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All Trails Lead to Sterling:
How Sterling A. Brown Fathered the Field of Black Literary and Cultural Studies, 1936-1969

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

Amber Easter Gautier Zu-Bolton
B.A. University of New Orleans, 2011

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In memory of my father, Ahmos Zu-Bolton II (1948-2005)

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Abstract

Poet and professor Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989) played a significant role in the birth of black literary and cultural studies through his literary and academic careers. Brown helped to establish a new wave of black cultural and folklore studies during his time as the “Director of Negro Affairs” for the Federal Writers’ Project. As a professor at Howard University, Brown influenced black literary studies through his literary criticisms and seminars and his role as a mentor to literary figures of the next generations. Through letters to and from Sterling Brown and manuscripts, this thesis argues that Brown’s poetry, publications and folk studies in the 1920s and 1930s laid the groundwork for his most prolific role of teacher-mentor.

Howard University, Black Arts Movement, Federal Writers’ Project, The New Deal, African-American studies, African-American literature, Literary Nationalism

“His office should have been connected to the Smithsonian Museum. It was filled with papers, folders, books and record albums. One could stand in the doorway and believe it was the gateway or portal to the black experience.”¹

---E. Ethelbert Miller, 2005

Introduction

On the Howard University Library website, the online library catalog system is named *Sterling*. This system gives access to the holdings at Howard University’s three libraries and to a number of databases, e-journals and other vital research documents. Simply put, *Sterling* is where students go to gain access to almost all the research tools available on campus. This search tool is named after poet, essayist, and longtime Howard University professor Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989). Sterling Brown served as a real-life database for many students at Howard University. Brown’s seminars and discussion sessions, often held at his Washington, DC home, neighborhood barber shops and other places outside of the classroom focused on African-American culture, history, music, literature and politics. These discussions were attended by literary and political figures such as Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), A.B. Spellman, and Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael). Baraka and Spellman became leaders in the Black Arts Movement. The Black Arts Movement was the cultural and artistic arm of the Black Power Movement. In a 1968 essay in *The Drama Review*, Larry Neal described the Black Arts and Black Power movements as “...the relationship between art and politics” and “the art of politics,” respectively. Baraka and Spellman were directly

¹ E. Ethelbert Miller, “On Sterling Brown,” *Beltway: A Poetry Quarterly* (2005): 12.

influenced by Sterling Brown through his poetry and music criticisms.² In his autobiography, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, Baraka credits Sterling Brown for showing "... [black] music could be studied and, by implication, that black people had a history. He was raising the music as an art, a thing for scholarship and research as well as deep enjoyment."³ In addition to his influence on the next generation of scholars and writers, Sterling Brown also played a role in the careers and scholarship of his literary colleagues such as Richard Wright, Marcus B. Christian, and James Baldwin. This essay will examine Sterling Brown's folklore studies in the 1930s and his role as Director of Negro Affairs for the Federal Writers' Project and demonstrate how they shaped his role as teacher-mentor at Howard University.

"Am I in the book?"⁴

The 1960s and 1970s saw an increase in ethnic and multi-cultural studies. The first Black Studies department was created in 1968 at San Francisco State University, and along with the Black Arts Movement came a rise in interest in black literature. A number of publications began, including the black literary journals *Callaloo* and the *Negro American Literature Forum*, along with numerous anthologies of American poetry expanding to include the work of black writers. In the 1970s, Sterling Brown became a popular topic in black literary and cultural studies. In 1984, Brown was named Poet Laureate for Washington, DC. At the time of his death, only one book had been published celebrating and analyzing his work. Joanne Gabbin published *Sterling Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*

² Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 12, no 4 (Summer 1968):29.

³ Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984), 109-110.

⁴ Before the publication of Joanne Gabbin's *Sterling Brown Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition* Sterling Brown asked Gabbin, "Am I in the book?" Joanne Gabbin, *Sterling Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1985), xvi.

(1985), five years before Brown died. Gabbin saw Sterling Brown's work as absent from the mainstream of critical discourse. *Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition* places Brown in the center of American, not just African-American, literary and cultural history. Gabbin provides biographical information including Brown's upbringing and its relation to his work.

Gabbins's work examines Brown's expertise on speech, folk rhythms, black vernacular and the memory of another tongue. *Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*, however, serves primarily as literary analysis of the oral tradition and vernacular spirit of Brown's poetry.

In *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics and the Poetry of Sterling A. Brown* (1999)⁵, Mark Sanders makes the argument that the poetry of Sterling Brown and the way he studied art are vital in understanding African American art and politics of the early twentieth century. Sterling Brown was a folklorist and critic who saw the New Negro era as the birth of African American modernity. In *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics*, Sanders discusses three collections of Brown's poetry. Sanders studies the ways in which Brown uses history in his work to redefine African American identity. By the time of Sanders's 1999 publication, dozens of articles featured in academic and literary journals praised Brown for his influence on black literary and cultural studies, including "And I Owe it All to Sterling: The Theory and Practice of Black Literary Studies,"⁶ "Sterling Brown: Maker of Community in Academia,"⁷ and Eugenia Collier's "Sterling's Way."⁸ It would be ten years before another major

⁵ Mark Sanders, *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics and the Poetry of Sterling A. Brown* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999).

⁶ Fahamisha Patricia Brown. "And I Owe it All to Sterling Brown: The Theory and Practice of Black Literary Studies," *African American Review* 31, no.3 (Autumn 1997): 449-453.

⁷ Joyce Camper, "Sterling Brown: Maker of Community in Academia," *African-American Review* 31, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 437-441.

⁸ Eugenia Collier, "Sterling's Way," *Callaloo* 21, no. 4. (Autumn 1998): 884-887.

publication on Brown was released. John Edgar Tidwell and Steven Tracy, both literary scholars in the Afro-American Studies department at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, published *After Winter: The Art and Life of Sterling Brown* (2009). The two scholars offered biographical information on Brown but also included an annotated bibliography and offer methods in which to teach Sterling Brown's poetry. These three major publications on Sterling Brown, his life and his career are all written by English professors and writers. Sterling Brown was a poet, professor of English and literary and cultural critic; it follows that scholars of literature would be at the forefront of writings about him.

Brown was also the subject of allegations of being a Communist sympathizer. In William J. Maxwell's *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*, an in-depth look is taken at government surveillance of prominent African American literary and cultural figures. Maxwell calls the FBI files, "the nation's highest medal of radical honor."⁹ Brown, shared this honor with many of his friends and colleagues, including Richard Wright, Alain Locke and James Baldwin. Students and mentees of his who were prominent in the Black Arts and Civil Rights Movements, including Amiri Baraka, A.B. Spellman and Stokely Carmichael also were the subject of extensive dossiers. The surveillance records of Brown and his many students point to the radical education that Brown fostered among those he mentored—so "radical" that he was the subject of FBI investigation. This thesis, however, takes a different frame in its consideration of Brown's significance, by focusing closely on his professional experience

⁹ William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 59.

and development as a teacher and historian and how that experience made him such an important light for young people fighting racism and segregation.

