

Langston Hughes and *Common Ground* in the 1940s

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The 1940s form a curious period in the literary career of Langston Hughes—that generous, modest, and prodigiously productive major American author from Harlem. Not that Hughes himself is responsible for any confusion; his literary critics are. One commentator describes Hughes' work during the decade as an increasingly disillusioned retrenchment from his optimistic proletarian internationalism of the 30s, another sees a movement away from bitter protest toward lighter humor, and a third does not comment on the 40s at all.¹ Hughes' contributions to the Common Council for American Unity (CCAU) and its quarterly, *Common Ground*, dispel some of this confusion as well as help to fill in the biographical void that looms beyond 1938 when his second and final volume of autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, closes.

After Hughes' radical activities during the 1930s, his affiliation with the CCAU seems to signal a patriotic shift in the 40s. The CCAU, although established in 1940, was actually a reconstitution of the Foreign Language Information Services (FLIS) founded in 1918. For more than twenty years, FLIS tried to give native born Americans "accurate information on foreign born groups, and [overcome] false prejudice and misunderstandings which stand in the way of assimilation," in short, to interpret "America to the alien, and the alien to America."² The Service addressed its foreign and native born

This article has profited from the careful reading and probing encouragement of my teacher and my friend, Dr. Dennis M. Jones (1932-1990), to whose memory the essay is dedicated.

1 Onwuchekwa Jemie, *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 125-126; Donald C. Dickinson, *A Bio-Bibliography of Langston Hughes. 1902-1967* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1967), p. 82; Therman B. O'Daniel, "Langston Hughes" in *Langston Hughes: Black Genius*, ed. Therman B. O'Daniel (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1971), pp. 14-15.

2 ACNS *Papers*, Shipment 7, Box 7, Folder 140.11 Civilian Relief, Dept of For Lang Information. Creation, Function Etc 1917-1921, "The Work of the Foreign Language

white constituency primarily through press releases to English and foreign language newspapers in the U.S. From 1922 the Service was directed by Read Lewis, a cagey, persistent old-stock Midwesterner with a law degree from Columbia, strong ties to the emerging social work profession, and a growing reputation as an expert on immigration policy.³

The organization turned a corner of sorts in 1934. That year Louis Adamic, with characteristically great energy, joined the FLIS Board of Trustees. Adamic had immigrated to the U.S. from Slovenia as a young man and become both a journalist and a recognized authority on the problems of immigrants. In the late 30s and early 40s, he stirred popular interest in U.S. cultural diversity with a series of books akin to Horace Kallen's ideas about "cultural pluralism" and titled with Whitman's phrase, "A Nation of Nations."⁴

In 1939 Adamic and Read Lewis secured a grant from the Carnegie Corporation. The money sparked a new name, the Common Council for American Unity, and spawned a new publication, *Common Ground*, a quarterly of fiction and non-fiction stressing intercultural harmony. The new quarterly attracted as its managing editor, M. Margaret Anderson, a second-generation Swedish American broadly knowledgeable about her own ethnic background and equally curious about others'.⁵

Of all the civic unity and race relations groups rejuvenated or initiated in the 1940s, the CCAU stood in the front rank of those conceiving of the cultural unity of the U.S. most comprehensively. The CCAU recognized cultural diversity as a basic fact of American life. As opposed to advocates of the "melting pot" theory of American social relations, Council adherents acknowledged old-stock WASPs, "Old" and "New" immigrant groups, as well as the "highly visible" minorities—African Americans, Oriental Americans, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans—as culturally distinct groups within the

Information Service" [n.d. but stamped "rec May 1921"], pp. 2-3. The Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota holds the papers of the Foreign Language Information Service that in 1940 was reorganized as the Common Council for American Unity, which in turn merged in 1959 with the American Federation of International Institutes to become the present American Council on Nationalities Services, thus the designation, "ACNS Papers." Hereafter references to documents among the ACNS papers will be abbreviated "ACNS Papers, shipment number: box number, folder name, 'document name,' page."

3 Daniel E. Weinberg, "The Foreign Language Information Service and the Foreign Born, 1918-1939: A Case Study of Cultural Assimilation Viewed as a Problem in Social Technology" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1973), p. 22.

4 Nathan Glazer, "Ethnic Groups in America: From National Culture to Ideology" in Monroe Berger, Theodore Abel, and Charles Page, *Freedom and Control in Modern Society* (Toronto: D. Van Nostrand, 1954), p. 158; Henry A. Christian, *Louis Adamic: A Checklist* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1971), pp. xxxi - xxxii .

