



The Life and Legacy of Sterling A. Brown, the Dean of Afro-American Literary Studies

--A Special Issue of *The Langston Hughes Review*--

For many readers and scholars alike, Sterling A. Brown—noted poet, literary critic, and student of southern Black culture—remains in relative obscurity today, his role in the New Negro Movement and beyond overshadowed to a degree by the resounding legacies of figures such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and others who have cemented their places in the African-American literary canon. After all, though his 1932 collection *Southern Road* was well received, it was not until 1975 that Brown published his next book of poetry, *The Last Ride of Wild Bill*, unable to find a publisher for his second book, *No Hiding Place*, because of the Great Depression that ravaged the United States. And yet, the impact of Sterling A. Brown cannot and should not be denied. As John Edgar Tidwell and Mark A. Sanders aptly note in their introduction to the 2007 *Sterling Brown's A Negro Looks at the South*, “A quintessential New Negro, Brown created a completely new artistic and poetic vocabulary, re-created the modes of conception and representation of the African American and blackness for a modern age” (3-4)--work that warrants another look into the important contributions to literature and culture that Brown offered throughout his life through his poetry, criticism, edited anthologies, teaching, and more.

In the intervening time between the publication of his poetic works, Sterling A. Brown was an avid literary critic and editor, helping to frame the ongoing conversation surrounding the African-American literary tradition and the representation of the African-American experience by white and Black authors alike. In 1933, for instance, Brown published a landmark essay titled, “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors” in *The Journal of Negro Education*, tracing some of the pervasive stereotypes developed over time first as a defense of chattel slavery and later as tools to justify both the disenfranchisement of and violence against Blacks. In addition, along with Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee, Brown published the 1941 groundbreaking work *The Negro Caravan*--an anthology of African-American literature aimed at “present[ing] a truthful mosaic of Negro character and experience in America” while “collect[ing] in one volume certain key literary works that have greatly influenced the thinking of American Negroes, and to a lesser degree, that of Americans as a whole” (v). These incredible works--alongside his 1937 *The Negro in American Fiction* and his 1972 *Negro Poetry and Drama*--were pivotal in advancing African-American literature as a serious field of scholarly study, just as he did throughout his forty-year career as a professor at Howard University.

This special issue of *The Langston Hughes Review* aims to expand critical review of this important, yet underappreciated figure, building upon key texts such as Joanne V. Gabbin’s 1985 *Sterling A. Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*, John Edgar Tidwell and Steven C. Tracy’s 2009 edited collection *After Winter: The Art and Life of Sterling A. Brown*, and Mark A.

Sanders' 1999 *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics and the Poetry of Sterling A. Brown*. Contributors are asked to consider, among other topics:

- the ways in which Brown's poetry worked to capture the life and the voice of the folk while "creat[ing] alternative aesthetic, cultural, and finally political space for black art and black lives in constant modal process" (Sanders xi);
- the impact of Brown's philosophy of and commentary on the blues as both poetry and record of the Black folk experience (see works such as his 1930 essay, "The Blues as Folk Poetry") on poetry, hip hop, and other forms of musical and cultural expression;
- how Brown expanded the representation of the African-American experience in his art and through the texts he anthologized, challenging the racial molds he saw at work with stereotypes such as the contented slave, the tragic mulatto, and the Brute Negro;
- intersections between the cultural and artistic philosophies of Sterling Brown and his contemporaries (i.e., the perspectives shared by Brown and Du Bois regarding propaganda, the importance both Brown and Hughes placed on representations of the folk and folk culture in order to advance diverse portraits of Black life, etc.);
- the significance of Brown's work with the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s and his views of Black life in Washington;
- Brown's role as editor and anthologist promoting the work of fellow Black writers influential not only for their literary works and preservation of folk culture but also for their historical, social, and cultural essays that chronicle the fight for emancipation and uplift across time;
- biographical studies of Brown with insight into his time as an educator, his role as the first poet laureate of the District of Columbia, and/or his 1940s interview with the FBI, concerned with his involvement with the Communist Party and potential violation of the Hatch Act;
- reflections on the Sterling A. Brown papers located in the archives and special collections at Williams College in Williamstown, MA;
- and the impact of Brown on those of the New Negro Movement and beyond.

Scholars interested in contributing to this special issue should submit both a CV and abstract of approximately 350 to 500 words to the guest editor and current president of the Langston Hughes Society, Christopher Allen Varlack, at lhsociety.president@gmail.com by March 5, 2021. Those whose abstracts are selected will be asked to submit articles (not to exceed 8000 words in length, adhering to the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook*) by January 14, 2022 for peer review. As we work to expand awareness and appreciation of Sterling A. Brown, we also invite book reviews on the biographical and critical texts that have been developed on Brown over time; if you are interested in composing a book review, please reach out to Varlack in advance; all reviews must be assigned in order to avoid duplication. Book reviewers will be responsible for securing copies on their own.

For more information on the Langston Hughes Society as well as *The Langston Hughes Review*, please visit our website at www.langstonhughessociety.org.

Works Cited

Brown, Sterling A. *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics and the Poetry of Sterling A. Brown*. U of Georgia P., 1999.