In James Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, Brown is identified as "quite possibly the most significant black literary figure in the United States during the second half of the 1930s."¹⁰ This research will identify the factors that made Brown a significant literary figure well past the 1930s and through the Civil Rights Movement and the 1960s and discuss Sterling Brown the poet, professor and literary figure while simultaneously identifying the historical factors that influenced Brown's rediscovery.

A New Negro

Sterling Brown was born in 1901 into what according to Michael Thelwell, "has been called the 'smug' or even 'affected' respectability of Washington, DC's African American middle class."¹¹ Brown grew up in segregated Washington, DC, the son of Reverend Sterling N. Brown, a distinguished pastor and professor at the Howard University School of Divinity. After graduating from Dunbar High School in 1918, Brown attended Williams College and later received his master's degree in English from Harvard University. He did not, however, use his Ivy League training to put himself in a different category than his black peers. In a 1980 interview, Brown proclaimed that "More niggers have been ruined by Harvard than by bad gin! Ralph Bunche and I had a thesis that every nigger that went to Harvard was crazy,

¹⁰ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 109.

¹¹ William Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, eds., *Oxford Companion to African-American Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 105.

starting with Bunche and with Brown.”¹² Although Brown was born into a middle-class black environment and was Ivy League educated, he was not interested in becoming a part of the black bourgeoisie.

Instead of embracing his middle-class roots, Sterling Brown decided to explore the artistic merit in black folk life and language. His path was influenced by his experience teaching at Virginia Seminary and College (1923-1926), Lincoln University in Missouri (1926-1928), and Fisk University (1928-1929).¹³ At each of these universities, Brown began to find the various cultural and aesthetic influences that would define the folk-based philosophy in his art. This is also where he first connected the study of folklore with his passion for his students. During his time at Lincoln University, he formed special relationships with his students. Brown allowed one student, Buckner-- known as “Buck,” -- to come to his house to help with chores. Buck used the money he made helping his professor to pay for school. The student also worked nights at a hotel. When he would come by on the weekends, he would cook for Brown and Brown’s wife, Daisy. Buck would cook huge, hearty meals that included porkchops, potatoes, and cabbage. Brown soon realized that purchasing food for Buck to cook, might have other benefits. Buck would invite friends, also students of Brown’s, and of course the extra food would be offered to the students so it wouldn’t go to waste. Although Brown acknowledged that it was getting expensive to keep hosting the students, he felt, “they couldn’t eat a man’s porkchops on Saturday mornings and flunk his test on Monday. So they even tried to master Emerson’s *Nature* and Shelley’s

¹²John Edgar Tidwell and John S. Wright, “Steady and Unaccusing: An Interview with Sterling Brown,” *Callaloo* 2, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 813.

¹³Andrews, *Oxford Companion* ,105.

“Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.”¹⁴ Not only was Brown creating a space to get his students more connected to his courses but, these informal, intimate meetings also gave Brown an opportunity to study a cast of characters from the South and Midwest. The motley crew included Buck, a student named Abe Lincoln, a football star Roba “Fats” Green and a dropout who continued to hang around, named Nathaniel Sweets. The students would come over to eat, listen to music on Brown’s portable phonograph and talk about blues and jazz. They listened to Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington and the students taught Brown about blues singer Ma Rainey and Louis Armstrong.¹⁵ Brown would hear stories about working on railroad gangs, witnessing lynchings and about people that the students had come across in their lives. Buck frequently talked about Slim Greer, a co-worker at the hotel, whose tall tales mixed with oral histories became the basis for a character who would appear in Brown’s future poetry. In the 1920s, Sterling Brown also traveled throughout Virginia studying black people. His first published poems featured in *Opportunity* magazine in the 1920s were often portrayals of the rural black people he met in Virginia and the folklore he learned from his students.

In the introduction to Brown’s collection *Southern Road* (1932) , James Weldon Johnson, writer and former leader in the NAACP, wrote, Brown “has made more than mere transcriptions of folk poetry, and he has done more than bring to it mere artistry; he has deepened its meaning and multiplied its implications.”¹⁶ Sterling Brown’s background in folklore studies and interaction with his students, prepared him for his future work with the

¹⁴ John Edgar Tidwell, Mark A. Sanders, eds., *Sterling A. Brown’s A Negro Looks at the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 37.

¹⁵ Ibid 38

¹⁶ Sterling Brown, *Southern Road* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co,1932).

Federal Writers' Project and gave him a distinctive perspective on rural black people throughout the South.

The Harlem Renaissance, or the New Negro Renaissance¹⁷ as it was known at the time, was a cultural and artistic movement in which black writers and visual artists became productive and widely appreciated. Sterling Brown's earliest work was featured in *Opportunity*, a journal that boasted publications from many leading Harlem Renaissance figures, although Brown is not usually considered a part of this movement. In fact, his work has been seen as signaling the end of this movement. In *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Radical" Self*, Henry Louis Gates suggests that "Brown's *Southern Road*, even more profoundly than the market crash of 1929, truly ended the Harlem Renaissance, primarily because it contained a new and distinctly black poetic diction and not merely the vapid and pathetic claim for one."¹⁸ Brown, who is often left out of the discussion of the Harlem Renaissance, published poems throughout the late 1920s but he very much represents the New Negro Movement. He listened to black speech and immersed himself in the lore and legends of black folklore. Brown may be left out of the Harlem Renaissance conversation because his publication *Southern Road* had a greater impact on the 1930s, which was considered the post-Renaissance years.

In a 1974 essay, "From one 'New Negro' to Another" featured in *Black Poetry in America*, Blyden Jackson writes, "Culturally Brown's poetry is poetry of and for the New Negro." The New Negro Renaissance ended with the Great Depression in the early 1930s.

¹⁷ I will use the term "New Negro Renaissance"

¹⁸ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Radical" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 227.

The Depression had affected black literature as much as the economy. W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out that "...it had greatly slowed up his [the American Negro] literary and artistic output." Sterling Brown's 1932 *Southern Road* was considered by Du Bois as the only thing "worthwhile in poetry" at the time.¹⁹

Director of Negro Affairs

The Great Depression of the 1930s created the need for many government programs. President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the New Deal as a series of programs to aid Americans. Many work programs were implemented to help the large number of unemployed Americans. One economic program put in place during the second New Deal (1935-1938) was the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The Federal Writers Project (FWP) was a program within the WPA which employed teachers, journalists, photographers, librarians and others trained in research, writing and editing to prepare guidebooks to all states and some large American cities.

