CHAPTER III

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF LANGSTON HUGHES AND HIS APPEAL FOR UNIVERSAL COLOUR LINE

“I’ve known rivers:
I’ve known rivers ancient as the world of older than the flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers”.
The first three lines of the signature poem of Langston Hughes’ ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’ (Gates Jr., 1254).

One of the outstanding poets who has been related to the Harlem Renaissance is Langston Hughes. He has been hailed as the Poet Laureate of the Harlem movement. His contribution as a poet, playwright and auto biographer is remarkable. An attempt has been made to explain the biographical details of Langston Hughes and to evaluate how far Langston Hughes’s autobiography resembles a picaresque novel and record of his yearly political and social thought that services as the outstanding firsthand document of Harlem Renaissance years and offers commentary on wide range of issues such as Race, Color, Jim Crow, Africa, Black experience in Europe in the post war years, jazz, blues and white patronage.

James Mercer Langston Hughes was born on 1st February, 1902 and died on 22nd May 1967. He was an American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist. He was one of the earliest innovators of the then-new literary art form called jazz poetry. Hughes is best known as a leader of the Harlem Renaissance. He famously wrote about the period that "the Negro was in vogue", which was later paraphrased as "when Harlem was in vogue" (Francis, 85).
Both of Hughes' paternal great-grandmothers were African-American and both of his paternal great-grandfathers were white slave owners of Kentucky. One of these men was Sam Clay, a Scottish-American whiskey distiller of Henry County and supposedly a relative of Henry Clay, and the other was Silas Cusen Berry, a Jewish-American slave trader of Clark County. Hughes's maternal grandmother Mary Patterson was of African-American, French, English and Native American descent. One of the first women to attend Oberlin College, she first married Lewis Sheridan Leary, also of mixed race. Lewis Sheridan Leary subsequently joined John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 and died from his wounds.

In 1869, the widow Mary Patterson Leary married again, into the elite, politically active Langston family. Her second husband was Charles Henry Langston, of African-American, Native American, and Euro-American ancestry. He and his younger brother John Mercer Langston worked for the abolitionist cause and helped lead the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society in 1858. Charles Langston later moved to Kansas, where he was active as an educator and activist for voting and rights for African Americans. Charles and Mary's daughter Caroline was the mother of Langston Hughes.

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri. He is the second child of school teacher Carrie (Caroline) Mercer Langston and James Nathaniel Hughes. Langston Hughes grew up in a series of Midwestern small towns. Hughes' father left his family and later divorced Carrie, going to Cuba, and then to Mexico, seeking escape from the enduring racism in the United States.

After the separation of his parents, while his mother travelled seeking employment, young Langston Hughes was raised mainly by his maternal grandmother, Mary Patterson Langston, in Lawrence, Kansas. Through the Black American oral tradition and drawing from the activist experiences of her generation, Mary Langston instilled in her grandson a lasting sense of racial pride. He spent most of his childhood in Lawrence, Kansas. After the death of his
grandmother, he went to live with family friends, James and Mary Reed, for two years. In his 1940 autobiography *The Big Sea* he expresses, "I was unhappy for a long time, and very lonesome, living with my grandmother. Then it was that books began to happen to me, and I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas" (TBS, 11).

Later, Hughes lived again with his mother Carrie in Lincoln, Illinois. She had remarried when he was still an adolescent, and eventually they lived in Cleveland, Ohio, where he attended High School. While in Grammar School in Lincoln, Hughes was elected class poet. Hughes stated that in retrospect he thought it was because of the stereotype that African Americans have rhythm and added, “I was a victim of a stereotype. There were only two of us Negro kids in the whole class and our English teacher was always stressing the importance of rhythm in poetry. Well, everyone knows, except us, that all Negroes have rhythm, so they elected me as class poet” (TBS, 24)

During High School in Cleveland, he wrote for the School newspaper, edited the yearbook, and began to write his first short stories, poetry, and dramatic plays. His first piece of jazz poetry, "When Sue Wears Red", was written while he was in High School. Hughes had a very poor relationship with his father. He lived with his father in Mexico for a brief period in 1919. Upon graduating from high school in June 1920, Hughes returned to Mexico to live with his father, hoping to convince him to support his plan to attend Columbia University. Hughes later said that, prior to arriving in Mexico, "I had been thinking about my father and his strange dislike of his own people. I didn't understand it, because I was a Negro, and I liked Negroes very much" (TBS, 54–56). Initially, his father had hoped for Hughes to attend a University abroad, and to study for a career in Engineering. On these grounds, he was willing to provide financial assistance to his son but did not support his desire to be a writer. Eventually, Hughes and his father came to a compromise that Hughes would study Engineering, so long as he could attend Columbia. The tuition fee provided by his father made him leave for Columbia for
about a year. While at Columbia in 1921, Hughes managed to maintain a B+ Grade average. He left in 1922 because of racial prejudice, and his interests revolved more around the neighbourhood of Harlem than his studies, though he continued writing poetry.

Hughes did various odd jobs, before serving a brief tenure as a crewman aboard the S.S. Malone in 1923, spending six months traveling to West Africa and Europe. In Europe, Hughes left the S.S. Malone for a temporary stay in Paris.

During the early 1920s in England, Hughes became part of the Black expatriate community. In November 1924, he returned to the United States to live with his mother in Washington D.C. Hughes worked at various odd jobs before gaining a white-collar job in 1925 as a Personal Assistant to the historian Carter G. Woodson at the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. As the work demands limited his time for writing, Hughes quit the position to work as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel. There he encountered the poet Vachel Lindsay, with whom he shared some poems. Impressed with the poems, Lindsay publicized his discovery of a new Black poet. By this time, Hughes' earlier work had been published in magazines and was about to be collected in his first book of poetry.

The following year, Hughes enrolled in Lincoln University, a historically Black University in Chester County, Pennsylvania. He joined the Omega Psi Phi fraternity. Thurgood Marshall, who later became an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, was an alumnus and classmate of Langston Hughes during his undergraduate studies at Lincoln University. After Hughes earned a B.A. Degree from Lincoln University in 1929, he returned to New York. Except for travels to the Soviet Union and parts of the Caribbean, Hughes lived in Harlem as his Primary Home for the rest of his life. During the 1930s, Hughes became a resident of Westfield, New Jersey.
Some academics and biographers today believe that Hughes was a homosexual and included homosexual codes in many of his poems, similar in manner to Walt Whitman. Hughes has cited him as an influence on his poetry. Hughes' story ‘Blessed Assurance’ deals with a father's anger over his son's effeminacy and queerness. The biographer Aldrich argues that, in order to retain the respect and support of Black Churches and organizations and avoid exacerbating his precarious financial situation, Hughes remained closeted.

Arnold Rampersad, the primary biographer of Hughes, determined that Hughes exhibited a preference for other African-American men in his work and life. However, Rampersad denies Hughes's homosexuality in his biography, concluding that Hughes was probably asexual and passive in his sexual relationships. He did, however, show a respect and love for his fellow Black men and women. Other scholars argue for Hughes' homosexuality. His love of Black man is evidenced in a number of reported unpublished poems to an alleged Black male lover (West, 162.).

On 22nd May 1967, Hughes died from complications after abdominal surgery, related to prostate cancer, at the age of 65. His ashes are interred beneath a floor medallion in the middle of the foyer in the Arthur Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. It is the entrance to an auditorium named for him. The design on the floor is an African cosmogram entitled Rivers. The title is taken from his poem ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’. Within the center of the cosmogram is the line: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (Gates Jr., 1254).

First published in The Crisis in 1921, ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’ which became Hughes's signature poem was collected in his first book of poetry. The Weary Blues (1926) Hughes' first and last published poems appeared in The Crisis. Most of his poems were published in The Crisis. Hughes' life and work were enormously influential during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, alongside those of his contemporaries - Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Aaron Douglas. Except for
McKay, the others worked together also to create the short-lived magazine *Fire!!* devoted to younger Negro artists.

Hughes and his contemporaries had different goals and aspirations than the Black middle class. They criticized the men known as the midwives of the Harlem Renaissance: W. E. B. Du Bois, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Alain Leroy Locke, as being overtly accommodating and assimilating eurocentric values and culture to achieve social equality.

Hughes and his fellows tried to depict the low-life in their art, that is, the real lives of Blacks in the lower social-economic strata. They criticized the divisions and prejudices based on skin color within the Black community. Hughes wrote what would be considered as their manifesto in *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, published in the Nation in 1926:

*The younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful and ugly too the tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.* (4)

Hughes identified as unashamedly Black at a time when Blackness was démodé. He stressed the theme of Black is beautiful as he explored the Black human condition in a variety of depths. His main concern was the uplift of his people, whose strengths, resiliency, courage, and humor he wanted to record as part of the general American experience.
Hughes’ poetry and fiction portrayed the lives of the working-class Blacks in America, lives he portrayed as full of struggle, joy, laughter, and music. Permeating his work is pride in the African-American identity and its diverse culture. He says, "My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind" (Qtd in Rampersad, 418). He confronted racial stereotypes, protested social conditions, and expanded African America’s image. Hughes is a people's poet who sought to re-educate both audience and artist by lifting the theory of the Black aesthetic into reality.

Hughes stressed a racial consciousness and cultural nationalism devoid of self-hate. His thought united people of African descent and Africans across the globe to encourage pride in their diverse Black folk culture and Black aesthetic. Hughes was one of the few prominent Black writers to champion racial consciousness as a source of inspiration for Black artists. His African-American race consciousness and cultural nationalism would influence many foreign Black writers, such as Jacques Roumain, Nicolás Guillén, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Aimé Césaire. Along with the works of Senghor, Césaire, and other French-speaking writers of Africa and of African descent from the Caribbean, such as René Maran from Martinique and Léon Damas from French Guiana in South America, the works of Hughes helped to inspire the Négritude movement in France. A radical Black self-examination was emphasized in the face of European colonialism. In addition to his example in social attitudes, Hughes had an important technical influence by his emphasis on folk and jazz rhythms as the basis of his poetry of racial pride.

In 1930, his first novel, Not Without Laughter, won the Harmon Gold Medal for literature. At a time before widespread arts grants, Hughes gained the support of private patrons and he was supported for two years prior to publishing this novel. The protagonist of the story is a boy named Sandy, whose family must deal with a variety of struggles due to their race and class, in addition to relating to one another.
In 1931, Hughes helped form the *New York Suitcase Theatre* with playwright Paul Peters, artist Jacob Burck, and writer Whittaker Chambers, an acquaintance from Columbia. In 1932, he was part of a board to produce a Soviet film on "Negro Life" with Malcolm Cowley, Floyd Dell, and Chambers.

Hughes' first collection of short stories was published in 1934 with *The Ways of White Folks*. He finished the book at a Carmel, California cottage provided for a year by Noel Sullivan, another patron. These stories are a series of vignettes revealing the humorous and tragic interactions between Whites and Blacks. Rampersad observes, “Overall, they are marked by a general pessimism about race relations, as well as a sardonic realism” (207).

