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Honor's Thesis

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“Goodbye Christ”: Langston Hughes, Black Art and Literary Censorship

Over the course of its development, African American literature has served a double purpose. In times of struggle it has been used to reflect the plights of the black community as well as served as a platform from which Blacks were able to speak. This often resulted in negative responses from the government to these authors. Racially charged literature that examined society's interactions with race as well as literature that questioned the very structure of the American government was particularly targeted and monitored. Arguably Langston Hughes was an author whose life showed this very phenomenon. Langston Hughes' life showed this first through his conflicts that he had with those outside of his race as well as the conflicts that he faced with in the black community. It is through his story that I focus my thesis and expose the struggles that resulted from censorship and racial divides. With these things in mind I plan to analyze the life of Langston Hughes, specifically his life after he published the poem "Goodbye Christ".

Hughes's radical poem "Goodbye Christ" attacks the gross commercial exploitation of religion by certain leading evangelists. The poem was first published, without Hughes's permission, in *Negro Worker* (November/ December 1932). (*Selected Letters* 5527)

"Goodbye Christ" served as a catalyst for Langston Hughes' career by being the poem that caught the attention of the Government, which feared that they were at the risk of losing their power. Through a close reading analysis of "Goodbye Christ" I will be able to get a deeper understanding of the social climate at the time of Hughes' career as well as to understand how he himself understood things his time. Through this I aim to draw connections between an author's social perceptions and the way that their audiences receive them. The consequences that Hughes was subject to will serve as evidence that a writer's social and political environment could and

did severely impact the way they illustrated the world. Throughout this thesis I aim to analyze how Langston Hughes' life reflects the struggles of the African American community through a close analysis of the poem "Goodbye Christ" as well as through close examination of the consequences that followed the publishing of the poem. Through this analysis I will understand the purpose societal influence has had on the overall development of the black voice.

Langston Hughes was an African American writer born in Joplin, Missouri. He was raised in Lawrence, Kansas by his grandmother Mary Langston who was a woman mixed of African American and Native American blood. He was born in 1902 to parents Carrie Hughes and James Hughes, both of which were fair skinned and privileged. His mother had a sense of entitlement due to the fact that she had fair skin yet felt that it was her duty to uplift the black community (*The Life of Langston Hughes* 10-15). On the other hand his father hated blacks and anything that was symbolic of blackness. Due to both of his parents' varying opinions on Blackness, Langston grew up conflicted about his race. He lived in many neighborhoods, most of which were primarily white, so grew up not being comfortably in touch with the black community and black related issues. It was this main issue that was a source of pain and confusion in much of his writing. Langston Hughes first began his writing career in his youth (*The Life of Langston Hughes* 10-15). However, once he moved to Harlem he was able to express the everyday lives of the poor black people there. He saw these experiences as a sign of the strength that black people held and took pride in being able to convey this strength through his words. It is for this reason that Langston Hughes became the unofficial Poet Laureate for African Americans and is also one of the reasons that he gained attention from the federal government. Initially, Langston Hughes gained interest in radical socialism during the "onset of the Great Depression and the failure of the American government under President Herbert

Hoover” (*Selected Letters* 3348). This interest in radical socialism manifested itself in a number of ways, such as through speeches and newspapers articles Hughes wrote, but his greatest expression of his support was done through his poem “Goodbye Christ”.

Langston Hughes’ poem “Goodbye Christ” is a very powerful and moving poem that is direct and symbolic. It reads as follows:

“Goodbye Christ.”

Listen, Christ,

You did alright in your day, I reckon-

But that day’s gone now.

They ghosted you up a swell story, too,

Called it Bible-

But it’s dead now,

The popes and the preachers’ve

Made too much money from it.

They’ve sold you to too many

Kings, generals, robbers, and killers-

Even to the Tzar and the Cossacks,

Even to Rockefeller’s Church,

Even to THE SATURDAY EVENING POST.

You ain’t no good no more.

They’ve pawned you

Till you’ve done wore out.

Goodbye,
Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,
Beat it on away from here now.
Make way for a new guy with no religion at all-
A real guy named
Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME-
I said, ME!

Go ahead on now,
You're getting in the way of things, Lord.
And please take Saint Gandhi with you when you go,
And Saint Pope Pius,
And Saint Aimee McPherson,
And big black Saint Becton
Of the Consecrated Dime.
And step on the gas, Christ!
Move!