Although Congress supported the funding of WPA relief projects in order to fulfill an economic need, FWP officials took this as an opportunity to begin research in American culture. The FWP published guidebooks for every state in the United States and conducted interviews with factory workers, farmers, members of ethnic minorities and former slaves.²⁰ As the National Director, journalist Henry Alsberg led the FWP to change the idea of American identity by embracing the nation's diversity.

¹⁹ Letter from W.E.B. DuBois, Atlanta, GA to Mrs. E.R. Mathews, Honolulu, HI, December, 14, 1934. W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

²⁰ Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 7.

From 1936 to 1940, Brown served as the editor on Negro Affairs for the Federal Writers' Project. In this position, Brown offered a wide knowledge of literature and American folklore, in addition to his interest in American history and culture. His position as editor was one of few professional leadership positions available to blacks under the New Deal. Ralph Bunche, chair of the political science department at Howard University and Robert Weaver, member of Franklin Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet"²¹ had insisted that "a black person knowledgeable in literary criticism and history be appointed at the national level to look out for black affairs."²² That person was Sterling Brown. Originally, Federal Writers' Project director Henry G. Alsberg had planned a separate section entitled "Negro Culture in America" in a five-volume *American Guide*, but after meeting with scholars, James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke, that plan changed. The meeting took place at Howard University and with the help of Johnson and Locke, it was decided that instead of this single contribution, an essay on black history and folklore would be included in each state guidebook.

Brown worked to create new standards for the facilitation of the interviews with former slaves. With the help of the Benjamin Botkin, Folklore Editor, Brown was about to revolutionize the manner in which the interviewers would ask questions. In doing so, Brown was able to get interviewers to get the former slaves to reveal issues rarely collected from

²¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed a number of black leaders to advise him on matters in the black community. They came to be known as the "Black Cabinet" and included Mary McLeod Bethune and Robert Weaver who was a special assistant to the Administrator of the United States Housing Authority. See B. Joyce Ross, "Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Youth Administration: A Case Study of Power Relationships in the Black Cabinet of Franklin D. Roosevelt," *The Journal of Negro History* 60, no. 1, (January, 1975) 1-28.

²² Joanne Gabbin, *Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*, 67.

their perspective.²³ Interviewers, often Southern and white, were putting in their own words and descriptions in such as “darky,” “nigger,” or “comical little old black woman.” Brown argued that the interviewer should try his or her best to report the interviews word for word and to only use these words if the interviewee actually used them.²⁴ He didn’t stop there. Brown also worked to ensure that blacks were given realistically portrayed in the state guidebooks. In the Alabama state guidebook, an early version highlighted Octavius Roy Cohen, a white author and editor for the Birmingham *Ledger* who published comical stories about black life. Brown disputed this part of the book and made the argument that Cohen should not be considered an expert on black life in Alabama.²⁵ In the final version, Cohen is featured but with a note that “There is, however, much minstrel exaggeration in [Cohen’s] presentation of characters, and the dialect does not always conform to the Negro’s speech.”²⁶

In some cases, Brown had to deal with differences between what the officials in Washington wanted versus what the local Federal Writers wanted. Brown traveled around the country addressing discriminatory hiring practices, and in one case Oklahoma writers’ refusing to share a water fountain with blacks.²⁷

Brown created a lot of contention with many of the state directors. Alabama state director, Myrtle Miles complained that giving blacks a bigger place in the state guidebooks was unfair because, “he [the Negro] simply comprises a part of the laboring class and has

²³ Gabbin, *Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*, 72.

²⁴ Sterling Brown “Notes by an editor on dialect usage in account by interviews with ex-slaves,” Date unknown, Federal Writers’ Project Negro Affairs, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²⁵ Sterling Brown, “Alabama: Birmingham, “May 28, 1937. Federal Writers’ Project Negro Affairs, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²⁶ Federal Writers’ Project, *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South* (New York: Hastings House, 1941), 133.

²⁷ Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935-1943* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), 258.

contributed nothing to the city's culture or beauty."²⁸ Miles became one of Brown's biggest critics. She deemed him biased and that he had no knowledge of the facts. The state director also proclaimed that, "Alabamians understand the Alabama Negro and the general Negro situation in Alabama better than a critic whose life has been spent in a another section of the country, however studious, however learned he may be."²⁹ Brown also ran into trouble in South Carolina when Mabel Montgomery, state director for the project, refused to hire black interviewers.³⁰ In the South Carolina guidebook, Brown fought the "picturesque" depictions of the South. In a 1937 letter to Alsberg he argued that "half-truth is not enough, however picturesque."³¹

In addition to acting as a national director, Brown also made a contribution to one of the guidebooks. Brown was involved in writing the guidebook, *Washington: City and Capital* (1937), which featured his essay "The Negro in Washington." Joanne Gabbin hails this essay "an assessment and indictment of the plight of blacks in Washington....Brown's master stroke of social criticism."³² By telling the story of black life in Washington, DC, Brown was able identify the dichotomy of his hometown. Brown compared the peculiar co-existence of the idea of freedom and justice as expressed by the capitol and the disappointing reality of life for blacks in Washington. Brown wrote, "In this border city, Southern in so

²⁸ Myrtle Miles to George Cronyn, October 4, 1937. Federal Writers' Project, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division, Washington, DC.

²⁹ Myrtle Miles to Henry Alsberg, August 10, 1937. Federal Writers' Projects, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division, Washington, DC.

³⁰ Sterling Brown, "Report from the Editor on Negro Affairs," February 1937, Letters from State Directors, FWP-National Archives, Record 69.

³¹ Sterling Brown to Henry Alsberg, May 14, 1937, Box 201, FWP-National Archives.

³² Gabbin, *Sterling Brown*, 81.

many respects, there is a denial of democracy, at times hypocritical and at times flagrant.”³³ He went on to chronicle the role and status of blacks in Washington beginning with the pre-Civil War era, including black mathematician Benjamin Banneker, who was appointed by George Washington to survey and lay out the city.³⁴ Brown also pointed out that Washington was a major site for the domestic slave trade and although there was a development of the black professional class during Reconstruction, the disenfranchisement of the District in 1874 greatly impacted the black population. Even after highlighting the accomplishments of Howard University as the “capstone of Negro education,” Brown ended with the stark reality that, “the Negro in Washington has no voice in government is economically prescribed and segregated as rigidly as in the southern cities he condemns.”³⁵

In April 1939, Representative Frank Keefe, a Republican from Wisconsin, charged the central office of WPA with allowing “communistic writers,” using the FWP “for circulating libel” into the Washington Guide.³⁶ The libel in question referred to Brown writing in the guidebook the story about George Washington Parke Custis, foster son of President George Washington and father-in-law of Robert E. Lee. Through original research, with his research assistants, Brown discovered that Custis had a black daughter to whom he had left land. The portion was removed from the guidebook and Sterling Brown found himself the object of FBI scrutiny for the next five years.³⁷

³³ Sterling Brown, “The Negro in Washington,” *Washington: City and Capital* (Washington, DC, US Government Printing Office, 1937), 90

³⁴ *Ibid* 68

³⁵ *Ibid* 89

³⁶ “House Member Threatens To Fight Writers’ Project” *Evening Star*, Washington, DC, April 9, 1939.