5 ACNS Papers, "Interview between Read Lewis, American Council for Nationalities Service, and Daniel Weinberg, Immigration History Research Center, 1971," p. 20.

U.S. The Council aimed through its quarterly "to tell the story of the coming and meeting on this continent of peoples belonging to about national, racial, and religious backgrounds."⁶ This inclusivity distinguished the CCAU from, for example, the bellwether of the race relations movement, the American Council on Race Relations, which concentrated on discrimination against minorities and stressed particularly the civil rights of African Americans.⁷

By any standard, neither the CCAU nor Common Ground ever had mass appeal during the 1940s. Both, however, were influential. When most in 1946, CCAU members numbered no more than 3,700 and Common Ground subscribers no more than 8,800.⁸ Nevertheless, the CCAU staff were consulted regularly by the federal government and local social service agencies for advice regarding foreign language groups, immigration policy, and intercultural education.⁹

Common Ground, for its part, attracted a nation-wide readership, a distinguished Advisory Editorial Board, and well-known contributors. The Board was made up of Adamic, Van Wyck Brooks, Pearl Buck, Mary Ellen Chase, Langston Hughes, Alvin Johnson, Thomas Mann, and Lin Yutang; contributors other than board members included the likes of Arthur P. Davis, Max Lerner, Carey McWilliams, Archibald MacLeish, William Saroyan, and Sigrid Undset. Shortly after beginning, Common Ground was receiving approximately 2,000 manuscripts annually—most of them unsolicited—out of which eighty or so were printed each year.¹⁰ Works first appearing in Common Ground were reprinted widely, and from its pages grew directly or indirectly twenty-five books, including Owen Dodson's *Powerful Long Ladder*, Woodie Guthrie's *Bound for Glory*, Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer*, and Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*.¹¹

⁶ "Editorial Aside," Common Ground, I (Autumn 1940), 2. Hereafter references to Common Ground, which was published in Autumn (A), Winter (W), Spring (Sp), and Summer (Su), will be abbreviated, for example, "CG, I (A 40), 2."

⁷ "Miscellany," CG, IV (Su 44), 101.

⁸ ACNS Papers, 6:25, CCAU/ACNS Analysis of Contributions by Year, 1933-1964, "Number of members"; ACNS Papers, 8:3, CG Statistics. By way of comparison, Nation's subscribers in 1946 numbered 42,297, New Republic's 38,576, Survey Graphic's 33,847, Story's 7,000, and Poetry's in 1945 2,900 (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son, 1946), pp. 642, 643, 812, 655; *N. W. Ayer and Son's Directory... 1945* (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son, 1945), p. 218.

⁹ See "The Common Council at Work," CG, VII (A 46), 98; IX (W 49), 103.

¹⁰ Letter from M. Margaret Anderson (MMA) to William Beyer (WB), 19 March 1976. A copy of this letter is at the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC), University of Minnesota. Hereafter Anderson's correspondence at the IHRC is designated "MMA to recipient's initials, date, IHRC."

¹¹ ACNS Papers, 8:3, Common Ground—Appeal: Correspondence 1950-1959, "Books which Have Grown Directly or Indirectly from Common Ground."

The style and content of the articles in *Common Ground* reflect a commitment to principles above narrow esthetics. The works published are easily comprehended both in form and content and are not at all *avant garde* except compared to prevailing notions of group relations. M. Margaret Anderson, sole editor of *Common Ground* after the first year of publication, described the magazine as "a literary quarterly with a theme, a thesis."¹² Nonetheless, articles were to be of high quality, with "specific incident that makes its point by implication rather than by editorializing, moralizing, preaching, or too much exposition" and without "defensiveness or mere anger and exposes."¹³ The editors often met these high standards. A columnist for the *English Journal*, for one, thought that *Common Ground* "consistently presents some of the best literary writing among current periodicals."¹⁴

Both the ideology and the esthetics of *Common Ground* apparently appealed to Langston Hughes. Beginning with the autumn 1941 issue, he contributed frequently to *Common Ground*. He was an active member of the Advisory Editorial Board from its inception in spring of 1942 until the magazine ceased publication in 1950. He directed other authors to *Common Ground*, spoke at New York area high schools under CCAU auspices, read his work at a "Living *Common Ground*" performance in Connecticut, participated in the CCAU discussion forum called the "American Common," and consented to be listed among the CCAU Committee of Sponsors. He also became a life-long friend of Margaret Anderson.

