CHAPTER FIVE

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The loveliest lynchee was our Lord....

Christ is a nigger,
Beaten and black:

Nigger Christ
On the cross
Of the South....

One of the stereotypes created by the White writers is that the colour "black" is identifiable with sin. This negative connotation of associating "black" with sin has affected the mind and art of the Black intellectuals. This long-fostered myth has been exploded by the staunch apostles of Negritude, like Leopald Senghor, Aime Cesaire and Leon Damas who celebrate blackness and its strengths.

In such a context, Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes are acknowledged as ardent followers of the Black and Beautiful Movement. They are Christian poets, who understand the significance of the Biblical verse which runs thus:

I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Keder, as the curtains of Solomon.


Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept....

Brooks and Hughes are aware of the fact that there is no discrimination based on colour in Christianity and they explode the stereotype created by the Whites that Black is connected with evil and sin. In fact, they find great strength, beauty and charm in being Black.

Brooks, after having rededicated herself to write poems that are "non-compromising" and "DEFINITE," attempts to make a study of the "world-shaking word," black. She lists all the meanings of the words "black" and "white" as given in her copy of little green Webster's New World Dictionary and offers this interesting observation:

Interestingly enough, we do not find that "white" is "opposite of black." That would "lift" black to the importance-level of white....

She sketches the beauty of "black boy-men" painted on the mural-painting, in "The Wall":

black boy-men.
Black
boy-men on roofs fist out "Black Power!" Val,
a little black stampede
in African

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640 The Bible, The Song of Solomon, 1: 5-6.
images of brass and flowerswirl, 
fists out "Black Power!" -- tightens pretty eyes, 
leans back on mothercountry and is tract, 
is treatise through her perfect and tight teeth.... 642

Langston Hughes, who is the "blackest" in expression according to Senghor, hymns the beauty of blackness in many of his poems. "When Sue Wears Red" is a fine example which displays his ecstatic mood in a few lines:

When Susanna Jones wears red
Her face is like an ancient cameo
Turned brown by the ages.

Come with a blast of trumpets,
Jesus!
When Susanna Jones wears red
A queen from some time-dead Egyptian night
Walks once again.

Blow trumpets, Jesus!

And the beauty of Susanna Jones in red
Burns in my heart a love-fire sharp like pain.

Sweet silver trumpets, Jesus!... 643

Like Brooks, Hughes makes an interesting study of the word "black" in his Simple-story, "That Word Black." He dreams of a day when everything black will be good and everything white will be bad and declares how he feels good about being black:

"I am black. When I look in the mirror, I see myself, daddy-o, but I am not ashamed. God made me.... He did not make us no badder than the rest of the folks. The earth is

643 Hughes, "When Sue Wears Red," in SPLH, p.68.
black ... and all that keeps mens alive comes right up out of the earth -- good old black earth. Coal is black and it warms your house and cooks your food. The night is black, which has a moon, and a million stars, and is beautiful. Sleep is black which gives you rest, so you wake up feeling good. I am black, I feel very good this evening. "What is wrong with black?"...

The Blacks, though living in America, are conscious of their past African religion, rites, rituals, practices and ceremonies. The African rhythms, drumbeats, tom-toms, warmth, shout and noise are ingrained in them and they find themselves caught between two cultures and civilizations. They have to live simultaneously in two worlds -- the Black and the White. They feel exiled in an alien land with a new religion which is characterized by solemn music and instruments as opposed to the heavy music, and "hand-clapping, body-rocking, foot-patting rhythm"645 accompanied by little short rhythmical hops, shaking of hands, and loud and steady singing. W.E.B.Du Bois points out to this double consciousness of the Black American in The Souls of Black Folks:

One ever feels his twoness -- an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder [My emphasis]....

Unable to forget the past and fully accept the Western religious rites and customs, the Blacks are caught up in a cruel dilemma. This is brought forth in the following meaningful lines:

645 Hughes, "Big Meeting," in LHR, p.71.
But the great western world holds me in fee,
And I may never hope for full release
While to its alien gods I bend my knee.
Something in me is lost, forever lost,
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,
And I must walk the way of life of a ghost
Among the sons of earth, a thing apart,
For I was born, far away from my native clime,
under the white man's menace, out of time....

In an oppressive, enslaved, poverty-stricken and economically dependent situation, the only form of social activity which was offered to the Black man was the Church service, where he could give vent to his suppressed emotions and feelings. It is at this juncture that one understands the significance of the spirituals. They are songs which served as a means for expressing the Blacks' longing for escaping the present hardships to a place far away, i.e., heaven where there will be everlasting bliss and happiness. Johnson traces how the spirituals came into existence:

[The] Negro seized Christianity,... the religion which implied the hope that in the next world there would be a reversal of conditions.... The result was a body of songs voicing all the cardinal virtues of Christianity, patience -- forbearance -- love -- faith -- and hope....

By nature, the Blacks are deeply religious, endowed with the Christian virtues of patience, long-suffering, endurance and humility. Again, the Christian religion speaks of a kind and just God who... sent His "only begotten son" to liberate the

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world enslaved by sin, by sacrificing His life on Calvary. This Gospel of God's love, which embraced the whole humanity, regardless of colour, creed, race and sex attracted the poor Blacks who were yearning for love and acceptance. Yet again, Christianity offered the Blacks a hope of unending joy and justice in the world beyond, which they sorely missed in the temporal world.

Though the Whites pointed Christ and salvation to the Blacks, they did not practise what they preached. There was a tremendous disparity between their doctrines and their lives. They justified and perpetrated slavery. They felt content that Christianity had no law forbidding slavery. In this regard, Jean Wagner's observation is relevant:

> From the outset, however, slavery forced Christianity to contradict itself. The Negro was admitted to baptism, on the one hand, while on the other he was declared devoid of a soul. Slavery, by simply existing, offered unceasing defiance to the teachings of Christ, and there was nothing in Christian institutions that could justify it. The sanctity of marriage was only a tragic irony for the Negro family, which at any moment could be wrenched apart by sale and dispersal, while Negro wives were practically at the mercy of their masters' appetites. For the masters, the slave's religion was often nothing but a huge farce;...

Frustrated with the White man's Christianity, some of the Black intellectuals considered Christianity a detrimental imposition on them. Some even openly renounced Christianity and embraced other religions such as Islam. Thus, a Cassius Clay became Mohammed Ali and a Leroi Jones became Imamu Amiri

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Baraka. But there were some Black intellectuals like Christopher Okigbo, Dennis Brutus, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes, to quote a few, who appreciated the worth of Christianity.

Brooks and Hughes are Christian poets, who find that the parables, miracles, sermons and preachings of Christ are so many learning experiences to the religious-minded Christians. Though the Whites do not follow what they profess to believe, Brooks and Hughes realize the significance of practical Christian living. They have suffused their poetry with Christian truths and profundities. When interviewed by Gloria T.Hull, Brooks was asked to compare herself with Robert Hayden. Brooks answered her, comparing their faith in religion. Her answer shows her faith in God, to whom she can pray with faith and then relax:

I don't have any special religion. My religion is -- I guess I'll say something corny -- PEOPLE, LIVING. I go to church on Mother's Day and on Easter Sunday. I will say, however, that when I'm up in a plane and lately when I'm in a car or any other conveyance I say Dear --, Please protect us all -- and then sit back and enjoy the ride....

Thus, one finds that Brooks' conception of God is on a practical level. As Melhem observes, "Brooks' faith, even when steeped in religion, attends the improvement of daily life, the necessity of struggle, the trust in possibility." For Brooks, political life and religious life are interlocked. Politics is one of the many dimensions of religion. And religion must cater to the needs of the present

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oppressive conditions. Arthur McGovern's view concurs with the ideology of Brooks:

> It is not enough, however, to know what the kingdom of God meant in Jesus' time. It must be grasped in the light of present experience. Today ... the kingdom expresses a people's utopian longing for liberation from everything that alienates them: pain, hunger, injustice, death. But it also conveys the absolute lordship of God who will carry out this liberation.

Brooks staunchly believes that Democracy and Christianity are two equally great ideals. She expects those ideals to begin with her. As Antonio Perez remarks, "A world in which religion has lost all socio-political embodiment is a world turned false; it is doomed to destruction."

