who had access to the manuscripts and letters is lost to history too. Shifting library policies meant that some materials were made public as they were catalogued and processed, while others remained restricted for various reasons.

Scholars have long acknowledged Carrie in their work on Langston, some even using fugitive letters as evidence for their arguments. Regennia N. Williams and Carmaletta M. Williams quoted from some of them in their coauthored essay "Mother to Son: The Letters from Carrie Hughes Clark to Langston Hughes." With that exception, however, no one has probed her collected letters for their own integrity or the significance they hold for Langston's aesthetic development and output. *My Dear Boy* undertakes such an interrogation.

While editing this body of correspondence, we were presented with a number of challenges. For instance, although Carrie Hughes was an extremely bright woman, she wrote with little or no regard for posterity or publication. Thus she often expressed herself quite informally and gave little attention to issues of complete sentences as well as proper punctuation, spelling, and grammar. For the most part, we resisted the urge to "fix" them: the letters are published as written. In a few cases, however, we felt the need to facilitate readability and clarity. Here we made silent emendations, such as adding periods or dropped characters, to make the reading smoother.

The letters present further complications. Carrie often wrote across the top, down the sides, and on the backs of pages. A few of the letters continue on after the closing "Lovingly yours, Mamma," while others begin before the salutation, typically "My Dear Boy." When appropriate, we place these "side notes" at the end when they read like postscripts, or before the salutation when they appear there. In each instance, we attempted to preserve the letter's integrity by keeping sentences in the order of the creation.

We also found it important to preserve Carrie's exact wording and spelling because they more clearly demonstrate her moods, voice, and eventually the deterioration in her skills and her health. Where her handwriting became especially shaky, we have provided notes to explain the thoughts she attempted to communicate. To Carrie's habit of double- or triple-underlining words, we have used brackets indicating this practice as her mode of emphasis.

Authoritatively documenting the dates of the letters was another problem. Many of them were either entirely undated or labeled with a month, date, or day of the week but no year. We placed these letters chronologically by making the best determination we could about the sequence of events in Carrie's and Langston's lives. We also used place of residence to make decisions regarding chronological order, aided by names of cities and states included in the letters. Not all names of people and places will be familiar to today's readers, so we have used notes to explain ones we were able to identify.

A further word about names: some biographers and critics strenuously argue that referring to subjects by their first name is akin to claiming an undue personal acquaintanceship or intimate familial knowledge. Arguments rooted in gender perspectives liken this practice, politically, to erasing a woman's identity and thus her complexity. In opting for the more familiar names of "Carrie" and "Langston," we claim no special relationship with this mother and her son. We are very much aware that self-identification can engender complexities, such as those that derive from Carrie's

naming and renaming of herself. We believe, however, that the brevity of first names intensifies the conflicted familial cohesion and entanglement *My Dear Boy* explores.

Structurally, this book eschews the traditional introduction and conclusion for a more integrative pattern we designate “prologue” and “epilogue.” These echo here an appropriate device in African American rhetorical and musical traditions: call and response. The prologue (the call) introduces Carrie and our method for reading her correspondence, while the epilogue (the response) registers Langston’s answers to his mother by examining his creative writing. Together, prologue and epilogue frame the letters and the headnotes that preface each section. Our intent is that this arrangement will provide a nearly cohesive narrative.

Our decision to forgo the point-counterpoint of Carrie and Langston exchanging letters was born out of necessity. Langston’s letters, unlike his mother’s, are still widely dispersed in libraries and personal collections, and there is no systematic listing of them. Furthermore, Carrie repeatedly begged Langston to write back to her, which tells us that he did not routinely respond to every letter she sent him. When Langston did write her back, his few extant letters are emotionally unrevealing, in keeping with his well-known predisposition for creating a wall around his innermost feelings. One only has to consult Charles Nichols’s and Emily Bernard’s collections of Langston’s correspondence to bear out this propensity. As a way of divining his views on familial relationships, we turned to his most typical mode of expression: his art.