Don't be so slow about movin?
The world is mine from now on-
And nobody's gonna sell ME
To a king, or a general,

Or a millionaire. (Hughes)

Throughout this poem Langston Hughes brings up a number of important issues to the black community. His use of names throughout the poem does not leave much room for inference or interpretation and lets the reader understand exactly what Langston Hughes is talking about, but also the various allusions he makes throughout the piece allows one to interpret the poem past surface inferences. In the first stanza of the poem, Hughes makes his initial claim about why he is saying Goodbye to Christ. He says “Listen, Christ, / You did alright in your day, I reckon- / But that day’s gone now. / They ghosted you up a swell story, too, / Called it Bible” (Hughes 1-5). In these lines Langston Hughes makes clear use of his voice as a black writer and directly associated the use of Christ as a way to oppress and manipulate Black people. His reference to the swell story that was ghosted up refers to the bible. It brings slavery to mind since African slaves were manipulated to be submissive and believe that their status as property were right because it was stated in religion that one must obey their master [God], which elevated whites to a level higher than blacks. Langston Hughes does admit that the manipulation worked on blacks when he says “you did alright” (Hughes 2). Through this intro to the poem, Hughes’ is claiming that Black people are past that level of manipulation and that they will no longer be controlled that way because “that day’s gone now” (Hughes 3). This initial stance allows the reader to contextualize the poem and so Langston Hughes’ “Goodbye Christ” is no longer just a poem about religion and communism but it is a poem about Religion in the Black community and the systematic oppression of blacks in America. Like slavery and the system of discrimination that Langston Hughes and Blacks in his era are trying to get rid of, Langston Hughes claims that the use of Christ as a weapon with which to persecute Blacks is dead. It is through this lens that I will approach the remainder of the poem.

Furthermore, in the poem “Goodbye Christ”, the tone of manipulation is present throughout the entire piece and this manipulation is a direct parallel to slavery. This is most prevalent in the lines where Langston Hughes writes “ The popes and the preachers’ve / Made too much money from it. / They’ve sold you to too many” (Hughes 7-10). In these lines Hughes is directly talking about the fact that many religious leaders exploited religion to make money off of it; instead of helping people as they claimed to be doing they were actually taking advantage of the people that were their followers. With deeper analysis of these lines, it is easy to see that Langston Hughes’ is also alluding to slavery. Hughes says “But that day’s gone now”, by which he means that Christ’s time is up just as the time of many slaves who were worn out and who had been used and sold for monetary gain had run out of time. (Hughes 3). By alluding to slavery Langston Hughes brings the conversation to the attention of his black readers and allows them to understand that his statements are beyond political. Langston Hughes relates the idea of communism to black people who possibly had not heard about it before or did not understand it, so that he could bring forth the idea of alternatives to the answer of religion that Blacks had been taught to turn to by whites. He is setting his poem up so that black readers can sympathize with this new cause. He shows them that they actually do have a choice in the way in which the country was being run. Langston Hughes also uses “Goodbye Christ” to discuss the impact of capitalism on America, specifically on African Americans. When he refers to the fact that those in religion are making money from organized religion he is questioning the genuineness of it all. The fact that money has become a factor shows that capitalism has seeped into this realm as well. It is because of this that this poem in particular caught the attention of the FBI.

Consequently, through the poem “Goodbye Christ”, Langston Hughes directly makes Christianity a target. As a result, Hughes makes the United States’ government and very

foundation of the country a target since our country is built on Christian principles that were rigidly followed during the time that this poem was published. Hughes calls out Christianity specifically when he says, “Goodbye, Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova, / Beat it on away from here now” (Hughes 17-19). This is a direct address to Christianity because Hughes’ uses all of the Christian names that are used to refer to the God followed by Christians. This is a very bold distinction to make and through doing this Hughes is showing that he is his own man who will think as he pleases. This is shown when Hughes tells God to “beat it on away from here now” (Hughes 19). He is making it known that Christianity is not needed and those who support it, the American Government, are not needed either. In the context of slavery, the stanza that this line comes from shows similar themes of rejecting the ideas of submissive blacks and becoming independent, however, this stanza has an even more blunt and self-assured tone. This new tone speaks to Hughes gaining more conviction for his belief that he deserves the right to be his own man. The stanza is almost urgent as the poem picks up energy. This is best shown when Hughes writes,

Make way for a new guy with no religion at all-

A real guy named

Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME-

I said, ME! (Hughes 20-23)

In these lines it is easy to see that Hughes is excited to be free of Christianity and Christian codes that have dictated the lives of African Americans. He wants to replace this religion that he deems has been fake in its protection of blacks. He says that it is time to make way for a real guy and in this makes it obvious that he feels that Christianity, as the US government has employed it, has made God into an unreal figure that has been molded for their purpose. Langston Hughes makes

a stand when he then recommends that Christ be replaced by communist figures. This shows that Langston Hughes believed that Communism would be more just in its treatment of Blacks than the current system in place in America. He brings back the theme of being done with slavery when he inserts himself into the list. Not only does this outwardly show that he supports communism when he groups himself with communist figures, but he also shows that as a black man he will have a voice and he demands he be heard. This is made doubly obvious when he repeats, "I said me!" (Hughes 23). Here Langston Hughes is unapologetic and speaks with much audacity in the face of the American government. He is a man who has shirked the chains of Capitalism and is demanding to be heard.