To *Common Ground* Hughes contributed most of the genre in which he worked. His pieces there include poetry, song lyrics, essays, short stories, and two of those "Simple" sketches that chat their way so freely from essay to short story to sketch and back again.¹⁵ In fact, Hughes published more often in

¹² Tape recorded letter from MMA to WB, 2 June 1976. A copy of this letter is deposited at the Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota. Hereafter in these notes Anderson's taped letters are designated "MMA to recipient's initials, date, IHRC."

¹³ ACNS *Papers*, 6:1, FLIS/CCAUFoundation Appeals—Carnegie Foundation, 1934-1949, "The Editors to American Writers and Literary Agents, n.d." appended to "Read Lewis to Frederick P. Keppel, 28 February 1941."

¹⁴ *English Journal*, XXV (June 1946), 356.

¹⁵ The sixteen works by Hughes appeared in *Common Ground* as follows: "What the Negro Wants," II (A 41), 52-54; "Evenin' Air Blues," II (A 41), 57; "Merry Go-Round," II (Sp 42), 27; "What Shall We Do about the South?" III (W 43), 36; "Madam to You!: Four Poems Concerning the Life and Times of Alberta K." III (Su 43), 88-90; "Beaumont to Detroit: 1943," IV (A 43), 104; "White Folks Do the Funniest Things," IV (W 44), 42-46; "Equality and Dogs," IV (Sp 44), 105-106; "I Thank You for This," V (A 44), 27-28; "Simple and the Second Coming," V (Sp 45), 105-106; "Graduation," VI (A 45), 86-87; "Peace Conference in an American Town," VI (W 46), 25; "Songs for Our Nation of Nations," VIII (A 47), 31-33; "Ballad of the Seven Songs: A Poem for Emancipation Day," IX (W 49), 21-27; "Second Generation: New York," IX (Sp 49), 47; "Theme for English B," IX (A 49), 89-90. Hereafter references appear in the text abbreviated as "(article title, page number)."

Common Ground during the 40s than in any other magazine. The thirteen works first published in *Common Ground*, plus the three reprinted there from the African American press outnumber the articles that appeared in each of the other periodicals publishing his work frequently during the decade. Except for Poetry and *Carmel Pine Cone* that were decidedly "little magazines," Common Ground seems to have been Hughes' principal access to the national non-Negro readership. In contrast, The New Yorker, New Republic, Saturday Evening Post, and New Masses each published two pieces by Hughes while Esquire printed one between 1940 and 1950.¹⁶

Hughes' Common Ground pieces reveal two major developments in his thought during the 1940s. First, Hughes added the American democratic creed to Christianity and Marxism as standards by which the U.S. could be measured, and second, he sharpened his focus on the heroics of common folk, particularly the ordinary black person. Hughes, as Jemie ably shows, initially proclaimed that esthetic in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) and refined it in "To Negro Writers" (1935), "My Adventures as a Social Poet" (1947), and the Spingarn Medal acceptance speech (1960).¹⁷ I want to point out, however, that within this esthetic the standards by which Hughes as an artist demanded social change evolved throughout his career. He repeatedly pried with his literary lever at different points under the racial mountain as he pushed to overturn the discriminatory social order.

This view of Hughes' esthetic has several implications. First, his contributions to Common Ground take on new meaning. Secondly, his characterization in 1953 of his 1930s works as "outdated" need not be suspected of expediency forced by McCarthyism.¹⁸ And finally, his essays, "The Need for Heroes" (1941) and "My America" (1943), become at least as important statements of Hughes' esthetic as the late 40s essay that Professor Jemie highlights, "My Adventures as a Social Poet."¹⁹ Before investigating these implications, we ought to examine the two developments of Hughes' thought found in his Common Ground articles.

Unlike the yardsticks Hughes used prior to the 40s, again and again in Common Ground he measures the U.S. by the then current preachments on democracy and freedom inspired by World War II. Watching white Americans giving freedom and democracy such grand play abroad while Jim

¹⁶ These statistics have been culled from Dickinson's bibliography. The other magazines in which Hughes was published most frequently during the 1940s are *Poetry* (fourteen originals), *Carmel Pine Cone* (eleven originals and three reprints), *Negro Digest* (nine and five), *Opportunity* (nine and four), *Negro Story* (six and six), *Crisis* (ten and one), and *Phylon* (six and three).

¹⁷ Jemie, pp. 9-19.

¹⁸ See Jemie, pp. 14-15.

¹⁹ "The Need for Heroes," *Crisis*, XLVIII (June 1941), 184-185, 206; "My America," *Journal of Educational Sociology*, XVI (February 1943), 334-336.