In the absence of a full-scale biography of Carrie Hughes, then, we hope this book will provide a useful portrait of her life as well as a context in which to view it.

ABBREVIATIONS

- ARI Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume I: 1902–1941. I, Too, Sing America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- ARII Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II: 1941–1967. I Dream A World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- CVV Bernard, Emily, ed. *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten*. New York: Random House, 2002.
- LHP Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
- WW Hughes, Langston. *I Wonder as I Wander*. New York: Hill and Wang. 1956.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1869 Charles Langston and Mary Leary wed on January 18. Charles brings a foster son, Desalines, to the marriage, and Mary brings Loise, her daughter with Lewis Sheridan Leary. (Leary died from injuries incurred during the 1859 raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry with John Brown.)
- 1870 A son, Nathaniel Turner Langston, is born to Charles and Mary.
- 1873 Carolina Mercer Langston is born on February 22 to Charles and Mary Langston on a farm five miles north of Lawrence, Kansas, near Lakeview.
- 1888 Charles Langston moves his family to Lawrence in order to manage his part interest in a thriving grocery store on Massachusetts Street, a main thoroughfare in town.
- Carrie is "the Belle of Black Lawrence" in her social life.
- 1891 Charles Langston founds the Inter-State Literary Society. Carrie reads before the club and becomes a star in the Progressive Club of St. Luke A.M.E. Church.
- 1892 Charles Langston dies in Lawrence, Kansas, in November.
- 1893 Carrie graduates from Lawrence High School and works as "Deputy District Clerk" in the Lawrence City Hall.
- 1894 Under the name "Mercer Langston," Carrie completes a ten-week course in kindergarten and primary school education in April at Kansas State Normal School in Emporia.
- 1897 Brother Nathaniel Turner Langston is killed in a workplace accident at the local flour mill.
- 1898 Carrie arrives in Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory, located twelve miles from the all-Black town of Langston, named for her famous uncle. She meets James Nathaniel Hughes there.
- 1899 Carrie and James marry on April 30 in Guthrie. The couple moves to Joplin, Missouri, where he works as a stenographer for the Lincoln Mining Company.
- 1900 Carrie and James report to a census taker the loss of a son "Hughes Inf of JM (col)," who appears to have been buried "beneath the gravel" of Joplin's potter's field, in Fairview Cemetery, on February 8.
- 1901 Carrie joins James in Buffalo, New York, in the early spring.

Near September 1, Carrie is in St. Louis with James's youngest brother, John.

1902 Langston Hughes is born near midnight on February 1, in Joplin.

1903 James works as confidential secretary for the Pullman Company in Mexico City. He is admitted to the bar in Mexico. Carrie takes Langston to her mother in Lawrence, thus inaugurating a pattern of abandoning and reuniting with him.

1907 The separated couple attempts to reconcile April 14 in Mexico, where James has taken up residence. An earthquake aborts this effort. Carrie returns to the United States, leaves Langston with his grandmother, and takes off for Topeka.

1908 Langston lives with Carrie in Topeka and attends Harrison, a predominately White elementary school.

1909 Carrie returns Langston to her mother in Lawrence in April. Carrie moves to Colorado Springs, Colorado.

1910 Mary Leary Langston takes her grandson to Osawatomie, Kansas, where former president Theodore Roosevelt honors her first husband's sacrifice at Harper's Ferry. This follows the commemoration she received in 1859, when a friend presented her with the bullet-riddled, bloodstained shawl he wore at his death.

1913 Gwyn Shannon "Kit" Clark, the son of Carrie's second husband, Homer, is born on September 24.

1915 Mary Langston dies on April 8. By then Carrie has divorced James and married Homer Clark, who brings his two-year-old son to the family. Carrie leaves Langston with family friends, "Uncle" James W. Reed and "Auntie" Mary Reed. Late summer he joins Carrie and family in Lincoln, Illinois, where he is one of two Black children in the school. He is in the eighth grade.

