Open and Closed Doors at the University: Two Giants of the Harlem Renaissance

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- Hughes died a recognized and lauded poet while Hurston died with little money and recognition
- Pairing them together is no conflation of black artists as they were good friends at a time and ran in the same literary circles
- Hughes and Columbia (5 pages)

Hughes' time at Columbia was not the first time he had been one of the few black students in the classroom. In high school, Central HIgh School in Cleveland, Ohio Hughes was the only black student in his graduating class. Despite the only black student at his class Hughes was able to thrive academically and be a part of student life

Hughes was the first of the two to enter the gates of the university at Morningside. He enrolled at the school of Mines at the insistence of his father who wanted him to become an engineer, opposite of the stellar career he would later have. In his biography, *Big Sea*, he has a total of three pages about his time at Columbia. He has nothing good to say as he starts the chapter with "I didn't like Columbia" (83) . He spent

on academic year at the university before leaving. He may not have much to say in his biography perhaps indicating the mediocre experience he had. Correspondence with his father reveal the financial struggles he had as a student that hindered him from being fully invested in his classes. Hughes' first contact with Columbia was largely isolating and exclusionary which lies in great contrast with the relationship he would build with the University in his later years of his career once he was a prominent writer.

Right before arriving at Columbia in the fall of 1921, Hughes stayed at room in the YMCA in Harlem. He described the experience of getting off the subway on 135th street in awe, "Hundred of colored people! I wanted to shake their hands with them, speak to them….Harlem!" (81). Among other black people, Hughes felt at ease and happy. This relieving reception Harlem gave Hughes contrasted with the cold and racist experience when he tried to access his dorm in Hartley Hall. The attendant at the hospitality desk, upon seeing Hughes, claimed that all the rooms were taken even though Hughes reserved his room far in advance. She asked if Hughes was Mexican and wouldn't give him his admittance slip until she made some phone calls and talked with several other hospitality staff members. This initial incident marked the first of many racist and explusionary experiences Hughes encountered in his one year at the university.

Hughes detailed how he was excluded by his peers in social events. A wealthy dorm mate would drive his car near the windows of Hartley Hall and invite his friends out for a ride but "he would never call me [Hughes] , of course" (83). This was the very same dorm mate that would only use Hughes to help him on his French homework. Hughes isolation of being one of the few black students on campus was also felt by his Chinese national roommate, Chun. Chun "said white people were much nicer in the missionary school in China from which he came" (83). The Columbia student body in 1921 seemed largely hostile to anyone who did not fit into a WASP category. Neither Hughes or Chun were asked to dance in social functions hosted by the universities or asked to join a fraternity. While this upset Chun, it did not surprise Hughes. The most egregious exclusion from student life came from The Spectator's staff, "When I [Hughes] tried out for the Spectator, they assigned me to gather frat house and society news, asn assignment impossible for a colored boy to fill, as they knew" (83). The Spectator could

have been a genuine place on campus for Hughes to develop and use his talents as writer. He wasn't outrightly rejected because he was black rather he was sent a coded message by the editors in assigning him to cover fraternity life. This characterized much of the discrimination Hughes faced at Columbia which disabled him from addressing it directly. Additionally with the disconnect he felt with the student body and student life, Hughes did not find any interest in his classes. Instead of applying himself to his studies Hughes "went to shows, read books, attended lecture sat the Rand School" (85). Since Hughes could not integrate himself to Columbia student life or find inspiration in his studies he looked elsewhere beyond the gates of the university.

Beyond his autobiography, the correspondence Hughes maintained with his father in Mexico give more insight to his relationship to the university as an undergraduate. Most of the correspondence pertains to money matters and issues transferring money from Mexico to New York. In a letter written in early October Hughes notes to his father that he applied to be a part of The Spectator, "I am trying out for The Spectator, the daily newspaper published at Columbia. The candidates received 3 classes a week in newspaper work free" (). In his correspondence with his father, Hughes mentioned no other extracurricular activity which implies a real excitement about joining the newspaper. He never mentions The Spectator to his father again probably due to them assigning him to fraternity life.

