

Soul Talk—Langston Hughes and Nina Simone’s Friendship A Conversation with Jason Miller

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ABSTRACT This interview presents Jason Miller’s research on the friendship between Langston Hughes and Nina Simone, who was known as the High Priestess of Soul. As a Hughes scholar, Miller combines his knowledge of Hughes with painstaking biographical research on Simone. In this way, he demonstrates how Hughes is connected to soul. Miller traces their friendship to Simone’s active participation in a local chapter of the NAACP when she was a high school student. Then he explains how the two artists later met, in a real sense, after Simone became a professional artist. Most important, Miller discusses the nature of their friendship, which led to their momentous collaboration on Hughes’s poem “The Backlash Blues” that Simone transformed into her own song, as evident in Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson’s film *Summer of Soul*.

KEYWORDS Langston Hughes, Nina Simone, “The Backlash Blues,” Civil Rights Movement, soul

Jason Miller’s research interests include twentieth-century American poetry, American literature, literary theory, and pedagogy. Professor Miller’s expertise on Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech was featured on the Smithsonian podcast “King’s Speech,” where he was in conversation with Kevin Young, director of the Smithsonian’s

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National Museum of African American History and Culture. His research on MLK and Dorothy Cotton has recently been featured in *The New York Daily News*, *Our State Magazine*, *The News and Observer*, *The Conversation*, WUNC News, *Capital Tonight* with Tim Boyum, and on *The State of Things*. Poet Kwame Alexander issued a nationwide writing challenge on NPR in 2021 based on his research. Professor Miller has also conducted extensive research on Langston Hughes. His books include *Langston Hughes and American Lynching* (2011), *Origins of the Dream: Hughes's Poetry and King's Rhetoric*, and *Langston Hughes* (2020). His latest digital project is *Backlash Blues: Nina Simone & Langston Hughes*, and his current book project is tentatively titled "Nina Simone, Langston Hughes, and the Birth of Black Power." In the following interview conducted on Zoom in 2021, I talked with Professor Miller about the friendship and artistic collaboration between Hughes and Simone.

Tony Bolden: Professor Miller, thank you for contributing to our project. When did Langston Hughes and Nina Simone meet for the first time? And what were the circumstances?

Jason Miller: It's very interesting. In 1949, Langston Hughes decides to launch his book *One Way Ticket* in what was then called Negro History Week, and he decides to start that throughout the state of North Carolina. He sets up a meeting where he goes out to Asheville, North Carolina. And eventually this week grows. It becomes about twelve days by the end. He starts in Black Mountain College, which is about forty minutes east of Asheville. It's a very interesting place because Jacob Lawrence had just spent the summer there as an artist in residence, and the folks at Black Mountain really weren't even aware that Hughes had been there until we started this research. Then Hughes shows up in the city of Asheville for three events in one day. I mean, what a curriculum he had in front of him. The main event was [at the high school where Nina Simone attended], and he shows up there as an invitation from her because she is then a sixteen-year-old secretary for the NAACP. And so, when he shows up at Allen High School, she is then still Eunice Waymon, already having grown up in Tryon, being recognized as an exceptional musician, artist, and then sent by scholarship to the Allen School for Girls. She's there in the audience. She would have likely been part of the receiving party for Hughes since she was part of the original invitation, and Langston

Hughes reads his poems on February 8, 1949, about 1:30 p.m., right in the Allen High School Auditorium in Asheville, North Carolina.

That event is interesting for a number of reasons. Hughes goes on to give two more talks that same day, before then going all the way back to Winston Salem, then on to Wilson, then to Washington, DC, and then ending up a ten- or eleven-day tour in Boston of all places. But when he's in Asheville, Nina Simone, then Eunice Waymon, would have seen a very famous figure in front of her as an artist in this particular way. Now, all the things we dream of as scholars aren't there. We don't have her sitting down at the piano. We don't think they had any real interaction in terms of knowing each other as a sixteen-year-old. But we had an opportunity to speak to Nina Simone's roommate. She traveled with Nina on Glee Club events, and she distinctly remembers Hughes reading [his 1921 poem] "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and the impact on the general audience of the students is remarkable. This young lady at the time—Mary Burnett is still alive—and she went on to earn a master's degree in literature, one of her favorite authors of all time being Langston Hughes. So, we can kind of take what impact that had on her and think a little bit about what it might have meant for then Eunice Wayman. I'll add one other thing: what was really interesting is how the city of Asheville reacted. To this day, Asheville is a very liberal, left-leaning city. It prides itself on being open-minded and democratic. [Well,] surprise, surprise. In 1949, that was not the case. A long series of almost three months of editorials go back and forth [about Hughes] in the newspaper. First, a woman writes in and says, "How come you didn't cover the Langston Hughes event? He's a famous figure. He was here in town. You didn't write about him at all in the White newspaper, the *Asheville Citizen Times*." Someone else writes back: "Well, I'll tell you why you shouldn't have covered him, because he's a Communist, left-leaning, anti-American subversive."