In 1935, Hughes received a Guggenheim Fellowship. The same year that Hughes established his theatre troupe in Los Angeles, he realized an ambition related to films by co-writing the screenplay for ‘Way Down South’. Hughes believed that his failure to gain more work in the lucrative movie trade was due to racial discrimination within the industry.

In Chicago, Hughes founded The Sky loft Players in 1941, which sought to nurture Black playwrights and offer theatre from the Black perspective. Thereafter, he was hired to write a column for the *Chicago Defender*, in which he presented some of his most powerful work, giving voice to Black people. The column ran for twenty years. In 1943, Hughes began publishing stories about a character called Jesse B. Semple, often referred to and spelled ‘Simple’, the everyday Black man in Harlem who offered musings on topical issues of the day. Although Hughes seldom responded to requests to teach at colleges, in 1947 he taught at Atlanta University. In 1949, he spent three months at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools as a visiting lecturer. Between 1942 and 1949 Hughes was a frequent writer and served on the editorial board of *Common Ground*, a literary magazine focused on cultural pluralism in the United States published by the Common Council for American Unity (CCAU).
Hughes wrote novels, short stories, plays, poetry, operas, essays, and works for children. With the encouragement of his best friend and writer, Arna Bontemps, and patron and friend, Carl Van Vechten, he wrote two volumes of autobiography, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*, as well as translating several works of literature into English.

During the mid 1950s and 1960s, Hughes' popularity among the younger generation of Black writers varied even as his reputation increased worldwide. With the gradual advancement toward racial integration, many Black writers considered his writings of Black pride and its corresponding subject matter out of date. They considered him a “racial chauvinist” (Rampersad, 119). He found some new writers, including James Baldwin, lacking in such pride, over intellectual in their work, and occasionally vulgar.

Hughes wanted young Black writers to be objective about their race, but not to scorn it or flee it. He understood the main points of the Black Power movement of the 1960s, but believed that some of the younger Black writers who supported it were too angry in their work. Hughes's work *Panther and the Lash*, posthumously published in 1967, was intended to show solidarity with these writers, but with more skill and devoid of the most virulent anger and racial chauvinism some showed toward whites. Hughes continued to have admirers among the larger younger generation of Black writers. He often helped writers by offering advice and introducing them to other influential persons in the literature and publishing communities. This latter group, including Alice Walker, whom Hughes discovered, looked upon Hughes as a hero and an example to be emulated within their own work. One of these young Black writers, Loften Mitchell observed of Hughes as

> Langston set a tone, a standard of brotherhood and friendship and cooperation, for all of us to follow. You never got from him, 'I am the Negro writer,' but only 'I am a
Negro writer.’ He never stopped thinking about the rest of us (Qtd in Rampersad, 409).

Hughes, like many Black writers and artists of his time, was drawn to the promise of Communism as an alternative to a segregated America. Many of his lesser-known political writings have been collected in two volumes published by the University of Missouri Press and reflect his attraction to Communism. An example is the poem ‘A New Song’.

In 1932, Hughes became part of a group of Black people who went to the Soviet Union to make a film depicting the plight of African Americans in the United States. The film was never made, but Hughes was given the opportunity to travel extensively through the Soviet Union and to the Soviet-controlled regions in Central Asia, the latter parts usually closed to Westerners. While there, he met Robert Robinson an African American living in Moscow and unable to leave. In Turkmenistan, Hughes met and befriended the Hungarian author Arthur Koestler, then a Communist who was given permission to travel there. Hughes also managed to travel to China and Japan before returning to the States.

Hughes travelled to Spain as a correspondent for the Baltimore African American and other various African American newspapers. Hughes was also involved in other Communist-led organizations such as the John Reed Clubs and the League of Struggle for Negro Rights. He was more of a sympathizer of communist ideology than an active participant. He signed a 1938 statement supporting Joseph Stalin’s purges and joined the American Peace Mobilization in 1940 working to keep the U.S. from participating in World War II.

Hughes initially did not favour Black American involvement in the war because of the persistence of discriminatory U.S. Jim Crow laws and racial segregation and disfranchisement throughout the South. He came to support the war effort and Black American participation after deciding that war service would aid their struggle for civil rights at home. The scholar Anthony Pinn has noted that
Hughes, together with Lorraine Hansberry and Richard Wright, was a humanist, critical of belief in God.

Hughes was accused of being a Communist by many on the political right, but he always denied it. When asked why he never joined the Communist Party, he wrote, "it was based on strict discipline and the acceptance of directives that I, as a writer, did not wish to accept" (IWIW, 140). In 1953, he was called before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations led by Senator Joseph McCarthy. He stated,

I never read the theoretical books of socialism or communism or the Democratic or Republican parties for that matter, and so my interest in whatever may be considered political has been non-theoretical, non-sectarian, and largely emotional and born out of my own need to find some way of thinking about this whole problem of myself (McCarthy, 988)

Following his testimony, Hughes distanced himself from Communism. He was rebuked by some on the Radical Left who had previously supported him. He moved away from overtly political poems and towards more lyric subjects. When selecting his poetry for his ‘Selected Poems’ (1959), he excluded all his radical socialist verse from the 1930s.

The structure of I Wonder as I Wander suggested Hughes’ attempt to create a travelogue that defines his persona as a cultural political witness and journalist. The eight sections, “In Search of Sun,” “Poetry to the People”, “Moscow Movie,” “South to Samarkand”, “Spring beside the Kremlin”, “Colour around the Globe”, “Writing for a Living” and “World without End” are arranged chronologically. Hughes begins with reference to the break with Charlotte Osgood Mason, the kind and elderly lady on Park Avenue. His split with Mason caused an illness, which gradually subsided with the beginning of his new career initiatives. Still concerned with the well being of his mother in Cleveland, Hughes, who joined with fellow
Cleveland Karamu House member Zell Ingram for a road trip to Florida, was motivated to travel following the break with Mason. He says,

I had better go sit in the sun for a while and think, having just been through a tense and disheartening winter after a series of misunderstandings with the kind lady who had been my patron. She wanted me to be more African than Harlem primitive in the simple, intuitive and noble sense of the word (IWIW, 40).

The reprise of the ending to The Big Sea, with its allusion to primitivism, shows that Hughes had not forgotten this painful transition moment.

At twenty nine years of age, Hughes travelled with Ingram to the Caribbean. In Cuba, Hughes heard songs which are “hip-shaking music of Afro Moorish, mixed in” (IWIW, 10). This music was relegated to the under classes, perhaps because of its African elements. The racial mixture in Cuba itself reflects a substantial African root and for Hughes a triple color line a variation of Du Bois’s principal dilemma of the twentieth century referring to skin colours from dark to light to nearer whites. Cuba’s racial climate in the 1930s, devoid of obvious Jim Crow markers and discrimination, was more flexible and more subtle. Hughes was denied admission to a Havana beach strictly based on colour, though a mulatto, with political clout, could enter.

Hughes also observed similar cultural and social divisions in Haiti and pursued one of the wonders of its history, the famed Citadel at Cap Haitien. A rain drenched bus ride into the mountains was also a cultural experience. Hughes measured Haitian culture comparatively. The division of Haitians into the barefoot the clerical workers, and the upper classes parallels the triple color line in Cuba. These observations are linked to his memories of interracial class divisions in Washington D.C. discussed in The Big Sea, perhaps what Hughes learned on this journey led him to write Emperor of Haiti, which depicts the tensions between
mulattoes and Black Haitians during the Haitian Revolution, leading to the demise of Dessalines, who began the construction of the Citadel but was killed before witnessing its completion. His successor, Henri Christophe, completed the architectural feat. The immensity and technological mystery of the structure, built “on a mountain peak whose slopes would create a problem for modern builders, is beyond belief” (IWIW, 60).

After visiting the Caribbean island, Hughes visited Florida and Mary McLeod Bethune, mentioned in The Big Sea, was a turning point in his career as a poet and writer. Many of the poets Hughes admired, such as Vachel, Lindsay, had been travelling bards. With Bethune and Ingram on a car trip to the North from Daytona, Florida, Hughes benefited from Bethune’s notoriety and social contacts. They were treated to the best of Black hospitality along the route, for in the 1930s the only accommodations for African Americans were frequently the homes of other Black people. For Hughes, Bethune was a distinguished icon, a “jet Black woman who had risen from a barefooted field hand in a cotton patch to be head of one of the leading junior colleges in America and a leader of her people” (IWIW, 47).

Hughes read at Black institutions such as Downingtown in Pennsylvania, Hampton in Virginia where he met vocalist Dorothy Maynor and where students were not permitted to hold a protest meeting, Morgan in Maryland, Howard in Washington, D.C., Virginia Union, Virginia State, Bethune-Cook man College, Southern University in Baton Rouge, Straight College in New Orleans where he met the aspiring young poet Margaret Walker, Texas College and Arkansas A and M. Although he experienced Jim Crow, he met Paul Green and sociologist Guy B. Johnson in North Carolina. In South Carolina, he visited Dr.Edward C.L.Adams, the white author of Congaree Sketches, who had relatives on the coloured side, but was refused entrance to the home of Julia Peterkin of Lang Syne Plantation. Hughes, who was invited by Peterkin to visit her when he met her in New York, satirized her novel Scarlet Sister Mary (1928) in his skit Scarlet Sister Barry.
(1938). Most important, Hughes’ play *Scottsboro Limited* (1931) was a re-enactment of the unjust imprisonment of those young men for a rape they did not commit. Hughes read to them humorous poems intended as a diversion from their serious circumstances. Also a response to the Scottsboro case, Southern Gentlemen, White Prostitutes, Mill-Owners and Negroes, Hughes published an article along with his poem ‘Christ’ in Alabama in ‘Contempo’, an unofficial student paper at the University of North Carolina and it was a forceful criticism of the Scottsboro debacle. At Chapel Hill, in defiance of the segregation codes, Hughes dined at a white restaurant with his liberal White hosts. Hughes also travelled through Georgia, Mississippi, Texas, Arkansas, New Mexico, Mexico, Oregon, Washington State, Los Angeles and San Francisco, where he was befriended by Lincoln Steffens and especially Noel Sullivan, who provided a less controlling form of patronage. In Berkeley, Hughes spoke at the University of California.

Inevitably Hughes resumed his international wandering this time as part of a group of twenty two African Americans, including actors Way land Rudd and Sylvia Garner, invited to make a film in the Soviet Union. Russia was a desirable location for certain African Americans because of the party’s support of Black causes such as Scottsboro. Theatrical figures such as Ira Aldridge, who first played Othello in 1833 in England and toured Russia in 1858, dancer Ida Forsyne, who performed the cakewalk in Moscow in the early 1900s and Abbie Mitchell and Georgette Harvey, who had been popular in St.Petersburg during the days of the Tzar, had all travelled extensively there. With his typewriter, book, a record player and a collection of Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong and Ethel Waters recordings, Hughes was pleased to find a jazz band at the Metropol Hotel in Moscow.