Furthermore, Langston Hughes wrote the poem "Goodbye Christ" not only to comment on the idea of slavery but also to comment on the fact that systematically, Capitalism was not built in favor of African Americans. By doing this he challenged the government that was in place and made a claim on the behalf of blacks. This claim was that they were finished supporting a system that did not support them. As a poet Hughes' felt as if it was his duty to make this known because "the exploits of capitalism ... [was a theme that] 'drastically affected the work of many poets'" (Best). Langston Hughes rejected the idea of capitalism very blatantly during the beginning part of the poem where he asks Christ to take with him a variety of big names in religion. Although initially one assumes that Hughes is going against these people because they promote belief in Christ, through deeper analysis it is easy to see that he actually rejects these people because of the way that they have been used as icons for religion within capitalism and have also been used to encourage consumerism. Those who felt threatened by Hughes attacked his character in order to discredit his work, which would just be the first of consequences he suffered as a result of this poem. This successfully distracted from the fact that

the religion in place had actually been encouraging the embracing of capitalism. This idea is shown in the lines of the poem where Langston Hughes says, “The world is mine from now on- / And nobody’s gonna sell Me / To a king, or a general, /Or a millionaire” (Hughes 35-37). Through these lines Langston Hughes is bringing to attention the fact that capitalism is making a price for everything and that he refuses to buy into that system as well as saying that he is no longer an African American to be bought and sold to further perpetuate capitalism. Very literally he denounces the idea of himself as property [as a slave] while also declaring a newfound freedom that was realized by embracing the idea of communism. He makes direct parallels between the system of capitalism and slavery. This not only gathers the attention of blacks that would want to experience the same freedom that he claims could be realized through communism, but also makes a claim to the world that Langston Hughes would not condone or participate in the systematic oppressive system that America had in place. This very political statement could not help but to catch the attention of those who were responsible for keeping our government system in place.

Langston Hughes’ poem “Goodbye Christ” made many political and social statements that offended a number of people in power. Langston Hughes received much negative backlash from this poem, specifically from the followers of those that he had named in the poem. One of these people who called for action against Hughes was Aimee McPherson one of the first celebrity pastors. Aimee McPherson had a following of about 5,000 and took great offense when Langston Hughes named her in his poem (Best). About her he said “Go ahead now, / You’re getting in the way of things, Lord. / And please take Saint Ghandi with you when you go, / And Saint Pope Pius, / And Saint Aimee McPherson” (Hughes). Through this Hughes had portrayed her as one of the people who had been perpetuating capitalism and who was money hungry. As a

result of this negative depiction, McPherson reacted by calling her followers to go against him. During a luncheon in Pasadena where Hughes was celebrating his published biography,

Evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson sent about a hundred of her followers to protest his appearance. McPherson had recently denounced Hughes from her Angelus Temple pulpit as a “radical and anti-Christ,” saying, “there are many devils among us, but the most dangerous of all is the red devil. And now there comes among us a red devil in black skin!” Heeding her advice, her supporters had come to distribute flyers denouncing Hughes as a Communist and an Atheist.

(Best)

This serves as an example of the negative fallout that resulted for Langston Hughes following the publishing of this poem. He had singled out someone who had a larger platform than him as well as more social power since McPherson was a white Christian. As an African American person Hughes, had no way of protecting himself from the attacks on his character. As a result, Hughes’ brand was tarnished and those who protested against the un-American theme of the poem aimed to make him suffer in many more ways. Langston Hughes would face a number of consequences due to “Goodbye Christ” and his support of Communism.