³⁷ Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 66, 140.

In the capacity of Editor of Negro Affairs for the Federal Writers' Project, Brown oversaw nearly everything written about blacks in America. Based on his background in the folk life of Virginia, Brown wrote a significant portion of *The Negro in Virginia* (1940). In 1941 Brown edited, along with Ulysses Lee and Arthur P. Davis, *The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes*. This anthology became the model for bringing together songs, folktales, and written literature in a comprehensive collection. As editor, Brown promoted the study of black history and folklore. In addition to his editorial duties, the FWP had Brown to organize the inventory of historical manuscripts about blacks as a part of the WPA Historical Records Survey.³⁸

Sterling Brown was also responsible for keeping track of the number of blacks employed with the FWP. In a 1937 report, the estimated number of blacks employed was about 2 percent of the total workers nationwide. As editor, Brown came in contact with many prominent black activists and artists. Many of these people served as consultants on the project including Mary McLeod Bethune in Florida and Horace Mann Bond in Louisiana.³⁹ He also reached out to historian Carter G. Woodson to serve as an advisor for the project. Woodson agreed to give all the assistance he could but only in an unofficial manner because he could not give all of his time so he did not want his name to be associated with the project.⁴⁰

³⁸ Gabbin, *Sterling Brown*, 70.

³⁹ Gabbin, *Sterling Brown*, 72.

⁴⁰ Woodson also warned Brown of using his name because he did not feel that government agencies agreed with the work of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and that he may be considered a "dangerous Negro". Letter from Carter G. Woodson. Washington, DC to Sterling Brown, Washington, DC May 8, 1936, Box 6 Folder W Sterling Brown Collection, Moorland-Springarn Research Center-Manuscripts Division, Howard University

Brown worked with several black writers on the FWP including Richard Wright and Marcus B. Christian. Richard Wright worked with the Chicago Writers' Project beginning in 1936.⁴¹ In a May 1937 letter to Brown, Wright wrote, "...in the nature of asking a favor." Wright had decided to move to New York City and asked Brown if he could do something about getting him a job on the New York Writers' project.⁴² Whether Sterling put in a good word for him is unknown but Wright did eventually work with the New York Writers' Project. In Louisiana, a black writers' project was created on the campus of Dillard University. Writer Marcus B. Christian was appointed as the director of the Dillard Writers' Project and focused on researching the folklore and folk history of Louisiana.⁴³

Sterling Brown, along with Benjamin Botkin, the National Folklore Editor, sought out to alter the "contributions approach" that was used in the study of black culture and history. Brown and Botkin argued that this method of study put blacks in a group set apart from the life of white America, which reinforced the idea of separateness. Brown discussed that Federal Writers' Project treatment of blacks in this manner, "Many Negro historians believe that what is called Negro history should be approached as the history of the Negro in America, not as a separate entity. They insist that the Negro has been an integral part of American life, however grudgingly received, a participant quite as much a contributor."⁴⁴

Brown's commitment to spreading black culture, literary and otherwise, was not just confined to the United States. In 1941, he was appointed to the Advisory Board of the

⁴¹ Gabbin. *Sterling Brown*, 71.

⁴² Letter from Richard Wright, Chicago, IL to Sterling Brown, Washington, DC May 20, 1937, Box 16 Folder W, Sterling Brown Collection, Moorland-Springarn Research Center-Manuscripts Division, Howard University.

⁴³ Jerah Johnson, "Marcus B. Christian and the WPA History of Black People in Louisiana," *Louisiana History; The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 20, no 1. (Winter 1979) 113.

⁴⁴ Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, Ulysses Lee, eds., *The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes* (New York: Dryden Press, 1941) 825-826

Council of Inter-American Relations and was part of an effort that included a book drive. The book drive called for books on the “culture of the American Negro for presentation to libraries in Latin America.” Brown was joined on the board by the likes of Lincoln University president Horace Mann Bond, Howard University history professor Rayford Logan and acclaimed visual artist Hale Woodruff.⁴⁵

Brown had much success as a guest lecturer at colleges and universities around the country. In the fall of 1942, he gave a lecture called, “The Negro in American Culture” at Alcorn A&M College (now Alcorn State University).⁴⁶ Brown was constantly invited to literary and arts festivals. In 1952 he was invited to be part of the dedication of the Charles Waddell Chesnutt Collection at Fisk University’s 23rd Annual Festival of Music and Art.⁴⁷

The Howard Years

Despite his work as a writer, journalist, critic and folklorist, Sterling Brown considered himself first and foremost a teacher. As a professor at Howard University, Brown taught hundreds of students and was a pioneer in making changes to the curriculum that led to an increased appreciation and study of vernacular of American and African-American art forms. At the time, Howard University was at the forefront of black education. Located in Washington, DC—the “uncrowned capital of black society”—Howard was a premier institution of higher learning.⁴⁸ Founded in 1867 for the newly freedmen, and by the mid-twentieth century, Howard was producing a number of notable figures including writers Paul

⁴⁵ “Concert to Open Drive For Books on Negro For Latin America,” *Evening Star*, May 23, 1941.

⁴⁶ “Sterling A. Brown Lectures at Alcorn,” *The Mississippi Enterprise*, November 14, 1942.

⁴⁷ “Fisk University Sets Annual Music and Art Festival,” *Jackson Advocate*, March 29, 1952.

⁴⁸ Jeffery C. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Laurence Dunbar and Zora Neale Hurston. The university also boasted a talented and respected faculty including biologist Ernest Just, historian Carter G. Woodson and father of the Harlem Renaissance Alain Locke. Sterling Brown joined the faculty at Howard in 1929, with the help of Locke, his mentor. Brown stayed on faculty at Howard throughout his time with the Federal Writers' Project and while touring the South promoting *Southern Road*. It was at Howard where he made a home and as a writer and scholar.

The Black Power Movement of the 1960s ignited a demand for departments dedicated to the study of black history and culture.⁴⁹ Sterling Brown's work helped to create and develop African-American studies programs throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In a 1969 letter, Brown was approached by Edward Brown of Syracuse University to help with the development of an Afro-American Studies program at the university. Northwestern University professor and historian Sterling Stuckey had recommended that Edward Brown reach out to Sterling Brown because he was, "an excellent resource person in the field of Afro-American studies, especially in Afro-American folklore."⁵⁰

Beginning in the 1960s, many scholars and artists had been motivated by the revived Civil Rights Movement. One example of this renewal is the Black Student Movement of 1960 after four North Carolina A&T students staged a sit-in to integrate the Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth's lunch counter. Professors and artists of this generation of radicals on the campuses of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) helped to

⁴⁹ The first Black Studies department was established at San Francisco State University in 1969 after the Black Student Union led a strike and presented a 10-point plan. See T'Shaka, Oba. "The San Francisco State Strike, A Study of the First Black Studies Strike in the United States," *Journal of Black Studies* 1, no.1 (Summer 1982):15-23.