The opportunity to participate as a writer in a film project to be directed by a German, Karl Yunghans would not have been possible in the United States. He assumes, “Hollywood was still a closed shop with the Negroes closed out” (IWIW, 93). The original screenplay for the Russian Meschrabpom Films project, *Black*
and White, written by a well-known Russian writer who had not been to the States, is set in Birmingham, Alabama, and concerns Black steel workers, domestic laborers, and union organizers. According to Hughes, the failure of the project reflected the difference in vision between the well meaning Soviets and the Black Americans, who knew the realities of racial prejudice firsthand. The film script was not plausible because it was not true to American life. In particular, Hughes objected to a scene in which a white, wealthy, Southern aristocrat publicly dances with a beautiful Southern coloured girl. Furthermore, Hughes encountered numerous bureaucratic snags. Nevertheless, Hughes insisted on a contract in English, another indication of his distrust of Soviet bureaucracy. Arthur Koestler, in his second volume of autobiography, The Invisible Writing (1954), offers another reason for the aborted film project, that the U.S Government had made it a condition for its recognition of the new regime that it renounces its propaganda campaign addressed to Black Americans. Hughes realized this as well and cited excerpts from newspapers such as the New York Herald Tribune, which discussed the underlying causes of the film’s failure and the international reaction. The dissolution of the Meschrabpom project caused violent dissensions among members of Hughes’ group, some of whom thought they were “being used as pawns in a game of international politics” (IWIW, 13). Hughes and others brought their grievances to the Comintern but were unsuccessful.

However, Hughes turned failure into an opportunity to wander and wonder about people of colour in the Soviet Union, such as Moscow’s mammy, Emma, a former dancer of some sixty years of age, “very dark, very talkative and very much alive” (IWIW, 13). Emma’s representation sharpens the difference between Russian life before and after the revolution, for she is said to have preferred the Tzarist days, though she was frequently a platform speaker and genuinely so at Moscow Scottsboro events, the case having become a major issue in Russia and an opportunity for denouncing the injustice of the West. Emma had sought refuge in the Soviet Union and was known as the beloved Negro Comrade. In addition to Emma, when Hughes’ group travelled to Odessa and the Black sea, Hughes
encountered a Negro resident of Kiev who spoke Ukrainian and was of Abkhasian origin and at the Lenin School in Moscow, the party school for foreign students, there were some Black attendees.

Hughes assessed the number of African Americans in Moscow to be not more than a half dozen. Naturally the colour issue was of interest to Hughes, who observed in the streets the “curiosity” of those “who had never seen a Black face before” (IWIW, 14). He was aware of Alexander Pushkin, the celebrated Russian author of *Eugene Onegin* (1831) and *Boris Godunov* (1825) and a great grandson of an African, Hannibal, who had been a General in service to Peter, the Great. Before Hughes made his journey, Claude McKay, the Jamaican born Harlem Renaissance poet, had visited, although McKay later turned anti Soviet and had fallen out of favour by Hughes’ time. At different periods, Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes and most important, Paul Robeson also journeyed to the Soviet Union.

Like Hughes, McKay retold his Soviet journey autobiographically in *A Long Way from Home* (1937). McKay, in 1922 the first Negro to arrive in Russia since the revolution, attended the Fourth Congress of the Communist International and addressed the Comintern. Like Hughes, he was treated as a Black literary celebrity inside and outside the capital. McKay states,

> I went triumphantly from surprise to surprise, extravagantly feted on every side. I was carried along on a crest of sweet excitement. I was like a Black icon in the flesh (IWIW, 132).

Despite these positive recollections, McKay knew that New masses attacked ‘If We Must Die’, his protest poem about lynching and persecution and that there were accusations of bourgeois indifference. McKay offered his own criticism of the party, especially the American wing, and acknowledged that as a poet he could never be a disciplined member of any Communist Party. Robeson visited the
Soviet Union in 1936 following Stalin’s 1934-1935 purges and after the murder of Sergei Kirov. Robeson’s lack of criticism regarding Stalin reflected the sympathetic views of many African Americans towards the Soviet Union because of its racial pronouncements.

Even though Hughes’s journey predated the purges, he still might have commented more pointedly on the subject in his 1956 autobiography, though he does refer to the practice of liquidation in which “politicians were often not simply removed from office, they were removed from this world” (IWIW, 15).

In general, Moscow was a significant cultural space for Hughes, who in the capital saw experimental, political and nonpolitical plays, such as Carmen. In addition to performances at the Moscow Gypsy Club, the city hosted various theatres and national playhouses featuring Jewish, Ukrainian and Gypsy performers. Mongolian musicians performed as the International Olympiad of Workers’ Theatres. The Moscow Art Theatre of Stanislavsky, which was untouched by Soviet ideology, produced older vehicles such as Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard or Gogol’s The Inspector General, the latter also staged by Vsevolod Meyerhold using constructivist sets, making it quite different from the realism of Stanislavsky. Most important, Hughes found the experimental theatre of Nikolai Okholopkov, the Krasni Presnia, Meyerhold and Okhlopkov, with whom Hughes conversed, influenced staging techniques for his Harlem Suitcase Theatre production of Don’t You Want to Be Free? (1938). Hughes also visited the more popular stages, the Vakhtangov, where Harlem was produced and the Kamerney, where Eugene O’Neill’s All God’s Chillum Got Wings was performed. Also in Moscow, Hughes was introduced to the short stories of D.H. Lawrence, particularly ‘The Lovely Lady’, which, like Maupassant’s stories in Hughes’s youth, caused Hughes to wonder if he could write fiction about folks in American, an echo of the title of his short story education The Ways of White Folks. In Moscow, Hughes also saw the Soviet political and judicial system at work in the trial of a British engineer accused of spying, a case that reminded Hughes of the later purge trials. During a
May Day parade, Hughes was not a hundred yards from Stalin and the other leaders of the Kremlin.

Although those in Hughes’ group were privileged in Moscow as representatives of the great Negro people, he was curious about the status of the millions of Asiatic peoples who were brown skinned and who could be found in Soviet Central Asia and especially Turkmenistan, where the majority of the coloured citizens lived. This racial interest furthered Hughes’ journalistic career since the special permit under which he travelled to Turkmenistan was available mainly to journalists. Hughes’ adventures on the Moscow Tashkent express included a cultural exchange involving his sharing of jazz records by Ethel Waters and Louis Armstrong. The geographical sites included the Ural Mountains, the Kzyl Kum Desert and the Kazakstan Desert during a period when the life of one of Russia’s most important writers, Maxim Gorky was being celebrated. As Hughes wandered, he continued to seek the Black presence and in Tashkent, Soviet Central Asia’s regional capital, he met Bernard Powers, a Howard University trained engineer, who proved the humorous African American adage that “there is at least one Negro everywhere” (IWIW,16). Beyond Ashkhabad, which is near the border of Iran, Hughes visited romantic Samarkand not far from Bokhara and the larger city of Tashkent.

When Hughes jumped off the train at Ashkhabad and found himself in the middle of the Turkmenian desert, he moved further into the reality of Central Asia and learned the significance of nichevo, a word of various meanings depending on tone but literally signifying ‘nothing’. To Hughes, nichevo meant ‘so what?’ Hughes became aware of the control exercised by the OGPC (United State Political Administration), the Soviet intelligence agency. His various short term friendships with a Red Army soldier from the high Pamirs, who ‘looked like a Chinese Negro, very brown, but with Oriental eyes’ (IWIW,16) with the youth Nichan in Tashkent and with Georgian sculptress Nina Zaratelli made him confront the language barriers of Russian, Uzbek and English. Also among his informal cultural teachers was the Tadjik solider Hajir who acquainted Hughes with the
supposed lovemaking and courtship practices of Tartar women. A brownskin Uzbek lad, Tajaiv was most memorable because of his pride in helping to build barracks. Hughes also met the Turkoman writer Kikilov, a “frail parchment colored little poet” (IWIW, 16) who was head of the Turkoman Writers Union.

Most important, Hughes came to know Arthur Koestler, the Journalist who had travelled to the North Pole and who wrote for the German newspaper chain Ullstein. Koestler, with whom Hughes travelled to Ashkhabad, Permetryab and Tashkent, visiting various kolkhozes (collective farmers) was in the Soviet Union to write about the new system and Ashkhabad. Hughes could relate to Koestler’s statement that a writer must write which expressed Hughes’ own goal to live as a professional writer, an intention furthered by his writing for the Soviet newspaper Izvestia. Koestler, too, would publish an autobiography in the 1950s, Arrow in the Blue (1952), which like I Wonder as I Wander is retrospective to the 1930s ending with Road to Marx covering the years 1930-1931. In Koestler’s novel Darkness at Noon, the principal character, Rubashov thinks that the Party denied the free will of the individual. Koestler reminded Hughes of African American authors Richard Wright, Wallace Thurman and Ralph Ellison and Jewish author Myron Brining, all of whom seemed unhappy fellows though Hughes admitted to being drawn to such personalities because of his own inner sadness. Hughes’s observations are that of a socio-literary historian, who saw 1932 as Koestler’s cross roads, the beginning of his bitter attacks on communism. The differences between the perceptions of Hughes and those of Koestler are based on race.

Hughes’s meeting of Koestler and others exemplifies an early, informal cultural exchange that revolved particularly around Hughes’s sharing of jazz. Jazz, which in the 1950s was used by the U.S. State Department as a way of easing cold war relations, is a universal leveler.

“Everywhere, around the world, folks are attracted by American jazz. A good old Dixieland stomp can break down almost any language barriers and there is something
about Louis Armstrong’s horn that creates spontaneous friendships” (TBS, 217).

Thus, the Communist Party’s position on jazz was objectionable to Hughes, who could not accept it being called a decadent bourgeois music’ Hughes wouldn’t give up jazz for a world revolution. The question of whether Hughes had ever joined the Communist Party is related to jazz, for his reason for not holding membership in that jazz was personal statement of his African American cultural heritage, my music.

Hughes’ wandering through the Soviet Union Central Asia, whose cotton fields reminded him of the American South, led him to broader conclusions about class and powers. The privileged in Tashkent can always get cream while most drink milk. The past was represented by some of those held in the OGPU prison, who Hughes equated to “those who had not wished to see the Jim Crow signs go down” an allusion to the American South in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. Ultimately, Hughes’ assessment as a coloured person was different from that of the idealists who after a mere fifteen years expected too much from Russia.

After leaving the Soviet Union in the spring of 1933 by way of the Trans Siberian Express, Hughes wandered to other sites of political transition, especially, Japan, where he continued to observe colour around the globe. Hughes’ trip to Korea, Shanghai and Honolulu gives the impression of his having “galloped around the world at top speed”( Nichols, 343). Like Moscow, Tokyo also offered cultural venues such as the Tsukiji theatre, which staged Porgy and where Hughes saw a modern play about the feudal period. He studied the structure of Japanese Kabuki Theatre and heard Kiyomoto music. In Japan, Hughes was initially again treated as a celebrated Black writer, and his Harlem poems appeared in translation, one publication presenting him on its cover so that he appeared quite Japanese with slanting eyes. Unlike during his Soviet journey, Hughes made formal political statements while in Japan about colonialism, complimenting the
Japanese Government for being the only noncolonial nation in the Far East, for what Hughes thought was its anti imperialistic stance, and for the absence of a colour line. Hughes’ remarks on colour and global politics suggest the international interests of Richard Wright, who in the Color Curtain (1956) reported on the Bandung Conference, a meeting of brown, black and yellow representatives, who had experienced the rigours of colonial rule.

