

Crisis, Catastrophe, and Contagion in the Works of Langston Hughes and His Contemporaries

--A Special Session for the Langston Hughes Society at the 32nd ALA Convention--

May 27-30, 2021

Westin Copley Place | Boston, Massachusetts

In 2021, we celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Langston Hughes Society, although we mark this anniversary following the grim year of 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic that has led to multiple crises, not least of which has occurred in the arts and higher education. Despite the use of tools for virtual interaction, quarantines and travel restrictions across the globe have impacted social engagement and personal connections. Langston Hughes, who traveled extensively both domestically and internationally, might have found these closures a hindrance to his ability to take his poetry to the people, although he would have been very attuned to the suffering of the “low down folk,” as he put it in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Hughes was no stranger to crises and catastrophes both acute and chronic, such as the Great Depression and long-standing racial discrimination that manifested itself not only in outright violence but also in housing and employment discrimination. He lent his pen and his presence to the crisis in Scottsboro, Alabama, and the catastrophe of the Spanish Civil War.

The Langston Hughes Society is pleased to accept abstracts of no more than five hundred words (for a fifteen- to twenty-minute presentation) on crisis, catastrophe, and contagion in the work of Langston Hughes and his contemporaries for its panel at the 2021 annual meeting of the American Literature Association. Papers may consider, for instance, how Langston Hughes’s works engage with the supposedly “scientific” discourse on miscegenation as a source of contamination and infection? How does Hughes’s work on behalf of the Scottsboro Boys in the 1930s demonstrate the value of art in response to crisis? Some additional topics for consideration include but are not limited to:

- representations of physical disease, psychological crisis, sexual assault, injury, and disability in the works of Claude McKay and Zora Neale Hurston
- critical perspectives on Langston Hughes’s articles in the *Afro-American* on the Spanish Civil War and the efforts to push “the Spanish people back into economic and spiritual slavery for the sake of a handful of rich men and outworn nobles” (Hughes, “Madrid Getting Used to Bombs” 173)
- the Slim Greer cycle in Sterling Brown’s 1932 poetry collection *Southern Road* as a vehicle for responding to the crisis of racism in the United States through the interplay of comedy and tragedy
- analysis of Hughes’s use of humor in his Simple stories, first published in the *Chicago Defender*, to engage public audiences with topics such as violence from white supremacist organizations and gender bias
- commentary on the contagion of interracial color prejudice in works such as Nella Larsen’s 1928 *Quicksand* and Walter White’s 1926 *Flight*
- representations of illness and the subsequent curative and healing processes in the works of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jessie Redmon Fauset, etc.
- commentary on the contagion of colorism in Wallace Thurman’s 1929 novel *The Blacker the Berry*, Nella Larsen’s 1929 *Passing*, and Zora Neale Hurston’s 1926 play *Color Struck*

- responses to the lynching tradition and other forms of racial violence in Langston Hughes's play *Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South*, James Weldon Johnson's 1912 *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Walter White's 1924 *The Fire in the Flint*, and Arna Bontemps's 1936 *Black Thunder*
- depictions of natural and economic catastrophes and their lingering ramifications on the African-American community in works such as Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Claude McKay's *Harlem Glory: A Fragment of Aframerican Life*, written in the 1940s but not published until 1990
- Langston Hughes's notion of a dream deferred as a tool for analyzing crisis and socioeconomic barriers to African-American advancement in literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

The deadline for abstract submissions for this panel is Friday, January 29, 2021. Please send, as an E-mail attachment(s), your abstract along with an abbreviated CV and 100-word biographical statement to Dr. Christopher Allen Varlack, President (lhsociety.president@gmail.com), to Dr. DeLisa D. Hawkes, Vice President (lhsociety.vp@gmail.com), and to Dr. Richard Hancuff, Secretary (lhsociety.secretary@gmail.com). Indicate, if applicable, any audio-visual needs. Note also that in addition to the registration fees required for ALA, presenters on this session must also be current members of the Langston Hughes Society by the time of the conference in order to present.

For more information on the Langston Hughes Society and our mission, please visit us online at www.langstonhughessociety.org.

Works Cited

- Hughes, Langston. "Madrid Getting Used to Bombs; It's Food Shortage That Hurts." *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, edited by Christopher C. De Santis, U of Missouri P, 2002, pp. 169-173.
- . "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, edited by Christopher C. Desantis, U of Missouri P, 2002, pp. 31-36.