⁵⁰ Letter from Edward Brown, Syracuse, NY to Sterling Brown, Washington, DC March 16, 1969. Box 14 Folder B, Sterling Brown Collection, Moorland-Springarn Research Center-Manuscripts Division, Howard University.

develop political and cultural activism that was crucial to the development of Black Arts and Black Power activism. Many leaders in the Black Arts Movement were mentored by radical professors at HBCUs. For Amiri Baraka and A.B. Spellman, that was Sterling Brown at Howard University.⁵¹ Baraka and Spellman in turn would become leading Black Arts artists promoting the notion of a black cultural continuum, including folk, popular and avant garde elements, which would provide the groundwork of the political liberation movement. Sterling Brown not only introduced African American culture as a subject of serious study, he also taught students about the Howard students of previous generations involved in grassroots activism.⁵²

In the late 1950s and 1960s the United States was confronted by a number of crises in domestic relations and foreign policy including desegregating schools and the war in Vietnam. In 1965, Howard's Board of Trustees unanimously approved a statement by President James Nabrit on academic freedom, freedom of speech, and student and faculty participation in University affairs. The statement also insisted that students who participated in civil protest and political activities did so as individual citizens and not as representatives of Howard University.⁵³ Many writers, including Amiri Baraka (known as LeRoi Jones at Howard University), Tom Dent (Morehouse College) and Larry Neal (Lincoln University), who attended historically black universities in the 1950s found what they felt

⁵¹ Smethurst. *The Black Arts Movement*, 329.

⁵² Ibid 330

⁵³ Howard University students participated in protest and demonstrations on campus and in the Washington area. Students picketed the construction of the new Men's Physical Education Building in the early 1960s because no black skilled workers were employed. Other students boycotted stores in Washington that refused to employ or serve blacks. See: Rayford Logan "International Activities and Civil Rights Movements," in *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867-1967*, (New York: New York University Press, 1969).

was a “cautious and accommodationist atmosphere.”⁵⁴ One example of that accommodationist nature was expressed in an essay published in *The Journal of Negro Education* at the beginning of the fall semester in 1960 by Howard President James Nabrit. Nabrit begins by proclaiming Howard as a “symbol of the inherent values in American democracy”. He went on to say that the university had been “nurtured and developed by the thoughtful care...of the federal government” and even denounced Communist China.⁵⁶

It was professors and mentors like Sterling Brown who encouraged students to become involved in the politics of civil and cultural movements. Brown also served as an advocate for students, particularly those involved in the Civil Rights Movements. In a July 1964 letter to President Nabrit, Brown urged Nabrit to meet with him to discuss the financial difficulties faced by students working for organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Numerous Howard University students, among whom are several of our best and most promising, are participating in the freedom movement in Mississippi and elsewhere...Because Howard University students have been prominent in the civil rights movement, we are concerned that they should not have to forfeit or cut short, or leave unrounded their education.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Smethurst. *The Black Arts Movement*, 329.

⁵⁵ For example, Baraka claims that Howard was like “an employment agency at best, at worst a kind of church...for a small accommodationist black middle class.” Baraka also complained that while he was at Howard “E. Franklin Frazier was on leave, [Alain] Locke had retired. Sterling Brown taught his best classes unofficially on his own time.” Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984)134.

⁵⁶ James M. Nabrit, Jr., “Howard University Looks to the Future.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 29, no. 4(Autumn, 1960) 412.

⁵⁷ Sterling Brown, Washington, D.C. to James M. Nabrit, Jr., Washington, D.C. July 31, 1964. Box 16 Folder B, Sterling Brown Collection, Moorland-Springarn Research Center-Manuscripts Division, Howard University.

Brown's concern was that while students were working for little or no money to engage in movements like SNCC's Summer Project, they would be unable to return to school because they could no longer afford it.⁵⁸

SNCC reached out to Sterling Brown in September of 1964 to participate in a series of institutes for civil rights workers. The purpose of these institutes was to "provide the kind of intensive study in the humanities and social sciences which will enable the civil rights worker to carry on his field activity with a deeper understanding of philosophical questions involved in his work..."⁵⁹ The SNCC Education Committee wanted Brown to serve as an advisor and visiting teacher in black culture for a few days as a part of the month-long sessions.

The social and political climate on Howard's campus, along with Sterling Brown's academic activism, is what provided intersecting spheres of black politics, education, and art and arguably served as the inspiration for the period of literary nationalism known as the Black Arts Movement. The climate on campus was changing, in the fall of 1966, Howard students elected their first homecoming queen with an afro hairstyle; signaling that students were ready for a change.⁶⁰ By the spring of 1968, Howard students had many concerns that were unanswered and felt that the University, with majority white trustees, did not reflect the needs of black students. On March 19, 1968, a group that grew to almost a thousand students, took over the Administration building and staged a sit-in in the office of university President Nabrit. The students called for Nabrit's resignation, a stronger voice in academic affairs, and

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Carole E. Merritt, Atlanta, Georgia to Sterling Brown, Washington, DC. September 22, 1964. Box 16 Folder S, Sterling Brown Collection, Moorland-Springarn Research Center-Manuscripts Division, Howard University.

⁶⁰ Ibram X. Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstruction of Higher Education, 1965-1972*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012):72.

a more culturally relevant curriculum. The university shut down and the negotiation standoff lasted until March 23rd. Nabrit refused to resign but he did make compromises regarding student affairs. As a result of the five-day protest, the university announced that a conference, entitled “Towards a Black University,” conference to be held later that year to discuss changes in the culture and curriculum. The national conference, was held in November of 1968. By this time, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, had been assassinated and riots had ripped through many urban centers, including Washington, DC. The conference which included a “Sterling Brown Night” of poetry, was attended by writer-activists Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez and Maulauna Karenga.⁶¹ Stokely Carmichael, a former student of Brown, proclaimed during the conference, “you’ve got to quit talking and start acting.”⁶²

What Brown taught *outside* of the classroom was for many their first time learning about African American folklore and literature.⁶³ Howard University, known then as “the Capstone of Negro Education,” offered only one course in African American literature and it was seldom offered and no black authors were included in American literature or humanities courses.⁶⁴ One group of students who benefited from Brown’s seminars and discussion outside of the classroom was the group of writers and political activists who published the journal *Dasein*.⁶⁵ This group of students included such political activists in the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG) as Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Charlie Cobb, and Michael

⁶¹ Karenga is widely known as the creator of the Kwanzaa holiday, a Pan-African alternative to Christmas.

⁶² Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement*, 128.