Before Langston Hughes suffered the consequences of his radicalism, he became more involved in work revolving around the social justice of African Americans because he wanted this involvement to actively and decisively address pressing issues. During this time racial segregation was still a large issue and with Langston Hughes being very liberal his ideals did not line up with that of the conservative politicians in office. This left him searching for something to fulfill the need he had to help out the community. To fulfill this need he used communism. In the beginning of his involvement with the Soviet Union, Langston Hughes was very impassioned

with it. He became involved with “working on ‘Black and White’ a proposed Soviet Union-sponsored movie about American race relations (*Selected Letters* 3349). Already possessing an interest in race relations within America, Communism sparked even more interest in Hughes. This is shown in a letter that he sent to a friend Carl Van Vechten in which he says “I’m doing a series of articles for IZVESTIA in the contrast between the darker people of the Soviet and the darkies at home ... The contrasts here are amazing ... brown, yellow and white mingling from the tea houses to the highest Soviets” (*Selected Letters* 3379). It was then that Hughes began to appreciate the race practices of the Soviets and hoped to encourage that behavior in America. These examples of Hughes give us insight on how the communist party could be appealing to a Black person in America during that time. For Hughes, the Soviet Union represented everything that America wasn’t. With the Soviet Union he was able to enjoy equality amongst his peers, the mixing of races as well as a sense of freedom that he would never be able to get in America. The Communist party was appealing because America gave no outlet for Black Americans. With this being said, Langston Hughes aimed to share this hope of a new start with other blacks, however, due to the villainization of the Soviet Union and Communism in America, this was impossible. This shows that initially Langston Hughes was very public with his support of the Soviet Union and did not see a problem with exercising his right to freedom of speech. However, once the consequences of his poem began to come to light he second-guessed his decision.

Langston Hughes suffered from surveillance and censorship throughout his career. The FBI first gave attention to Langston Hughes because of the efforts of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover against the poem “Goodbye Christ”. It was Hoover and his implementation of more advanced surveillance and censorship that shaped much of media consumption. As Langston Hughes became more relevant and continued releasing poetry that spoke on issues regarding the

Black community, Hoover turned his eye to Hughes. This was done through having various FBI agents track Langston Hughes' movements and serve as ghostwriters for his literature. These ghostwriters critiqued, monitored and interpreted Hughes' writing according to their own interests. A large basis of the ghost reading of Langston Hughes texts were heavily opinionated using terms such as "seemed communist" or "possibly subversive" (FBI File). Also, FBI agents served as Ghostreaders through written works such as *Radicalism and Sedition among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications*, which is a twenty-six page narrative that outlines the issues within the Black Community according to interpretations made by FBI agents of black writers' writing (FBI File). Hoover himself interprets the meaning of Langston Hughes poem "Goodbye Christ" through his pamphlet "Secularism—Breeder of Crime" (FBI File).

Throughout the time when J. Edgar Hoover would speak against Hughes, he would refer to this pamphlet. This was Hoover's attempt at "shaping the way Americans thought" (Culleton 106). In order to maintain control over the media that Americans consumed J. Edgar Hoover used the FBI as a sort of filter where he would advise Americans on what was appropriate for "good" Americans; Langston Hughes was labeled by the FBI as not being "good" because of his support for communism. This is shown in the FBI's transcript of Hughes where J. Edgar Hoover writes, "the Bureau files contain numerous references reflecting Hughes to be a communist. He is the author of the sacrilegious poem [Goodbye Christ]" (FBI file). It was his poem "Goodbye Christ", coupled with the fact that he spoke with members of the Soviet Union about how Blacks and other minorities were not treated equally as whites in America that led to his censorship. About this address to the Soviet Union it is said,

Hughes enthusiastically visited the Soviet Union, and was made to pay dearly for his Depression-era support of Communist causes during the Cold War, but seems

never to have joined the Communist Party. The FBI's file-keepers nonetheless compiled over 550 pages on his life and works, impressed in particular by his claim that "Negroes are growing in international consciousness. (*FBI Eyes*)

This serves as proof of the FBI's close surveillance of Hughes. The amount of detail that actually went into observing Hughes surpassed simply tracking his writing and even involved keeping up to date on his actual physical location. This is shown through the fact that one transcript of Hughes' surveillance details the hotel he speaks at, the crowd he spoke to as well as the details of his speech. This surveillance also attempted to infer Langston's future actions because the FBI officials only assumed that Langston Hughes was rallying to gain support to go against the American government and did not have sufficient support for these claims. Langston Hughes simply expressed his support for the Soviet Union and the fact that he felt it would be in the best interest of Blacks. This is shown when it is said, "In his speech [Langston Hughes] stated that there will be no racial discrimination in the United States if the people would follow the Russian example. [He] stated that he is a believer in Russian Soviet form of government and thereby admitted being a Communist" (Maxwell). This obvious support of the Communist party would all but disappear once Langston Hughes comes to realize and experience sanctions from the government.