While Brooks' statement of faith in God is indirectly stated or just hinted at, Hughes promulges the same directly and clearly:

> Were I asked to preach a sermon about God, I would have to begin by saying that I don't know very much about God -- but I have a feeling that God is related to everything and everybody on earth.

When Hughes was questioned whether "religious faith of any kind" influenced his

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work, Hughes responded spontaneously:

Yes, I would think very much so. I grew up in a not very religious family, but I had a foster aunt who saw that I went to church and Sunday school ... and I was very much moved, always, by the, shall I say, rhythms of the Negro church, ... of the spirituals, ... of those wonderful old time sermons ... And when I began to write poetry, that influence came through....

Mary Beth Culp observes how religion and race lie intertwined in Hughes' poetry:

... Hughes sought to capture the essence of every aspect of black culture, including its religion. Religious feeling is always interdependent with racial feeling in his poetry. He views religion in the larger context of black culture, presenting it variously as a source of strength for the oppressed,...

Brooks and Hughes are religiously oriented Black intellectuals who find meaning in Christianity. If Christ is the first victim of mankind, they identify the Black sufferer as the next victim of mankind.

A Black individual finds many parallels between himself and Christ. He identifies himself with Christ on the level of the indignities and undue sufferings experienced by Christ. Christ becomes not merely a White man's God, but a "nigger Christ" and a "black Christ." Christ "came unto his own, and his own received him not." He "took upon him the form of a servant," identified

655 Hughes, quoted in James A. Emanuel, Langston Hughes, p.90.
657 The Bible, St. John, 1:12.
658 The Bible, Philippians, 2:7.
Himself with the poor, the lowly, the humble, the oppressed and the exploited. He did good to all, but there was no one to own Him. He was "despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief."\footnote{The Bible, Isaiah, 53:3.} His own disciple betrayed Him and the same people who had received good things from him cried, "Crucify Him." He was crucified on the cross for no fault of His own. This picture of Christ perfectly parallels the Black's situation in America. Like Christ he is rejected and ignored in his own land. Though he has contributed to the progress of America, he is overlooked and taken for granted. Quite often he is victimized and lynched for no fault of his own. Such an identification eases his burden and comforts him with thoughts of compensation in heaven.

Brooks' poems on Christ and religion are comparatively fewer than Hughes'. Still, one traces the Black's identity with Christ in some of her poems. She lists "Black Jesus" as one among the heroic Black figures in "The Leaders." Again, in "the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon," she pictures the loneliness of God elaborately with a touch of humour:

\begin{quote}
I THINK it must be lonely to be God
Nobody loves a master. No. Despite
The bright hosannas, bright dear-Lords, and bright
Determined reverence of Sunday eyes.

Picture Jehovah striding through the hall
Of His importance, creatures running out
From servant-corners to acclaim, to shout
Appreciation of His merit's glare.

But who walks with Him? - dares to take His arm,
To slap Him on the shoulder, tweak His ear,
Buy Him a Coca-Cola or a beer,
Pooh-pooh His politics, call Him a fool?
\end{quote}
Perhaps -- who knows? -- He tires of looking down. Those eyes are never lifted. Never straight. Perhaps sometimes He tires of being great In solitude. Without a hand to hold [My emphasis]....

The loneliness presented is that of a master and not a slave or servant. Yet, the state of loneliness has been pictured in its full intensity in moving words: "Without a hand to hold." This is possible because Brooks herself has experienced the *sturm und drang* of being an alienatee. Hence, she draws a similarity between a lonely God and a lonely Black.

It is interesting to cite the poem of Edward Estlin Cummings as a running parallel and the poem quoted below identifies Christ Jesus as an alienatee and a loner. The poem makes interesting reading and it reads thus:

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no time ago
or else a life
walking in the dark
i met christ

jesus) my heart
flopped over
and lay still
while he passed (as

close as i'm to you
yes closer
made of nothing
except loneliness....
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660 Brooks, "the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon," in *WGB*, p.15.

The Black man traverses a very difficult path. It is a "hard home-run," and a hard climb with many landings, corners and impediments, just like the difficult way of the Cross. In fact, the Cross and the Calvary are symbols of suffering for the poet. It is interesting to record that the poet is conscious of the Gospel truth that physical suffering is always followed by a spiritual reward.

Brooks' "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath" presents the Black's life in terms of Calvary-experience:

But my detention and my massive stain,
And my distortion and my Calvary
I grind into a little light lorgnette
Most sly: to read man's inhumanity.
And I remark my Matter is not all.
Man's chopped in China, in India indented.
From Israel what's Arab is resented.
Europe candies custody and war... 662

Here, Brooks tries to gauge the Black man's "Calvary" with reference to other oppressive conditions, the world over. She finds oppression as something universal and decides to ride on with determination:

And I ride ride I ride on to the end --
Where glowers my continuing Calvary.
I,
My fellows, and those canny consorts of
Our spread hands in this contretemps-for-love
Ride into wrath, wraith and menagerie

To fail, to flourish, to wither or to win.
We lurch, distribute, we extend, begin... 663 *


663 Ibid., p.118.

* This bears repetition.
It is to be observed that the plight of the Black is really pathetic; his Calvary is continuous. Like Christ, who chose to die on the cross for the sake of humanity, the speaker resolves to ride on to the end, towards Calvary for the redemption of the Blacks.

Quite often, the Black man suffers unduly for no fault of his own. Onwuchekwa Jemie explains this in detail:

Most lynchings are for rape. But it is common knowledge that in the South it is extremely rare that a black man has actually raped or attempted to rape a white woman. In the South, sexual contact between black men and white women, from slavery times to the present, has almost always been initiated by the white woman. And every black man in the South knows that if he is unlucky enough to become the object of a white woman's affections, he must leave town or die. When a white woman invites you to love, you are doomed. If you accept and it is found out, as it will sooner or later, she will cry rape, and you will be lynched. If you refuse, she will in humiliation and revenge cry rape, and you will be lynched....

In "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," the villain chased and killed by the "Fine Prince" is a Black child of just fourteen years.* He is charged of having made sexual advances to the "milk-white maid," but she herself is unsure of the boy's crime:

... she could not remember now what that foe had done Against her, or if anything had been done....

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664 Onwuchekwa Jemie, Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry, p.111.

* This bears repetition.

The punishment for the Black boy is severe:

...the cramped cries, the little stuttering bravado,
The gradual dulling of those Negro eyes,
The sudden, overwhelming little-boyness in
that barn?...666

Crucifixion is the most cruel and shameful punishment given to traitors, criminals and political agitators. Jesus Christ suffered such a death on a cross. The Black man is also lynched on a tree, like Christ. Amidst a mob of cheering lynchers he will have "the rope around his neck, the knife at his genitals and the fire all over him."667 In "The Chicago Defender Sends a Man to Little Rock" which is hailed as "a deeply religious poem"668 with Christian symbolism by D.H. Melhem, Brooks sketches in detail the harassments of Black boys and girls as a result of school integration. The crowning image of Christ as the loveliest lynchee strikes a parallel between the Black victims and Christ:

And true, they are hurling spittle, rock,
Garbage and fruit in Little Rock.
And I saw coiling storm a-writhe
On bright madonnas. And a scythe
Of men harassing brownish girls.
(The bows and barrettes in the curls
And braids declined away from joy.)

I saw a bleeding brownish boy....

The lariat lynch-wish I deplored.

The loveliest lynchee was our Lord....669 *


* This bears repetition.
According to Melhem's interpretation of these lines, the black school children will be "redeeming life through their suffering and impeccable spirit"\(^{670}\) like Christ.

Christ's crucifixion culminated in His glorious resurrection. Crucifixion became meaningful with Christ's coming back to life. Harry B. Shaw refers to the renewal of the Black man's spirit, inspite of the odds against him as "spiritual rebirth" and points out how Brooks uses it in her poetry:

As if to emphasize the spiritual nature of the black's rebirth, Miss Brooks alludes to it often in terms of redemption, the second coming of Christ, or other religious phenomena. The black man, like Christ, has borne the cross of persecution largely for being what he is...\(^{671}\)

Though Brooks does not give any overt reference to Christ's resurrection, she develops the theme of "life through death" in her work, "Riot":

\[
\text{Lies are told and legends made.} \\
\text{Phoenix rises unafraid...}^{672}\]

Like the phoenix which regains its life from self-consuming fire and ashes, the Black man's spirit survives the harsh actualities of this life:

"There they came to life and exulted, the hurt mute.

