



*Langston Hughes*  
Station

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## LANGSTON HUGHES NATIONAL POETRY PROJECT

Annual Report  
2002-2003

University of Kansas  
Lawrence, Kansas



## **Langston Hughes National Poetry Project Annual Report, 2003**

The Langston Hughes NPPP originated from two sources. One is the success of the Langston Hughes Centennial Symposium "Let America be America Again," which Chancellor Hemenway called the "most important event in the university's history," and of other centennial activities. This symposium reassessed Hughes' literary and cultural importance and provided opportunities for reading, listening to, and talking about poetry and its role in American culture.

The other is the University's longstanding desire to create an outreach component identified with Langston Hughes within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. For some years, a "Langston Hughes Resource Center" was discussed but not brought to fruition. Guided by discussions in the Hughes centennial year with our partners Shook, Hardy, Bacon, National Council of Teachers of English, the Academy of American Poets, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and Hughes's publishers Alfred A. Knopf, and Hill & Wang, the LHNPP became the way in which the work begun with the centennial symposium could continue.

The LHNPP has given a significant amount of time since the symposium to collaboration on other Hughes centennial activities, developing and enhancing national, state, and local related literary and cultural activities and serving as an incubator for other projects that originated in the centennial symposium.

### **NEH Planning Grant report**

The LHNPP's planning grant "Speaking of Rivers: Taking Poetry to the People," ended in February 2002. We submitted a final report on our activities in May to the National Endowment for the Humanities (see report attached).

Our report included information about soliciting 25 sites for Poetry Circles, groups of 20-30 people, led by a Hughes scholar or specialist, who come together to read and discuss Hughes's poetry and other work. Sites range from libraries, writers clubs, community centers, and a county jail to a Kansas City law firm and the National Council of Teachers of English. We also identified twenty-one poets and scholars—including Joy Harjo, Kevin Powell, Ross Talarico, Elmaz Abinader, and Emily Bernard—who agreed to be in our Speakers Bureau.

We developed the "Langston Hughes Reader's Guide" for the Poetry Circles. The guide includes a chronology of Hughes's life; an extensive narrative overview, with particular emphasis on his life in Kansas and the Midwest; a summary of the sessions; and a selected bibliography. The "Langston Hughes Reader's Guide" was distributed to all participants in the Poetry Circles, was modified for use in the schools, and became a major component of the recruitment package for the Poetry Circles.

Because of the tremendous local interest in the Hughes centennial activities, Lawrence was chosen as the site of a model Poetry Circle designed to attract widespread interest in teaching and reading Hughes. "Reading and Remembering Langston Hughes," a four-part book discussion series, focused on Hughes' poetry, prose, and autobiography. Six Kansas communities

participated in this series, which began in fall 2001 and concluded in spring 2002. The Kansas Humanities Council provided funds to support this project. The Lawrence Public Library hosted the first Poetry Circle, which had to be divided into two groups of 32 people because of the large number of people interested in participating. These book discussions were audiotaped for repurposing on the NPP website as part of an online Poetry Circle and are now available in both streaming audio and print formats. These discussions also serve as the basis for a cross-listed one-hour credit course "Reading and Remembering Langston Hughes" offered through the University of Kansas Independent Study program.

The development of the project website, *Digital Hughes* ([www.kuce.org/hughes](http://www.kuce.org/hughes)), was the second major task to be accomplished during the planning period. During the Hughes centennial symposium, KUCE recorded visiting Hughes scholars and poets who presented at the symposium and the ensuing session discussions. C-Span also videotaped the Danny Glover presentation on the evening of February 7 and the symposium events on Friday, February 8. Virtually all scholars and artists who attended the symposium consented to having their presentations taped. The website houses extensive resources for use in a variety of settings and is a major means to disseminate project materials and facilitate contacts.

The content of the website provides background material on Langston Hughes, links to other sites, an extensive bibliography, and other resources on Hughes, the Harlem Renaissance, African American history and literature, poetry, jazz, and to the various places he lived, including Harlem, Lawrence, and Joplin. It also provides background information on the symposium presenters and their publications on Hughes and related subjects.

### **Grant Product**

A fifteen-minute original video featuring Robert Pinsky, Judith Jones, and Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis reading and discussing their favorite Hughes poems has been shown at several sites, including the NEH.

### **NEH Implementation Grant**

In February 2002 we submitted an implementation grant to the NEH. We learned in July 2002 that we had not received the grant, although all of the reviewers' comments praised the project's concept and goals. Throughout this year we maintained contact with our Poetry Circle sites and Speakers Bureau members, the majority of whom remained part of the project. Several sites have already completed their Poetry Circles, including the National Council of Teachers of English, which supported 105 sites in 31 states. We resubmitted the grant in February 2003 after making adjustments requested by the NEH reviewers (see supplemental materials).