Hughes’ ongoing cultural interest, jazz was also available in Tokyo, where there were recordings of W.C.Handy’s St.Louis Blues and jazz bands with Filipino musicians who played good jazz. Shanghai, on the other hand, with its International Settlement community, was a different cultural experience. There, Hughes heard stories from journalists that put Chicago at its wildest to shame. The complex overlapping social authorities included British Sikh Police, who clamped down on radicals and white foreigners, who drew a colour line against the Chinese in China itself. Students were arrested for their activities in opposition to Chiang Kai Shek. Hughes became somewhat familiar with the Bund areas and the Bubbling Well Road section of Shanghai with its weakness for African American entertainers. There was Jazz in China, and at the Canidrome Gardens he heard the best American jazz band in the Far East, the Pianist Teddy Weatherford’s group which was known in Bombay, Manila and Hong Kong.

The African American presence in Shanghai shows the vibrancy of Black entertainment in the celebrity of Nora Holt, Valaida Snow, the dancing Mackey Twins, musicians Bob Hill and Jack Carter and trumpeter Buck Clayton, who in 1936 joined the Count Basie Orchestra. Hughes also met politically influential people, most notably the sister in law of Chiang Kai-Shek, Madame Sun Yat-Sen, who had received an American education and spoke beautiful English. For Hughes, the political relationship among Japan, China and the Soviets with suspicion, was a reality he faced firsthand following his interrogation by Japanese authorities, which ended in his being declared persona non grata for having been in contact with Madame Sun Yat Sen and Japanese expatriate director Seki Sano, whom Hughes had met in Moscow. Hughes would also discover the racial treatment of Koreans in
Japan and his misrepresentation as having praised Japan’s imperialism to the highest.

Hughes’ wanderings in the Soviet Union and the Far East from 1932 to 1933 shielded him from somewhat the early years of the depression in Harlem, but the realities of labour disputes confronted him when he sojourned at the literary sanctuary of Noel Sullivan in Carmel, California and continued to pursue writing for a living. In Carmel, Hughes again faced the Scottsboro issue and met Ella Winter, with whom he would later collaborated on the play *Harvest* about migrant laborers in the San Joaquin Valley. During Hughes’ California stay, he also met boxer writer Jim Tully and fighter Henry Armstrong and visited Arna Bontemps, his literary ally and confidant with whom he co-authored a children’s book set in Haiti, *Popo and Fifina* (1932).

Despite the personal loss of his father and the dilemmas surrounding the 1935 Broadway premiere of *Mulatto* the controversial banned play about mixed race issue produced by Martin Jones and starring Rose McClendon, Hughes pursued his international career as a journalist by covering the Spanish Civil War for the Baltimore African American. He journeyed to Spain from France in July 1937, not long after Joe Louis’ defeat of James Jack Braddock for the heavy weight world championship, an apex in African American pride in the elevation of Louis as heroic icon. Hughes’ wanderings in Spain were more focused than those in the Soviet Union and the Far East. He visited such cities as Valencia, the site of the House of Culture, Barcelona, and especially Madrid. *The Spanish Civil War* was a turning point in the 1930s struggle against fascism, which Hughes hoped would result in a world without end.

Initially travelling with Nicolas Guilin to Barcelona, Hughes wanted his readers to know about the contributions of African American to the war effort, their role in the international brigades and other issues relating to race and color in Spain. He set out to discover what effect, if any, the bringing by Franco of dark troops to Spain from North Africa had on the people in regard to their racial
attitudes. Hughes wondered about the treatment of Black Americans on furlough and the conditions faced by Moorish prisoners under the Loyalists. He learned from an African from Guinea that the new Republic stands for a change for my people in Africa to become educated. Supposedly in Spain, for which the African presence was not new, there was not the slightest trace of colour prejudice.

In Madrid, the epicenter of Hughes’ war experience. Madrid was also a cultural site, where Hughes saw flamenco dancers and singers such as La Nina de los Peines, Pastoral Pavon, whose performance was like the primitive Negro blues of the deep South. The problematic word primitive, which Hughes had also employed in The Big Sea, is not meant pejoratively, but as an indicator of the foundations of early blues singers. Flamenco artists who remained in Madrid were part of the stubborn resistance under the long range guns. Also, Black jazz musicians such as the Cuban EL Negro Aquilino, who also played flamenco, were popular in Spain. The bombing of Madrid by Franco’s forces was witnessed at close range by Hughes, who resided at the Alianza de Intellectual’s, a mansion used as a club for writers and artists. Hughes and the others endured the persistent nighttime trauma by listening to such jazz recordings as Jimmie Lunceford’s Organ Grinder’s Swing, used to draw out the intense shelling on one particular night.

In Madrid at the time, there were such writers as Leland Stowe and New York Times journalist Herbert Matwees. In Madrid, where there were no signs of surrender, Hughes realized that as an American he could go home anytime, in contrast to the Spaniards. He witnessed the results of battle firsthand and saw a body here, leg there, sense that presage the devastation to European cities as a result of World War II. Hughes’ one and only wound, a minor abrasion, was caused by a dumdum bullet fragment.

When Hughes visited a prisoners’ hospital in Madrid and saw one of the darkest, tallest men he had ever seen, a man who resembled a Black ghost he found out from a young Moor the story of how Moorish men and women were brought
by the rebels to participate in the war. The Moors represented a strange union of the Cross and the Crescent against Spanish democracy, an allusion to the Muslim heritage of the Moorish mercenaries and the claim of the Falangists that they were acting in the cause of Christ. Ironically, the Moors themselves were victims of North African oppression. The reaction of Black members of the international Brigades to this dilemma inspired Hughes’s poem ‘Letter from Spain’, which describes an African American fighter who assists a dying Moor and connects the fate of free Spain to the end of African colonialism.

Hughes’ meeting of all kinds of Negroes in Spain gave him a more complete understanding of race because even in Spain an African American could be a disgrace to the race by lacking heroism. Yet there were many examples of heroism among the Black members of the International Brigades, such as Oliver Law, proclaimed a Loyalist, National Hero, Doughes Roach, Otto Reeves, Ralph Thornton, Abraham Lewis, Thaddeus Battle, a Howard University student, and Milton Herndon, the older brother of Angelo Herndon, union organizer and author of *Let Me Live*, as an icon. Milton Herndon named his unit the Frederick Douglass Machine – Gun Company. However, Hughes’ treatment of the heroic Black fighters does not specifically address the later controversy surrounding the so-called Abraham Lincoln Bridge, a self-proclaimed group within the Fifteenth International Bridge and the first contingent of some twenty-eight hundred Americans to enter the war. Although it has been argued that the International Brigades were Soviet inspired, Hughes did not see any Russian combatants.

Hughes interviewed nearly one hundred soldiers, including such African Americans as Lieutenant Walter Garland who commanded a training base and whose unit had experienced the heaviest bombardment from the air of any modern army. Hughes singled out such participants as Herndon, Garland, Oliver Law and Abe Lewis, who unlike the Moors were not conscripts but sympathizers who had come of their own free will. Hughes saw their participation as a historic moment in which African Americans became voluntary fighters or ambassadors a label that
during the cold war of the 1950s and 1960s would be used to describe jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie.

In 1937, Hughes as an international journalist, adept at distilling a personal interpretation out of his own emotions saw the outlines of World War II and the cold war of the 1950s. In the thirties, exiles from Japan, Germany and South America had found refuge in Paris and Moscow. The world was an uncertain place on the verge of a war that for Hughes was a troubling threat to the continuity of his world. When Hughes closes the autobiography with the simple phrase, “For a moment I wondered” (IWIW, 387), he freezes that moment when the threat of Fascism troubled him beyond his thoughts of race, home and mother. In the twenties a traveler and wanderer beyond Harlem, in the thirties, a journalist and professional writer, Hughes had become a citizen of the world and knowledgeable in global politics. No longer wondering about racial identity, as does the persona in his poem ‘Cross’, Hughes realized that his interests had broadened from Harlem to all the coloured peoples of the world to all the people of the world. Although he journeyed, it was not as an exile, though he was averse to the racial conditions in America, but as an African American jazz enthusiast who would return home to Harlem to answer through writing his era’s questions of identity, race, and culture which had their parallels in the places he had traversed.

Autobiographies are constructed as personal histories in which authors consciously shape their life stories, editing their experiences in order to provide a desired perspective and voice. This is certainly true of Langston Hughes’s The Big Sea, the first volume of his autobiography, which blends personal, social and cultural observations, presenting a persona that is more public than private. Like numerous other memoirs and autobiographies, The Big Sea re-creates the past with creative embellishments.

The principal biographers of Hughes, using corroborating documents such as correspondence have pointed to factual discrepancies in his autobiography. In his presentation of his time in Genoa, Hughes omits some revealing matters of
substance, twists some and imagines others. The striking discrepancy in the opening of *The Big Sea* is in the name of the ship on which Hughes journeys to Africa, actually the West Heseltine instead of the S.S.Malone, as Hughes calls it. Such discrepancies do not affect the overall truth of Hughes’ text. Such inconsistencies can be attributed to the limitations of memory or to conscious concealment, but they do not lessen the ultimate merit and cultural significance of the work, which for twenty first century readers is an invaluable primary document.

Published nine years after the closing period of its narration, *The Big Sea* does not cover Hughes’ 1930s literary development, during which he expressed a decidedly leftist political position. Nonetheless, as Hughes fashioned the work from memory, he evidently shaped it to correspond to political positions he held at the end of the thirties, following the backlash against radicalism as a result of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939. Hughes’s close ally and fellow Harlem Renaissance writer Arna Bontemps advised Hughes not to write about the Communists because they change their line too much (Nichols, 287.).

Before its publication in the summer of 1940, *The Big Sea* was excerpted in the *Saturday Review of Literature* and *Town and Country* and serialized in the *African American newspapers*. It was reviewed favourably in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Opportunity* and *the Crisis* but received mixed notice in *Survey Graphic* and *Saturday Review*; less complimentary evaluations appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune* and *Phylon*.

In his 1940 *New Masses review* entitled *Stormy Weather* Ralph Ellison argued that *The Big Sea* would offer valuable material to the student of American letters, surpassing the autobiographies of James Weldon Johnson and Claude McKay in its realistic assessment of the Harlem Renaissance. However, Ellison asserted that the book resembled a ‘Picaresque Novel’ and that it lacked a ‘Deeper Unity’. Ellison’s review was influenced heavily by his ideological position of 1940. His own early literary career was shaped more by the political left of the 1930s than by the ‘New
Negro’ currents of the Harlem renaissance, which he saw as a movement supported by patronage and pursuing the exotic and the primitive (Ellison, 20-21). In certain respects, Hughes ultimately comes to similar conclusions about the Harlem Renaissance and certain patrons, though he avoids an ideological presentation.