Crowing blacks at home, Hughes observes that "Negroes think democracy's left hand apparently must not know what its right hand is doing" (*White Folks Do the Funniest Things*, 46).

Hughes emphasizes repeatedly that this duplicity must be faced as a basic part of American self-definition and not merely as a minority problem or a regional question.²⁰ For example, "What Shall We Do About the South?" deftly rephrases the question of its title in national terms even as the essay ostensibly sets out to answer the question as stated. "For a New Yorker of color," Hughes patiently explains, the South begins a half hour away in Newark, New Jersey, where street-comer hamburger stands would not serve a black person wishing to sit, and segregation becomes complete a bit farther south at the nation's capital, which aptly signals "the state of American democracy in relation to colored peoples" (*What Shall We Do about the South?*, 3).

The war was long over by 1949 when Hughes' final contribution to *Common Ground*, "Theme for English B," appeared. Here too, though, he dragged America before the disparity between what it was saying and what it could be expected to do. The black student persona of the poem holds his white instructor to their common civic allegiance despite differences in age, race, education, and political freedom: "You are white—/Yet a part of me, as I am a part of you./That's America" (*Theme for English B*, 90).

Hughes, of course, had pointed to the American dilemma long before the 1940s. He worked the theme as early as the "Our Land" section and the "I, Too, Sing America" epilogue of *The Weary Blues* (1926). "Let America Be America Again," with its aside that "(There's never been equality for me,/Nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free.),' " appeared as the lead poem in his proletarian collection, *A New Song* (1938). Yet it was his work during the 1940s that allowed him to say accurately in 1950 that "... the major aims of my work have been to interpret and comment upon Negro life, and *its relation to the problems of Democracy*" [my italics].²¹ Beside examining the nature of democracy in *Common Ground* during the 40s, Hughes also scrutinized representative political order in *Freedom's Plow* (1943), *Jim Crow's Last Stand* (1943), the "Words like Freedom" poems in *Fields of Wonder* (1947), and the "Making a Road" section in *One-way Ticket* (1949).

Until the 40s, Christian charity and Marxist class-solidarity had provided the criteria by which Hughes judged Jim Crow's America. "My Adventures as

²⁰ Nine of Hughes' fifteen pieces in *Common Ground* touch on this theme: "What the Negro Wants," "What Shall We Do about the South?" "Beaumont to Detroit: 1943," "White Folks Do the Funniest Things," "I Thank You for This," "Peace Conference in an American Town," "Songs for Our Nation of Nations," "Ballad of the Seven Songs: A Poem for Emancipation Day," and "Theme for English B."

²¹ "Some Practical Observations: A Colloquy," *Phylon*, XI (Fourth Quarter 1950), 307.

a Social Poet" catalogues Hughes' troubles at the hands of those affronted by his measuring the U.S. with those standards.²²

Applying the standard of democracy could also cause discomfort. "White Folks Do the Funniest Things"—which Margaret Anderson once labelled "Langston like, in sort of laughing, roaring at the idiocies of white folks"²³—provoked more comment from readers of *Common Ground* than any other piece it published.²⁴ One protester blustered with bewildering logic, "Hughes is purposely offensive.... One smart-aleck negro can do more harm to the negro cause in a community than an entire company of night riders." Anderson herself took to the pages of *Common Ground* to chastise this and other readers Hughes had offended. She condemned ignoring the paradox of crusading for freedom overseas while denying it at home on the basis of color.

I suggested above that a second development of Hughes' thought can be traced in *Common Ground*: his concern for the heroics of ordinary African Americans. Common black folk had been Hughes' primary subjects since 1921 when the first poem he published as an adult, "Negro Speaks of Rivers," appeared in *Crisis*.²⁵ Hughes' personae of the 40s, however, are different. Instead of the weary bluesmen and yet-young prostitutes of 1920s Jazzonia or the massing workers and long-suffering mothers of 1930s union halls, the 40s belong to assertive Jesse B. Semple, his awesome cousin Minnie, and the indomitable Alberta K. Johnson, "Madam to You!" While Minnie does not appear in *Common Ground*, and "Simple" gives only cameo appearances, it was in *Common Ground* that Alberta K. Johnson first asserted her demand for dignity and her will to prevail.²⁶

The "Four Poems Concerning the Life and Times of Alberta K." introduce the *Common Ground* reader to a respectable black cook and cleaning lady. The poems give a slice of an ordinary black person's life in times that routinely require heroism of blacks who just as routinely, however extraordi-

²² *Phylon*, VIII (Third Quarter 1947), 205-212. The two poems Hughes cites here as irritating churchmen most, "Christ in Alabama" and "Goodbye, Christ," were both written in the 1930s. See Professor Jemie's discussion of Hughes' "Marxist decade" (Jemie, p. 13).