At the end of summer the family joins Homer in Cleveland, Ohio.

1917 Homer leaves for a job in Chicago, and Carrie joins him. Langston lives alone in an attic apartment in Cleveland.

1918 Langston visits Carrie and Gwyn in Chicago over the summer. Homer moves on. By the end of summer Langston has saved "a little money" and returns alone to Cleveland to finish high school.

1919 Carrie and Gwyn join Langston in Cleveland. In June Langston travels with his father to Mexico, but he returns in September.

- 1920 Langston graduates from high school. A month later he returns to Mexico and stays a year. He sends money to Carrie from his earnings teaching English.
- 1921 Carrie and Gwyn move to a small one-room apartment in New York City. She convinces Langston to move in with them. In September, he enrolls at Columbia University and moves into a dormitory.
- 1922 Carrie, Homer, and Gwyn live in McKeesport, Pennsylvania.
- Langston lives in a rooming house in Harlem at 156 West 141st Street and works on a ship literally going nowhere—it is moored in the Hudson River.
- 1923 Langston boards the freighter *West Hesseltine* in Manhattan on June 23, throws all his books overboard (except for Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*), and works his way to Africa. In October returns to Carrie in McKeesport with a monkey and less than a dollar. A furious Carrie sells the monkey. On Christmas Eve Langston is at work on another ship, which docks in Rotterdam.
- 1924 Langston meets Arna Bontemps who remains Hughes's closest friend for life. James Hughes marries his housekeeper, Frau Schulz, in January. Langston sails out to sea on February 5 after not hearing from Alain Locke about admission and scholarship to Howard University. Langston deserts the *McKeesport* in Holland, purchases a visa to France, and lives in Paris. He returns to New York in November. Soon after, he moves to Washington, D.C., to live with Carrie and relatives.
- 1925 At Christmas, Langston receives notice of scholarship to attend Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.
- 1926 February 14, Langston leaves a furious Carrie, who is living with Gwyn in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to attend Lincoln University, where "neither crime nor bad grammar" were tolerated. He spends summer in Harlem rooming house and contributes to the only issue of *Fire!!*, which critics pan.
- 1927 Langston meets patron Charlotte Osgood Mason. She offers him \$150 a month for the first year to free him for "artistic flight."
- 1928 Mrs. Mason arranges for Gwyn to board and attend school in Springfield, Massachusetts. Carrie sabotages the arrangement because she is "too lonely" without him.
- Langston stores the Harper's Ferry shawl in a safe deposit box in a Fifth Avenue bank.
- 1929 Langston and Mrs. Mason clash over what she perceives as ingratitude. Langston has Thanksgiving dinner with Carrie, Homer, and Gwyn in Atlantic City.
- 1930 Langston is in Cuba on February 25.

- 1931 “Scottsboro Boys” arrested on March 25. Langston sympathizes with their cause.
-
- Langston lives with Carrie in Cleveland for three months, leaving on April 1.
- Langston moves to a Harlem YMCA upon returning from Haiti.
- 1932 Carrie and Langston visit Lawrence and stay with “Auntie”—now Mary Reed Campbell—in mid-March. Carrie continues to live in Cleveland, but Langston sails for Russia on June 14 to help make a movie titled *Black and White*. The production is never completed, but he remains there for a year.
- 1933 Carrie appears in Hall Johnson’s production *Run, Little Chillun*.
- 1934 On October 22, James Nathaniel Hughes dies in Mexico of complications from several strokes. Neither Langston nor Carrie is mentioned in his will.
- 1935 In a May 14 letter, Carrie writes Langston that she has a “very bad blood tumor” on her breast. Langston lives in Mexico. On October 24, *Mulatto* begins a two-year run on Broadway.
- 1938 Carrie dies of breast cancer on June 3.