And so, way before the McCarthy hearings, in 1949, this is already hounding Hughes. And what's fascinating is that this [contention] boils up so much that by April, Langston Hughes himself responds to the controversy in the paper. There's a record of him writing back and saying that anybody that would have been there would have realized [that] I'm as American as can be. I said nothing political, and I had a pleasure being here in Asheville. And that kind of ends it. So, it's a really interesting cultural record.

TB: Wow! I didn't know Nina Simone was already politically inclined as a teenager who worked for the NAACP. That helps to explain some of her songwriting as well as her views about art. You've indicated that she and Hughes met again at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1960. What was the significance of this meeting?

JM: The 1960 Newport Jazz Festival meeting has incredible repercussions for both these key figures in American history and culture. Nina Simone is very up and coming, and she is invited to perform on the first day. She's sandwiched between people like Art Blakey and a couple of other folks. I think she's also there with the Dave Brubeck Quartet. Yeah, she's there on day one, but Langston Hughes likely would have been involved, even in her invitation being there because he had been on the board since 1958. So, he made executive decisions about things. So, Simone is there and we know from two different sources that this is the first time they would both consider them actually meeting, even though the event in forty-nine puts them in the same space.

TB: Okay.

JM: Yeah, it's 1960. They both say, "We met for the first time right here at Newport," and it's startling what happens as a result of this. Langston Hughes has done something quite remarkable. He's finally convinced the Newport Jazz Festival to give him a blues session, and this has been unbelievably unreported. Hughes set up an over-three-and-a-half-hour session where he introduced blues music to an almost exclusively white audience on a large scale for likely the first time in America. Instead of sneaking into a club instead of going into a small juke joint, almost twelve thousand people could show up in Newport and hear the blues played. And we're talking big players: Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, John Lee Hooker, just to name a few. What's incredible is, we think of festivals now as just only performance. But Hughes has organized what he calls a workshop, and so he actually wants to teach the crowd different styles of blues. He talks through and he gives a long, four-and-a-half-minute summary of how he met W. C. Handy and what that meant to him. And as he's going through this [Simone is watching him]. One of my graduate students, Kelly Pryor, took on this and said, "I'm going to look into this a little more," and she used resources that many of us in our generation don't. She decided to look at a YouTube clip and captured Nina Simone in the second row watching this entire workshop.

TB: Is that right?

JM: Yes. But let's step back from that for a second. Nina Simone is not just thinking of Langston Hughes as poet, writer, artist. She is seeing him as literally an expert on blues music. He is ordering Muddy Waters around. He is giving directions to Otis Spann, and he was up-front about going into details about the musical genre of the blues. Now that festival is famous for a number of reasons. After that blues session, interest [becomes] so extensive that white college students riot because they can't get enough tickets to get in. They overrun the barricades. They crash over the fences and walls, and so Willis Conover steps forward right at the end of Hughes's session and says the festival is closed. Think of the tragedy. The next day, John Coltrane was set to perform. And so, the festival ends with Simone watching Hughes up there after Willis Conover steps forward, [apologizes,] and says the festival is closed. Hughes and others honestly believe it might be the last time the festival ever gets back together.

So Langston Hughes, probably earlier in the day, wrote on a Western Union telegram, a song called "Goodbye Newport Blues." Muddy Waters sings it, and the very last words on the recording are actually Langston Hughes's saying, "Goodbye Newport, goodbye." So, Simone is introduced to Hughes as someone that understands blues music, has unbelievable cultural credibility and power in this particular world, and is actually writing songs for other people on the spot like Muddy Waters. So, that's half the story. The other half of the story is, because the record company knew that Nina Simone was really impressive live, they recorded that performance. The recording becomes *Nina At Newport*, and that record gets into Langston Hughes's hands. Were talking July of 1960. When the record comes out, Hughes listens to it and he loves it. You can imagine trying to organize all these people, pull things together, make sure your session goes off. He finally sits down and really listens to Nina's music, and decides to dedicate an entire article in the *Chicago Defender* called "Spotlight on Nina Simone." It comes out November 12, 1960. The whole thing is to Nina Simone. So, what he does is lend an incredible amount of credibility to Nina Simone because Hughes is probably never more popular in America than he was in 1960. And when he writes this, he sends a copy to Simone (there's only one copy that's in private hands that I've had a chance to see), personalizes it, and he talks about listening to that album being the reason he really highlighted her.