To cut on expenses, Hughes washed his own laundry in his room which took most of the night and read textbooks available at the library instead of buying them new. He decided to board with Chun in his second term in order to save on rent. He also tried to get a job in late November but informed his father that the ait list at the student employment office was so long that he would not get a job until the next year. In several instances, Hughes hinted at his financial difficulties in his letters. He noted that as it got colder he would be in need of winter underwear and wrote about a suggestion that his French teacher gave him to study in Paris as it was more affordable. Miss Faucet, editor of the *Crisis* magazine, also echoed the suggestion believing it would be better for Hughes to study in Paris as there would be more "Colored students" (). It appeared that Hughes came to a breaking point in February 14th 1922 when he requested his father

to write a letter to the dean to allow him to withdraw from the university as he could not keep up with the expenses. For Hughes, juggling courseworks while doing everything in his power to keep costs down proved too stressful. He noted that he would spend “half the night washing my clothes” while his other classmates allowances provided by their parents provided them $1200 to spend a year. Hughes did not spend even a fraction of that as his father required him to send itemized receipts of all of his expenses and was easily angered when Hughes failed to do so.

He detailed his expenses to his father in the following fashion:

Term One

Tuition	158.00
Exam fee	6.00
Dormitory	87.50
Class fee	2.50
Books	14.83
Total	

Gym fee of $4

Weekly expenses $7

This was just the initial projected expenses that soon increased as Hughes realized how expensive it was to live in New York. He often had to request for money from his father who grudgingly sent him more and demanded that he detail his additional expenses to him.

Term one plus term two expenses:

Tuition (Sept.)	166.00
Tuition (Feb.)	144.00
Dormitory (Sept) ($10 deposit)	87.50
Dormitory (Feb.)	77.50
Books	27.76
Expenses in September (Landing Hotel and YMCA)	52.00
Clothes	79.00
Dentist	11.00
Doctor (physical exam)	3.00
Class expenses (dinner, freshman cap, etc	9.00
Lecture courses at the Rand School	3.50
On hand at present	27.83
Total	694.09

$694.09 would be around $10000 today adjusting for inflation which is still very expensive considering that Hughes was living on a budget. His expenses were almost half of the $1200, around $17,000 in today's money, his peers had at their disposal. It is no wonder that Hughes wanted to leave the university to find a more liveable situation. He later enrolled at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania where he fared much better academically and socially. Hughes finished the first term with one A, one B+, two Bs, one B-, and C. He finished his last term with two B+s grades, one B, one C+, and and F.

In Lincoln University, he was graded in groups. There were five in total number one the highest standing and five being the group of failure. He never got lower than group three in his standings. Documents from his time at Lincoln include prom invitations, certification of his membership in Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, and certification of his membership of the Phi Lambda Sigma Literary society (). At Lincoln, Hughes was able to maintain a solid academic record and immerse himself in student life. At Columbia, he was sure that Greek life could never be accessible as fraternity member or reporter but at Lincoln he was able to find community in Greek life. Later *in his career, Hughes wrote of poem entitled Columbia. While it is not clear when it was first published, it does contain some clues to what Hughes felt about Columbia University at the time of its publication. The poem is largely about colonization and references Columbia as a colonizing force. At first, it may seem tangential to Hughes experiences at Columbia University but in naming the poem Columbia he does directly tie it to the university institution.*

While Hughes was at Lincoln University, Hurston was getting her start at Barnard College with the help of white allies dedicated to supporting black artists. Hurston had a knack of winning people over with her charm when it came to getting what she wants. This charisma and confidence was thanks to her childhood. Hurston's pride in her black identity was cultivated by her upbringing in Eatonville, Florida which was the inspiration for her most well-known novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston was born in 1891 Notasulga, Alabama to sharecroppers but they later moved to Eatonville in 1892 where they would raise Hurston. Eatonville was self-sufficient all-black community. Hurston's father was able to start a carpentry business and later became mayor of the town. Hurston was so unaware of her race and the social conventions of the time that according to Fradin, in her book *Zora!*, "Zora like to sit on the gate post near the road and watch the white people drive by in their horse-drawn carriages and in a new invention called the automobile" (10 Fradin). Hurston would often ask to accompany the white people in their automobiles much to her grandmother's chargin as she was a former slave and feared that Hurston would be lynched. These early race interactions that Hurston had growing up gives context to the later relationships she had with her white mentors. She was subservient when she needed to get her own way yet always

remained true to herself and confident in her abilities. She did not let stereotypes of black women define her or lead her to have inferiority complex rather she was aware of her talents and felt she deserved recognition.Hurston's childhood in Eatonville also informed her later academic interest in Anthropology as she grew up with African-American folklore and traditions that had its roots in African traditions passed down during the times of slavery.

The confidence in herself that Hurston was able to cultivate in Eatonville caught the attention of many white people when she moved to New York City in 1925. It was her charisma and personality that led to her befriending of Annie Nathan Meyer, founder of Barnard College who would later help her gain admission to the all women's college. Both Hughes and Hurston collided when they were both winners of writing contests hosted by the *Opportunity* magazine. The founder of the magazine Charles S. Johnson created the magazine to document black culture often neglected by mainstream media sources and wanted to give a platform to up and coming black arits (britannica). During the after party, Zora met several people who would be key in here development as an artist and academic such as Meyer,

- She won the prize at an opportunity event for her play Spunk.

