

“The Task of the Negro Writer as an Artist”: Language as Vehicle of Power and Identity Construction in the Work of Langston Hughes and His Contemporaries

SAMLA 91 | Theme: Languages—Power, Identity, Relationships
November 15-17, 2019 at the Westin Peachtree Plaza in Atlanta, Georgia

Throughout their lives, Langston Hughes and his contemporaries used language to represent the powerless and to speak truth to power in a highly discriminatory racial landscape. Hughes, for instance, often wrote to right wrongs and to bring attention to injustices such as the prosecution of the Scottsboro Boys. In *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), Hughes reflects that he wanted “to write seriously and as well as I knew how to about the Negro people,” which was a theme he explored early in his career with “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926). Language was a mode through which he explored these lives and those he encountered in his travels. As Gene Andrew Jarrett argues, “Hughes’s understanding of Jim Crowism in the U.S. South informed the language he needed to interpret the social, class, or racial inequalities in countries located outside the U.S.” In time, Hughes honed that language to provide keen criticisms of oppression both nationally and internationally, often couched in humor, such as with his Simple stories.

In keeping with the SAMLA 91 conference theme, “Languages: Power, Identity, Relationships,” the Langston Hughes Society invites papers that explore “the power of language to change lives and make our world a better place for all.” Interested participants might want to consider, for instance, Hughes’ long-running column in the *Chicago Defender* that addressed current events or his work on the lynching culture throughout the United States. One might also consider the ways in which Hughes lent his poetry to specific causes such as the Spanish Civil War or Scottsboro. As always, papers examining all periods of Hughes’ career are welcome. Eager to examine the clear intersections between Hughes and other writers of his time, we also welcome proposals on his contemporaries—figures such as Claude McKay, whose “If We Must Die” became a rallying cry for many across the diaspora as they fought against cultural and political oppression—and those who carry on his literary legacy today.

Please send proposals of no more than five hundred words (for a fifteen to twenty-minute paper) to Dr. Christopher Varlack, President (lhsociety.president@gmail.com) and Dr. Richard Hancuff, Secretary (lhsociety.secretary@gmail.com) no later than May 21, 2019, with a response expected no later than May 26, 2019. Note that in addition to paying the membership and registration fees for SAMLA, presenters must also be members of the Langston Hughes Society by the time of the conference in order to present. Please indicate any audio-visual needs (if essential) in your E-mail. For more information on the Langston Hughes Society and our ongoing work, please visit our website at www.LangstonHughesSociety.org.