What the spotlight on Nina Simone does is, it reminds listeners that she's completely different than Billie Holiday. And he goes out of his way to say [that] she is far more talented at the piano. She has completely different abilities and talents. And that was kind of hounding Simone at the time because she covered the *Porgy and Bess* song, and that had been kind of her entrée, very similar to how many outsiders would have got to know Billie Holiday. So finally, that is of critical importance because that starts the correspondence between Hughes and Simone that will never end: exchanges of books, letters, telegrams, postcards, happy birthday wishes that go on and end up being over eighty moments of times of correspondence, let alone all the times they meet. So, the 1960 Newport Jazz Festival was critically important, and as scholars of Langston Hughes know, it's important to Hughes because the very next day he stays in Newport and begins what will become the series *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*. He starts writing it literally on July 4. He stays in Newport for a couple weeks after that.

TB: Wow, that's fascinating. My next question concerns the concept of soul. As you know, Simone figures prominently in Questlove's film *Summer of Soul*, and she was known as the High Priestess of Soul when the Soul Festival in Harlem occurred in 1969. Similarly, Hughes defined the meaning of soul and described his first published poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," as an expression of soul.

JM: I have rarely been so excited by a question. I think soul is a fantastic way to think about the connection between these two folks. Whenever it arises in our imagination, we often go back to W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folks* as a touchstone in this regard. But I went back to one of Hughes's first biographers. We often forget that more than seven people have written biographies on Langston Hughes. This is the 1968 biography by Milton Meltzer, who was the son of Austrian immigrants, and he had to interview Hughes in person. This book, *Langston Hughes: A Biography*, was actually a National Book Award finalist in 1968. Can you imagine being Milton Metzer, sitting down and asking Langston Hughes what he thinks is soul in the mid-sixties? He got a two-paragraph response: "a sort of synthesis of the essence of the Negro folk arts, particularly the old music and its flavor, expressed in contemporary ways, but so clearly and emotionally colored with the old that it gives a distinctly Negro flavor to today's material in music, painting, writing, or merely in personal

attitudes and conversation.” The response continues, with Meltzer quoting and paraphrasing Hughes: “You can find ‘soul’ in such examples as Ray Charles or Margaret Bond’s music, and in Jacob Lawrence’s paintings. There were overtones of it in the Harlem and Watts riots of the 1960s, things ‘that whites feel but fail to understand,’ something to which only ‘soul-brothers’ born to the tradition can fully react in whatever form it occurs.” This notion of soul, I think, is quite fascinating to hear in Langston Hughes’s own voice and words, speaking on the record about it.

TB: Agreed. It’s amazing how contemporaneous he was and his ability to see all these threads. I knew you’d come up with something. I just didn’t know what it would be. Do you know whether Hughes and Simone ever discussed soul or its meaning?

JM: I don’t know exactly what conversations Hughes and Simone might have had in person. But there are a couple other quotes that [might relate] to your question. We have a detailed record of how they spoke to each other, and I think an imaginative way of thinking about embodying one’s heritage, embodying one’s identity helps us think about a few things they exchanged. On January 26th of 1965, Langston Hughes had just seen Simone perform in New York City, and he wrote her a very short letter that essentially said that her singing and piano-playing amounted to an entire orchestra. I like that idea of an orchestra kind of hiding someone’s soul, right? Not allowing it to kind of step forward and just be its own organic structure. And imaginatively, I think that idea of embodiment and presence might be behind that. Equally interesting, there’s an incredibly important letter that Nina Simone writes back to Langston Hughes on July 6th of 1965. It’s four-and-a-half pages long. It’s almost without parallel in Simone’s correspondence for its length and detail. She writes back to him from London [after] rereading both his autobiographies: *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*, and she says this at the very end: “Everything in it, I identify with.” And I think that really fits Hughes’s notion of the past becoming the personal, becoming the future, becoming the present: that in some way there’s this transfer that’s happening in these particular ways. And so, a building of an identity, a notion of presence, so I think soul would have been something they connected with very, very strongly.

TB: What do think drew Langston Hughes and Nina Simone together?

