

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LITERARY

A Dream Deferred

Langston Hughes and the Poetry of Harlem

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

September 13, 2026

Contribution Track • ERA V–VI • Chapel Hill & Wilson, North Carolina

Who He Is

James Mercer Langston Hughes was born February 1, 1901, in Joplin, Missouri, and raised largely by his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas after his parents separated, moving through roughly six cities before age twelve. He enrolled at Columbia University in 1921 and left within a year, working as a busboy, launderer, and merchant seaman — travel that took him to West Africa and Europe — before completing his degree at Lincoln University, a historically Black institution in Pennsylvania, in 1929. By the mid-1920s he had emerged as the central poetic voice of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Weary Blues and the Racial Mountain

His debut collection, *The Weary Blues* (1926), grew out of a poem that won first prize in Opportunity magazine's 1925 literary contest and helped launch his career with Alfred A. Knopf. That same year, in *The Nation*, he published "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," a manifesto for Black artists' freedom to depict Black life honestly rather than pandering to white or Black bourgeois respectability.

"We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame... We know we are beautiful. And ugly too." — Langston Hughes

He pioneered blues and jazz rhythm as poetic structure rather than mere subject, most fully in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), whose opening poem gave Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* its title.

"What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?" — Langston Hughes, "Harlem"

The 1953 Hearing

During the Depression Hughes wrote openly radical, pro-Soviet poetry and traveled to the USSR in 1932–33. On March 24, 1953, he testified before Senator Joseph McCarthy's Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, disavowing his earlier work as youthful naivety rather than invoking the Fifth Amendment — a choice that protected his career while costing him standing with some on the left. Across a career spanning poetry, fiction, drama, essays, and his long-running "Simple" newspaper columns for the *Chicago Defender*, he remained the most widely read Black poet of his century. He died May 22, 1967, in New York, following complications from surgery.

North Carolina Stops

In December 1931, following publication of his poem "Christ in Alabama" addressing the Scottsboro case, Hughes spoke at all-white UNC-Chapel Hill under police presence after a trustee reportedly said he "should be run out of town"; university president Frank Porter Graham allowed the event to proceed. In February 1949 he lectured at Darden High School in Wilson, North Carolina for National Negro History Week, with proceeds benefiting the local Black library's bookmobile fund, and visited students at St. Alphonsus Catholic School, who performed his poem "Freedom's Plow" for him.

NC Local Lens

No documented Fayetteville or Cumberland County connection was found for Hughes despite a targeted search, and none is claimed here. His confirmed North Carolina appearances — Chapel Hill in 1931 and Wilson in 1949 — sit elsewhere in the state. Given how heavily Hughes toured historically Black colleges and libraries in the 1930s through 1950s, a Fayetteville stop is plausible but unconfirmed; this entry represents only what a search of general and institutional sources could verify, not what a deeper dive into Fayetteville Observer archives or Fayetteville State University's own scrapbook collections might eventually turn up.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Committee named: Hughes testified before the Senate's McCarthy subcommittee, not the House Un-American Activities Committee — a distinction worth preserving precisely.

Birth year: 1901 is standard across institutional sources; at least one secondary source misprints 1902.

Formal Communist Party membership: sources agree on radical writing and Soviet sympathy in the early 1930s but disagree on whether he was ever a formal CPUSA member versus a fellow traveler.

Possible undocumented Fayetteville stop: a targeted search of DigitalNC's North Carolina Newspapers portal and Fayetteville State's Rudolph Jones Scrapbook Collection was not performed in this research pass and could change this entry's NC Local Lens finding.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Langston Hughes and His Poetry," Library of Congress, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021687598/>.
2. "Langston Hughes," Poetry Foundation, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes>.
3. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Poetry Foundation (reprint of the 1926 Nation essay), accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain>.
4. "Langston Hughes on Trial," American Experience, PBS, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/mccarthy-langston-hughes-trial/>.
5. "More than 90 years ago, poet Langston Hughes visited UNC-Chapel Hill amidst controversy," WFAE 90.7, March 10, 2023, <https://www.wfae.org/arts-culture/2023-03-10/more-than-90-years-ago-poet-langston-hughes-visited-unc-chapel-hill-amidst-controversy>.
6. "Langston Hughes," Black Wide-Awake (Wilson, NC local history blog, citing the Wilson Daily Times, Feb. 8–9, 1949), accessed September 13, 2026, <https://afamwilsonnc.com/tag/langston-hughes/>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.