The implementation grant will fund the following activities for "Speaking of Rivers: Taking Poetry to the People":

- Schedule, promote, and advertise twenty-five Poetry Circles at local sites that discuss the life and works of Langston Hughes. Funds will support a site facilitator, local discussion leaders,

the purchase of books by Langston Hughes, and a visiting scholar or poet to give one public presentation.

- Expand, print, and distribute the *Langston Hughes Reader's Guide* for the Poetry Circles and as a general information document on Hughes.
- Produce and distribute a resource kit, *A Poetry Circle for All Seasons*, with instructions for developing the basic model for the Poetry Circle, sample program strategies, a continually updated listing of print and video sources, and the speakers bureau list.
- Expand and maintain Digital Hughes, a comprehensive website containing the online resources, the proceedings from the Hughes Centennial, and links to Hughes and poetry-related events and materials for U.S. and global audiences.
- Prepare a speakers bureau of poets and scholars available for public programs.
- Develop and implement a project evaluation plan.
- Recruit partners and sponsors for additional Poetry Circles from corporate and private sectors.

## **University of Kansas**

### **The Langston Hughes Center for the Study of American Cultures**

Chancellor Robert Hemenway charged the Langston Hughes Center committee with developing a proposal for the Langston Hughes Center for the Study of American Cultures. Alison Watkins has coordinated this committee's activities--setting up meetings, maintaining communication within the committee, and compiling the committee's final report. The proposal is currently under consideration by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences.

## **Community Activities**

### **Langston Hughes February Festival: Celebrating Kansas Writers & Artists (February 19-23, 2003)**

This project was part of a pioneering venture, a collaboration between the University of Kansas English Department's Conference on New Literacies, the Kansas Conference on Writing and Literature and the initial Langston Hughes February Fest. All of these programs had the overlapping goals of celebrating Kansas writers and artists. The intent of this new partnership was to build on the tremendous success of the February 2002 Langston Hughes centennial symposium, which has been recognized as an exemplary event with several regional and national awards. The Kansas Humanities Council funded the public events on February 22-23. A final report to the KHC is currently being prepared.

The festival began on February 21 with two sold-out performances of Kevin Willmott's *CSA: Confederate States of America* at Liberty Hall and a standing-room-only performance of KU students' one-act plays at the Lawrence Arts Center.

During five sessions at the Carnegie Building in downtown Lawrence scholars and writers spoke to small but energized and thoughtful audiences. The session topics were "Kansas' Poetic Landscape," "Bridging the Gap between Literature & Science," "Growing Up in Kansas:

Coming of Age & Enchantment Stories,” “Exploring Literature through Dance,” and “A ‘Novel’ Approach to Kansas. “

Although Gordon Parks was unable to travel to Kansas because of health and weather problems, KU Continuing Education media staff planned and executed an innovative long-distance interview session with Parks in his New York home. Panel members in Kansas interviewed Parks, whose comments were captured on videotape, rushed by overnight express to Lawrence, and edited in time for the Saturday evening presentation. The audience was treated to a moving “virtual” evening with Gordon Parks, a legendary Kansas son and Renaissance man world renown in several fields who is still “at the top of his game” at ninety years of age. Excerpts of St Clair Bourne’s documentary film *Half-Past Autumn: The Life and Works of Gordon Parks* were also shown.

On February 23 three film screenings were held at the Haskell Indian Nations University auditorium. Audience members were able to talk with two filmmakers, Madison Lacy and Pok-Chi Lau, after viewing their work. For all of the events on that weekend our goals were for the audience to learn more about their state’s cultural heritage through a variety of perspectives and to participate in provocative discussions. We accomplished both goals.

### **African American Women’s Oral History Project**

Following the Hughes symposium, this group has launched an effort to collect oral histories from the African American, Hispanic, and Native American citizens of Lawrence. Marla Jackson’s quilt exhibits that tell related stories are an important component of this project.

Group members have developed appropriate questions and a training workshop for potential interviewers, and they have compiled lists of possible interview subjects. They presented a session at the 2003 Oral History Conference sponsored by the Hall Center. Project interviews will be videotaped and transcribed. The videos will be available to the public on Channel 19, the Sunflower Broadband public access channel, and will be placed in the archives of Spencer Research Library. This project was the genesis of the current Ford Foundation proposal on Native American/African American relationships.

