Dear Carlo, Dear Langston: An Epistolary Friendship: Review of *Rememher Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten*. Edited by Emily Bernard

Christopher C. De Santis
*Illinois State University, ccdesan@ilstu.edu*

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Dear Carlo, Dear Langston
An Epistolary Friendship
Christopher C. De Santis


Among the most prolific of American writers, Langston Hughes—referred to at various times as both the “Poet Low-Rate of Harlem” and the “Dean of Black Letters”—gained international attention and acclaim in nearly every genre of writing, including poetry, the short story, drama, the novel, history, autobiography, journalistic prose, children’s and adolescent literature, the libretto, and song lyrics. Born in Joplin, Missouri, on 1 February 1902 and raised mainly by his maternal grandmother, Hughes grew to maturity with a deep awareness of the African-American struggle for equality in a nation bent on maintaining a racially divided social order. Hughes’s memories of childhood were peopled with heroes and heroines of African America. His grandfather, Charles Langston, had been tried in 1858 for protecting a fugitive slave; another relative died with John Brown at Harpers Ferry. Hughes’s grandmother, Mary Langston, ensured that the boy was well versed on the lives and exploits of people such as Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells Barnett, Mary White Ovington, and W. E. B. Du Bois, among others. Equally vivid in Hughes’s memories were the painful incidents of racial discrimination that made him, even as a child, all too aware of the compromised ideals of the nation he loved. Recalling the Fourth of July speeches that celebrated “liberty and justice, freedom and democracy” which he heard as a boy, Hughes “knew they did not apply to me because I could not even buy an ice cream soda at the corner drug store where my mother bought the family soap. I could not go to the movies in Lawrence, Kansas, because there was a sign up: COLORED NOT ADMITTED.”

Despite the formidable hurdle of an ever-present color line, Hughes prospered as a writer. His professional writing career spanned almost five decades, taking him from Harlem, the place he considered home, to Mexico, Spain, France, Cuba, Africa, and Soviet Central Asia, among other places. Deeply committed to an American democracy that, in his own lifetime, never quite delivered in actuality what it promised in theory, Hughes nevertheless dedicated his life to capturing in print the triumphs, dreams and frustrations of working-class black people everywhere, always retaining the youthful hope that “We have tomorrow / Bright before us / Like a flame.” This early vision was both an act of defiance and a call to action. On the one hand, Hughes defied a nation that sought to keep the African-American community in perpetual bondage through legal segregation and the fostering of racial prejudice. On the other hand, he challenged black artists to cultivate the rich culture of the African-American community in music, paintings, sculptures, poems, and fiction. By 1967, the year of his death, Hughes had attained the status of a true ambassador of the arts and spokesperson for oppressed people worldwide. Forty-six years after stepping foot in Harlem for the first time, he could look back proudly on a career that was highlighted by fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and

the Rosenwald Fund, first prizes in literary competitions sponsored by Opportunity magazine and the Poetry Society of America, the coveted Spingarn Medal, and honorary doctorates from Lincoln, Howard, and Western Reserve universities. Perhaps more important than these many honors, Hughes could also look back secure in the knowledge that, in addition to writing, his was a career dedicated to the ideals of democracy and committed to activism and social reform.

A good deal of scholarship over the past thirty years has been devoted to Hughes's life and writings, particularly to his poetry and fiction and to his status as one of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance. In time for his hundredth birthday in 2002, the University of Missouri Press is completing publication of The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, a seventeen-volume collection that will ensure wide access to most of Hughes's writings for generations to come. Nevertheless, there is one genre in Hughes's vast oeuvre—the personal letter—that has gone largely unnoticed. Hughes was an avid letter writer, generating thousands of pages of epistolary prose over the course of his career. In 1980 Charles Nichols brought together the letters of Hughes and Arna Bontemps, Hughes's close friend and a fellow writer, in the Arna Bontemps–Langston Hughes Letters, 1925–1967 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company), but the bulk of Hughes's epistolary writings has remained unpublished and, with the exception of a relatively small group of scholars using them for various critical and biographical projects, unread. The publication of Emily Bernard's edition, Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925–1964, is thus a cause for celebration among Hughes's many admirers. Useful to scholars seeking a better understanding of the complex relationship between Hughes and Van Vechten, the edition will also appeal to general readers for what it reveals about the everyday life of a beloved African-American writer and the close friendship he cultivated with a white patron of the arts whose name, according to Bernard, "became synonymous with white exploitation of black culture" (xv).