*The Big Sea* appeared the same year as Richard Wright’s classic *Native Son*, which became a Book of the Month Club selection. To a degree, Hughes’ book was in competition with Wright’s career-making work, which sold more widely. Wright’s own review of the autobiography in the *New Republic* lauded Hughes as an African American Cultural ambassador and Alain Locke, though complimentary, suggested a need for a critical interpretation of what he considered adventure, Ironically, Locke figures in the autobiography when Hughes recalls travelling with him in Europe. Although it was not a great commercial success when it was first published, *The Big Sea* was well received in South Africa and appeared in an Italian edition with a ‘Pablo Picasso Jacket’.

The genesis of Hughes’s first autobiography goes back to the mid 1920s and urging of Carl Van Vechten, as revealed in a letter of June 4, 1925 that Van Vechten wrote in consultation with Blanco Knopf, the wife of the publisher Alfred Knopf. Van Vechten suggested Hughes write a work that was not chronological but that moved backward and forward with a vivid description of character and people and places, revealing nostalgia for beauty, colour and warmth. Bernad, the biographer of Hughes says,

Hughes expressed his own doubts about writing a ‘histoire de ma vie’ because of the possibility of having to include or exclude people who have been the cause of my doing or not doing half the important things in my life though Hughes found the prospect of fictionalizing a good deal an intriguing one (16-18).
In his letter to Van Vechten, Hughes describes his impression of an itinerant life in the early twenties using the metaphor of petals of a flower in his *Scarlet Flowers*: The outline for the life history is a template or road map of his travels. That Hughes did not complete the project until almost fifteen years later suggests the challenge it posed and the difficulty of writing one's life history at a relatively young age.

If Van Vechten and Knopf were part of the genesis of *The Big Sea*, Bontemps was the supporting voice in 1936 encouraging Hughes to finish the project. Hughes indicates that it was Bontemps who actually prodded him into starting *The Big Sea* while they were en route from Toledo, Ohio, to Chicago on a lecture tour. Hughes was definitely responsible for the title *The Big Sea* though he accepted his publisher’s deletion of the subtitle, *The Sage of a Negro Poet*. Regrettably, *The Big Sea* was not a commercial success, though it has proved to be the foundation for biographical treatments of Hughes, serving as a record of Hughes’ early political and social thought and as the outstanding first hand document of the Harlem Renaissance years.

Divided into three sections such as ‘Twenty-One’ ‘Big Sea’ and ‘Black Renaissance’, ‘The Big Sea’ is more than a personal record in that it offers commentary on a range of issues including race, color, Jim Crow, Africa, the Black experience in Europe in the postwar years, jazz, blues, and white patronage. Opening with his recollections of his voyage to Africa in 1923, Hughes initially considers racial identity and the way he formed a conception of Africa as ancestral home of African Americans. In Hughes’ most important poem, ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’, published in 1921 in the *Crisis*, he had offered a poetic hypothesis and a romantic link to Africa. Hughes experienced culture shock when the African did not believe that he was Negro. In this context, being ‘Negro’ meant being Black, leading Hughes to question his identity as a ‘brown’ person of African descent. In affirming his identity as a ‘American Negro’, Hughes introduces a theme that will re-emerge at the end of the autobiography when he confronts the dilemmas of
patronage and the expectations of his being a representative of the American African.

In the first part of the autobiography, racial and interracial issues are raised in Hughes’ account of his sojourn with his father, James Hughes, a lawyer and businessman at Toluca in Mexico. In Hughes’ words, his father hated Negroes and disliked all of his family because they were Negroes. This admission, along with the statement “I did not like my father” (TBS, 49) characterizes a conflicted father-son relationship. What Hughes learned from his father about American nationalism is based on a racial understanding of inequalities in America. James Hughes’ response to economic disparity was to leave America rather than attempt to counter from within the racial barriers. In addition to race, his father’s informal teachings also involved class. When Hughes and his father journey by train from Cleveland to Mexico, Hughes’ father comments pejoratively on Black labour in Arkansas and expresses similar deprecating remarks about Mexican labour. Hughes follows these comments with the realization that his father “had a great contempt for all poor people” (TBS, 41).

Not necessarily as a result of Van Vechten’s recommendations regarding colour, Hughes articulates color conceptions popularized during the twenties. In an echo of the color designations found in such works as McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928), he describes himself as ‘brown’ his father as a ‘darker brown’ and his mother as an ‘olive – yellow’ (TBS, 11). Like many African Americans, Hughes descended from a racially mixed family with European, Native American and of course, African ancestry. His grandmother’s first husband, Lewis Sheridan Leary, rode with John Brown at the raid on Harpers Ferry and was later killed. Hughes’ most historically significant ancestor was Virginia Congressman John Mercer Langston, the brother of his grandmother’s second husband, Charles Langston. Despite the prestige of this branch of the family, Hughes clearly marks his early family status as one without material wealth by saying, “We were never very much in society in Kansas” (TBS, 16).
If Hughes’ association with his father helped him to define the borders of race and class, being raised by his mother and grandmother contributed to the development of his poetic instinct and imagination. Hughes’ early contacts with the world of Black culture came in the form of meetings or passing acquaintances with noted figures or personalities. Hughes’ early musical perceptions are linked to memories of George Walker, also known as Nash Walker, who with his partner Bert Williams formed one of the most notable teams of Black Vaudeville Walker, who had lived in Kansas, was a music student of Hughes’ uncle Nat Turner Langston. Most important, Hughes remembers having seen his first phonograph as part of a presentation Walker made in Lawrence prior to his death. The phonograph is a significant memory for Hughes, who would later develop his own record collection as a jazz and blues aficionado.

The beginnings of Hughes’ poetic leanings around the age of fourteen are connected to his mother’s marriage to her second husband, Homer Clark, to Hughes’s new baby brother to World War I and to his move to Lincoln, Illinois, near Chicago. In Hughes’ telling, his designation as grammar school ‘Class Poet’ is also a result of racial conceptions. Although the evidence presented by Hughes’ biographers indicates that he was a talented and popular student, he suggests that his fellow students selected him because, realizing that a poem had to have rhythm and given the stereotype of rhythmic talent connected to African Americans, they felt Hughes was the most likely owner of such skills. Hughes’ first poem was some sixteen verses and devoted to his teachers, especially his favorite Ethel Welch. (Rampersad, 24).

The autobiography is useful for the information it provides about Hughes’ reading habits as a youth and student. He favoured Paul Laurence Dunbar’s dialect works and read the novels of Edna Ferber. He specially cites Florence Barclay’s novels The Rosary (1910) and The Mistress of Shenstone (1910), Gene Stratton –
Porter’s Freckles (1914) and all of Harold Bell Wright, which might have included such works as The Calling of Dan Matthews (1909), or The Eyes of the World (1914). Theodore Dreiser and Guy de Maupassant, the famed French short story writer, were also part of Hughes’ reading. It was Guy de Maupassant’s work that made Hughes really want to be a writer and express African American life in stories so true that people in faraway lands would read them.

Hughes’ poetic interest developed during the years he attended Central High School in Cleveland, where one of his teachers was the daughters of the African American fiction writer Charles W.Chesnutt. Hughes admits to liking Longfellow’s ‘Hiawatha’ (1857), though he was also introduced to such modernist poets of the day as Vachel Lindsay, Amy Lowell, Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg by his English teacher, Ethel Weimer. Hughes imitated both Sandburg and Dunbar, but Sandburg became his guiding star. While in high school at the time of the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, Hughes became aware of such magazines as the Liberator and the Socialist Call and heard the leftist spokesperson Eugence Debs, all of which affected his nascent political leanings and sympathy for the working classes. He also read Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and W.E.B. Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk (1903), which stirred his youth.

Hughes’ literary persona was also influenced by the urban African American folk culture of Chicago’s South Side. When he visited his mother during a summer vacation, his experience of South State Street, a teeming Negro street became an important marker of Black urban culture. In high school, Hughes began his serious development as a poet. By graduation he had written a whole notebook full of poems. His poem ‘When Sue Wears Red’ was inspired by a little brownskin girl he met when they were both seventeen. Her skin, like rich chocolate and her red dress appealed to his visual imagination. After graduation, Hughes wrote the Afro-centric poem ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’ while travelling by train to visit his father in Mexico. Interestingly, both these poems employ references to Egypt. The next stage of development for Hughes’ political and cultural perceptions occurs after his separation from his father and his journey to New York to attend Columbia University. In New York, Hughes explores the Black metropolis of
Hughes’ reminiscences of Africa appear in part two, *The Big Sea*, the signature section of the autobiography. In December 1923 issue of *Crisis* not long after his African Voyage, Hughes published ‘Ships, Sea and Africa’ which offers poetic impressions of the Motherland. Certain rendering of Africa that Hughes comes to a gradual understanding of the romantic and the actual, the meaning of colour racial identity and labour for colonized Africans. His memory of his first glimpses of the continent is expressed in the poetic language that mirrors his wonder and enthusiasm at first seeing the Brooklyn Bridge and Harlem. Hughes describes the beauty of Africa as,

> Africa is a long, sandy coast-line, gleaming in the sun. Palm trees sky tam. Rivers darkening the sea’s edge with the loam of their deltas. People, Black and beautiful as the night. The bare, pointed breasts of women in the market places. The rippling muscles of men loading palm oil and cocoa beans and mahogany on ships from the white man’s world. (TBS, 102).

The language, also echoing images from ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’, is imagistic and anticolonial. The white man becomes symbolic of the economic relationship between the West and Africa. Furthermore Hughes describes his interaction with the Africans as problematic in relation to his identity as a Negro which he equates to being African. A fellow seaman, one of the ‘Kru’ men from Liberia, acquaints him with the realities of colour in West Africa and the way the concept of the white man is used to identify missionaries of colour or colonial administrators from the West Indies, who are considered White Hughes’ recognition of racial and color differences is reminiscent of earlier nineteenth century travellers of African descent, such as Edward Wilmot Blyden of the Virgin Islands and Martin Delany, physician, author, and soldier, who presented their complex attitudes toward indigenous Africans, and it prefigures one of the more
complex issues of the twentieth century for African Americans who identify with Africa as homeland but often are unaware of the perceptions of continental Africans. Hughes’ references to a Liberian seaman’s cynical attitude toward ‘foreign colored men’ who “think we Africans know nothing” (Miller, 171) suggests the relationships between nineteenth-century repatriated African Americans or Afro Caribbeans and the indigenous populations in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In summarizing his visit to some thirty-two ports, Hughes creates a mélange including monkeys and bright birds white men with guns at their belts, inns and taverns, Europeans only, Missionary Churches with the Negroes in the back seats, along with other ironies, some resembling American segregation that adds up to Africa. He is especially troubled by the circumstances of African women who prostitute themselves for ‘mon-nee’ and he clearly distances himself from the other sailors who take part in the collective sexual exploitation. Furthermore, colonial exploitation is expressed effectively in the chapter ‘Burutu Moon’ which as a set piece combines poetic imagery with fiction like characterization and plot. The tall Black, sinister ships are tropes for this exploitation, which Hughes captures in a recreated commentary of the collective natives who realize that ebony, ivory, mahogany and African women are elements of trade and bribery.