### **The Langston Hughes Center for Community Enrichment**

The LHNPP has participated in the Lawrence Public Library Study Group that has presented a plan to the City of Lawrence to transform the Carnegie Library Building into the Langston Hughes Center for Community Enrichment. The study group’s proposal includes: developing programming to encouraging verbal and cultural literacies, coordinating oral history initiatives, highlighting the significance of Langston Hughes in Lawrence, and housing the National Heritage Area office.

### **Poetry: The Language of Life**

During the spring semester of 2002, six Lawrence poets visited Lori Stussie’s creative writing class at Lawrence Alternative High School on Wednesday afternoons. The goal of the project,

funded by the Douglas County Community Foundation, was to expose the students to poetry and allow them to read, write, and discuss poetry with local poets. In their reactions to the poets' visits that are included in the book of the students' poetry that was published at the end of the semester, some of the student poets commented that they liked having different people come to the class because each made unique contributions. As the poetry book comprised of the students' works from the semester demonstrates, the students took the challenge of writing poetry seriously and ran with it, with wonderful results.

### **Read across Lawrence**

Alison Watkins, Maryemma Graham, and Barbara Watkins have served on this committee organized by the Lawrence Public Library. This annual community reading program encourages Lawrence residents to read the same book, attend book discussions, and other related events. In 2002 as part of the community-wide Langston Hughes celebration, Lawrencians read Hughes' *Not without Laughter*. This year's book was Tom Averill's *The Secrets of the Tsil Café*. More than 300 people attended RaL events in 2003.

### **Community Arts Roundtable**

Each month a group of Lawrence arts and humanities organizations, including the LHNPP, meets at the Lawrence Arts Center. This group deals with such issues as marketing, collaboration on projects, and unifying Lawrence's cultural organizations.

### **National Outreach Activities**

The Langston Hughes National Poetry Project has begun to conduct workshops and plan activities beyond Lawrence. In addition, expanded possibilities for partnerships continue. On March 23, 2003, at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Research Center, Maryemma Graham conducted a three-hour workshop for registered participants as part of the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (4C's). The conference theme was taken from a Hughes poem, and the workshop was one of the highlights of the three-day event. Although 34 people had preregistered, nearly 100 filled the media center for the workshop. The LHNPP website developed by KU Continuing Education and the *Langston Hughes Reader's Guide* were the major resources utilized. Each participant received the Reader's Guide (because of the unexpectedly large audience, some had to be mailed afterwards) and the website was "tested" for its usefulness, thoroughness and accessibility. Because of the excellent design of the KUCE website, under the supervision of Dr. Barbara Watkins, participants were able to view the rich discussions that took place over several months in a streaming audio format. Several participants commented that this was the first workshop that presented possibilities not only for teaching at various academic levels, but it also gave many different types of people, including individuals with disabilities (the website is ADA compliant) diverse opportunities to learn about and appreciate the richness of Langston Hughes, who has been too often perceived as a "simple" poet.

A meeting with Deborah Garrison, poetry editor at Alfred A. Knopf, involved a discussion of a possible conference on Twentieth Century Poetry and a documentary film on the evolution of

modern poetry [some of the footage is already housed at KU]. KU is the first choice site for such a conference because of the national perception that the Hughes Centennial Symposium was “the most inclusive of academic conferences” and continues to have an impact. Garrison pointed out that Hughes remains their best-selling author of all time, even outselling Toni Morrison. Such a conference would certainly make use of the extensive archive of Beat poetry at Spencer and examine the Midwest as a “climate for genius.” (Another top-selling Knopf poetry author is another Kansan, Kevin Young of Topeka.) Knopf gave \$7500 to support the Hughes Centennial and is expected to be a large donor for this conference that would attract the most important poets writing in the nation today. The conference would explore the last fifty years of American poetry, beginning with the Beats and culminating with Hip Hop poetry. Garrison has offered the Knopf poets to participate in the Speakers Bureau for the National Poetry Project.

## **Grants**

### **1) Funded**

National Endowment for the Humanities, “Speaking of Rivers: Taking Poetry to the People” planning grant, \$40,500

Douglas County Community Foundation, “Poetry: The Language of Life,” \$2,500

Kansas Humanities Council, “Langston Hughes February Festival: Celebrating Kansas Writers & Artists,” \$5,800

Kansas African American Commission, for videotaping of presentations in three Kansas public schools, \$2,500

### **2) Pending or in Initial Stages**

National Endowment for the Humanities, “Speaking of Rivers: Taking Poetry to the People” implementation grant, \$224, 959 (submitted February 2003)

Rockefeller Foundation, “River City Stories: A Community Arts Project,” \$77,850 (submitted May 2002; being revised for resubmission) This project would provide opportunities for three distinct Lawrence groups—African-American, Native American, and Hispanic—to do research, to collect their own stories, and to present them through a variety of expressive forms, both literary and folk based.