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\(^{671}\) Harry B. Shaw, *Gwendolyn Brooks*, p. 132.

Then it was over.
The dust, as they say, settled"….673

Compared with Brooks, Hughes' poems on Christ, religion and the Black man's identity with Christ are more personal and intimate. In "Ma Lord," he strikes a comparison between the troubled Black and Christ:

Ma Lord ain't no stuck-up-man.
Ma Lord, he ain't proud.
When he goes a-walkin'
He gives me his hand.
"You ma friend," he 'lowed.

Ma Lord knowed what it was to work.
He knowed how to pray.
Ma Lord's life was trouble, too,
Trouble ever day.

Ma Lord ain't no stuck-up man.
He's a friend o' mine.
His soul on fire,
He tole me I was gwine.
He said, "Sho you'll come wid Me
An' be ma friend through eternity."...674

Charged with hope and love, the poem exhorts the Black man to work, pray and endure with the faith of living in Christ Jesus.

In Hughes' hands, Christ becomes a "nigger Christ." In "Christ in Alabama," Hughes takes liberty with Christ and identifies Him with the mulatto, the product of miscegenation:

Christ is a nigger,
Beaten and black:
Oh, bare your back!

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Mary is His mother:  
Mammy of the South,  
Silence your mouth.

God is His father:  
White master above  
Grant Him your love,

Most holy bastard  
of the bleeding mouth,  
Nigger Christ  
On the cross  
Of the South....

It is interesting to note that the Whites were enraged with the "nigger" being bracketed with Christ. James A. Emanuel makes a pointed observation which runs thus:

...the phrase 'Nigger Christ' penetrates beyond devotion to a sympathetic identification molded racially by sharing unmerited suffering and revilement....

However, Hughes shares his intention in writing such a poem:

...anything which makes people think of existing evil conditions is worthwhile. Sometimes in order to attract attention somebody must embody these ideas in sensational forms. I meant my poem to be a protest against the domination of all stronger peoples over weaker ones....

The story "On the Road" presents the theme of the Black's identification with Christ movingly. The Black man, Sargeant, too tired and sleepy to notice snow
falling on him, knocks at a Church topped by a stone crucifix and stone Christ. Like Sargeant, Christ himself is left outside the Church, dispossessed. In his attempt to break open the door, the Church falls down and Sargeant is happy that he has liberated Christ. Later, the liberated Christ himself is seen walking beside Sargeant. James A. Emanuel's observation regarding the Black's identification with Christ reads thus:

Christ is one of the dispossessed, impaled on a cross, outside the church. He cannot free himself, yet must come down to the little man, down into the snow to become the companion of a lowly man who cannot enter the church that has petrified the Saviour. Thus the Negro identification with Christ develops....

Hughes considers Christ as the archetype of suffering. The Black man's experience of Calvary is picturesquely brought out in the following lines:

I PRAYED
LORD KNOWS I PRAYED
DADDY
I CLIMBED
UP THAT STEEP HILL
THE VIRGIN
WITH A CROSS
LORD KNOWS I CLIMBED
BUT WHEN I GOT
JOHN JASPER JESUS
WHEN I GOT TO CALVARY
UP THERE ON THAT HILL
ALREADY THERE WAS THREE --
AND ONE, YES, ONE
WAS BLACK AS ME....

678 James A. Emanuel, Langston Hughes, p.95.
679 Hughes, AYM, pp.51-52.
* This bears repetition.
Commenting on these lines, Onwuchekwa Jemie has the following to say:

The believer arrives at the hill-top to find that Christ has already been crucified. Christ has already died for him; he does not now need to die, only to endure the pain. The ritual of atonement is complete when he suffers as Christ suffered, bearing his own cross through life. Of the three crucified on the hill he says, "One / Was black as me"; and the one is Jesus himself rather than one of the two thieves, not only because that belief has some basis in history, but more importantly, because only a black Christ... could know the agonies of the black man in the New World and therefore serve for identification [My emphasis]....

Hughes imagines the consequences if Jesus would come back as a Black man in his poem "Bible Belt":

It would be too bad if Jesus
Were to come back black.
There are so many churches
Where he could not pray
In the U.S.A.,
Where entrance to Negroes,
No matter how sanctified,
is denied.
Where race, not religion,
is glorified.
But say it --
You may be
Crucified....

Though on one level, Hughes' longing for Christ's identifying Himself with the Black at least in His second coming is projected, on another level, Hughes' vehement criticism of the Church which sacrifices sanctity, brotherhood and religion for race-consciousness is expressed.

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681 Hughes, "Bible Belt," in P and L, p. 38.
Identifying Mary's son with a lynch-victim, Hughes develops the theme of crucifixion in "Ballad of Mary's Son":

It was in the Spring.
The Passover had come.
There was fasting in the streets and joy.
But an awful thing
Happened in the Spring --
Men who knew not what they did
Killed Mary's Boy.

He was Mary's Son,
And the Son of God was He --
Sent to bring the whole world joy.
There were some who could not hear,
And some were filled with fear --
So they built a Cross
For Mary's Boy....

Here, one understands the bond which is established by Hughes between "Mary's Boy" and "Mary's Son." In other words, he compares the lynch-victim and the cross-victim to bring about their similar predicament.

"Big Meeting" is a dramatic story by Hughes, in which the preacher strides back and forth as he conducts the service, sketching Christ's ascent towards Calvary, carrying the heavy cross. He includes the Black man's contribution in carrying the heavy cross: "Then a black man named Simon, blacker than me, come and took the cross and bore it for Him Umn!..." Then he proceeds to narrate the indignities suffered by Christ in heart-rending words of poesy:

And they left my Jesus on the cross!
Nails in His hands! Nails in His feet!

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682 Hughes, "Ballad of Mary's Son," in LHR, p.127.
683 Hughes, "Big Meeting," in LHR, p.75.
Sword in His side! Thorns circlin' His head!
Mob cussin' and hootin' my Jesus! Umn!
The spit of the mob in His face! Umn!
His body hangin' on the cross! Umn!...  

The preacher ends his poetic sermon amidst wails, weepings and moanings
drawing a parallel between a lynch-victim and Christ:

That's what they did to my Jesus!
They stoned Him first, they stoned Him!
Called Him everything but a child of God.
Then they lynched Him on the cross [My emphasis]....  

Here one perceives that the word "lynched" has substituted "crucified."

Hughes has written quite a number of poems on the lynch-theme. A black boy
gets lynched just because he had expressed his wish to be free as in "Southern
Mammy Sings." And, a Black man is victimized to assert the Whites' racial
superiority as in "Ku Klux":

They hit me in the head
And knocked me down
And then they kicked me
On the ground.

A klansman said, "Nigger,
Look me in the face --
And tell me you believe in
The great white race....  

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684 Hughes, "Big Meeting," in LHR, p.75.
685 Ibid., p.76.
686 Hughes, "Ku Klux," in SPLH, p.163.
"Lynching Song" unfolds the pathetic drama of the cruel act of lynching:

Pull at the rope!  
O, pull it high!  
Let the white folks live  
And the black boy die.  

Pull it boys,  
With a bloody cry.  
Let the black boy spin  
While the white folks die.  

The White folks die?  
What do you mean --  
The white folks die?  

That black boy's  
Still body  
Says:  

NOT I.... 687

It is the Black boy who spins but it is the White folks who die. This paradox drives home the truth that by shedding the blood of the Black whose still body pleads innocence, the White folks harm themselves by exposing their own lives to jeopardy and guilt and sin-ridden life.

All the poems on the theme of lynching show but one thing: that the Black man unduly suffered -- suffered more than he deserved at the hands of the Whites.