My Dear Boy

PROLOGUE

The renowned poet, fiction writer, playwright, essayist, and humorist Langston Hughes has been the subject of countless biographies, critical studies, celebratory conferences and symposia, and other well-earned acknowledgments of his enduring body of creative writing. Hughes is widely acclaimed for his shaping influence on the development of African American literature and for his generous assistance to a younger generation of writers emerging in the early 1960s. For all the careful scrutiny given to this luminary, it is curious that one of his biggest influences has gone virtually unexamined: his mother, Carolyn “Carrie” Hughes Clark. In nearly all the attention devoted to Hughes’s blues and jazz ethos, humor, vernacular voicings, and poetic innovations, the possible role Carrie may have played in her son’s vast array of stylistic experiments and literary production has been nearly ignored.

Conceptually, the matter of “influence” remains a conflicted notion. However, the idea we propose has little to do with establishing *literary* precursors, demonstrating convergence with or divergence from the work of other poets and fiction writers, or employing other such relational strategies with regard to authors and book reading.¹ Fundamentally, *My Dear Boy* sets forth “influence,” using the correspondence Carrie sent to Langston, as a means of extrapolating a subtle familial transaction revealed in such representative works as his *Not without Laughter*, *Mulatto*, “Negro Mother,” and *So Gone Home*. Our use of letters to place the Self in perspective falls within a well-explored tradition.

In her impressive study *The Cultural Work of the Late Nineteenth-Century Hostess*, Susan K. Harris thoughtfully contextualizes an important perspective on the letter-writing tradition. She begins with the most common assumption about personal letters as a rhetorical act: that “they are private conversations between individuals” (51). Using William Decker’s *Epistolary Practices*, she complicates this idea by noting that most letters have “multiple interfaces.” She continues: “Decker’s postmodern term ‘interface’ ... helps us to think of letters as a two-way process instead of as a purely unidirectional, inscriber-to-recipient, mode of writing. ... [T]hinking in terms of multiple interfaces enables us to consider the effect of the letter on the person writing it as well as the person or persons receiving it” (52). In his own way, Faulkner scholar James G. Watson offers an insight similar to Harris’s: “Personal letters are fragments of autobiography in which the Self and the Word are designedly one. They deliver the letter writer figuratively into the hands of the reader, but because they do, the Self written in private letters is vulnerable to intrusions” (*William* xii). Implicit in Watson’s astute observation are two key points. First, in Faulkner’s letters, the relationship between Self and Word is a self-conscious, deliberate working out of personality and self-expression. Thus the art of letter writing becomes for Faulkner a rehearsal for his fiction. Second, while the private nature of his correspondence is not intended for posterity or to be widely shared, the letters are nevertheless open to the interpretations others might bring to them.

Although Carrie’s letters, even to the most casual reader, are not intended to reveal the reading communities Harris discusses, it is possible to extrapolate “multiple interfaces.” They are without the epistolary conventions governing Faulkner’s public and private correspondence, but her letters are nevertheless open to interpretation. She obviously did not write with posterity in mind. No doubt she would rankle at the examination of her correspondence for what it divulges about her own person and her contentious familial relationships. Such an exploration, though, serves a higher purpose than merely “airing dirty laundry” or exposing an idiosyncratic personality. The transaction between Self and Word in her letters manifests an inextricably linked emotional connection between her desperate

pleas to Langston and his aesthetic response to her demanding entreaties. Thus the “interface” in her letters is a two-way process between writer and recipient: there is communication with Langston and revelation of deep insight into her Self. Using the analysis we propose reveals a vulnerability that public readers might readily perceive.

As this prologue demonstrates, Carrie’s letters reveal a life fraught with a complexity and complication heretofore unexplored and with a depth that offers her life as a shaping influence on Langston’s art. The epilogue frames his response to the intricacies of her life, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. By inscribing their relationship as a series of familial conflicts, Langston confronts their family ties *indirectly*, via aesthetics. Between this “call” and “response” lies a body of Carrie’s letters that function as epistolary testaments, placing a mother’s relationship to her well-known writer son in a wholly new perspective.