⁶³ Writer Eugenia Collier had the following to say about her background in African American studies. “In the segregated schools of Baltimore, we were taught precious little about our black heritage except during Negro History Week. For five days we learned about Phyllis Wheatley, Booker T. Washington, Paul Laurence Dunbar, George Washington Carver, and Langston Hughes... We never read slave narratives, Du Bois, Harper, McKay, Walker, Hurston, Wright-or Sterling Brown.” Eugenia Collier, “Sterling’s Way.” *Callaloo* 24, no. 4, Sterling Brown: A Special Issue (Autumn, 1998) 884.

⁶⁴ Collier, “Sterling’s Way,” 885.

⁶⁵ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 334.

Thelwell. Many of these students, like Carmichael and Cobb, went on to become leaders in SNCC. *Dasein*, which began at Howard in 1961, was a quarterly journal dedicated to publishing poetry, fiction and drama. Sterling Brown served as a member of the advisory board and also contributed work to the journal.

Brown's reputation for acting as a mentor to students was well known outside of Howard University's campus. In a 1938 letter from the Scribia Writers Club at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, Brown was invited to give a lecture for the members. The letter that boasted previous speakers such as Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson, specifically mentions Brown's "informal gatherings" and how the Tougaloo students have read his poetry and criticisms.⁶⁶ Brown was called upon by various sources to help in matters literary, historical, cultural and even personal. Writer James Baldwin, who had already published *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953), and *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), reached out to Brown in May of 1960. Baldwin wrote to his friend Sterling Brown to seek help getting information for an article for *Mademoiselle* magazine. Baldwin had been in Florida, without any luck looking for information about a student strike and multiple fires on the campus of Florida A&M University, so he reached out to Brown for any information or possible leads. Baldwin wasn't going to Brown for literary advice, but instead was approaching him as a person with a wealth of cultural knowledge that spanned beyond poetry and prose.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Tougaloo College Scribia Club, Tougaloo, Mississippi to Sterling Brown, Washington, D.C. December 20, 1938. Box 10 Folder T, Sterling Brown Collection, Moorland-Springarn Research Center-Manuscripts Division, Howard University.

⁶⁷ James Baldwin, Atlanta, Georgia to Sterling Brown, Washington, DC May 31, 1960. Box 16 Folder B, Sterling Brown Collection, Moorland-Springarn Research Center-Manuscripts Division, Howard University.

Brown was asked at various times to serve as cultural historian for several different projects. As a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Brown was approached about contributing a history of the organization. In a letter dated March 15, 1938, Albert Dent, Grand Basileus of Omega Psi Phi, wrote to Brown about serving on the Board of Editors for a publication that would chronicle the fraternity.⁶⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois also sought out Brown to write entries for the *Encyclopedia of the Negro*.⁶⁹

‘I’ve been rediscovered, reinstated, regenerated and recovered...’⁷⁰

Sterling Brown examined the black presence in American literature long before it was popular. Some have argued that Brown's classroom practices, as well as his practice of inviting his students to his home for "field study," was at the basis of this early cultural criticism. Brown's students, many of whom would go on to become prominent literary figures, expressed their appreciation for Brown through their literary work, scholarship and as teachers themselves. Literary critic and cultural scholar Kimberley W. Benston believes that "...at the Kearney St. house of the Howard years and untold lecture halls, libraries, community centers, and street corners in between, Sterling Brown created ritual spaces of vibrant African-American discourse where the boundaries of formal and vernacular expression were crossed and recrossed...."⁷¹

⁶⁸ Albert Dent, New Orleans, LA to Sterling Brown, Washington, DC March 15, 1938. Box 16 Folder D, Sterling Brown Collection, Moorland-Springarn Research Center-Manuscripts Division, Howard University.

⁶⁹ W.E.B. DuBois Atlanta, GA to Sterling Brown, Washington, DC November 1. 1935. Box 16 Folder D, Sterling Brown Collection, Moorland-Springarn Research Center-Manuscripts Division, Howard University.

⁷⁰ "Interview with Sterling Brown "Grace Cavalieri, Washington, DC. 1977.

⁷¹ Kimberley W. Benston, "Listen Br'er Sterling: The Critic as Liar / A Pre(r)amble to Essays on Sterling Brown," *Callaloo* 21, no. 4, Sterling A. Brown: A Special Issue (Autumn, 1998): 845

At Howard University, Brown became the literary, academic and cultural center of the campus. Brown made connections between that which was academic and non-academic. Many scholars like Benston have argued that their lives as scholars of African American literature and criticism, as well as writers of Africa and other parts of the Diaspora, would be much more difficult without the work of Sterling Brown as their foundation. Benston declared that, “Anyone interested in the future of African-American literary and cultural understanding must trust so, as a store of discursive and methodological wisdom remains lodged in the memories, tapes, and inscriptions of Sterling Brown's public presentations, extemporaneous tutorials, and other teacherly ‘rambles.’”⁷²

In 1969, when Sterling Brown retired from Howard University after forty years, his exit was a quiet one. There is no evidence that there was any event or acknowledgment to mark the transition a special. However, soon after his retirement, he became a “rediscovered” poet, the center of many poetry readings, lectures, and tributes, and was presented with several honorary degrees.⁷³ Howard University bestowed an honorary doctorate upon Brown at the 1971 commencement, along with Duke Ellington.⁷⁴ Even after retirement, his home remained a gathering place for students, friends and colleagues like Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, and Haki Madhubuti (then Don Lee).⁷⁵ After the Institute for the Arts and Humanities’ April 1973 writers’ conference, a gathering of poets assembled at the Brown house. Publisher Dudley Randall recalled one evening where three generations of poets were

⁷² Kimberly Benston, “Listen Br’er Sterling,” 845.

⁷³ John Edgar Tidwell, John S. Wright and Sterling Brown. “Steady and Unaccusing: An Interview with Sterling Brown” *Callaloo*, 21, no. 4, (Autumn, 1998): 810.

⁷⁴ See appendix

⁷⁵ Joyce Camper, “Sterling Brown,” 440.

at the Brown's house. Sterling Brown prepared the way for the resurgence of interest in Black Literature Studies since the 1970s. Before many scholars recognized Black Studies as a legitimate field, Brown taught the first courses in Black Literature at Howard University and as a visiting professor at Atlanta University, Vassar College and New York University.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Beginning in the 1960s, Sterling Brown has become the father figure of African-American literature in many circles. A number of artists and scholars, including E. Ethelbert Miller, Ahmos Zu-Bolton, and Michael Thelwell from succeeding generations gathered about him and made him a part of their own careers. Beginning in the 1980s, there was a variety of growing popular and scholarly interest in Sterling Brown. At the 1981 meeting of the Modern Language Association, tribute was paid to Sterling Brown for his many years of service as a "man of literature."⁷⁷ A *Black World* special issue in 1970 and Michael Harper and Robert Stepto's 1979 *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship* became the first of several anthologies and journal special issues dedicated to Brown. When Brown died in 1989, poet Ahmos Zu-Bolton held a tribute at his bookstore, Copastetic Community Book Center, in New Orleans. The night featured poets, playwrights and artist-activists who had been influenced by Brown's work and mentorship.⁷⁸ Zu-Bolton

⁷⁶ In a 1937 letter from John P. Whittaker, Registrar of Atlanta University, Whittaker outlines the course Sterling Brown will teach at the University in the summer of 1937. These courses included American Poetry and Prose of Negro Life. Box 16, Folder D, Sterling Brown Collection, Moorland-Springarn Research Center-Manuscripts Division, Howard University.