²³ MMA to WB, 1 June 1976, MRC.

²⁴ M. Margaret Anderson, "Letter to the Reader," CG, IV (Sp 44), 92.

²⁵ *The Crisis*, XXIV (June 1921), 71.

²⁶ Dickinson (pp. 212-214) has incorrectly listed the four poems as appearing in the "Winter 1943" issue of *Common Ground* which may have led James A. Emanuel (*Langston Hughes* [New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967], p. 154) to misdate them too. Emanuel also states (p. 154) that the series was first entitled "Madam to You: The Life and Times of Alberta K. Johnson" in *One-Way Ticket*. The title of the *Common Ground* poems, which antedate *One-Way Ticket*, is, of course, essentially the same. The four poems would have been five had Hughes' agent, Maxim Lieber, sent to Anderson "Madam and the Wrong Visitor" when he mailed the first four. It arrived, though, after she had already made up the dummy for the issue, which didn't allow an additional page (MMA to Langston Hughes [LH], 25 May 1943, Yale University Library [YUL]).

narily, survive with their spirits and senses of humor intact. Madam Johnson hides nothing, but then why should she? "Madam's Past History" and "Madam and Her Madam" show that she has and does work hard despite the Depression, a no-good man, the parsimonious W.P.A., and the naively exploitive white woman who employs her. She is not super-human, though. She is stymied by her present boy friend's Jim Crow induced lethargy that she doubts even the Army can remedy (Madam and the Army, 89). And she does admit to a weakness for romantic movies while openly assuming responsibility for being duped by Hollywood into forgetting temporarily her far-from-romantic everyday existence (Madam and the Movies, 90). Make no mistake: this is not Willy Loman or any other anti-hero. Madam Johnson will not accept others' pity—"DON'T WORRY 'BOUT ME!" she tells the W.P.A. (Madam's Past History, 88). Nor will she swallow her own self assertion—"But I'll be dogged/If I love you!" she tells her demanding white employer (Madam and Her Madam, 90). Alberta K. Johnson, like Jesse B. Semple (Hughes intends here the colloquial, admonishing pun on "Just be simple"), is straight-forward and formidable, common but not simple-minded.

Madam Alberta K. Johnson has plenty of like-minded, strong-willed, ordinary folk as company in the pages of *Common Ground*. Hughes himself created Mary Lou Jackson, the newly graduated typist with high ambitions; the incisive student of "Theme for English B"; and the seven heroes of the "Ballad of the Seven Songs." Other authors offered a jibaro from Puerto Rico whose harsh common-law justice is miraculously upheld by the U.S. courts, a Slovenian in Cleveland who belts a foreman who berates him, a Georgian Russian immigrant to New York who refuses to be a scab laborer and tells the plant manager so, a Mexican American who gives New Mexico county nurses and extension agents their comeuppance as handily as Alberta Johnson does her tormentors, a young Navajo father who follows custom in order to gain back his half-orphaned daughter from his culturally confused in-laws, a Jewish boy dying of TB in a changing Northern urban neighborhood who forces his immigrant family to bury their racism, a Chinese father who despite poverty and an Old World outlook carefully cultivates a strong but bi-culturally viable family—the list could go on and on.²⁷

This spirit of common folk meeting on common ground pervades the magazine. People here are often class conscious and pro-union but never doctrinaire. Examples of inter-ethnic and trans-racial cooperation abound.

²⁷ Tere Rios, "The Beseiged," IX (Sp 49), 35-40; Frank Mlaker, "My Uncle Polde," III (A 42), 50-56; George and Helen Panashvily, V (A 44), 35-40; Dorothy L. Pillsbury, "Adobe Alphabet," VII (A 46), 82-87; Juanita Platero and Siyowin Miller, "Chee's Daughter," VIII (W 48), 22-31; Jo Sinclair, "Listen to My Heart," VIII (Sp 48), 81-96; Jade Snow Wong, "Daddy," V (W 45), 25-29.

News items carry word of the intercultural education movement, equal housing, and everyday mutual understanding.²⁸

Langston Hughes contributes to this spirit. One of the "Songs for Our Nation of Nations," which were drafts for the lyrics of the musical version of Elmer Rice's *Street Scene*, incants, "We were a regular Noah's ark,/ Every race beneath the sun/ But our motto for graduation was:/ *One for All and All for One!* / ... Just American kids together—/ The kids in school with me" (The Kids in School with Me, 31). Another of the songs tells of over-the-back-fence exchanges about blueberry pie among mothers, about baseball among their sons, and about neighborliness among "Colored, White ... Gentile, Jew ...You!" (Peace Conference in an American Town, 25). In this open atmosphere, Hughes even submitted a poem about a young second-generation American enamored of New York although born of an Irish mother and Polish Jewish father who both remember other skies and homelands (Second Generation: New York, 47).