Hurston's years at Barnard were more successful than Hughes' years at the Morningside campus. Though Hurston was able to socialize with her white classmates, they often treated her a the token black student. Initially she felt hy

- InInitially she felt ostracized
    - Classmates would make fun of her in French class
    - Tutelage of Fannie Hurst
    - Gave her social capital and she become something of a token to her white classmates
    - She enjoyed her studies but struggled within the confines of the student schedule
    - Reached outside in Harlem

Outside of her classes, Hurston was steeped in the literary life that Harlem provided. At Barnard she became what we would call today a token minority to her white peers. Outside of Barnard, in Harlem she was able to meet and create with other young black artists. Her time spent in Harlem also increased her difficulties managing her time as a full-time student.

- Financial struggles but found support in Hurst and Meyer
    - Zora, due to her charm, was able to secure funding to continue her studies at Barnard

Franz Boas is largely recognized as the father of Anthropology as a discipline. Early in his career he disputed the fallacies of race science pointing to historical events, such as slavery, that prevent peoples from building civilization. He transformed the entire discipline of Anthropology to distinguish race from culture and to move the discourse away from racial superiority. Instead he focused on studying the specificity of cultures. According to Columbia's department of Anthropology's website Boas "pioneered the concept of life group displays, commonly known as dioramas, and exhibited skulls of various peoples to demonstrate the irrelevance of brain size and argue the diminished significance of theories of racial distinction between humans" (Columbia Anthropology). His research was in direct opposition to then considered legitimate science of phrenology that argued that the shape of skull was determinant of a human's mental capacity. Boas arrived to New York from Germany in 1896, partly to escape the anti-semitism of Bismarck Germany, and in 1899 became "became the first Professor of Anthropology at Columbia" (Columbia anthropology).

Boas negation of race science and creation of the Department of Anthropology at Columbia made him a perfect mentor for Hurston. The first met

- Recognized her talent

With the help of Hughes, Hurston was able to secure the patronage of who they called Godmother. Godmother was Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy benefactor to many artist of the Harlem Renaissance such as Hughes, Alaine Locke, and Hurston. Her terms were strict in that she could not reveal her, Manson's, identity to anyone and

all the material she collected was in Manson's domain. This strained her relationship with Boas as she could not reveal her research to Boas without Godmother's permission. In a letter to Boas written in December of 1928 when she was in the South doing anthropological work under his tutelage, she writes "I have wanted to write you but a promise was exacted of me that I would write to no one. Of course I have intended from the very beginning to show what I have, but after I had returned. Thus I could keep my word and at the same time have your guidance" (life in letters). Towards the end of the letter Hurston acknowledges the the influence Boas had in her development as anthropologist, "The experience I had under you was a splendid foundation" (life in letters). To some degree, Hurston had to neglect Boas as a research partner and mentor because he could not provide the same financial resources that Manson could. In letter written to Boas in June of 1930 Hurston referred to Manson as the "angel" who was "cold towards the degree, but will put up money for further research. I have broached the subject from several angles but it got chill blains no matter how I put it" (life in letters). Mason overshadowed Boas' influence on Hurston on her development as an academic. Boas wanted Hurston to pursue and PhD in Anthropology

Hurston was close to realizing an her dream of getting a PhD when she received funding, outside of Mason influence, to pursue her PhD in Anthropology at Columbia. On December of 1934 Hurston happily wrote to Boas about the Rosenwald scholarship she secured to pursue her doctorate, "If all goes well I shall be entering immediately after the holidays. I have wanted the training keenly and tried very hard to get Mrs. Mason to do it for me. She would give money for everything else but that" (life in letters). Hurston exhibits an eagerness to start her doctorate under Boas and away from the influence of Mason which she at times found stifling and too controlling. The Rosenwald scholarship offered Hurston scholarly freedom and financial stability with no strings attached.

- Failed chance to get a doctorate at Columbia

Hurston did not enjoy the same involvement at Barnard College and Columbia University as a notable writer as Hughes did. In a letter to George Arthur, she does note that "the literary world is taking due notice of me. The annual Writer's Tea at Barnard

College has me for the guest of honor" (life in letters). This is one of the few times Hurston is invited back on campus. Towards the end of her life, she lost contact with many of her friends in New York and she remained in the South later in her career.