⁷⁷ Steady and Unaccusing, 811.

⁷⁸ See Appendix.

met Brown in the early seventies, after Brown's retirement from Howard University, while he was still a figure on campus and still mentoring students and young writers alike. Sterling Brown is often quoted as saying. "My legacy is my students" or "my audience has been the classroom."⁷⁹ This supports the argument that Brown sits at the forefront of black literary and cultural studies and that it is through his art and his scholarship that he influenced writers, historians, and critics inside and outside of the classroom. In an interview with John Edgar Tidwell and John S. Wright, Brown said, "I have reached more critics and writers and intelligent kids, more than anybody else, more than [Alain] Locke. Right behind up there. [Pointing] All those books up there are signed by critics, writers, and novelists....but I don't let you be too serious, but I'm teaching like Mark Twain, with anecdotes."⁸⁰ Through his early folklore studies and work with the Federal Writers' Project, Sterling Brown was able to travel and observe black life in various locales. He drew on this experience in writing his poetry and his teaching to lay the foundation for black literary and cultural studies since the 1930s. In a 1977 interview with writer Grace Cavalieri, Brown admitted that he never thought he was a superior teacher but after retiring, the amount of calls, visits, letters and dedications he received made him realize it was a success. Sterling Brown was a poet, writer, folklorist and critic of the nineteen twenties and thirties but all trails lead to Sterling Brown's most prolific work being that of a teacher-mentor.

⁷⁹ Benston. "Listen Br'er Sterling," 839.

⁸⁰ John Edgar Tidwell, John S. Wright and Sterling Brown. "Steady and Unaccusing: An Interview with Sterling Brown: 814-815.

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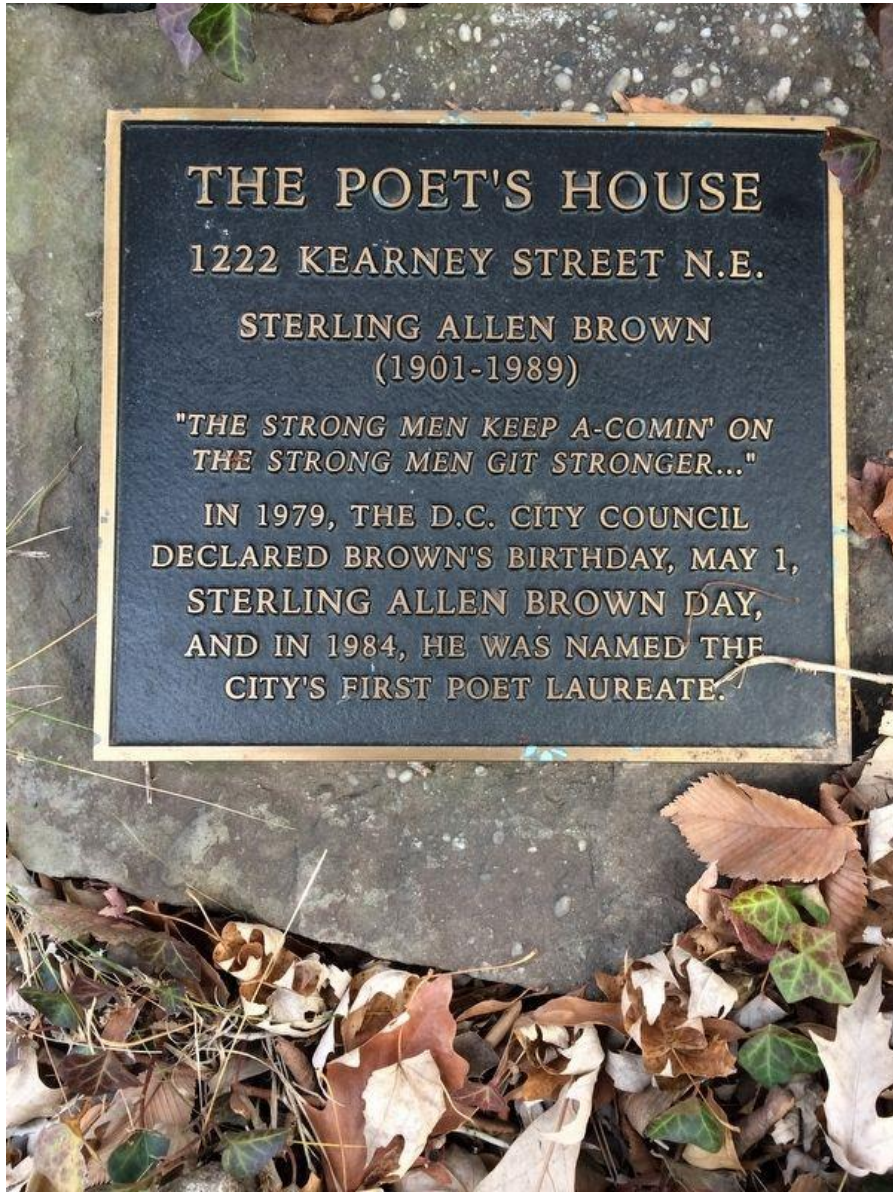
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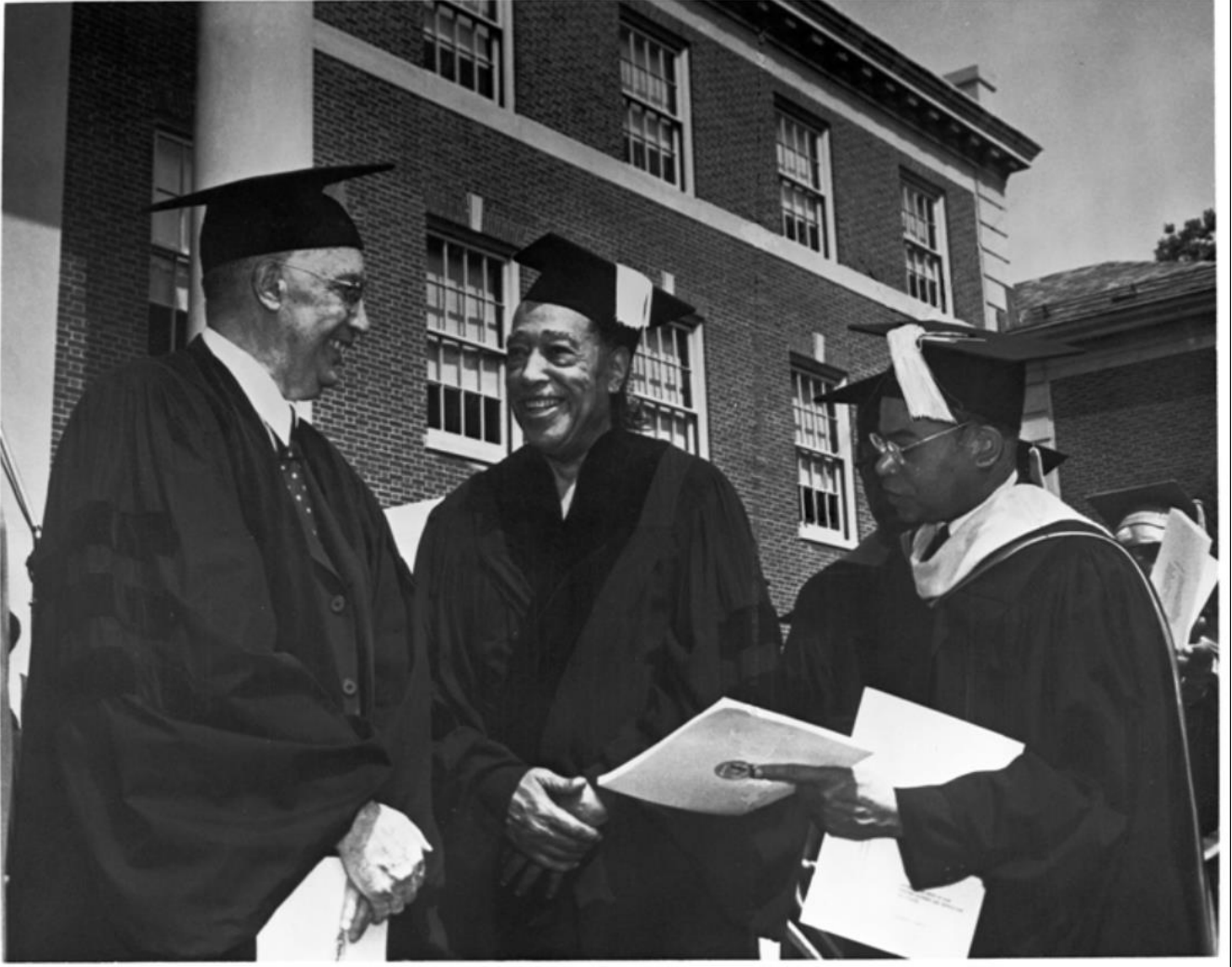
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Appendix