As I mentioned earlier, Hughes joined in the activities of the Council and did more than just submit manuscripts for publication. Margaret Anderson remembered later that in his memberships on the CCAU Committee of Sponsors and the *Common Ground* Editorial Advisory Board, Hughes began "a token Negro" but became "far more than that. One of our most useful members."²⁹

Hughes actively supported various efforts sponsored by the Council. In March, 1945, for example, he sat on a panel with Margaret Mead and Helen Papashvily at a special membership meeting of the American Common.³⁰ He recruited at least writers Gwendolyn Brooks, Ralph Ellison, and Margaret Walker, as well as artists Oliver Harrington and Jacob Lawrence to submit their work to the quarterly.³¹ Given the small sums *Common Ground* was able to pay its authors, photographers, and illustrators, one can guess that Hughes counseled the young artists he recruited to give material to *Common Ground* regardless of the pay in hopes that the more established periodicals would thereby see the novices' work in print.³²

²⁸ See, e.g., Milla Z. Logan, "Jin-Nee," VII (A 46), 9-16; Jean Paradise, "The Friends," IX (A 48), 86-94; Aubry Haan, "Books Make Bigots," VII (Sp 47), 3-12; Ernesto Galarza, "Program for Action," IX (Su 48), 27-38; Isabel Currier, "Monument of, for, and by the Living," IX (A 48), 33-41.

²⁹ MMA to WB, 2 June 1976, IHRC.

³⁰ "The Common Council at Work," CG, V (Su 45), 100.

³¹ MMA to WB, 1 June 1976, IHRC; MMA to LH, 31 July and 12 August 1942, 25 May 1943, YUL; MMA to Margaret Walker, 28 March 1943, ACNS *Papers*, 8:4, Wa-we-wh.

³² *Ibid.*; Stella Kamp, "Langston Speaks His Mind to Young Writers," *Opportunity*, XXIV (April-June 1946), 73. Gwendolyn Brooks eulogized Hughes' "affectionate interest in the young. He was intent, he was careful. The young manuscript-bearing applicant never felt

The friendship between Margaret Anderson and Hughes began on a train from New York City to Westport, Connecticut, on Thursday, May 14, 1942. Although Hughes had already published three works in *Common Ground* and been appointed to the Advisory Editorial Board by that time, he and Anderson had never met. It was the publication of "Merry-Go-Round" in the spring 1942 issue that was responsible for their being on the same train to Connecticut. Mrs. John C. Baker, an enthusiastic subscriber to *Common Ground* and a member of the Westport branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, was moved by "Merry-Go-Round" to organize a "Living *Common Ground*." Baker's model was the Federal Theater's "Living Newspaper" during the 1930s. The Westport branch of the League and the CCAU jointly sponsored the event. Beside readings by Hughes and Van Wyck Brooks, Anderson recounted later that "There were various skits, all illustrative of the *Common Ground* theme. Very well done and they had a very big audience.... [Baker] hoped it might become a prototype of other Living *Common Ground*'s that other cities might copy."³³

Even though nothing more came of "living" demonstrations of the common ground Americans shared, Anderson and Hughes hit it off "He was as easy as an old shoe to get to know and talk to."³⁴ Anderson herself was equally unpretentious. At that time she was a forty-year-old, former high school English teacher with Mount Holyoke and Columbia degrees but without any qualms about being addressed by her first name or taking a spin around the usually staid CCAU offices perched on a mail cart.³⁵ The second-generation Swedish American whose parents came in the 1880s to Jamestown, New York, from Småland quickly established a solid friendship with the long-here African American whose roots stretched out to West Africa, France, and England as well as deep into Native America. The friendship rode cheerfully along on similar streaks of whimsy and on small kindnesses exchanged from time to time.³⁶ When Anderson discovered that Hughes was "passionately fond of jelly beans," for example, she sent him some. For his part, Hughes made her gifts

himself an intruder, never went away with oak turned ashes in the hand" ("Langston Hughes," *Nation*, 205 [3 July 1967], 7).

³³ MMA to WB, 2 June 1976, IHRC. I have checked M. Margaret Anderson's recollections against an account of the Westport production in "News Notes," CG, III (A 42), 112.