Like the phoenix image of Brooks, which is symbolic of Christ's "life through death," Hughes presents the image of a "human seed" in "Tomorrow's Seed," written in the context of the Spanish War:

687 Hughes, "Lynching Song," in One Way Ticket, p.58.
New life will grow
For there are those who cannot see
The mighty roots of liberty
Push upward in the dark
To burst in flame --
A million stars --
And one your name:
Man
Who fell in Spanish earth:
Human seed
For freedom's birth....

Thus, it is found that the spirit of the Black man survives amidst physical suffering. The present suffering symbolized by the "seed" paves way to future glory, symbolized by the "million stars."

The analogy between Christ and the Black individual orients the Blacks to a Christian way of living. So, Brooks and Hughes have imbued their poetry with Christian concepts, virtues and ideals worthy of emulation and practice. For instance, Brooks refers to heaven as a place of justice, goodness and kindness. This faith in the kingdom of God is brought out by her in "hunchback girl." The hunchback girl views God as her father, and simultaneously expresses her faith in heaven where there will be no crookedness, as on earth:

MY FATHER, it is surely a blue place
And straight. Right. Regular. Where I shall find
No need for scholarly nonchalance or looks
A little to the left or guards upon the
Heart to halt love that runs without crookedness
Along its crooked corridors. My Father,
It is a planned place surely. Out of coils,
Unscrewed, released, no more to be marvelous,
I shall walk straightly through most proper halls
Proper myself, princess of properness....


689 Brooks, "hunchback girl: she thinks of heaven," in WGB, p.11.
Moreover, Brooks displays her faith in divine guidance in "One wants a Teller in a time like this." The speaker Annie understands that it is difficult for a man or woman to do "enormous business" alone, on his or her own strength. She firmly reaches out to God who is real and true:

One wants a Teller in a time like this.

One's not a man, one's not a woman grown,
To bear enormous business all alone

One cannot walk this winding street with pride,
Straight-shouldered, tranquil-eyed,
Knowing one knows for sure the way back home.
One wonders if one has a home.

One is not certain if or why or how.
One wants a Teller now: --

Put on your rubbers and you won't catch cold.
Here's hell, there's heaven. Go to Sunday School.
Be patient, time brings all good things -- (and cool
Strong balm to calm the burning at the brain?) --
Behold,
Love's true, and triumphs; and God's actual....

The Teller who is a divine emissary of God gives a series of imperatives to the Blacks to guard themselves against the cold and heat of the existing conditions. He specifically draws their attention saying "Behold" and gives the filtered essence of Christian message and meaning that "love" is true and triumphant in the end since God's existence is real. Melhem interprets that the Teller's advice is "practical, homely advice and encouragement, while fortifying belief in love and God."  

690 Brooks, "One wants a Teller in a time like this," in WGB, p.116.

God's multidimensional person as the guide, comforter and provider of needs is to be seen in St. Julia's exclamation in "In the Mecca":

"Isn't He wonderful wonderful!" cries St. Julia
"Isn't our Lord the greatest to the brim?
The light of my life. And I lie late
past the still pastures. And meadows. He's the comfort
and wine and picalilli for my soul.
He hunts me up the coffee for my cup.
Oh how I love that Lord."...\(^{692}\)

In the poem written in honour of her father, Brooks evinces belief in life after death, where there is no more "cramping...chill," or "hindering fever" which are suggestive of the physical life's miseries:

He walks the valleys, now -- replies
To sun and wind forever.
No more the cramping chamber's chill,
No more the hindering fever.

Now out upon the wide clean air
My father's soul revives,...\(^{693}\)

Though disgusted with the harsh actualities of life, the man in "the soft man" creeps every Sunday to the Church -- "the clean unanxious place" -- to pray and get strengthened to face the next week. The poem begins with the desperate question, "DISGUSTING, isn't it, dealing out the dams / To every comer?"\(^ {694}\)

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\(^{692}\) Brooks, "In the Mecca," in \textit{WGB}, p.378.


\(^{694}\) Brooks, "the soft man," in \textit{WGB}, p.9.
but gives the hopeful alternative towards the end:

But grin.
Because there is a clean unanxious place
To which you creep on Sundays. And you cool
In lovely sadness

No one giggles where
You bathe your sweet vulgarity in prayer....

Brooks emphasizes the quality of tolerance, which is very essential in an interracial society, through her character Sonia Johnson in her Maud Martha. When Miss Ingram casually says that she works like a nigger to earn a few pennies, Sonia Johnson is not "stepped up" about that word. Keeping Maud staring steadily at her, Sonia Johnson proceeds to give her reasons:

"You know, why I didn't catch her up on that, is -- our people is got to stop feeling so sensitive about these words like 'nigger' and such. I often think about this, and how these words like 'nigger' don't mean to some of these here white people what our people think they mean. Now, 'nigger,' for instance, means to them something bad, or slavey-like, or low. They don't mean anything against me. I'm a Negro, not a 'nigger.' Now, a white man can be a nigger, according to their meaning for the word, just like a colored man can. So why should I go getting all stepped up about a thing like that? Our people is got to stop getting all stepped up about every little thing, especially when it don't amount to nothing."...

Sonia Johnson's long sermon underscores her mature thinking and understanding. Brooks' recommendation is that every Black individual should attain maturation.

Christ's message of love and forgiveness is condensed and conveyed in "A Black Wedding Song." Brooks argues how love can serve as a powerful weapon to

meet the assaults that the couples may encounter and how "jewels of black love" and forgiveness can keep them together to continue their "darling duet":

I
This love is a rich cry over the deviltries and the death. A weapon-song. Keep it strong.

Keep it strong. Keep it logic and Magic and lightning and Muscle. Strong hand in strong hand, stride to the Assault that is promised you (knowing no armor assaults a pudding or a mush.)

Here is your Wedding Day. Here is your launch.

Come to your Wedding Song.

II
For you I wish the kindness that romps or sorrows along. Or kneels. I wish you the daily forgiveness of each other. For war comes in from the World and puzzles a darling duet -- tangles tongues, tears hearts, mashes minds; there will be the need to forgive.

I wish you jewels of black love

Come to your Wedding Song [My emphasis]... 697

And Hughes' faith in God is personal and intimate like that of Brooks. In a short poem "Personal" he is able to highlight the relationship between himself and God:

In an envelope marked: Personal
God addressed me a letter.

In an envelope marked:

Personal
I have given my answer.... 698

In "Tambourines" Hughes celebrates God's eternity:

A gospel shout
And a gospel song:
Life is short
But God is long!... 699

"Sea Charm" is another simple poem which depicts God's grandeur and might:
"... the sea is strong / Like God's hand. / They know / But that sea wind is sweet
/ Like God's breath." 700 Again, like Brooks, Hughes exhibits his dependence on God in "Prayer":

I ask you this:
Which way to go?
I ask you this:
Which sin to bear?
Which crown to put
Upon my hair?
I do not know,
Lord God,
I do not know.... 701

In "Feet o' Jesus," Hughes believes in God's mercy and his power to reach out and save him:

698 Hughes, "Personal," in SPLH, p.88.
699 Hughes, "Tambourines," in SPLH, p.29.
700 Hughes, "Sea Charm," in DK, p.27.
At the feet o' Jesus,
Sorrow like a sea.
Lordy, let yo' mercy
Come driftin' down on me.

At the feet o' Jesus
At yo' feet I stand.
O, ma little Jesus,
Please reach out yo' hand....  

And Hughes, like a true Christian, humbles himself as a sinner in God's sight:

Have mercy, Lord!

Po' an' black
An' humble an' lonesome
An' a sinner in yo' sight.

Have mercy, Lord!...

Incidentally, kneeling down and praying is the outward manifestation of humility while engaged in directing one's body, mind, feelings and thoughts towards the Almighty.

Hughes believes in the saving power of Christ as in "Ballad of Mary's Son":

This is my body
And this is my blood!
His body and His blood divine!
He died on the Cross
That my soul should not be lost.

His body and His blood
Redeem mine....

702 Hughes, "Feet o' Jesus," in SPLH, p.17.
704 Hughes, "Ballad of Mary's Son," in LHR, pp.127-128.
Religion has played a significant role in strengthening and toughening the spirits of the oppressed Blacks. The mother in "The Negro Mother" tells her children how her faith in God steeled her spirit and how God put a song and a prayer in her mouth to help her survive.