Historical marker at 1221 Kearney Street, NE, Washington, DC

Photo: Devry Becker Jones



Sterling Brown, Duke Ellington, G. Frederick Stanton, Howard University, 1971

Sterling Brown Collection, Moorland-Springarn Manuscripts Division, Founder's Library,
Howard University

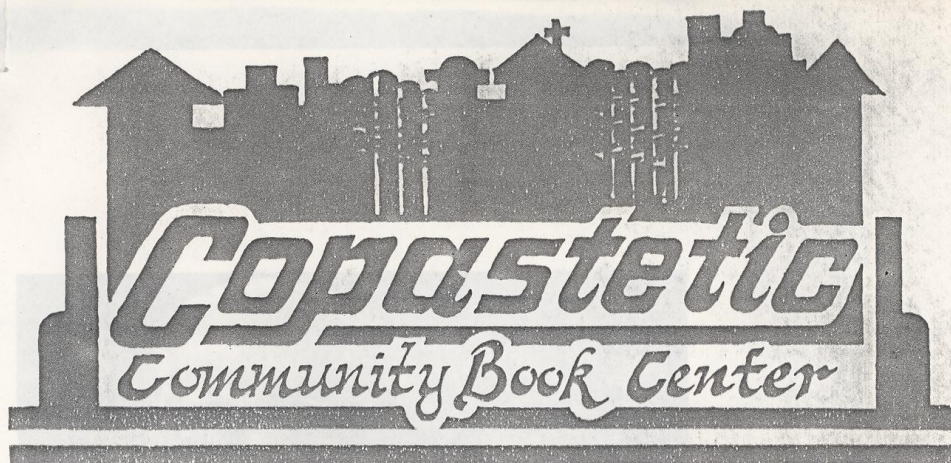


Jackson State College Festival, 1945

Back Row from Left: Arna Bontemps, Melvin Tolson, Jacob Reddix, Queen Dodson, Robert Hayden

Front Row: Sterling Brown, unidentified, Margaret Walker, Langston Hughes

Melvin Beanus Tolson Papers, Library of Congress



1616 Marigny/New Orleans 70117

(504) 949-1648

For Immediate Release

At Copastetic Community Book Center (1616 Marigny St. on February 11, 1989 at 8:00 pm.

Copastetic Community Book Center and The Jazz And Heritage Foundation will present a tribute in honor of the late Sterling Brown (1901-1989) "The Dean Of Afro-American Folkpoetry". Local poets will be featured reading from Dr. Brown's works. These poets will include: Kalamu Ya Salaam, Director of Bright Moments, Lee Grue, President of New Orleans Poetry Forum, Que Vais Gex-Breaux, of Dillard University, Debra Smith, Veteran Actress, Lolis Elie, Attorney and Veteran Of The Civil Rights Movement, Chakula Cha Jua, President of Alliance for Community Theaters, Tom Dent, Executive Director of The Jazz And Heritage Foundation, Raymond Breaux, member of Congo Square Writers Union, Harold Evans, Director of Cox Cable's Graffiti Magazine, Adella Gautier-Zu-Bolton, Theater Artist for Art's Connection and Dr. Ahmos Zu-Bolton, Director of Copastetic Community Book Center.

According to Ahmos Zu-Bolton former research assistant under Dr. Brown, "Sterling Brown was a mentor, philosopher, scholar and poet who's contributions to literature will live and live and live to influence generations in his life time and we plan to honor him so that everyone can share in the works of this giant of a man."

For further information call: 944-4814 or 949-1648

Press release for tribute for Sterling Brown, 1989

Amber Zu-Bolton, personal collection

Vita

Amber Zu-Bolton is a New Orleanian with a life long love for literature, arts and history. The daughter of two artists, Amber grew up in the cultural oasis of her parent's bookstore, Copastetic Community Book Center. After studying film at Howard University in Washington, DC, Zu-Bolton decided to pursue a degree in history. Her research interests keep in line with her upbringing and include; African American cultural studies, literary studies and the history of broadcasting and film.