Hughes’ reminiscences of Europe are quite different from those of West Africa. He observes the cultural scene in Paris as one acquainted with its Harlem counterpart, focusing scene in Paris as one acquainted with its Harlem counterpart, focusing on the presence of African Americans, especially entertainers and jazz artists. Employed at Le Grand Duc as a cook, Hughes observes the club’s principal African American singer, Florence Embry Jones, beautiful brown skin girls from Harlem, as well as a host of other performing artists and members of the white elite.
Hughes mentions such personalities as the poet Louis Aragon and the dancer Joe Alix, who performed with Josephine Baker. Musicians of the period were trumpeter Cricket Smith, violinist Louis Jones, Clarinetist Frank Withers and drummer Buddy Gilmore. Pianist Palmer Jones worked at the Ambassadeurs with his wife, Florence Embry and knew many old blues and folk songs. He was part of the Black musical tradition that was of interest of Hughes. The array of Black artists also includes the singers Olle Cooper and Crutcher and Evans, dancer pantomimist Louis Douglas and drummer Sammy Richardson. The afterhours ‘jaim session’, an important element of the Harlem jazz scene, was duplicated in Paris, where musicians and vocalists performed such songs as ‘Frankie and Johnnie’ and ‘Henrico’.

Although Paris was the cultural highlight of his time in Europe, Hughes did visit other countries such as Spain and other cities such as Venice, which he toured with Alain Locke. Hughes’ journey home past Gibraltar inspired him to write a poem about the face of England looking into the face of the Dark Continent, a satiric mockery of negative Eurocentric perceptions of Africa that suggest.

Although Africa and Europe affected Hughes’ poetic development and his socio cultural consciousness, his contact with Black Society in Washington D.C. where he met Mary Church Terrell and other famous Negro leaders, led to his national recognition as a poet. Although Hughes suggests his ambivalence toward the nice, cultured and coloured people, he seems disappointed to be a poet forced to work in a laundry because of not having the right connections to secure a job as a page at the Library of Congress. In Washington, Hughes’ writing of poems in the manner of the Negro blues and the spirituals suggests his own blue emotional state. Furthermore, Hughes’ reflections on segregated Washington offer a personal social history regarding race and the colour line, accentuating the fundamental irony of discrimination in the nation’s capital.
Especially relevant to the development of Hughes’ poetic style, Seventh Street, with its pool halls, barrelhouses, Churches, and restaurants, was the site for his further inculcation of the blues and Black music. For Hughes, Black music was figuratively related to the sea. He describes it as,

Like the waves of the sea coming one after another…. so is the undertow of Black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power (TBS, 162).

If Washington in 1925 intensified Hughes’ study of the blues, it was also the location for his meeting of two significant figures in African American history and American poetry, respectively, Carter G. Woodson and Vachel Lindsay. Hughes admits to not enjoying the work he did for Woodson, though he acknowledges the importance of Woodson’s contribution in editing the Journal of Negro History and compiling Thirty Thousand Free Negro Heads of Families, published in 1925. Hughes retells the legendary story of his contact with Lindsay at the Wardman Park Hotel, where Hughes left three poems on scraps of paper, ‘Jazzonia’, ‘Negro Dancers’ and ‘The Weary Blues’ for Lindsay’s perusal. The result was a notice in the journals The Washington Star and the Baltimore Afro American about the write up under the headline ‘Bus Boy Becomes Poet’. “One night he was just one of the bus boys scurrying here and there with empty dishes, ice, water bottles and more butter and the next day he was Langston Hughes, prize winner of a poetry competition conducted by the ‘Opportunity Magazine’” (Baltimore,1). The accompanying photography of Hughes shouldering a tray of dishes later appeared in variety of newspapers in the United States:

Hughes’ return to New York and Harlem after winning the Amy Spingarn prize from Crisis, a prize offered by another of the white patrons of Black achievements, furthered his association with other African American writers and artists who were beginning to form what would become known as the Harlem Renaissance, which Hughes in part three calls ‘Black Renaissance’. Harlem and
New York in general appealed to him because of the nightlife and musical entertainment they afforded. The 1920s saw the rise of stellar African American performing artists such as Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, Rose Mc Calendon, Ethel Waters, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Gladys Bentley.

The Black Renaissance section, identified in a 1940 letter to Bontemps as the Harlem part was supposedly cut in its final draft stages because “it was the part publishers liked least and though had least of me in it” (TBS, 321). In December 3, 1939, in his letter to Van Vechten, Hughes defended the inclusion of details in this section, a sign of his recognition of Harlem’s cultural importance as “Harlem’s rise to culture and neo-culture seems to me to be of historical importance and interest to quite a few people, both white and coloured” (Rampersad, 376). With Van Vechten’s help, the deleted sections were reinstated. By placing his personal experience in the background, Hughes accentuated his cultural criticism.

In Harlem, Hughes came in contact with visual artists such as Winold Reiss who drew another of the classic images of Hughes. Hughes includes those figures who were instrumental in shaping his career or who were supporters and recognized members of the burgeoning ‘Renaissance’. Although he acknowledges Jessie Fauset and Alain Locke as two of those who midwife the so-called New Negro literature into being, he praises above all a third supporter, Charles S. Johnson, the editor of *Opportunity*, as the one who did more to encourage and develop Negro writers during the 1920’s than anyone else in America. Hughes also suggests a primary group of writers, including Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps, Rudolph Fisher, Wallace Thurman, Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston.

In Harlem, the colour line and integration occurred simultaneously, particularly in cabarets and nightspots “where formerly only colored people laughed and sang and where now the strangers were given the best ring side tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers” (TBS, 244). Hughes’ analysis of white interest in Harlem is tinged with irony and sarcasm because the downtown clubs
were off limits to African Americans and for white patrons uptown, African Americans were stereotypes of the singing and dancing variety. When Hughes voices the oft repeated identification of the period as the era in which the Negro was in vogue, he implies a cultural interest by white Americans but also an objectionable mimicry of the Black experience. This is exemplified by Ethel Barrymore’s Black Face performance in the play based on Julia Peterkin’s 1928 novel Scarlet Sister Mary. Hughes would later parody such attempts in his skit Scarlet Sister Barry (1938).

Rather than being a purely romantic reminiscence, Hughes’ treatment of the Black Renaissance emphasizes the underlying realities. He agrees with assessments of the bitterness and frustration of literary Harlem as depicted by Van Vechten in Nigger Heaven (1926) and Thurman in Infants of the Spring (1932). This was a period in which African Americans of social importance revelled in claiming association with white celebrities. This supposedly mutual satisfaction of interracial socializing occurred at affairs held by millionaire heiress A’ Lelia Walker, daughter of Madame C.J. Walker, entrepreneur in beauty products. A’ Lelia Walker’s guest list would turn any Nordic social climber green with envy, and her death in 1931 marked the decline of the vogue since she had been a patron through her Harlem salon known as the ‘Dark Tower’. Her importance is indicated as well by the participation in her funeral ceremony of figures such as Mary McLeod Bethune.

For Hughes, Harlem was also the rent party, depicted graphically in The Big Sea with reproductions of rent party cards. The rent party stimulated Hughes’ imagination because it was a place where Black labourers, from maids to porters to laundry workers, met for their own enjoyment. In certain respects, Hughes casts himself as an outsider. When he refers to hearing their laughter he separates himself from the partygoers, though he recollects the floor shaking as the dancers danced.
In 1926, Hughes was certainly a member of the bohemian fringe. As one of the younger writers, he collaborated with Thurman, Hurston, Bennett, Aaron Douglas, Bruce Nugent and John P. Davis to create an age defining Negro quarterly of the arts, *Fire* whose title rendered by Hughes in *The Big Sea* without the exclamation marks metaphorically referred to burning away the old dead conventional Negro-white ideas. The shortlived *Fire* was intended as an alternative publishing outlet, though its reception by the old guard, represented by Du Bois, was a negative one.

In Hughes’ assessment of the Harlem writers, Rudolph Fisher ranks among the wittiest, able to exchange barbs with Alain Locke. Hughes also provides vignettes of Hurston and Toomer, although in hindsight Hughes’ remarks about Hurston are sarcastic and contain hints of the personal disagreement that arose between them regarding their play *Mule Bone* and other issues.

Although Harlem is Hughes’ main focus, he also covers down-town, showing how whites of social bearing, such as the Spingarns, Eddie Wasserman, Muriel Draper and Rita Romilly, socialized with African Americans in a kind of reverse slumming. The downtown events were opportunities for Hughes to come in contact with recognized figures of the New York social, cultural and literary scene such as Somerset Maugham, Fannie Hurst, Louis Untermeyer and Salvador Dali.

Further, Hughes offers a critical assessment of his own poetry and includes certain poems within the text, such as ‘Cross’ and ‘Brass Spittoons’ the latter from his controversial second collection of poems in famously titled *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927). When Hughes divides the critical taste of the period, it is along class lines, for he argues that works such as McKay’s *Home to Harlem* and his own poems using blues and folk forms were not favoured, though the novel of Jessie Faust was appreciated because they presented only good Negroes, clean and cultured. For Hughes certain Black critics failed to recognize ‘satire’ and ‘irony’, but George Schuyler’s *Black No More* (1931) with its ‘obvious satire’ was apparently acceptable. Significantly and in contrast to Du Bois and others, Hughes
defends Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* and equates it to *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, both of which had an unfortunate choice of title. Hughes castigates Black critics for having written so stupidly about *Nigger Heaven*. It is not surprising that Hughes defends Van Vechten. They certainly had a close literary relationship and it was Van Vechten who considered *The Big Sea* “a history of the race in America in the vein of Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, though Van Vechten urged Hughes to be more weighty in the next volume and deal with issues such as the plight of the Negro in contemporary America” (Bernard, 195).

In addition to offering a cultural survey of the Harlem Renaissance, *The Big Sea* provides perspectives on Black institutions of higher education especially Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, which Hughes attended during the apex of the Harlem Renaissance. Although Hughes acknowledges that by the time of the publication of *The Big Sea* the faculty at Lincoln had become integrated, the years of his attendance caused him considerable thought. Hughes, who liked Lincoln very much, is nonetheless critical of the institution. He is distressed that no negro had ever, in all its seventy years, held a professorial position at Lincoln. This disappointment foreshadows the kinds of curricular and academic issues that fueled the Black student movements on white campuses during the sixties.