Hughes believes that "Heaven is / The place where / Happiness is / Everywhere" and that there is life after death:

They put ma body in the ground,
Ma soul went flyin' o' the town,
Went flyin' to the stars an' moon
A shoutin', God, I's comin' soon.

O Jesus!

Lord in heaven,
Crown on His head,
Says don't be 'fraid
Cause you ain't dead.

Kind Jesus!

An' now I'm settin' clean an' bright
In the sweet o' ma Lord's sight --
Clean an' bright,
Clean an' bright....

The ideals of love and servanthood are filtered and presented in just two lines:

Serve -- and hate will die unborn
Love -- and chains are broken....

---

Hughes presents the Black man executing humble tasks like shining the shoes and cleaning the brass spittoons cheerfully. Jesus Christ himself had demonstrated the importance of being humble by washing the feet of His disciples:

\[
\text{Know ye what I have done to you?}
\text{Ye call me Master and Lord: and Ye say well;}
\text{for so I am.}
\text{If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.}
\text{For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.}\ldots
\]

The Black man does the menial tasks as per St. Paul's exhortation: "And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him."\textsuperscript{709} "Brass Spittoons" is an example for the same:

\[
\text{A bright bowl of brass is beautiful to the Lord.}
\text{Bright polished brass like the cymbals}
\text{Of King David's dancers,}
\text{Like the wine cups of Solomon.}
\text{Hey, boy!}
\text{A clean spittoon on the altar of the Lord.}
\text{A clean bright spittoon all newly polished, --}
\text{Atleast I can offer that.}
\text{Com' mere, boy!...}\]

Thus one reads the Christian profundity in the poetry of Brooks and Hughes. Every now and then Brooks and Hughes voice their doubts and fears about God,

\textsuperscript{708} \textit{The Bible, St. John,} 13:12-15.
\textsuperscript{709} \textit{The Bible, Colossians,} 3:17.
\textsuperscript{710} Hughes, "Brass Spittoons," \textit{Fine Clothes to the Jew} (New York: Knopf, 1927), p.28.
religion, the impracticability of Christianity and the antithetical elements of the Whites' religion. They are filled with questions when the Black man's life becomes very arduous. Inspite of identifying the Black man with Christ, Brooks and Hughes sometimes get disillusioned with religion and view God as the White man's accomplice. Mary Beth Culp's observation explains this further:

In the poetry of Hughes, as well as other black poets, Christ is sometimes white, symbolizing the oppressors and acting as their accomplice; at other times he is black, the image and friend of the lynched Negro, and one who suffers with him. With the black-white Christ symbol black poets have represented the contradictory elements of the religion of whites which was passed on to the slaves....

As stated above, the Black poets picture Christ as Black and White simultaneously in order to underscore the contradictory elements of the Whites' religion and the disparity between their practice and preaching. Again, Brooks and Hughes do not want to renounce Christianity for the faults of its White followers; rather, they want their Black fellowmen to cling on to it and survive with its help.

Both Brooks and Hughes have had phases of religious conflict in their poetic career but have always retained their faith. Brooks once said, "I can't think of anything I've written that speaks sweetly of religion." On another occasion, Brooks complained of God's failure to soothe her suffering and wipe her tears:

712 Brooks, Black Women Writers at Work, Ed. Claudia Tate, p.46.
... You, Lord, be there.
Be there, behind that enigma
Of clouds and changing air.... 713

Again, in "A Lovely Love," she refers to Christ in a rather detached manner as
"that other one." 714 In the sonnet "firstly inclined to take what it is told," the
speaker confesses how she "had been" ready to have faith in a "total God":

For youth is a frail thing, not unafraid.
Firstly inclined to take what it is told,
Firstly inclined to lean. Greedy to give
Faith tidy and total. To a total God.
With billowing heartiness no whit withheld.... 715

But it is significant to note that in the next sonnet Brooks points out how God
works in a mysterious way, and asserts the persona's trying to overcome her
disillusionment by calling on God to "step forth in splendor," and right His
children's lives:

Out from Thy shadows, from Thy pleasant meadows,
Quickly, in undiluted light. Be glad, whose
Mansions are bright, to right Thy children's air.
If Thou be more than hate or atmosphere
Step forth in splendor, mortify our wolves,
Or we assume a sovereignty ourselves.... 716

713 Brooks, "Plaint," quoted in George E.Kent, A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks,
p.73.
715 Brooks, "firstly inclined to take what it is told," in WGB, p.55.
716 Brooks, "God works in a mysterious way," in WGB, p.56.
Though tinged with a trace of bitterness towards God's indifference, one does not fail to notice the persona's referring to God as the father who is expected to right His "children's" air.

The cynical tone bordering on the foregoing lines is altered a little in the "the children of the poor" sonnet-series. The mother is willing to let her children try religion as an answer to their problems. She inculcates faith in her children, herself standing ready to help them if they falter:

... be metaphysical mules;  
Learn Lord will not distort nor leave the fray.  
Behind the scurryings of your neat motif  
I shall wait, if you wish: revise the psalm  
If that should frighten you: sew up belief  
If that should tear: turn, singularly calm  
At forehead and at fingers rather wise,  
Holding the bandage ready for your eyes [My emphasis]....

For Brooks, "The certainty we two shall meet by God / In a wide Parlor, underneath a Light / Of lights, come Sometime, is no ointment now." She has developed a personal philosophy of her own about God and people. According to her biographer Kent, she believes that "God becomes a reserve resource, with the individual still working from the belief that he or she can help self, can make things happen and be mainly self-sustaining" [My emphasis]. Again, Kent

* This bears repetition.
718 Brooks, "The certainty we two shall meet by God," in WGB, p.95.
719 George E.Kent, A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks, p.147.
quotes Brooks regarding her belief in self-help:

I rarely ask him [God] for anything -- a little lingering independence of spirit still whispers to me somewhat, telling me that it is wrong (if not bad) to ask God for help where it appears that you can help yourself....

Thus, it is to be noted that Brooks stresses the Black man's working for his improvement without idly waiting for God to do things for him; for her, God seems "a near reality." Kent gives an incident in Brooks' life which helped Brooks receive a "strength superior to any that I have known." She had prayed for a dying child, who miraculously recovered. Kent concludes, "Her self-reliance remained, but God also remained available, as a friend with whom to discuss tragedy, aspiration, 'or the loveliness of flowers and blue air'" [My emphasis].

It is precisely such an independent spirit and idea of self-reliance and God as someone who can be approached if there need be, that makes Brooks exhort the Black boys to plunge into action even if eyeless leaders fail, and God is "a There":

Because
the eyeless Leaders flutter, tilt, and fail.
The followers falter, peculiar, eyeless too.
Force through the sludge. Force, whether
God is a Thorough and a There,
or a mad child,
playing
with a floorful of toys,
mashing
what when he wills. Force, whether
God is spent pulse, capricious, or a
yet-to-come....

720 Brooks, quoted in George E. Kent, A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks, p.147.
721 Idem.
722 Ibid., p.129.
723 George E. Kent, A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks, p.129.
Sometimes Brooks chooses to be purposefully and deliberately ambiguous about her views on God and religion. In "Love Note I: Surely," one cannot identify the person addressed -- whether it is a lover or God. Brooks tactfully leaves it ambiguous: "And I doubt all: You. Or a violet."  

Like Brooks, Hughes is intimate with God. He is open and personal in his questions regarding God, prayer and religion. He raises questions like, "What was the use of prayer?" and "... who but the Lord / Can protect me?" He calls God "THE WHITE GOD" who never visits the Negro quarter, in his Ask Your Mama:

AND THE WHITE GOD NEVER GOES
FOR THE MOON WOULD WHITE HIS WHITENESS
AND THE NIGHT MIGHT BE ASTONISHED
AND SO LOSE ITS REPOSE....

In the same poem, Hughes draws an identification between the lynched Black and the crucified Christ on Calvary. That is why Jean Wagner remarks that "the expression of the poet's religious feeling remained consistently wrapped in ambiguity."  

