

## [Langston's Lawrence \(Hughes Birthday\)](#)

Blog Post published by Shawn Leigh Alexander on Wednesday, February 3, 2016

### **Langston's Lawrence (Hughes Birthday)**

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Langston's Lawrence wasn't idyllic. It was frequently *Not Without Laughter* as his first novel was titled. The Midwest's racial segregation made it a heartless Heartland. Kansas wasn't a "Free State" for all. Nor could good self-respecting colored folks miss the fact that they were tolerated rather than embraced. The narrative of Lawrence became how Quantrill's raid killed white folks, not them. There interaction in "the Bottoms," as East Lawrence was referred to and in North Lawrence were where former slaves acquired lands to build a life that was not a stereotype and spaces that wasn't ghettoized. Lawrence was the kind of place, though there was a budding university in town, where if you were lucky you got a break and headed east or west to get away from the stifling pressure of no expectations.

Yet it was in Lawrence where Hughes learned that he was a proud inheritor of a legacy of Black abolitionism. Any kid who is wrapped in a surviving blanket from John Brown's raid at Harper Ferry has to learn something about democracy and struggle, even if the city in which he lived wasn't an encouraging to he and other Black children. He learned on New Hampshire Street, the street where this event is taking place, there was pride and self-sufficiency never discussed in the Lawrence newspaper or local histories. Black folk owned stores like his grandfather had own on Massachusetts. They had fraternal orders, churches, taverns and houses of ill repute. Though his stern grandmother tried to keep him close, he heard and saw things about the city that she could never imagine.

And he learned so much from attending the theater with his mother in Kansas City. There was the world of the imagination and laughter. He had seen one of Lawrence's own, George Walker, make it to Broadway in the landmark and internationally successful musical *In Dahomey* with music by Will Marion Cook and lyrics by Paul Laurence Dunbar, become a superstar. George Walker and his comedic partner Bert Williams had done something no Black folk had ever done, they cracked the "Great White Way," a pun those two would have loved laughing about on stage. However, not too many people in Lawrence recognized Walker's accomplishment even until this day. He had to go out into the world to find success, just as Hughes would leave Lawrence without a sign on the street that said this was his hometown.

Though Hughes had fond memories of Lawrence, the city had no fond memories of him. You see, normally when a great artist is from a city there's a pride, there are memorials, and there are statues in the plaza. Though Lawrence loves to view itself as liberal, it isn't really. As Hughes knew Lawrence, reflected all the troublesome burdens of what it meant to live as Black in America.

I differ with his great biographer Arnold Rampersad; Hughes learned what it meant to Black in Lawrence. He knew what it meant to be ostracized and to be colored. If he didn't learn religion sitting in St. Luke African Methodist Episcopal Church, he learned pride. The church after all had African proudly brandished in its name. It was his journey with his mother from Lawrence to Topeka to Lawrence that taught him pride in Black people's accomplishments, their musical forms, and their dances. In his childhood years he had a notion of the beauty of Blackness. In 1923, when he wrote this poem titled *My People*, an homage to W.E.B. Du Bois's 1903 *Souls of Black Folk* he understood Black beauty that the Black community of Lawrence had taught him.

The night is beautiful,  
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,  
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful also, is the sun.  
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

Langston's Lawrence was simply a reflection of America writ large. In Lawrence's schools, Pinckney and New York Street, he learned saying the pledge of allegiance and reciting verses of nationalistic fidelity were hollow. Ever playful he would come to mock those school recitations in his poem *American Heartbreak*:

I am the American heartbreak—  
Rock which Freedom  
Stumps its toe—  
The great mistake  
That Jamestown  
Made long ago.

Langston's Lawrence was not without laughter, but the city bequeathed to him things that would inspire his verse, spark his adventures, and secure him as an internationally acclaimed writer of great, great importance who once lived in Lawrence, Kansas.

Presented:

Langston Hughes Creative Writing Award, Lawrence Art Center

February 1, 2016

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