A fuller appreciation of her letters first requires an assessment of the image of Carrie that comes to light in critical discussions about her. Biographers and historians generally assert that Carrie as woman, wife, and mother fails to be doting, kind, loving, nurturing, or maternal. Instead, she appears in most studies as a complex and “difficult” woman. How do writers reach this conclusion? It can be argued that from her act of self-naming, of projecting a particular representation of herself, emerges a personality that betrays eccentricity and conflict. Born Carolina Mercer Langston, on Saturday, February 22, 1873, in her adult life she successively or alternately referred to herself as “Caroline Langston,” “Carolyn Hughes” (after her marriage to James N. Hughes, Langston’s father), “Carolyn Hughes Clark” (after her divorce from James Hughes and marriage to Homer Clark), and “Carrie Clark.” She also spelled Clark with and without a final “e.” Despite what may seem inconsiderate decisions, arbitrary choices, or simple necessity, Carrie, wittingly or not, participates in the power of naming to define her sense of self. As she seeks to project the image of a strong, fiercely independent woman, however, she invariably contradicts this representation by using emotional appeals, evoking guilt, expressing anger, or simply importuning to coerce her son’s love, affection, and especially his financial support. Therein lies the source of her enigmatic personality, which more deeply probing scholars, such as Arnold Rampersad and Faith Berry, uncover as they seek awareness of who she was and where she fit into Langston’s life.

Typically, however, Carrie appears in most Hughes scholarship as a brief citation, an obligatory nod to the fact that she gave birth to him. Other discussions either reiterate a few facts about her birth into a socially and politically prominent family or reveal personality traits and quirks that imply an indelible mark on Hughes’s own struggles to define himself and his art. In her teenage years, Carrie enjoyed a rather privileged social position. She lived as a legatee of a prominent ancestral past. This is not to suggest that she merely basked in the glow of an abundant, glorious family history. She was aware of what critic Charles H. Nichols, in another context, describes as an inheritance of “austerity and dedicated moral purpose.” In part, this means that with parents barely one generation removed from the postbellum imperative of racial uplift, she too “felt the obligation to prove that Africans were not only educable but capable of high culture” (Nichols 6). The racial imperative she embraces manifested itself in “her taste for musicals, plays, [and] novels” as well as in her practice of elocution and longing for the professional stage (ARI 9). Her racial *raison d’être* did not end there. Arnold Rampersad elaborates: “Carrie Langston had become at fifteen one of the belles of Black Lawrence, Kansas. At eighteen, encouraged by her father, she read papers before his Inter-State Literary Society and even recited her own poems. Light olive in complexion, stylish and popular, Carrie became a star in the St. Luke’s Progressive Club. When the rival Warren Street Second Baptist Church founded its own cultural society, she was elected ‘Critic’” (ARI 9).

To characterize Carrie’s manifestation of the ancestral imperative as largely artistic is not to deny

her awareness of the family's political heritage. She understood that her father, Charles Langston, had been a passionate abolitionist, an ardent supporter of John Brown, and a prominent figure in Kansas Republican politics. As president of the Colored Benevolent Society, grandmaster of the Black Masonic Fraternity, and associate editor of a local Black newspaper, the *Historic Times*, he served at the heart of Lawrence's social activities. She knew quite well the history of other family members. John Mercer Langston, her uncle, had taken degrees from Oberlin College, received admission to the Ohio bar, become a professor of law and acting president at Howard University, and served in the U.S. Congress as a representative from Virginia. Her mother, Mary, an abolitionist, was a widow before marrying the man who would become Carrie's father. Mary's first husband, Lewis Sheridan Leary, had died from wounds suffered during the attack on the Harper's Ferry arsenal with John Brown. Ten years later she would marry Charles Langston. Carrie embraced this storied past and saw herself as part of it.