Hughes went through a religious crisis in the nineteen thirties, when he was strongly infatuated with communism. It was during this time that he attempted to

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726 Hughes, "Song for a Dark Girl," in SPLH, p.172.
727 Hughes, "Who But the Lord?" in SPLH, p.196.
728 Hughes, AYM, p.36.
729 Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p.473.
write some of the most rebellious poems like "Good Bye Christ" and "A New Song":

Listen, Christ,
You did alright in your day, I reckon --
But that day's gone now.
They ghosted you up a swell story, too,
Called it Bible --
But it's dead now.

Goodbye,
Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,
Beat it on away from here now.
Make way for a new guy with no religion at all --
A real guy named
Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME....

Bitter was the day
When ...
... only in the sorrow songs
Relief was found --
Yet no relief,
But merely humble life and silent death
Eased by a Name
That hypnotized the pain away --
O, precious Name of Jesus in that day!

That day is past.

I know full well now
Jesus could not die for me --
That only my own hands,
Dark as the earth,
Can make my earth-dark body free....

It is significant to note that these rebellious gestures were not the permanent features of his mind and art. "Good Bye Christ" was never reprinted in any


volume. All the lines of revolt were deleted when the poem was reprinted in *A New Song*. When "Good Bye Christ" evoked much misinterpretation and opposition, Hughes dismissed the poem as "a regrettable error of his immature youth," and said that personally he never shared those views. Hughes had actually attempted to attack the perversion and hypocrisy of Christianity, as practised by the Whites.

Regarding leanings towards communism of which he got disappointed later, Hughes has only to say that he has never been a communist:

I have never been a Communist,... am not now a Communist, and don't intend to be a Communist in my natural life....

Inspite of their religious crises, Brooks and Hughes have always retained their faith; they are basically Christian poets. They overcome their conflicts and view religion with a fresh perspective.

Brooks and Hughes relate religious problems to social problems and understand the teachings of Christ in the new political dimension of liberation. The message of the *Bible* is one of liberation. Christ is the true liberator, as per the verse, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." Liberation needs to occur where there is suppression and bondage. In the *Bible*, God is the liberator always on the side of the oppressed. He identifies Himself with the poor.

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734 *The Bible, St. John*, 8:36.
and the needy: "He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his Maker." God brought the Israelites out of the house of bondage -- Egypt: "With a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm." Speaking of the oppression in Latin America, Arthur F. McGovern defines liberation as follows:

Liberation ... means more than just freedom or improvement. It implies a judgment on, a condemnation of, the present state of affairs. It is a word of confrontation and conflict. It expresses a new historical awareness that they are not just insufficiently developed but dominated and oppressed peoples....

It is such an awareness of their selves and the situation, that Brooks and Hughes expect the Blacks to attain. It is possible only when they are liberated in their minds as well. Emancipation from slavery is just a beginning. It has to pass through liberation at the individual psychological level and continue through the social level and finally culminate in an ideal spiritual level wherein they love one another as in an extended family. Brooks and Hughes proceed from one stage to another and point to the Blacks the path of true liberation.

Physically, the Black man has long been liberated from the cruel shackles of slavery. But still, traces of past stick on to him and he is unable to forget his hateful, shameful and cruel past. Instead of remembering his rich past with pride and gusto, he shrinks in shame and humiliation. It only shows that his mind is still in bondage.

735 The Bible, Proverbs, 14:31.
736 The Bible, Psalms, 136:12.
Brooks and Hughes talk of the inner freedom. In this connection, it is of interest to note that Brooks' "Thoughts of Prejudice" advocates emancipation from the preconceived, self-disparaging thoughts and notions of the Blacks about themselves:

But little men of Afric's swarthy shore,
There is more prejudice within your race
Than out beyond its shadowed bar; far more
Within your tract than any other space.
Why search for foreign dung, why seethe and foam
When so much mucky filth lies loose at home?...

In "The Explorer," the explorer's searching for "a room of wily hush somewhere within" through the dark, scrambled halls is a fervent attempt to attain freedom from inner grief and sorrow. "To a Winter Squirrel" depicts Merdice's longing for freedom. She is fascinated by the scurrying squirrel and envies it:

. . . . Merdice
of murdered heart and docked sarcastic soul,
Merdice
the bolted nomad. . .

. . . . envies you your furry
buffoonery
that enfolds your silver skill.
She thinks you are a mountain and a star, unbaffleable;
with sentient twitch and scurry....

Here, the phrases "murdered heart" and "docked sarcastic soul" and the paradox "bolted nomad" are aptly employed by Brooks to bring out Merdice's state of

739 Brooks, "To a Winter Squirrel," in WGB, p.407.
bondage. Again, the words like "mountain," "star," "twitch" and "scurry" serve to point out the freedom which she longs for.

And, Alfred in "In the Mecca" undergoes a transformation during the course of the long poem. He gets slowly liberated from his earlier views which supported a passive existence. Now that he has undergone a metamorphosis, he is aware of "a material collapse" of those values which in positive words are termed "construction" of new values of black sanity:

something, something in Mecca continues to call! Substanceless; yet like mountains, like rivers and oceans too; and like trees with wind whistling through them. And steadily an essential sanity, black and electric, builds to a reportage and redemption.
   A hot estrangement.
   A material collapse.
   that is Construction...  

As in Brooks' poetry, inner freedom of an individual is equally an essential ingredient of Hughes' poetry. According to Charles S. Johnson, the editor of Opportunity, no other writer "so completely symbolized the new emancipation of the Negro mind" than Hughes. Hughes' voice rings clear when he concludes thus in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain":

We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves [My emphasis]....

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740 Brooks, "In the Mecca," in WGB, p.403.
Hughes means the inner freedom which a man must enjoy in order to enjoy the social freedom when he says, "... freedom ain't freedom when a man ain't free." 743

There must be freedom obtained at the social level too -- in gaining equal opportunities in all basic needs. Annie in Brooks' "Men of careful turns, haters of forks in the road," after having requested the Whites to admit her to their "mutual estate," appeals to them to let her enjoy her freedom among them:


... Do not hoard silence
For the moment when I enter, tardily,
To enjoy my height among you. And to love you
No more as a woman loves a drunken mate,
Restraining full caress and good My Dear,
Even pity for the heaviness and the need --
Fearing sudden fire out of the uncaring mouth,
Boiling in the slack eyes, and the traditional blow.... 744

One can see how the Black speaker enters the company of Whites timidly and gingerly "to enjoy my height" among them. She remembers the traditional blows that she used to receive and compares her efforts to befriend them to those of a woman loving a drunken mate.

Hughes voices the Black man's urgent need for freedom in quite a number of his poems. He dreams of a world "where black or white, / Whatever race you be, /


Will share the bounties of the earth / And every man is free, thus exhibiting his broad-minded vision which includes all human beings regardless of colour and race. His earnest desire for equality is seen in his poignant poem "Let America Be America Again":

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.  

"Freedom Train," "Freedom's Plow" and "Democracy" are some of the poems exclusively dedicated to the theme of freedom and democracy. Hughes' "Refugee in America" reveals the depth of his longing for liberty:

There are words like Freedom
Sweet and wonderful to say.
On my heart-strings freedom sings
All day everyday.

There are words like Liberty
That almost make me cry.
If you had known what I knew
You would know why.

According to Jean Wagner, "no poet has ever found more moving tones to utter Freedom's beautiful name" than Hughes.

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745 Hughes, "I Dream a World," quoted in James A. Emanuel, Langston Hughes, p.130.


748 Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p.460.
Brooks and Hughes do not stop with merely glorifying Liberty and Freedom and expressing their longing for emancipation at all levels -- physical, mental and social. They go a step further and point to the Blacks how to attain the same. In doing so, they view it on a higher level by envisioning a community of love, based on the Christian concept of love.

One recalls Arthur F. McGovern's view that liberation is confrontation and conflict. In the Bible, one comes across Jesus Christ confronting the religious and political authorities of His day, and His teachings are in conflict with theirs. In this context, McGovern's observation is relevant:

[Jesus] suffered the punishment imposed on political agitators (crucifixion) rather than the punishment dealt out to religious blasphemers (stoning) because his denunciations challenged every claim to power which does not embody God's love and truth....