Following the publishing of "Goodbye Christ", Langston Hughes was labeled as a Communist by the government and the government's supporters. Being labeled as such not only tarnished Hughes' reputation but also impacted the course of his career. Langston Hughes literature had been inspired by the climate of the society around him and his writing took a political stance. This did not sit well with those who were most comfortable with African American being passive and occupying subordinate positions. The poem "Goodbye Christ"

struck many political cords and garnered the attention of many young people who were interested, as many youth are, in changing the future of the country for the better. With politics moving into a more progressive and liberal direction Langston Hughes' poem "Goodbye Christ" reflects the political views of the incoming generation, which did not sit well for those who were in power. Where his literature had previously been loved and adored by many, his white fan base was dwindling for fear of the impact Langston Hughes' poetry would have on their children. This is shown best in a record of a speech given by Senator Hawkes to the senate in 1948. In this speech Senator Hawkes states,

We are overlooking a most important right and duty to ... instill in our youth a greater understanding of our Constitution and its guarantees. I desire to give an illustration of the Freedom, which we in this country allow Communists and their fellow travelers, I refer to Langston Hughes. His name will be found on Congressional Reports by the Un-American Activities Committee. I shall read a few things to show you what is going on in the United States... I went to church ... I was amazed to see a Communist stand up in the Pulpit and to hear him, without ever a reference to the life of Christ or the fact that we have a Bible, berate the United States, tear it down for 55 minutes and eulogize Russia. He is preaching in the Pulpits, talking to the student in our High Schools and speaking to College groups. (FBI File)

Here Senator Hawkes shows that Langston Hughes was feared to have a negative influence on the youth. Hughes was getting his words out to those who would soon have political power, which was a threat to the government in place. Hughes was sanctioned and censored, not only for the topic and aggressive tone of "Goodbye Christ" but also because many feared that his

message would spread and plant a seed in the mind of citizens. This caused Langston Hughes to gain the attention of a number of people, highlighted by the fact that Langston Hughes' communist support was being discussed in the US Senate. Eventually, Langston Hughes had to testify before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations appealing the idea that he was sympathetic to the communist cause. During this testimony, "Hughes was forced to surrender. In a televised hearing, he repudiated his radical past (*Selected Letters* 346-347). Following this Langston Hughes' poetry took a "lighter manner" (Berry 299). The attention that Langston Hughes gained due to his poem "Goodbye Christ" was unwanted and proved to mean trouble for Hughes.

Also, through his poem "Goodbye Christ" and his very active support of the Communist party Langston Hughes represented resistance to religion and anti-government behavior. This impacted people's overall perception of who Langston Hughes was as a person. He was perceived as a terror to society, which distracted from his literary talent. His literature was no longer measured according to his talent, but was measured according to what people perceived to be his character. This was shown in the Hughes' FBI transcript, which details a letter from a white mother who is contacting Hoover in regards to a poem that her daughter recited during her 8th grade graduation. In the letter it states,

My Dear Mr. Hoover, My daughter graduated from 8th grade ... the children presented a wonderful program ... Several days ago while discussing the presentation with a friend the subject of the program was brought up, namely a poem. I was told this was written by a Negro communist. Can you tell me if this is true? Please let me know as my husband and I are very much interested in the welfare of our country and the future of it depends on our children's education,

which is a mess. (FBI File)

This letter supports the idea that Langston Hughes' character was being evaluated before the value of his literature. While the white mother seemed to enjoy the poem when it was performed, when she found out that Hughes was potentially communist, she steered away from it. The attacks on Langston Hughes' character made it harder for him to get his work recognized and appreciated by others, who were afraid of being sanctioned by the government. This was manifested through dwindling support for his writing as well as getting events that Langston Hughes was scheduled to perform at canceled and as putting organizations that attempted to schedule him, to speak, under investigation (FBI File). The poem "Goodbye Christ" changed Hughes' career path and forced him to shy away from obviously political subjects.