Her heart, though, was fixed on stage performance. Being Black, a woman, and a Black woman with marginal talent posed handicaps that Carrie could not easily surmount. In 1892, her world was shattered when her father died. The family had enjoyed prominence, but his death left them impoverished. Her life then became paradoxical. While she aspired to a future in the limelight of onstage performance, economic necessity forced her into more prosaic labor. She managed employment as schoolteacher, stenographer, and domestic before a series of local stage roles finally led to her dream of appearing on Broadway, in Hall Johnson's 1933 folk drama *Run, Little Chillun*. Along the way, constant poverty would foster a struggle, and she persistently pursued the rainbow's end from the midst of the storm.

Thus Carrie's passionate pursuit of her dreams of a successful stage career ran counter to the reality of the world in which she was forced to live. As generally represented in the scholarship on Langston, she emerges as a self-centered, demanding, needy, and frustrated woman. Rowena Jelliffe of Cleveland's Karamu Players recalled, in an interview with Arnold Rampersad, that Carrie, in certain ways, "had become a hard woman. ... She was concerned only with money. She was always pounding Langston about it. Carrie hammered at him all the time with the idea that he wasn't going the way she wanted him to go. She thought he was wasting his time writing poetry" (ARI 38–39). From this description emerges not just her conflicted relationship with Langston but also the guilt and depression engendered in him. Hughes's admission of hatred for his father is well known, but the resentment he felt for his mother is not as explicitly stated. No doubt these feelings were exacerbated by what scholars point to as her restive spirit, a "pattern of constant movement" as critic Onwuchekwa Jemie calls it (xxv). Her peripatetic nature culminated in an often physical but also emotional distance from her son. Shortly after Langston's 1902 birth, Carrie moved with him from Joplin, Missouri, to her mother's home in Lawrence. By biographer Faith Berry's account, this relocation inaugurated a life in which Langston lived in seven cities before he was twelve years old (Berry, *Langston* 4). An easy conclusion is that she was simply incapable of providing Langston with a stable home, but this conclusion is too hastily derived. Carrie's rootlessness and detachment meant that she was able to maintain only a tenuous connection with him at best. The long times they spent apart and the tension between them when they were together were not conducive to developing a cohesive relationship.

The uncertainties of Carrie's life, caused in part by the economic unpredictability of the Depression, forced her to be "dependent upon him, [even though she was] not attentive" (Berry, *Langston* 11). Carrie suffered the on-and-off attention of her second husband, Homer Clark, whose own wanderlust kept him constantly searching new towns for employment. He left his own son, Gwyn (nicknamed "Kit"), in Carrie's care, thus increasing the pressure on her for the family's economic survival. Carrie seemed unaware that Langston's enormous literary reputation did not translate into financial success. She persistently approached him for money, as if his coffers were always filled. He

requests evolved into demands, as when, in his senior year of high school, she engaged him in a tug of war between school and work (Berry, *Langston* 21). For Carrie, Langston's potential as a laborer and contributor to her financial well-being was infinitely more valuable than his education. Gone was her sense of rich family history in which education was fundamental to the family's success. She needed him to be a source of income so that her life and leisure would be provided for.

Until her death in 1938, her pattern of "importuning and flightiness" caused Langston no small amount of hardship (ARI 305). Understandably, he felt trapped. On one hand, his father tempted him with promises of money, which, like the thirty pieces of silver, would require him to embrace self-hatred and racial hatred. On the other, Carrie reminded her dutiful son of his obligation to care for her. She desired and expected Langston to shower her with financial support and attention. Rejecting his father was easier for him, as he did when withdrawing from the School of Mines program at Columbia University. However, while "Hughes loved his mother," as Rampersad wrote, "a true reconciliation with her was impossible; his childhood loneliness made him suspicious of her and of all women. Except perhaps one" (ARI 167). As discussed shortly, Langston's relationship with Carrie sent him looking for a surrogate mother—which he would find in Charlotte Osgood Mason.