³⁴ MMA to WB, 1 June 1976, IHRC.

³⁵ MMA to WB, 1 June 1976, IHRC.

³⁶ William Beyer, "Searching for *Common Ground*, 1940-49: An American Literary Magazine and Its Related Movements in Education and Politics" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1988), p. 55; Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume I: 1902-1941. I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 5, 10. The quotation in the following sentence is from MMA to WB, 2 June 1976, IHRC.

of many of his books, each with a personal note in his massive script. Drawn to Anderson as a person, Hughes came to respect her highly as an editor.³⁷

Anderson's teaching experience led her to have a special interest in how the CCAU might affect the schools.³⁸ In early 1944, she thought up a scheme to send, under CCAU auspices, minority artists to New York City area high schools. The visits were intended to give students a pleasurable experience with minority adults as a counter to the menial stereotypes perpetuated by the mass media and the discriminatory employment pattern.³⁹ Anderson said she logically turned to Langston Hughes first "because he had such charm and his poems were so understandable, simple on the surface. He liked kids; they took to him. He was fluent in French and Spanish." Anderson arranged the schedule, and during October and November of 1944, Hughes was off to a demanding but generally well-received tour of twenty-five high schools in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut.

Spurred by the enthusiastic reception that Hughes received in most schools, Anderson thought of next sending out Pearl Primus, the black ballerina. The Council never could find funds, however, and this democratic educational project never carried further.

Even though Hughes had occasion to find his way over to the CCAU offices less often after the school tour, he and Anderson continued their friendship.⁴⁰ Sometime before Hughes and his close friends, Emerson and Toy Harper, moved in 1947 from the three-room apartment they shared on St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem, Hughes invited Anderson home for dinner with the Emersons and Arna Bontemps. At one point in the relaxed and jovial evening, Hughes and Bontemps deftly waited table and bragged tongue-in-cheek about their skills as busboys.⁴¹ When *Street Scene* opened in October, 1946, Hughes sent tickets to Anderson for opening night. After she was seated, someone delivered to her what looked like a graduation diploma, a sheaf of paper rolled up and tied with ribbon. Inside, a complimentary dedication letter to Anderson from Hughes prefaced a flowing description of the evolution, poem by poem, of "Wrapped in a Ribbon and Tied in a Bow," one of the songs in the musi-

³⁷ Hughes wrote a note to this effect in the copy of *One-Way Ticket* he gave to M. Margaret Anderson. Miss Anderson has given me the thirteen books Hughes gave to her between 1944 and 1963.

³⁸ MMA to WB, 1 June 1976, IHRC.

³⁹ Unless noted otherwise, this account of Hughes' high school tour relies on MMA to WB, 2 June 1976, IHRC. Cf. M. Margaret Anderson, "Langston Hughes Tours High Schools: A New Approach to Interracial Understanding" in California Elementary School Principals' Association, *Education for Cultural Unity*, 17th Yearbook (1945), pp. 103-105; "My Adventures as a Social Poet," 212.

⁴⁰ MMA to WB, 2 June 1976, IHRC.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

cal.⁴² Four of the discarded lyrics were printed in *Common Ground* as "Songs for Our Nation of Nations," all celebrating multi-ethnic democracy.⁴³

Milton Meltzer has conjectured that Langston Hughes' great gift for friendship may have stemmed from a need to make allies, black and white, because he was never wholly without a sense that he lived in enemy territory.⁴⁴ The messages, gifts, visits, and copies of his own books flowed out in a steady stream toward the people he so easily befriended. Beside being on the board of CCAU and *Common Ground* in the 40s, Hughes was also on the War Writers Board and the editorial boards of *Negro Digest*, *Negro Story*, and *Phylon*.⁴⁵ All of this is not to suggest that Hughes' friendship with Anderson, his generosity toward the CCAU, or his support of *Common Ground* were insignificant. Quite the opposite.

Despite the enormous demands on Hughes' time, he must have decided that a large measure of friendship and support for Anderson, the CCAU, and *Common Ground* were warranted by them—and by current political events, continued oppression of blacks, and Hughes' own personal and professional needs. Whatever Hughes' exact motivations, his contributions to *Common Ground* show his increased willingness to apply the American democratic creed to U.S. realities and they reflect his refined interest in portraying the heroic commoner, particularly the ordinary black hero, to the American public.