In an attempt to fairly represent the epistolary friendship between Hughes and Van Vechten—a Midwesterner by birth who received some acclaim for his writing and photography but whose most persistent legacy has been the unfortunately titled novel of Harlem life in the 1920s, Nigger Heaven—Bernard faced the onerous task of choosing for inclusion in the volume a fraction of the nearly one thousand five hundred letters exchanged by the two men over the course of a relationship that spanned almost forty years. While her principles of selection were admittedly basic—"The letters I have chosen were selected both for their liveliness and for the stories they tell" (xxix)—they resulted in a collection of writings which, like much of Hughes's other nonfictional prose, belie the deceptively simple nature of his verses through a profoundly broad and intellectually engaging understanding of twentieth-century American culture and world affairs. Whether responding to Van Vechten's sharp criticism of his revolutionary socialist poetry of the 1930s or chronicling for his friend a road trip through the South with Zora Neale Hurston, the letters included in Remember Me to Harlem retain the same literary traits that endeared Hughes in the 1920s to the African-American community and later to a broad, international readership: clear, unaffected language; imagery that vividly depicts the lifestyles and concerns of common, working-class people; subtle, witty, yet sharply pointed commentary on the oppression of African-Americans by racism, prejudice, and Jim Crow laws; and finally an enormous generosity of spirit that encompassed all people, and through which his prolific body of work has survived and continues to have a profound impact on students and scholars of African-American culture.

In addition to broadening our understanding of Hughes as a major figure in American literature, Remember Me to Harlem presents a portrait of a complex, interracial friendship that challenges easy assumptions about the role of white patronage in the African-American artistic communities. Van Vechten has often been represented as a shallow dilettante, a dabbler in the arts who "took up" African-American culture on a lark when black writers and Harlem enjoyed a brief vogue during the 1920s. Such a representation is not without some truth. Van Vechten's letters to Hughes read at times like the record of a paternalistic white man desperately seeking approval from his protégé, as when, for example, Van Vechten thanks Hughes in 1927 for defending Nigger Heaven in the Pittsburgh Courier: "Thanks for your paper (thanks a lot for what you say about me) which I think is superb. The situation is easy to explain: You and I are the only colored people who really love niggers" (46). Remember Me to Harlem makes clear, however, that Van Vechten's commitment both to Hughes's professional career and to the preservation of the papers and manuscripts of other African-American writers was a sincere, lifelong gesture. The letters provide a fascinating record of the instances in which Van Vechten facilitated the publication of Hughes's writings by introducing the young writer to some of the most important people in the publishing industry. Moreover, they serve as a progressive chronicle of the development of the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of American Negro Arts and Letters at Yale University, which Van Vechten established in 1941 through the donation of his own collection of African-American books, manuscripts, letters, and music. Van Vechten's foresight ensured that editions such as Remember Me to Harlem—the bulk of which is composed of letters housed
in the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection—would be possible.

*Remember Me to Harlem* marks a significant contribution to African-American literary studies and stands as an excellent model for future editions of the works of Hughes and Van Vechten. Bernard contributes to the important record of African-American art and culture with these letters for which she provides a brief but helpful contextual introduction and head notes and annotations that explain references to people and events that may be unfamiliar to general readers. The result is a book that admirably manages the difficult task of appealing both to scholarly and popular audiences.

**Notes**

2. Langston Hughes, “Poem,” *Crisis* 28 (August 1924), 163.