Carrie's letters, therefore, function as a gateway into understanding a number of issues that derive from a complex familial relationship. They direct us to a deeper understanding and fuller appreciation of Carrie as a person, a woman, and a mother—a representation greater than the one Hughes biographers typically capture. Her correspondence clearly delineates the strained, distant, and incongruous relationship she has with her son, thus documenting the barriers to developing a close familial alliance. As testaments of a nonfunctioning family, her letters, we argue, provide the source material that Hughes transforms into meaningful art. To understand how these complicated family relations become "influences," it is necessary to employ a theoretical construct that unravels the complex nature of the family relations shaping his work.

Bowen Family Systems Theory

Arnold Rampersad first called for a biographical approach to Black subjects that made greater use of psychological theories in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*. At the same time, he provided an admirable response to his own call in an exhaustive two-volume history of Langston's life. Even though his method is a subtle immersion into Freudian psychoanalytic theories, Rampersad largely explores the individual Self to the exclusion of other nurturing or natural influences, leading to what Jerome Bump, in quoting Foucault, concludes is "'a socially isolated and individualistic view of the self' that 'precludes the possibility of enduring attachments or responsibilities to another'" (328). Scholars interested in applying psychological theory to literary analysis often point to the weakness of the theory of the Oedipal Complex, one of Freud's central tenets, as evincing a need for a more inclusive psychological approach. Generally, there is some agreement with Storhoff, who writes: "The Oedipal Complex as a theoretical orientation ... oversimplifies because it does *not* address the self-in-family" (291). Framing Carrie within the *family unit* and not just as the image of a neglectful, self-aggrandizing, insensitive mother has interpretive advantages. This larger context enables a broader portrait, one that explores causal relationships in her interactions with others.

The most appropriate heuristic for this approach is psychiatrist Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory (FST) because it provides a valuable means for interrogating the "multiple interfaces" of Carrie's letters and their significance for the aesthetic vision driving Langston from the mid-1920s to the late 1930s. FST gets at Carrie's motivations and the role familial relationships play in developing them. Thus the focus shifts from the individual to the family and the processes by which the member

interact with one another. Simply put, an examination of “inter-relational processes” investigates with greater scrutiny the evidence usually gathered to condemn Carrie. Bowen’s theory of the family helps to explicate Carrie’s complexity as well as Langston’s response to it by using three interconnected concepts: self-differentiation, fusion (or enmeshment), and triangulation.

Differentiation

Bowen posits self-differentiation as an ability to adhere to one’s own principles, regardless of the degree of emotional pressure one experiences. As implemented by researchers Johnson, Buboltz, and Seemann, Bowen’s concept of differentiation of self “refers to an individual’s ability to function in an autonomous and self-directed manner without being controlled by family members or significant others and without emotionally cutting oneself off from these significant relationships. ... In other words, differentiated individuals are able to separate themselves from unresolved emotional attachments in their families without severing significant relationships” (191). Elements foundational to the building of self-differentiation are present at birth. An individual’s childhood and adolescent familial relationships determine, however, to what degree that Self will be fully developed—that is, differentiated from others in the family. For example, young children who assert themselves in seemingly willful ways are said to have “minds of their own.” They are very much part of the family system and bond with others in the family, but they are developing their own personalities and distinguishing themselves from their siblings, parents, and others. Those children are self-differentiating themselves, placing themselves apart from others in their sphere.

In demonstrating the literary uses of Bowen’s theory, Schiff writes compellingly of Philip Roth’s novels: “Basically, [differentiation] is the level of one’s emotional maturity and individuality. ... A person with a well differentiated ‘self’ recognizes his realistic dependence on others, but he can stay calm and clear-headed enough in the face of conflict, criticism, and rejection” (33). In effect, this presents a fight to retain one’s own sense of value in the face of efforts to make one conform to values deleterious to one’s core beliefs. Individuals with the strength to withstand the push to become like the others are well self-differentiated. The weaker ones, those who capitulate to outside pressure, are poorly self-differentiated.