Starting in the early forties, Hughes started corresponding with several Columbia faculty across departments. The correspondence mostly had to do with speaking invitations and proposed collaborations with departments at Columbia. By now Hughes was prominent and widely recognized poet outside black artistic circles. The former isolation he experienced during his time as a student was replaced by the eager inclusion of Hughes and his work in the Columbia community. March 3rd of 1943 marked the beginning of years of correspondence between Hughes and Russell Potter of Columbia's institute of Arts and Sciences. Dr.Russell Potter was appointed director of the Arts Institute in 1930 and was in charge of the adult education division which included organizing lectures and talks. In Potter's first letter to Hughes he invites Hughes to a tribute event to the life of George Washington Carver and an accompanying biography by Rackham Holt. He writes "On behalf of the university I have to honor now to invite you to join us" (Beneike).

Some days later Hughes gets a letter from another Columbia faculty member from the University Extension, John H. H. Lyon. Professor Lyon taught a class for several years at Columbia and frequently invited notable authors and poets. He writes "at each meeting of the class I had someone who has done distinguished work in letters speak most informal" (Beneicke). In past year of the class, he has invited "better known poets from Frost and our friend, Stephen Bennett to Carl Sandburg" (Beinecke). Hughes, before rejected by the Columbia community because of his race, how is considered by the faculty to be among the great artist of his time, at least well-known and respected enough to be invited to a Columbia event. About two weeks later, Professor Lyon writes again to Hughes asking for a response and offering his payment of fifty dollars again.

On April 7th 1943, Russell Potter writes again to Hughes thanking him for his part in the Carver event and requests Hughes to make another appearance at an informal

poetry gathering. In response Hughes writes that “I shall be delighted to appear at Columbia again”

In November 16th Potter thanks Hughes “most sincerely for the signed portrait” and notes that “It is a good one and I am very glad to have to add to our collection in the Speaker’s room” ().

Potter and Hughes retain correspondence and rapport for years. Potter frequently invites for Hughes to attend and participate in lectures and talks. His monetary compensation increases through the years of invitations signaling the rise of Hughes stature as an artist.

Responding to another lecture request on April 27th enthusiastically responds “I still have happy memories of the Charles S. Johnson dinner at the Faculty Club” (Beineckie). HUghes exhibits and excitement about his inclusion at exclusive Columbia events and does not seem to hold any resentment towards the institution he has such a terrible time as an undergraduate. The Columbia student body seemed receptive to his presence as in December of 1953 that he received “two or three nice fan letters from students” after a past lecture Potter invited him to speak at (beinecke). The admiration and respect the students have of Hughes is further demonstrated by invitation on behalf of the student council to and Arts Forum as they considered Hughes to be one of “leaders in the creative arts” (Beinecke).

Potter invited Hughes to exclusive events such as a private dinner with the president of Fisk University or cocktail events. Columbia faculty such as Potter brought Hughes back into the fold of the Columbia intellectual life

Unfortunately on March 1957, Potter notified Hughes of the University’s decision to close the Institute of Arts and Sciences which marked the end of years of correspondence pOtter had with Hughes as the director of the institute.

Hughes involvement in the Columbia community later in his career was not limited to lecture talks. The Department of Music and the Columbia Theater Associates collaborated with Hughes to produce The Barrier, one Hughes’ operas in November

1949. In a letter to Milton Smith Hughes requested “in line with publicity and promotion for The Barrier perhaps the campus bookshops might be interested in stocking some of my books, particularly The Weary Blues” (Beineicke) Here the university had a clear commitment to producing and selling Hughes’ art. The play ran for 10 days at the Brander Matthews theater in Midtown New York. Willard Rhodes, of the Department of Music, expressed his gratitude towards Hughes saying “I trust that it will find its way to Broadway where the authors and composers will be more substantial than here at Columbia” (Beinecke). The Barrier has never been performed live before so Columbia’s production of the play marked a significant step in the proliferation of Hughes’ art. Not only did the Columbia community actively sought Hughes’ presence at lecture talks, they also genuinely believed in the artistic merit of his work.

Assessing both Hughes and Hurston’s time at the Columbia/Barnard campus, it would be stretch to say that they both were able to thrive on campus. As an undergraduate, Hughes was excluded from campus life due to him being one of the few black students in his class and his financial difficulties. Hurston was able to find mentors to gain social stature among her peers but she also struggled financially. They both looked to Harlem as a place for artistic inspiration outside the predominantly white community at Columbia. Today, both Barnard and Columbia market Hurston and Hughes as prominent alumni in their respective colleges. This marketing is not completely fair as Hughes attended the school of Mines for a year and Hurston transferred to Barnard from Howard University and she spent substantial time outside of Barnard Student Life.

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