Hughes’ concern with race and Jim Crow is also evident in his recollections of a Southern journey he made with Hurston. This trip undoubtedly deepened Hughes’ understanding of the blues. Hearing Bessie Smith *Blocks away* from the theater where she was practicing in Macon was an experience of vocal dynamics, and Hughes and Hurston got to know her pretty well. Later, in Westfield, New Jersey, Hughes collaborated with Hurston on the folk comedy *Mule Bone*. In Hughes’ version of the collaboration, he was responsible for the plot and Hurston for having authenticated and flavoured the dialogue. Even though Hurston had already written *Color Struck* (1926) which appeared in *Fire* Hughes does not recognize her as the more experienced dramatist. The failure of the *Mule Bone* collaboration is expressed with a clever wordplay as the heart was broken and the
art was broken though there is no inclusion of details of a personal or romantic relationship with Hurston.

*The Big Sea* also serves as a writer’s description of the creative process in the production of a first novel. Hughes blended fact and fiction in *Not without Laughter* (1930), for example in his use of an actual storm, a cyclone that destroyed part of his grandmother’s house. This factual basis produced characters that seemed to live in the room in which he was writing. However, Hughes was disappointed when the novel was finally published. He admits his shortcomings as a novelist, feeling as if he had let down the actual characters.

Hughes’ disappointment with *Not without Laughter* parallels his disaffection with patronage. When he states that the strength of the surest dream is the strength of the primitive world, he not only evokes the dream metaphor that will be central to his poetic ideas but also prepares the reader for his recollection of his relationship with Charlotte Osgood Mason, his white patron, whom he broke off relations over the very concept of primitivism. Mason encouraged Hughes to travel to Cuba in search of a collaborator for an opera. In Havana, he met Jose Antonio Fernandez de Castro, who provided a rumba of a good time. Hughes later satirized Mason in veiled presentation of white patronage in the short story ‘The Blues I’m Playing’, published in his story collection *The Ways of White Folks* (1934). Hughes expresses the break with his mentor Mason with emotional timidity that he wanted to be released from any further obligations: “It does not signal the end of white patronage for Hughes, who benefited from Noel Sullivan’s support in completing *The Big Sea*. However, this assistance differed from the artistically controlling kind practiced by Mason” (Miller, 71).

Able to comfortably reside for a time in Westfield, New Jersey, as a result of Mason’s support, Hughes expresses the contrast between his favored literary existence and the economic difficulties experienced by laborers at the end of the
twenties the realities of social disparity. His decision to include the poem ‘Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria’ in *The Big Sea* testifies to his concern for the dispossessed jobless and those coloured folks in Harlem who were hungry a long time in 135th Street. It was this realization, enhanced by his period of patronage, that led to his break with Mason, expressed in one of the most telling statements of the autobiography, one that not only reiterates issues Hughes confronted during his African journey but also defines the American Negro and questions the very notion of the primitive, which in some sense Hughes had imbibed and rejected by saying

I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem (*TBS*, 325).

In defining his identity through distinctly American and Black urban locales, Hughes echoes his earlier depictions of African American life in urban spaces, in the streets where he had heard the blues and the laughter that would influence his poetry and other literary works. Although he does not completely repudiate the very concept of the primitive, he is at least honest in articulating his uncertainty about its relevance to his own literary purpose. As in ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’, Hughes can be understood as expressing a collective identity. His conflict regarding his African self is linked to his rejection of simplistic notions of primitivism and he is reminder of Du Boisian double consciousness concerning racial identity in the twentieth century. For Hughes one of his two souls reside in the deeper rivers of his poetic imagination, his Black soul, which had its extensions across the Atlantic, though it recognized its formation in the Diaspora. For readers of *The Big Sea* and observers of the American and African American literary scene of the twenties, Hughes remains a unique chronicler of the African
American folk voice, an insider and a traveler, a cultural critic and a believable witness.

In *I Wonder As I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey*, Langston Hughes continued his personal and cultural recollections. *I Wonder as I Wander* begins at the point where his first autobiography, *The Big Sea* ends. Although *I Wonder As I Wander* was published in 1956, it is limited principally to the years 1931 through 1937 and unlike *The Big Sea*, is not heavily concerned with Harlem. *I Wonder as I Wander* ranges from locales in the United States to the Caribbean, The Soviet Union, the Far East, France, and Spain. Dedicated to Arthur and Marion Spingarn, Hughes’ longtime associates known for their support of African Americans, *I Wonder as I Wander* was published at a turning point in national and global history, during the initial years of the Civil Rights Movement, exemplified in the courageous refusal of Rosa Parks in 1955 to relinquish her front seat on a Montgomery to Alabama bus.

The mid 1950s was also the era of the initial stages of the cold war, the arms race, the Eisenhower Presidency and Nikita Khrushchev’s leadership of the Soviet Union, a period during which the United State viewed Communism as a threat. The Red Scare, symbolized by the extremism of Joseph McCarthy was waning. In 1953 Hughes had come before the McCarthy committee and had given in to the pressures to renounce his earlier association with the Left. Later in 1956, Richard Wright’s *The Color Curtain: A Report* on the Bandung Conference was published, recounting a meeting of coloured leaders of the colonized countries in Asia and Africa. In addressing retrospectively such political themes as the early years of the Soviet Union, colonialism and fascism in Europe, *I Wonder as I Wander*, though it might be anachronistic, was tangentially relevant to the era of its publication. The autobiography questions the success of the Soviet Revolution in relation to ethnic minorities prior to Stalin’s purges of 1934-1941. It is also a first hand account of the *Spanish Civil War* of 1936-1939, during the era of the Popular Front against fascism. Hughes was not just a personal witness to a major historical occurrence but an “interpreter of it as well” (Miller, 31).
Hughes saw from the ground the attempts at consolidation in the far-flung Soviet Republics, which in the 1990s dissolved with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Frequently, Hughes’ descriptions of places and personalities, from Caribbean vistas to Soviet soldiers to farmers to expatriate Black American entertainers and jazz musicians to fighters in the international brigades, are in terms of colour and race. Another motif of the autobiography is Hughes’ recollecting of writers, artists and intellectuals such as Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Neruda, Nicolas Guillen and Arthur Koestler, the Hungarian born author who wrote scathing criticisms of communism. Koestler, born in 1905 had become a member of the Communist Party in 1931 but withdrew in 1938. He was imprisoned under Franco during the Spanish Civil War (Crossman, 15).

One of the key issues in Hughes’ literary career is whether he had actually joined the Communist Party, as had such African American writers as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, both of whom eventually broke with the party. Another of Hughes’ fellow writers, Afro-Cuban poet Nicolas Guillen, had also been a party member, having joined in 1937. The same year, Hughes influenced Ellison politically by introducing him to certain radical journals. Wright had become a party member through his connection to a John Reed Club, a group with which Hughes had also been associated (Williams, 3-4).

In his own manner and in a fashion less dramatic than Koestler or Wright, Hughes too would suggest certain inconsistencies in Communist ideology and bureaucracy, yet he praised communism’s apparent racial egalitarianism. Despite the suggestion that “Hughes and others may have inadvertently become party members by singing a petition in Carmel, California, in 1932, there is little evidence that Hughes was a card carrying member of the party and subject to the kinds of restrictions and ideological dilemmas that drove Ellison and Wright from its ranks” (Duffy, 53). The most important thing is that Hughes’ portrayal of the Soviet system in *I Wonder as I Wander* does not ponder to Red Scare politics.
The tone of *I Wonder as I Wander*, which is written somewhat like a novel, varies from the humorous to the serious and is especially incisive when Hughes documents the *Spanish Civil War*. The brevity of the period covered by the autobiography suggests a limitation in Hughes’ conception of his life in that it excludes the 1940s and 1950s. In its time, Hughes considered *I Wonder as I Wander* to be his biggest book with some five hundred and eighty three pages in manuscript when a draft was given to his publisher, Rinehart in 1955. *I Wonder as I Wander* appeared a year after Hughes’ collaborative project with the brilliant photographer Roy De Carava, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955) and the same year as another collaborative work, *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* (1956), with Milton Meltzer. One of Hughes’ books for younger readers, *The First Book of the West Indies* also came out in 1956.

*I Wonder as I Wander* marked Hughes’ achievements beyond poetry. In the 1950s his major medium was prose and his autobiography was his best work of the genre during that period. With the publication of *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hughes completed a project of more than a decade, one whose progress he shared with fellow Harlem Renaissance writer, friend and literary confidant Arna Bontemps. Hughes had anticipated that the volume would be completed by the end of the summer of 1943 and he recognized that it might have been published by that time if he did not wander even more than wonder, suggesting his interest in other projects and his ongoing travels. “When Bontemps urged Hughes not to completely neglect working on *I Wonder as I Wander*, he was again acting as literary ally, as he had done during the completion of *The Big Sea*. In asking Bontemps how I Wonder stacks up beside *The Big Sea*” (Nichols, 127).

Hughes was seeking his friend’s critical approbation. Nineteen forty three would have been a propitious time to publish the autobiography because it would have come out the same year as Roi Ottley’s *New World A Coming*, a prophetic book on Harlem and race in the United States, presaging the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s. Also, had Hughes published *I Wonder as I Wander* in the
early 1940s, its retrospective view of the 1930s and its discussion of both communism and fascism would have been timelier.

After completing the manuscript of *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hughes in an April 1956 letter to Bontemps, written from Hughes’ Harlem home, reflected on autobiography as literary art, the process of condensation and shaping, a process he knew well from *The Big Sea*. He tells further,

My No.2 Life is going to be good. I never really read it before until this week. I’ve now cut all the impersonal stuff, down to a running narrative with me in the middle on every page, extraneous background and statistics and stories not my own gone by the board. The kind of intense consideration that of course, keeps an autobiography from being entirely true, in that body’s life is pure essence without pulp, waste matter and rind which art of course, throws in the trash can. No wonder folks read such books and say, How intensely you’ve lived (TBS, 343).

Following the publication of *The Big Sea*, Carl Van Vechten had suggested that Hughes’s next volume of autobiography should not only deal with the plight of the Negro but also tell at last whether or no you think communism is the way out and that such comments would be expected and relevant to this reputation. To a degree, Hughes addressed Van Vechten’s suggestions, though it is primarily through an international focus that Hughes furthers such central themes as race and color. In a November 16, 1956 letter to Hughes, Van Vechten expressed his satisfaction with *I Wonder as I Wander*, calling it

one of your better jobs, written with a good deal of skill, well organized, indeed much better organized than the original book in this series and invariably interesting” and singling out the “Russian section” as the “best”. Although
Hughes indicated that Van would “figure again” in *I Wonder as I Wander*, he is not included to any significant extent (Bernard, 195).

The somewhat mixed but mostly positive reception of *I Wonder as I Wander* by African American reviewers writing for Black and mainstream publications shows Hughes’ standing in the 1950s. A well considered evaluation by Nick Aaron Ford of Morgan State University appeared in *Phylon*. Ford suggested that Hughes had a fourfold task: entertainment, cultural history, racial matters and philosophy of art and of life. Although Ford concluded that the autobiography would offer many moments of pleasure and profit he was critical of Hughes’s historical presentations, thinking them to have been dragged in to demonstrate the author’s knowledge.