Such was the task for Carrie. With the deaths of her father (1892) and her brother Nat Turner Langston (1899) as well as the departure from Lawrence of her sister Loise and another brother, Desalines, Carrie was left to contend with a mother who opposed her forays into theater and the arts. From their contest of wills emerged the challenge to Carrie’s self-differentiation. To be at least moderately well differentiated, communicate effectively, and function autonomously through times of high stress, both Carrie and her mother had to be capable of controlling their own emotions. Both needed to understand the necessity for a realistic interdependence. Each could have helped the other and both could have retained their individuation. Instead, Carrie essentially abandoned her mother during their time of highest stress to attend college, which in itself is a self-differentiation tactic. At a later stress point, she left Langston in the care of the extremely impoverished Mary. This should have been an opportunity for mother and daughter to fuse appropriately, in a manner that would promote self-differentiation. Carrie’s abandonment of Langston, however, forced Mary to fuse with functional kin, James and Mary Reed, for survival.

Fusion (or Enmeshment)

Bowen’s premise—that the family is an emotional unit with complex relationships—clearly indicate

the small number of families who easily process the concepts that make a strong functioning unit. Families are able to navigate successfully the inevitable stress and conflicts that accompany life and still remain a cohesive unit with everyone retaining strong, individual personalities. In order to achieve success, members of the family must be able to process a number of factors, including the ability to communicate well with each other; to be well differentiated, which is the ability to develop and emerge from stressful situations strong and independent; to use adequate problem-solving skills; to bond appropriately and develop cohesive relationships especially in times of high stress; and to control affect and emotion. Less successful families find themselves beset with further issues. For example, times of high tension and stress, such as extreme poverty, require additional processes such as emotional fusion, during which the family bands together to help each other. When this is done appropriately, the members emerge from the stress with their individuality intact, thus ensuring the survival of the family. Inappropriate fusion, however, comes at the cost of losing individuation. Fusion, therefore, signifies the extent of parents' over-involvement in each other's life and the lives of their children, which generally leads to the loss of psychological boundaries (Storhoff 303n2).

Families, including the Hughes-Clark family, undergo both predictable and unpredictable changes as they develop. Part of determining such changes means assessing the extent to which family members, whether willing or not, are intensely connected by emotions. For example, the amount of tension in the familial relationship dictates the extent to which family members enjoy or resent the emotional investments necessary to sustain the relationship. Those emotions and that investment are not always comforting or beneficial. Often people feel disconnected from their families. This estrangement is not measured by distance. People sitting next to each other can feel distant. Conversely, family members half a world away can feel emotionally close to each other. Having determined the degree of family connectedness, it is possible to show the importance of emotional survival and the need for individuation.

One of the most important guarantees of the emotional bonding of a connected family is effective communication. However, one of the most prevalent problems in family processes is *ineffective* communication, when family members are incapable of explaining their needs, wants, desires, goals, and ambitions to each other. They lack the ability to articulate or develop appropriate responses. Family members must learn how to solicit and express information in clear, nonthreatening ways. Healthy communication results when they attempt to understand coded language, the language people use to keep safe, and to express themselves directly and clearly. Healthy communication allows family members to learn from and accept each other's individuation and self-differentiation.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Carrie, in her formative years, grew up in what seemed to be the quintessential well-connected, emotionally strong blended family, capable of thriving in spite of the omnipresence of Jim Crow. As previously stated, she had the opportunity to become self-differentiated by asserting herself in her family and in her community, building strong relationships, and developing and maintaining her individuality. The world of this socially engaged, highly popular, beautiful young Black woman of Lawrence was severely tested, however, when her immediate family was decimated by departures, financial ruin, and death. Nevertheless, Carrie conveniently forgets the cohesive family times when she confesses in her letters that she has "never been happy."

Instead of appropriate fusion, Carrie begins a pattern of movement and stasis in which her self-centered demands divide each family system in which she participates. She and James divorce when Langston is very young. Homer leaves her and returns many times until eventually he completely abandons her. As an adult Langston does not want to live with her for any extended time. Only Gwynn, an underage boy with no other familial support during most of the period during which the letters in

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