Continuously, Langston Hughes' FBI transcript shows that the FBI followed his every move over the course of months. This occurred after the publishing of "Goodbye Christ" and serves as further examples of the consequences suffered by Hughes. Also this speaks of the social climate at the time in which Hughes' was at his peak as a writer. Blacks and their right to speak how they felt was monitored so closely that following the publishing of one poem, Hughes was thought to be an enemy of the state. As a black person Hughes was stuck, either he spoke his feelings and suffered the consequences or he kept his mouth shut and turned his back on his people. This is a reflection on the continued policing of Black people and black thought. The fact that Hughes was told what he could and could not think and write showed that black people had no social capital and those that attempted to gain some were sanctioned accordingly. It was the plight of being African American that caused Hughes to draw the FBI's attention. Langston Hughes' various recreational actions only furthered the suspicions of the FBI as following the critique of his poem, and located in his FBI transcript, is a note that states "Hughes was a

member of a Negro delegation which visited Russia in 1932 to study Communism” (FBI File). Not only was Black thought being policed but black physicality was being monitored as well. The fact that Hughes went to Russia was a worry of the FBI, which shows the fact that the government of this time did not intend for blacks to enjoy this type of agency. Langston Hughes and his censorship serve as prime examples of blacks in America during the time of the Harlem Renaissance and his surveillance is evidence that the supposed freedom that blacks of this time were supposed to enjoy was actually nonexistent. Langston Hughes’ suffered consequences in his personal life as well for his troubles did not exist solely between Hughes and racist whites, but also existed between him and other members of the black literary community.

Langston Hughes was a man that greatly valued the relationships he had with other writers. He ensured that he made himself a resource for the younger up and coming authors and that he knew them well. He also ensured that he engaged in constructive conversations with his literary peers. He was excited to see all the young talent and believed that they would continue to keep the literary tone that he had set around. Although Langston Hughes initially built great bonds with these young authors and his own peers, when he switched his writing to a lighter tone some of these authors did not agree with it. This caused a rift between Hughes and his contemporaries who often felt as if he had sold out or had become the Uncle Tom of black literature. In spite of this Hughes refused to “make of their inevitable competition with one another a ‘Battle Royale’ for the scraps that whites tossed at times to artists of color” (*Selected Letters* 158). The various authors that Hughes faced these issues with were “Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston and Claude McKay” (*Selected Letters* 158). He also had a relationship that was very tense with Leroi Jones, who would later be known as Amiri Baraka. One of Langston Hughes’ most tense relationships was with his literary peer Countee Cullen. The two had a

transparent relationship where they would offer critique on the others poetry and it was the context of their poetry that was the source of disconnect between the two poets. This is exemplified in a letter that Langston Hughes sent to Countee Cullen where Hughes is critiquing a piece of Cullen's work in which he said,

Your Suicide Chant doesn't excite me ... Really I think it is the worst thing you've ever done. Most of your poems are beautiful but this one isn't. ... Excuse me! As to my own poem, people are taking it all wrong. It's purely personal, not racial. If I choose to kill myself, I'm not asking anybody else to die, or to mourn either. Least of all the whole Negro race. (*Selected Letters* 1090)

This shows where the stress in their relationship lay and how, in time, their differing views became more of an issue. In the same letter Langston Hughes feels as if Countee Cullen's poem doesn't have enough meaning behind it and that it lacks the type of energy that would be expected of Cullen. In contrast, Hughes is claiming that his own poetry doesn't have as much meaning behind it as Cullen has inferred. The fact that he is rejecting the idea that his poem is speaking on issues of race shows how Hughes wanted to steer away from the trouble that he suffered through previously and how his literary peers wanted him to address the troubles. This makes it evident that Hughes was attempting to separate himself from such deep material in an effort of self-preservation. This shows Langston Hughes transitioning to less weighted literature. He tries to say that the poem he sent Countee is not making any political statements at all although that is what Langston Hughes was renowned for before hand, Hughes is making an effort to keep a lower profile.

In the Fifties and Sixties, as younger poets began to emerge on the scene, Langston Hughes felt as if these younger poets were becoming too radical, as his interactions with poets

James Baldwin and Amiri Baraka reveal. Ironically, he did not agree with the content of some of their poetry. This could have been as a result of the fact that he himself had experienced the repercussions of being radical. While Hughes intended to shield these younger poets from having similar experiences, they felt as if he was not being true to himself because he was avoiding causing trouble. This is exemplified in a letter that Langston sent to James Baldwin [insert date] in which he says,

Jimmy: I fear you are becoming a “Negro” writer and propaganda one, at that! What’s happening???? (Or am I reading wrong?) ...[It] surely makes of you a sage whose hair, once processed, seems to be reverting. Hope it makes the best-seller list. You might as well suffer in comfort. (*Selected Letters* 8334)

Here it is easy to see that Langston Hughes does not agree with the apparent change in Baldwin’s writing and does not think that it will be good for his career. He does admit that it is an interesting piece, however, from personal experience he knows that James Baldwin will have to face repercussions. He also notes on the outwardly change that blacks were going through as the generations changed by commenting on Baldwin’s typically processed hair that he was allowing to go back to its natural state. This serves as a prime example of the differences between each of the generations and is why Langston Hughes had such a hard time understanding these up and coming poets and vice versa. However, Langston Hughes did not see these differences in as negative a light as the younger poets did and he hoped that the controversial disagreements would be more constructive than negative for the poets. This is most shown in comments that Langston Hughes said regarding Leroi Jones, or Amiri Baraka. In a letter to a friend Langston Hughes says,