Equal in depth to Ford’s commentary was the extensive evaluation by John W.Paker of Fayetteville State Teachers College in the *Journal of Negro Education*, which asserted that Hughes was born with a migratory impulse and that his literary equipment included the observation of people, customs and languages in many countries of the world. Luther P.Jackson Jr. in the *Crisis* also questioned the inclusion of the personal side by calling Hughes strangely evasive. Jackson preferred Hughes’ Harlem writings, findings that Hughes is at his wonderful best when he reports on the troubles of poor Harlem Negroes or the ways of white folks is an allusion to Hughes’ 1934 short story collection, *The Ways of White Folks*. For Jackson, the autobiography lacked reasoning of the why and where forces of race relations and took a middle of the road position regarding the Soviet policies. The best part was Hughes’ journey to New York by car with Mary McLeod Bethune, which gave insights into Hughes’ warm personality.

In a primarily favorable commentary in *Saturday Review*, Roi-Ottley thought Hughes to have written warmly and amusingly with flashes of social and racial insights. He called the autobiography a sort of vagabondia and excellent fare and identified Emma, African American women in Moscow called Moscow’s
mammy and given considerable description by Hughes, as his own favorite. In a contribution to the *Chicago Tribune* book review, Ottley offered a variation on his *Saturday Review* piece, suggesting that “the one and only direct appeal the Soviet ever made to win the American Negro to the cause of communism was a dismal failure,” (35) referring to the aborted film project as a hilarious, sometimes sardonic story as told by Hughes. Another main stream publication, *the New Yorker*, in its brief notice not only called the book ‘immensely interesting’ and ‘written with bounce and zest’ (9) but also acknowledged Hughes’s admiration of the ‘absence of a color line’ in the Soviet Union.

Less favourable was Saunders Redding’s commentary in the *New York Herald Tribune* Book Review. Redding, critic and educator, acknowledged a frank and charming quality but questioned the volume’s depth, a remark similar to Ellision’s criticism of *The Big Sea*. Opening with disparaging remarks about travelling, calling it a sort of disease that seems to strike writers with a particular virulence, Redding reluctantly claimed that travel may not have been particularly harmful for Hughes, though Hughes did more wandering than wondering. The autobiography was also reviewed in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, where it was considered a moderately happy go lucky hegira laced though it sometimes is with angry incident.

*I Wonder as I Wander* was clearly “partial and sympathetic toward the Soviet Union and fully supportive of the Communist cause in the Spanish Civil War” (Redding, 131). Probably the lack of topicality led to the sparse sales of the book, under three thousand copies for the initial two years, as well as limited appreciation by the more conservative segment of the U.S. reading public. In 1949, it was likely the political content that caused the Knopfs, who had published *The Big Sea*, in particular, Blanche Knopf, to decline publishing *I Wonder as I Wander*. In a November 10, 1949, letter to Hughes, Blanche Knopf responded to his outline for the autobiography, calling it pretty weighted she withheld making a commitment before Hughes and written some of it so that one can read it. Essentially she suggested regrettably and with great difficulty that the outline as it
reads is not a book and that Hughes take it elsewhere. However, the sustaining merit of the autobiography, published by Rinehart in 1956, was proved by its successive editions brought out by other houses in decades to follow.

In *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hughes identifies an array of persons he encountered during his global travels. Many of the writers he met had an influence on his perceptions of their societies and cultures. In Haiti, Jacques Roumain, a member of the Haitian elite who appreciated the culture of the people without shoes, referred to Hughes as the greatest Negro poet who had ever come to honor Haitian soil. Moscow offered a variety of contacts, including Sergei Eisenstein, the director of the film *Potemkin*, playwright Sergei Tretiakov, poet Demain Biedni, and Boris Pasternak, who cultured in appearance and shy with strangers did not produce political poetry. In the 1930s, Moscow was an international meeting place for such writers as Louis Aragon of France, mentioned in *The Big Sea*, poet Emi Sao of China, theater director Seki Sano of Japan and Charles Ashleigh of England. Hughes also met a number of Americans in Moscow. John Hope, the dogmatic Negro lawyer, who married Harlem social activist Louise Thompson, had traveled there, as did dancers John Bovington and Isadora Duncan, who came seeking artistic freedom.

One of Hughes’ favorite capitals was Paris, which he had documented extensively in *The Big Sea* and which he revisited in 1937 to attend the Second International Writers’ Congress and as a ‘Prelude to Spain’. He also passed through Paris following his coverage of the Spanish Civil War. In Paris, Hughes reacquainted himself with Nancy Cunard, editor of the anthology *The Negro* and with Ada Bricktop Smith, the nightclub personality who is treated at length in *The Big Sea* and who took over the Grand Duc nightclub, naming it after herself.

In Paris, Hughes also found poet Leon Damas of French Guiana, who was an associate of Andre Gide, Jacques Roumain, scholar Mercer Cook, Rene Maran and the legendary Josephine Baker, headliner at the Follies Burgers and known among the Negroes of Montmartre for her competence in French. At the
international Writers’ Congress Hughes was among such writers as Stephen Spender, W.H.Auden, John Strachey, Pablo Neruda and Andre Malraux. In Mexico, where Hughes traveled to settle his father’s estate and briefly lived a bohemian life, he became acquainted with poet Andres Henestrosa, French photographer Henri Cartier Bresson and illustrator Miguel Covarrubias, who had drawn the cover for Hughes’s first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*.

During the civil war in Spain, Hughes came in contact with more white American writers than at any other period in his life up to 1956. Malcolm Cowley, Martha Gellhorn, Lillian Hellman, Meyer Levin, Dorothy Parker, Stephen Spender, Andre Malraux and Journalist Herbert Matthews were there, as were Hughes’ fellow travelling companion Nicolas Guillen and Black American short story writer Lucius McDaniel, who was a member of the International Brigades. In Valencia, Hughes met poet Miguel Hernandez. Cuban poet Alejo Carpentier was in Madrid along with Mexican writers Octavio Paz, Maria Luisa Vera and Jose Mancisidor. Significantly Ernest Hemingway, who lived in the vulnerable Hotel Florida in Madrid, was the most celebrated American journalist covering the war. Hughes’ recounting of the day he spent with Hemingway, who was adored by the men in the Brigades, is unspecific Hughes claiming to have little recollection of what they talked about. Apparently, Hughes and Hemingway were not exactly in the same journalistic circle. Hemingway frequented the Aquarium, a bar that was beyond Hughes’ economic reach. What Hughes learned from Hemingway was how a writer could take actual experience and weave it into one’s own fictional work. Back in the United States, Hughes also came in contact with writers and artists in the politically left Carmel scene, where Lincoln Steffens and Hollywood personalities Jimmy Cagney, Greta Garbo and Jean Harlow and Indian mystic J.Krishnamurthi could be found.

Hughes’ more public association with celebrated individuals contrasts with his presentation of private relationships. There has been a good deal of speculation about Hughes’ private self and it is informative to view how he shapes his persona in *I Wonder as I Wander*, particularly in recounting his relationships with women.
In his recollections of the Caribbean, Hughes refers to his ‘girl’ in Haiti, Clezi – Anne, a chubby little Haitian girls who spoke only patois and did her best to make life at Cap Haitian pleasant, but he gives more emphasis to Zell Ingram’s affair with a Dominican woman named Coloma. At a rumba party in Cuba, Hughes, as guest of honor was given his choice from any of the mistresses. Hughes also makes observations on women in particular cultures, such as his remarks that in Soviet Central Asia “thousands of women were still in harems in spite of the new decrees and veiled from head to foot in public”(IWIW, 211). However, Hughes also observed that in Turkestan, women were treated like human beings and not chattels, suggesting progress beyond the restrictions of the veil as a result of Soviet achievements. In parts of this region, ‘Muezzins’ continued their calls to prayer, showing that the new system had not eradicated Islamic religious and cultural practices. Hughes describes his attempt to make contact with women in Central Asia and recreates a dialogue in which he inquires, in languages that today appears sexist, Is that where those broads live? Here Hughes’ unsuccessful encounter with the ‘skinny redhead’, a Tartar woman, is meant as a humorous event. Another woman, Natasha, whom he meets in Moscow, is also presented in physical terms. She was not beautiful, not ugly but very healthy looking with a buxom body. While in Moscow, Hughes was also in love with dancer Si-Lan Chen.

Hughes also noted the status of prostitution in the Soviet Union, Japan, and Spain. In Moscow, the First Conference of Prostitutes become Workers and the disappearance of the infamous Yellow Ticket identification cards signaled the decline of the practice. His remarks about prostitution in Japan indicate a certain descriptive objectification of women. They “fluttered around swaying like trees and waving silken fans, until someone in the room chose one of them”(IWIW, 242). But in Spain, where prostitution was evident in Valencia, Hughes discovered that Loyalist women were not to be viewed as objects of sex but as workers and citizens just like men. Perhaps the most sensitive personal allusion, though made in passing is to his broken relationship with Elsie Roxborough, a passing fair skinned African American, who in Detroit in 1937 staged Hughes’s play Emperor of Haiti.
as *Drums of Haiti*. These recollections and remarks, mixed with cultural and political observations, give a fragmented picture of Hughes’s personal life.

In both the autobiographies, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*, one can cull out certain general tendencies and observations about the subject author. The first and foremost characteristic of Hughes is his picaresque nature. Throughout his life span, he keeps journeying to several countries with a ulyssessian spirit of inquiry. He visited almost thirty three ports and after discontinuing his studies at Columbia University that too against the will of his father, James Hughes. He left for West Africa in 1923, joining the crew of a freighter and threw away all the books into the sea. He got terribly disillusioned and disenchanted with his racial identity when he encountered the Africans declining categorically about his Africanness. His search for identity got fully shattered and he felt he should go to other parts of the world in search of the African race. He was terribly suffering from race consciousness by asking himself very many existential questions like ‘Who he is’, ‘where his roots are’ and ‘what his identity is’. When he comes to understand the reality that he is only a mulatto and he cannot find asylum even in Africa, he feels disappointed. Then he tries to meet his Black brethrens in various parts of the world and there too he comes to terms with the truth that the blacks are sidelined everywhere under the sun and the stigma of race is an indelible aspect. In 1924, he goes to Paris and worked in a kitchen of a night club. In 1925, he goes to Washington. In 1926, he joined Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and became a graduate in 1929. In 1930 he visits Cuba and then leaves for Haiti in 1931. In 1932 he goes to Soviet Russia for a film project along with twenty two young African Americans and stayed there for about a year. He wrote radical verses. The communist ideology fascinated him and he has shown profound involvement. In 1944 the FBI has done its surveillance because of his association with radicalism. In 1953 Hughes was forced to testify before Senator Joseph McCarthy’s subcommittee on subversive activities. He gave up all his involvement with radicalism by then. Once again he got disenchanted with his ideology of communism. He felt he could not reconcile with rigid system of
communism. The discipline-oriented Russian politics does not provide room for Jazz music which is supposed to be the be all and end all for the African Americans. Finally he comes back home after wandering and wondering a lot in the world. He understands that life is an unfathomable big sea and one had better identify one’s limitations.