Again, it is important to understand the role of religion. The remark of Antonio Perez runs thus:

The primary role and task of religion is the establishment of a world based on just relationships.... It has political, economic and social dimensions. To believe in God is to work for justice and to serve those in need. To be authentic, religion must be fleshed out in the struggle for a more humane world. God is on the side of people and their liberation, fighting against structures that continue to oppress them. To accept God is to opt for liberation and to take a stand on the side of the people....

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750 Antonio Perez, *Atheism and Liberation*, p.86.
The quality of love has the liberating power. In fact, Christ's message is one of love. Antonio Perez speaks of love as an active and dynamic force which can create a "community":

Jesus' essential message ... is a summons to love ... By its very nature love is a dynamic and active force. It goes out of itself and tries to create community. It does not tolerate injustice and inequality. It liberates people from everything that stands in the way of communion. It sees all human beings as active subjects and brothers and sisters. It rejects all abuse or exploitation....

Brooks and Hughes highlight this aspect of love, in the context of Black life-situations. They view it as a powerful weapon which can release the Blacks from their bondage. In this light, Christianity is something more than Church-going and being "religious." It stresses the concepts of love and humanity. Brooks and Hughes do not confine their vision of love within the Black community alone. It spreads far and near. It includes the whole of mankind. True to Harry B.Shaw's observation, the Blacks' "rebirth does not refer only to the Blacks' reclamation of freedom but also to the salvation they will bring to mankind in general."

In this context, significantly then, Brooks' humanistic concern embraces all humanity. She does not emphasize on Black solidarity alone at the cost of universal brotherhood. She takes the role of a poet-prophet and in her sermon-poems voices her humanism. The Church is not a mere building of stone and bricks but a "community of love." That love begins with the Black and

752 Harry B.Shaw, *Gwendolyn Brooks*, p.133.
continues and extends:

Build now your Church, my brothers, sisters. Build never with brick nor Corten nor with granite. Build with lithe love. With love like lion-eyes. With love like morningrise. With love like black, our black -- luminously indiscreet; complete; continuous."  

With the available resources, i.e., "black love" which is found in abundance in the Blacks, the poet expresses her desire to build the Church. As Melhem mentions, "For Brooks, ideals are the given of existence, whether or not supernaturally endowed, and the task is to create a humane society in the benign image of an extended family."  

Human love is spontaneous and natural. It knows no age or race distinction. This is touchingly brought out in the poem "Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat" where the newly arrived Black maid is spontaneously kissed back by the creamy child:

Kissed back the colored maid,  
Not wise enough to freeze or be afraid.  
Conscious of kindness, easy creature bond.  
Love had been handy and rapid to respond....

Maud Martha extends this love even to a tiny little mouse. She finds "a fine small dignity" in the mouse, pities it and lets it free. She becomes conscious of a sudden sense of goodness in her:

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Suddenly, she was conscious of a new cleanness in her.... A life had blundered its way into her power and it had been hers to preserve or destroy. She had not destroyed. In the center of that simple restraint was -- creation. She had created a piece of life. It was wonderful. "Why," she thought, as her height doubled, "why, I'm good! I'm good." She ironed her aprons. Her back was straight. Her eyes were mild, and soft with a godlike loving-kindness.  

Kent observes how Brooks stresses on the values of liberation by developing a sense of togetherness, born out of love: 

Leaving to others elaborate political pronouncements, elaborate get-whitey strategies, and free-wheeling suggestions of violence, Brooks seized largely upon cultivation of group and intragroup self-appreciation, togetherness, creativity, endurance, wisdom, and faith, for the liberation values to be pushed.  

Brooks' strategy for obtaining liberation in the true sense is by making "Black-emphasis" for Blacks and not against Whites.* Unlike many of her contemporaries and those of the previous generations, Brooks is seldom bitter. Arthur P. Davis' comment runs thus: 

... Miss Brooks' protest poems, written in an integration age, are usually quite different in spirit and approach from those of the New Negro generation. She has subtle irony, a quiet humor, and oftentimes a sense of pity, not only for the black victims of prejudice but also for the whites who are guilty. But her works as a rule are not fiery or defiant, and they are seldom bitter.  

---

* This bears repetition.  
If at all Brooks is enraged, it is righteous rage. William H. Hansell feels that her rage is good and justifiable. She does not "feed" on it: "... the rage is good because it is justifiable; it is rage aroused by undemocratic and un-Christian practices that violate American ideals."\(^{759}\)

Brooks, in her interview with Claudia Tate, expresses her wish to clean the Church:

\[\ldots\text{the whole church area needs more attention. I'm not just}\]
\[\text{talking about sisters in their wide hats, shouting. There's a}\]
\[\text{whole lot going on in the church, and somebody ought to}\]
\[\text{tackle it.}\] \(^{760}\)

In the same interview, Brooks' idea of religion is given. It is something to do with practical life:

\[\text{My mother was "religious." Both my parents believed in}\]
\[\text{doing right.\ldots We were taught to be kind to people. The}\]
\[\text{word "kind" best describes my father. He was kind and he}\]
\[\text{believed people ought to be kind to each other. His religion}\]
\[\text{was kindness. My father, as an adult did not go to church,}\]
\[\text{but he was kinder than swarms of church-goers. So I grew}\]
\[\text{up thinking you're supposed to be nice. You're supposed to}\]
\[\text{be good, I grew up thinking you're supposed to treat people}\]
\[\text{right.}\] \(^{761}\)

Brooks exposes the sad truth that people want war and it is their creed and joy. In "In Emanuel's Nightmare: Another Coming of Christ," a most beautiful man,  

\[\text{William H. Hansell, "The Poet Militant and Foreshadowings of a Black}\]
\[\text{Mystique: Poems in the Second Period of Gwendolyn Brooks," in}\]
\[\text{L.D., p.75.}\]

\[\text{Brooks, Black Women Writers at Work, Ed. Claudia Tate, p.46.}\]

\[\text{Idem.}\]
tall, strong, coldbrowed and mildly smiling comes down, out of heaven "to clean the earth / Of the dirtiness of war." Even if He has the power to save, he finds that the people are unwilling to forgo war:

Now tell of why His power failed Him there?  
His power did not fail. It was that, simply,  
He found how much the people wanted war.  
How much it was their creed, and their good joy.  
And what they lived for. He had not the heart  
To take away their chief sweet delectation.  

The people wanted war. War's in their hearts.  

God's Son went home. Among us it is whispered  
He cried the tears of men.  

Feeling, in fact,  
We have no need of peace [My emphasis]....

Brooks makes it clear that God is made inactive; He is unable to bring peace and happiness to the world inspite of His power to do so. Unless the people develop a sense of brotherhood and love for peace, God will not force His way and will on men.

Like Brooks, Hughes envisions a society based on love and not on colour. Such a society embraces all kinds of people. He mentions what he is going to do when he becomes a composer:

... I'm gonna put white hands  
And black hands and brown and yellow hands  
And red clay earth hands in it

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762 Brooks, "In Emanuel's Nightmare: Another Coming of Christ," in WGB, p.369.

763 Idem.
Touching everybody with kind fingers
And touching each other natural as dew
In that dawn of music when I
Get to be a composer
And write about daybreak
In Alabama....

This poem speaks of "love" among men which is as gentle, natural and spontaneous as dew.

Hughes exhibits his belief that all are born equal in the following lines:

The plan and the pattern is here,
Woven from the beginning
Into the warp and woof of America:
ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL....

It is such an understanding that leads him to view even the humble and lowly as "human beings " created by God. He finds a beggar boy highly potent:

What is there within this beggar lad
That I can neither hear nor feel nor see,
That I can neither know nor understand
And still it calls to me?

Is not he but a shadow in the sun --
A bit of clay, brown, ugly, given life?
And yet he plays upon his flute a wild free tune
As if Fate had not bled him with her knife!...

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Hughes holds that "when religion places itself at the service of mankind, particularly the humble people, it can ... strengthen them and guide them."  

And love, which is the fundamental principle of Christ's message, must extend to the needy:

Gather up  
In the arms of your pity  
The sick, the depraved,  
The desperate, the tired,  
All the scum  
Of our weary city  
Gather up  
In the arms of your pity.  
Gather Up  
In the arms of your love --  
Those who expect  
No love from above....