I don’t like [Leroi’s} current plays at St. Marks and I see no harm in saying so,

do you? Just as your or Leroi have a perfect right to dislike and say so any writing of mine. . . . In my long years of writing, I've found that adverse (and particularly controversial) comment, which arouses discussion, does more good than harm. I've been called everything from a "sewer dweller" (Negro press) to a "Communist traitor" (white press). So I hope my comments won't hurt Leroi. I'd like to see him become a great big Jones in marquee lights. And more power to you, too, for so frankly expressing your opinions. I would be a sad day if the young writers all agreed with the old. (*Selected Letters* 9030-9031)

In this quote it is shown just how open Langston Hughes was to the various critiques that he received from others and also showed that he was open to the critique. Where some feelings towards him may have been hostile he remained calm and level headed about the differences. Instead he encouraged constructive criticism, which may have further cemented the idea of him being an Uncle Tom in the minds of the younger poets. Also through this excerpt from his letter Langston Hughes sheds light on some of the struggles he endured throughout his career that may have contributed to him being so critical of the work of the younger authors. Where his younger contemporaries may have felt spite for him and his critiques he felt as if he was doing them a good service by being so open. As a consequence of changing his literary tone, Langston Hughes experienced strain with in the literary community, which worked against his efforts to build lasting relationships with these other poets.

Additionally, Langston Hughes felt as if critique regarding one's actions and writing was good and helped things positively in the long run. As a result of this he was always transparent with those around him, making sure that they were doing their part for the black community. It was this type of investment within the black community that showed why Hughes looked

towards the Soviet Union for relief. The Federal government did not want the black community to actively engage with the issues at hand and definitely did not want Black intellectuals, who had earned the necessary education, to work towards a systematic change in America. Being a sympathizer of the communist party was Hughes way of pulling his people in a better direction than where they were headed. During the time that Langston Hughes wrote "Goodbye Christ" and was thought to be a supporter of the Communist Party, from 1932-1954, America was in a state of unrest specifically due to the changes, and resistance to, the racial structure of America. Specifically, Langston Hughes lived during the Jim Crow era when blacks were sanctioned according to laws that perpetuated inequality. As a writer Hughes experienced advantages that other African Americans like him were unable to experience. His writing was given a platform through his work with white publishers and editors; however, this was sometimes a source of trouble for Hughes. "With white publishers... they didn't care as [Hughes] did, about reaching black readers as a distinct group" (*Selected Letters* 285). This forced Hughes to have to be more proactive in reaching his black audience himself. This would ensure that blacks are privy to the same information as their white counterparts. Also during this time the access citizens experienced within America varied according to race, so blacks built their own platforms such as black owned newspapers. These newspapers served as main sources of information for the black community and it was through one newspaper in particular that Hughes contributed to the information the black community was receiving. This was done through Langston Hughes' weekly column in the Chicago Defender, a primarily African American paper, that lasted from 1942-1962 (*Selected Letters* 285). Through this column, Hughes talked critically about issues surrounding race and politics. The climate during Langston Hughes' career contributed to a large amount of the qualms Hughes had regarding the United States.

Additionally, a major contributor to the negative social climate during Hughes' career was the reign of J. Edgar Hoover over the Federal Bureau of Investigation. During the time that J. Edgar Hoover had control of the FBI, the FBI became much more intrusive and controlling in the lives of Americans. J. Edgar Hoover himself seemed intolerant of blacks, particularly Hughes, due to the fact that he wrote "Goodbye Christ". To show his disdain with the poem Hoover quoted the entire piece in his pamphlet "Secularism-Breeder of Crime" (Culleton 108). During Hoover's reign, Hoover focused his efforts against "the New Spy" or against people who betrayed their government in support of another government system, specifically communism (Maxwell 47). In an effort to control what was referred to as the "Red Scare" (Maxwell 48) Hoover punished anyone who spoke out against the US Government even if it was benign. About this time it is said that Hoover's reign was a "relatively irresponsible witch hunt in which the Bureau's agents were not trained to protect civil liberties" (Maxwell 48). With a hostile government in place during his career it gives even more cause for why Langston Hughes changed his literary tone. He had been witness to the negative sanctions that many people suffered and avoided them as well. Evidence of Hughes wanting to avoid the negative sanctions of the FBI is as follows when Hughes says to his lawyer,

Send the FBI a copy of the transcript of my testimony for their files with a brief covering note, since Cohn told us Hoover once used "Goodbye, Christ" in a speech, and perhaps should therefore be advised that this no longer represents my views in any way. (*Selected Letters* 7103)

The Hoover administration's pervasiveness is an obvious sign of the freedom that African Americans did not have and also exemplified why Langston Hughes had to be cautious about the things he wrote.