Philip Morris, (now Altria), Jennifer Goodale, of Altria Foundation, is considering our proposal to conduct residential poetry camps to identify and train talented young people in the Chicago/Kansas City area. Goodale provided a strong support letter for the NEH grant proposal and is assisting us with identifying additional partners. A likely possibility is Michael Warr, founder of the Chicago-based Warr Zone, a multi-arts organization widely known for its innovative and effective programs for at-risk youth.

AOLTimeWarner, Maryemma Graham has contacted Richard Parsons, CEO, at the suggestion of Gordon Parks. TimeWarner is now the custodian for *Life Magazine* archives. (Parks was the first African American photographer to be hired by a major national magazine.) Provost David Shulenburger has strongly encouraged us to pursue this trail, which may lead to Parks' placing his photo archive at KU. Its value is estimated in the millions of dollars.

Ford Foundation This grant would involve faculty at KU and Haskell and would be managed by the Hall Center. While it is NOT a "Langston Hughes Project" activity, it evolved from discussions between Maryemma Graham and the Ford Foundation. Funding initially was sought for the Hughes Centennial. As the dialogue continued, Ford Foundation program officer Gertrude Fraser became interested in the variety of activities involving pioneering work in interracial relationships being done at KU. After visiting Lawrence in fall 2002, she decided to fund a "new" project here. The grant proposal, which is being written collaboratively under the supervision of Associate Dean Carl Strikwerda, is nearly ready for submission.

Kellogg Foundation The Black Women's Oral history Project has contacted Ford Foundation program officer Barbara Sabol, formerly of Lawrence, about possible funding for the Lawrence multiracial oral history project. This project is modeled in part on another Kellogg initiative, *The African American Health Care Project: The Oral Histories*, which documents historical experiences of African Americans in Southeastern Michigan with regard to Health Care, the Health Professions, and the Health Sciences.

## Awards

In the past several months the Langston Hughes centennial symposium has been honored with several regional and national awards. Two other national and international awards are pending.

Universities Continuing Education Association (UCEA) Region V, Innovations and Contributions Award

UCEA Liberal Learning Community of Practice Phillip E. Frandson Award for Sustained Excellence in Arts Humanities and Sciences Programs.

UCEA Conferences and Professional Programs Community of Practice Exemplary Program Award

UCEA Outstanding Noncredit Program Award-- special recognition

Association for Continuing Higher Education (ACHE) Region VIII Exceptional Noncredit Program Award

The Hughes symposium also received two regional awards (one gold, one silver) from the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE)



## National Advisory Board

- Sheila Biddle** Professor of history at Columbia University and former program officer with the Ford Foundation, also serves as a consulting advisor to this project.
- Mary Beth Blake** Lawyer, Kansas City, Missouri, Shook, Hardy, and Bacon law firm
- Charles Flowers** Executive Director, Academy of American Poets, New York, NY
- Sandra Gibbs** Urbana, Illinois, director of special programs, National Council of Teachers of English
- Nancy Hiebert** Lawrence, Kansas, member, Lawrence/Douglas County National Heritage Area Committee
- Juanita Moore** Executive Director, American Jazz Museum, 18<sup>th</sup> & Vine, Kansas City, Mo.
- Kevin Powell** New York, NY, poet, editor, cultural critic
- Arnold Rampersad** Sara Hart Kimball Professor of English at Stanford University, distinguished author and official Hughes biographer, and executor for the Hughes estate serves as consulting advisor
- Jerry W. Ward Jr.** Poet and professor of English at Dillard University, New Orleans, LA

## Staff

The faculty member most identified with the Langston Hughes National Poetry Project is Maryemma Graham, professor of English.

Alison Watkins is the project's coordinator, primary researcher, and grant developer. Watkins has worked with the project since February 2001. This half-time position was funded from March 2001-March 2003 by the Office of the Chancellor as part of his support for the development of a proposal to create the Langston Hughes Center. Beginning in March 2003, this half-time position has been supported by the funds from the Project on the History of Black Writing. Pending notification of the NEH funding, the chancellor has committed another year of support for this position.

Several KU faculty and staff continue to give their time to work with the LHNPP. Substantial support is provided by KUCE, especially Barbara Watkins, coordinator of curriculum and projects at KUCE since 1984. Watkins oversees the design, development, and maintenance of the project website, *Digital Hughes*. Should the NEH implementation grant be funded, Watkins will serve as co-director, and as the primary administrative contact for the project.