What are the literary historical implication of these 'two points'? First, Hughes' freedom and democracy pieces in *Common Ground* and elsewhere during the 1940s show how he continued to search for criteria with which he could convince both blacks and whites that they should level the discriminatory racial mountain. Professor Jemie has observed that the largest number of Hughes' poems treat "the black's struggle for political power and economic well-being within the American framework of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution."⁴⁶ The 1940s were Hughes' most productive years poetically,⁴⁷ and his poetry during the decade reflects the standard he used to judge the political and social health of the United States. His associations with the CCAU and his contributions to *Common Ground* help us understand why he chose this standard of democracy (as opposed to the

42 MMA to WB, 1 June 1976, IHRC.

43 See Dickinson, pp. 141, 237. On page 237, Dickinson makes two mistakes: only "Friendly in a Friendly Way" was reprinted in the *Langston Hughes Reader*, and all four poems appeared in the "Autumn 1948" issue of *Common Ground*.

44 Meltzer, pp. 264-265.

45 Emanuel, p. 41; see the mastheads of *Negro Story*, *Negro Digest*, and *Phylon*.

46 Jemie, xvi.

47 Emanuel, p. 42.

Christian and Marxist standards he used earlier or the Third-World standard he would choose later)⁴⁸ and whom he urged to apply it.

Second, Hughes' growing preoccupation with multi-ethnic democracy in *Common Ground* and elsewhere demonstrates that he gradually developed a new, non-Marxist formulation of his esthetic during the 40s, a change of perspective that could lead him to characterize in 1953 his 30s work as "outdated" without leaving him open to charges of caving in to McCarthyism. He was under intense pressure from red-baiters as early as his school tour for the CCAU in 1944. In a piece widely syndicated on the Monday morning of the second week of the tour, New York *Sun* columnist George E. Sokolsky singled out Hughes as the quintessential joiner of communist-front organizations, which frightened a few school boards (among them—much to Margaret Anderson's chagrin—the board in Cranford, New Jersey, where Anderson lived) into cancelling Hughes' appearance.⁴⁹ Of course he had to be wary of the Senator from Wisconsin, yet "Democracy" courses throughout his CCAU work right from the start in 1941. In "My Adventures as a Social Poet" (1947) published six years before "Langston Hughes Speaks" (1953), Hughes states that he has never been a communist.⁵⁰ Jesse B. Semple, Minnie, and Alberta K. Johnson are worlds apart from Hughes' mass-produced creations of the 30s, even if "Sister Johnson" in *A New Song* could be Alberta Johnson's own sister.⁵¹

Finally, in light of Hughes' freedom and democracy pieces, "The Need for Heroes" and "My America" become as important as "My Adventures as a Social Poet" for understanding Hughes' restatement of his esthetic during the 40s. "My America" (1943) poses the American dilemma as only an insider whose "ancestry goes back at least four generations on American soil—and, through Indian blood, many centuries more" (My America, 334)—can. If all Americans were like the Georgia rednecks who had then recently beaten up Roland Hayes, the internationally renowned black singer, African Americans could see little difference between America's ideals and Hitler's. Nonetheless, Hughes is confident that blacks will join with whites like Roosevelt, Wallace, Willkie, and Pearl Buck to help bring the realities of the U.S. more in line with its ideals.

There are reasons to believe, says Hughes, that life on common ground is possible. "The Need for Heroes" (1941) addresses primarily young black writers. Hughes admonishes the writers to "Look around you for the living heroes who are your neighbors—but who may not look or talk like heroes

⁴⁸ Jemie, p. 126.

⁴⁹ George E. Sokolsky, "The Joiners," New York Sun, 122 (23 Oct. 1944), p. 17; MMA to WB, 2 June 1976, IHRC.

⁵⁰ "My Adventures as a Social Poet," 209.

⁵¹ *A New Song* (New York: International Workers Order, 1938), p. 26.

when they are sitting quietly in a chair in front of you" (*The Need for Heroes*, 185). Hughes sees that he has not been sufficiently aware of the need for heroes in his past work and issues a call he himself would heed often in the 40s:

We need in literature the kind of black men and women all of us know exist in life; who are not afraid to claim our rights as human beings and as Americans; who are not afraid of the mobsters, the crooked politicians, and the often ignorant, short-sighted, and dangerous demagogues in places of power; who are not afraid of the sometimes venal black demagogues paid to fool and mislead their own people. (*The Need for Heroes*, 185)

The foes in *Common Ground* are seldom so formidable or so close to home, but such ordinary heroes stride through every issue. Given "The Need for Heroes" and "My America," then, no wonder that *Common Ground* is the literary turf where Madam Johnson first trod and the schoolchildren of "Songs for Our Nation of Nations" danced while Langston Hughes contemplated freedom and democracy in 40s America.