In final analysis, following the publishing of the radical poem “Goodbye Christ” Langston Hughes was impacted in these ways: through censorship, through his personal relationships and through the change of tone in his writing. Through a close examination of Hughes and his life I was able to show the impact of racial and social based constraints on the works of this African American writer. Langston Hughes’ platform as a writer that was very in tune with the struggles of the black community gave him insight on the systematic oppression that blacks experienced during the time of his career. He was able to not only witness racial tension in action, but also was able to comment on the tension with other intellectuals, sparking much needed conversations. Langston Hughes’ poem ‘Goodbye Christ’ is a perfect example of the trying times lived through by Hughes and it is through Langston Hughes’ poem that one gets a understanding of the political climate of America during the 1930s-50s. “Goodbye Christ” serves as an eloquent read on religion and race in America as well as the institution of slavery. Throughout this poem Langston Hughes addresses the use of religion as a tool with which to pacify and control African Americans. He also shows how Religion had become distorted in America to be another supporter of Capitalism, promoting consumption and not promoting the help that the African American community needed. By targeting Christianity directly, Langston Hughes makes it obvious that he is in disagreement with the ways of the American government. It is through this very bold and confrontational poem that Langston Hughes garners the attention of a number of people. There were consequences for Hughes, following the publishing of his poem and these consequences took shape in the form of censorship, career oriented pressure and strain in the relationships that Hughes had with other Black authors. Through close analysis of these consequences, one was able to see the way in which racism manifested as well as the ways that African Americans were sanctioned because of their race. Hughes was placed in a double

bind feeling an obligation for his own self-preservation as well as feeling guilt for shirking his duty to the Black community. To contextualize the work and life of Langston Hughes with FBI censorship in mind, one must reflect upon the state of America at that time, allowing us to understand the way in which African American people were forced to navigate. America during the 1930s through the early 1950s was in a transitional period where Blacks were trying to find their place in the country, but were not giving equal access to society at large. The struggles that he endured and the direction his life took as a result, serve as a perfect parallel for the black struggle.

Langston Hughes as a literary figure today is beloved by many and it is through analyzing his life that I have become aware of his radical nature at the beginning of his career. His life, the mistakes he made and the bold moves that he took throughout the span of his career serve as examples for modern African American writers of the steps they should take with caution when speaking on issues of race. As he aimed to do while living, Langston Hughes is a black author who has impacted literature in numerous ways and helped shape it into what it is today. Langston Hughes made a path for young black writers after him to have the ability of truly exercising their right of freedom of speech. With regards to our present society, these ideas are important because of its relevance to the presence of racial tension even now in America. Much like Langston Hughes, African Americans are currently having their voices censored or ignored. The social climate during the 1930s-1950s closely mirrors the climate of present day America in terms of race, which has left many black youths in search of some form of guidance regarding the topic of race. Langston Hughes and the way that he navigated his own experiences serve as evidence that today's black youth are not in this alone. Where Langston Hughes bumped heads with his peers regarding how to react to the injustices in our country, current radicals and more

compliant blacks are facing this same conflict. This is a very relevant topic considering the recent rise in black authors and poets due to the black lives matter campaign. Black art has transformed in style, form, as well as delivery, however, the core of the art has remained the same; it is still being used to bring to awareness the struggle of the African American community. Having an in depth understanding of how past black writers were impacted and the way their work was shaped will help cultivate the future of black literature. Poems like “Goodbye Christ” serve to remind African Americans where we have come from, but also lets us know that our future is in our own hands. Throughout this thesis I aimed to show how a writer’s social and political environment impacted the way they perceived and illustrated the world. I focused particularly on Langston Hughes because he is such a historically prominent person who was at the forefront of black literature during a time where censorship was at its all time high. Through my observations and analysis of Hughes I have been grown a greater understanding of the role that surveillance played in literature and have come to understand the course of Langston Hughes’ career to a better degree. Langston Hughes and his poem “Goodbye Christ” served as catalysts to get people thinking about African Americans and their place in literature and will continue to have this impact in the future.

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