Here, the word "gather" recalls Christ's "gathering" love when He said unto Jerusalem: "... how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings,..."

In the same tone of gathering-love, Hughes appeals to the director and actors of his comedy Simply Heavenly to treat it as a dignified comedy of Black life:

What I suggest now is that you hold them very closely to your heart and play them out of love for all the little ordinary guys in the world who are lost and lonely ... and all the girls who are desperately seeking a rock on which to build a castle that won't sink into the sand. If you love deeply enough this simple man and the simple woman you are playing, such men and women in the audience ... will love you ... And

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767 Hughes, quoted in James A. Emanuel, Langston Hughes, p.92.
769 The Bible, St. Matthew, 23:37.
between you and all the people -- in the audience -- and in the world -- there will be the beauty of affection and understanding that finds no barrier in footlights ... or color lines, or images in the mind... since the heartbeat in all of us is the same...  

One notes how Hughes' love stretches forth and reaches the lost and the lonely of the whole world.

Like Brooks, Hughes has never been bitter towards his White brothers. By nature, Hughes is loving, cheerful and humorous. He himself states his view of life in this regard:

Bitterness is not a part of me.... I see myself, I see the Negro people as, first of all human beings ... aspiring for all the things that other Westerners aspire, but conditioned by the outside pressures of prejudice and discrimination... If we human beings were not the resilient animals that nature has made of us, perhaps our species would not have survived .... But the universality which is common to all men, makes of us all, basically, brothers....

Again, like Brooks, Hughes likes to see the Church cleaned and restored to its original meaning and ideals. He deliberately attempts to write the story "On the Road" to bring home this wish. He told the writer Kay Boyle thus:

I was writing of ... Jesus as a human being whose meaning sometimes has been lost through the organization of church.... The function of religion in daily life as the Reverend [Martin Luther] King has made it function, is what I was talking about.... Sargeant had done as much for Jesus in

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getting Him down off the cross as Jesus had done for Sargeant in showing him that even the Saviour of men had nowhere to go except to push on.\textsuperscript{772}

Like Brooks' Christ in "In Emanuel's Nightmare: Another Coming of Christ," the Christ crucified outside the Church is immobile and inactive till Sargeant pulls down the Church and liberates Him. It is interesting and significant to go through the conversation between the free Christ and Sargeant:

"Yes," said Christ, crunching his feet in the snow. "You had to pull the church down to get me off the cross."
"You glad?" said Sargeant.
"I sure am," said Christ. They both laughed.
"I'm a hell of a fellow, ain't I?" said Sargeant.
"Done pulled the church down!"
"You did a good job," said Christ. "They have kept me nailed on a cross for nearly two thousand years."\textsuperscript{773}

In the light of this understanding of Liberation at all levels, one further proceeds to understand the need of a "vision." Individual Liberation should lead to a broad outlook.

Any mission without vision is in vain. In the Bible one reads, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."\textsuperscript{774} In the case of the Blacks, unless they have a definite vision, they are prone to fail. Again, as in St. Paul's letter to the Hebrews, "...let

\textsuperscript{772} Hughes, quoted in James A. Emanuel, \textit{Langston Hughes}, p.94.


\textsuperscript{774} \textit{The Bible}, Proverbs, 29:18.
us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, / Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith."  

Brooks and Hughes visualize an America free from racism. Brooks wants a new America, which she voices through Don Lee in "In the Mecca":

Don Lee wants not a various America.  
Don Lee wants a new nation under nothing;  
a physical light that waxes; he does not want to be exorcised, adjoining and revered;

he does not like a local garniture nor any impish onus in the vogue;  
is not candlelit but stands out in the auspices of fire and rock and jungle-flail;  
wants new art and anthem; will want a new music screaming in the sun....  

The physical light which waxes from fire to sun recalls Hughes' image of the mighty roots of liberty bursting into flame and then into a million stars in "Tomorrow's Seed."

Brooks' vision of faith rings clear in "Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward," where she challenges the self-soilers, down-keepers, sun-

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775 The Bible, Hebrews, 12:1-2.  
776 Brooks, "In the Mecca," in WGB, pp.393-394.
slappers and harmony-hushers: "Even if you are not ready for day / it cannot always be night."\footnote{777}

Similarly, Hughes passes on his vision to the Black fellowmen by referring to it as a dream. He has written many dream-poems and advises the Blacks to cling on to dreams. They help survival. His "Freedom's Plow" gives in detail how a dream originates and grows and finally culminates. And James A. Emanuel records his view on this poem:

"Freedom's Plow" tells in seven pages the importance of vision ("First in the heart is the dream"); of creative cooperation ("labor -- white hands and black hands"); of faith in the public ("The people often hold / Great thoughts in their deepest hearts"); and of broad perspective ("That plow plowed a new furrow / Across the field of history")....\footnote{778}

Hughes' vision of faith includes his rightful place in America:

... They done beat me and mistreat me,  
Barrel-staved me and enslaved me,  
Lynched me, run me, and Jim Crowed me,  
Acted like they never knewed me.

But I'm here, still here --  
And I intend to be!  
It'll never be that easy, white folks,  
To get rid of me....\footnote{779}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[777] Brooks, "Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward," in \textit{FP}, p.23.
\item[778] This bears repetition.
\item[779] James A. Emanuel, \textit{Langston Hughes}, p.130.
\end{footnotes}

\textit{Hughes, "Here to Stay," quoted in Arnold Rampersad, \textit{The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II}, p.231.}
In order to imbue a faith as strong as this, Brooks and Hughes furnish the Blacks with quite a number of Christian symbols of faith, all of which point either to hope or endurance or perseverance or determination: the sun, the stars, the rainbow, the dawn, the morrow, the crown, the cross, the dream and the like.

With a vision ahead and faith within, the Black individual should lead a life of charity and good works. Faith and good works go hand in hand. The desired future will not come in a silver platter. He has to work for it.

Brooks advises the Blacks to step forth and seek a society free of oppression and racism, thus bringing "profound redemption" for America:

We seek no clue of green.
We seek a Garden: trees,  
the light, the cry, the conscience of the grass.  
In this most sociable of all centuries.

We seek informal sun.  
A harvest of hurrah.  
We seek our center and our radius.  
Profound redemption. And America....

True to the Biblical promise, "he that seeketh findeth," the Blacks need to seek inward at their "center" and extend outward along their "radius" in service of mankind.


781 The Bible, St. Matthew, 7:8.
Hughes, in Ask Your Mama, pictures the Black who has "made it" the hard way and earned a name:

GOT THERE! YES, I MADE IT!
NAME IN THE PAPERS EVERY DAY!
FAMOUS -- THE HARD WAY --
FROM NOBODY AND NOTHING TO WHERE I AM.
THEY KNOW ME, TOO, DOWNTOWN,
ALL ACROSS THE COUNTRY, EUROPE--
ME WHO USED TO BE NOBODY,
NOTHING BUT ANOTHER SHADOW
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES,
NOW A NAME! MY NAME -- A NAME!... 782

In the process of achieving the goal through the hard way the Blacks ought to be wise and "mindful / as wily wines" 783 and "Be wary -- / And be wise!" 784

Announcing her mission to esteem all human beings, including her oppressors, Brooks assertively says:

Behind my expose
I formalize my pity: "I shall cite,
Star, and esteem all that which is of woman,
Human and hardly human."

Democracy and Christianity
Recommence with me [My emphasis].... 785

782 Hughes, AYM, p.43.
783 Brooks, "Young Africans," in FP, p.18.
Hughes, an equally committed artist, professes his faith with clarity and certitude:

Try to step between me and God-- and you will be thinner than a shadow and less of a wall than the evening fog [My emphasis]....

Hemouths his dedication to suffer, struggle, work, pray and fight through the Black clown:

But no! Not forever
Like this will I be:

Suffer and struggle.
Work, pray and fight.
Smash my way through
To Manhood's true right [My emphasis]....

Thus, Brooks and Hughes prove themselves to be Christian poets. They charge their poetry with Christian profundities and throw light on the liberating power of Christ's love.

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