JM: I think it's really easy to start with Langston Hughes's trajectory and think about what might have brought him to a mentoring role. You can go back and see how many people he assisted. In personal letters to his best friend, Arna Bontemps, you can see how often he was really ecstatic to help others out. One among many examples is photographer Roy DeCarava. When he came to Hughes with photographs, Hughes tried repeatedly to set him up with exhibitions. He held on to fifty copies [and show them to] anybody that walked into the office. So, Hughes had some kind of sense either of his own goodwill or as an ambassador to everything he had achieved to try to include others. He also had an incredible aesthetic eye and ear. I mean, we don't want to overlook the real basics either. He could tell when somebody had the "it factor," and could find that right away. You know, he helps DeCarava in immeasurable ways, including writing his Guggenheim Fellowship for him and on and on. There are all kinds of other people behind the scenes. He talks about being so excited about publishing Alice Walker. We could go on and on.

So, I think Hughes comes into this role with some kind of combination of being a real aesthetic prodigy for recognizing others, for having good will, and then also recognizing probably how many people helped him along and trying to do the same thing in this particular age. I think it starts there, and chronologically, that's how the relationship seems to be. Hughes almost out of nowhere actually sent the first autobiography to Nina Simone without any contact. And so, he's kind of already heard her somewhere from the very start. And I'd like to imagine—I would never assert—that it might have been her piano playing as much as anything. I mean, Hughes had a great affection for Thelonious Monk, on and on, and I think he could understand somebody that could really play the piano. And unquestionably, she was at the top of her game. For Simone, I do believe we have that larger aura of Hughes never being more popular than he was in 1960. So here you are, very young, meeting somebody of this stature. You know, his reputation precedes him. And I hope I don't overemphasize it, but I don't think I can really personally understand what it would be like to sit in the crowd and watch Langston Hughes on a stage where you had just performed hold forth for three-and-a-half hours with absolute blues legends. So, I think the thing that's easy to miss is that she would have regarded Hughes not only as a great [literary] artist, but somebody who really understood music. I think that link would

have been something that really attracted her. And then, of course, none of us would overlook that Langston Hughes devoted an entire article to you called “Spotlight on Nina Simone” early in your career. And again, those particular articles usually only devoted a sentence or two to popular books and things that were going on. To have the whole article be about you, that’s somebody that very measurably and pragmatically is going to be helpful to you.

All those things probably come together in this regard, and then it blooms into Hughes continually suggesting songs for Simone to sing and her picking a few as they go along. But there’s one other thing that needs to be noted, because I don’t want to overemphasize Hughes. We know without a shadow of a doubt that the most important cultural figure in Simone’s life was Lorraine Hansberry and Hansberry’s influence on [her politics]. But once Hansberry passes in early 1965, Hughes really fills that void. When Hansberry is kind of gone, Simone turns to Hughes even more—to such an incredible extent that she actually confuses the fact that she traveled with Hughes to the March on Selma in 1965. She says it in her autobiography incorrectly, says it in the film *What Happened, Miss Simone?* But in her imagination, she was that close—he was that much of a friend that he was with her the whole time.

TB: [Laughs] That brings us to “Backlash Blues,” which Simone performed at the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival. There are different accounts of Hughes’s and Simone’s collaboration on his poem “The Backlash Blues.” What is the story of their collaboration?

JM: This is really the origins of my interest in this, and it’s quite fascinating because we know that by 1964, Hughes had established this back-and-forth with Simone where he’d suggest a song she considered. She chose several. But by October 1966, instead of picking someone else’s lyrics or trying to write his own lyrics for her, which he did, he takes a poem that he’s come up with called “The Backlash Blues.” And in October, he approaches Simone with it as a poem and suggests that she consider putting music to it. We know Hughes’s limited ability technically with music, but he had great reverence for those that could turn things into [something new]. And so, Simone adds the music to it. Now, let’s add a little bit of context here. The term the white backlash had originated in 1964. It does not predate that in America, and it is, of course, this horrific idea

of white supremacy rearing its head. It had never disappeared but coming forth more assertively to reclaim its horrible calls on power.

So, Hughes is activating and kind of creating this figure, Mr. Backlash, which is the embodiment of the white backlash in this particular character. He hands her the poem, and then things get really interesting. Hughes is in the audience on November 22, 1966, at the Lincoln Center Philharmonic Hall. Now let's think of what that moment would mean for Hughes. He would claim, quite excitedly, that he opened the Lincoln Center when [his play] *Black Nativity* was the first thing to play there. So, he's in the audience. And for what is likely the first time ever, Nina Simone plays that song before a live audience with Hughes in the audience. And all reviews of it claim the song and name it in the newspapers: that this is something really exciting. Simone somehow gestured that it was Hughes's poem, and so it's mentioned in [reviews], and the feedback is so immense that from that time in November '66, she keeps playing it all the way through early 1967. And by July 1st of 1967, she's again back at the Newport Jazz Festival. But, of course, all Hughes lovers will know something traumatic has happened. May 22nd at 10:30 p.m., Langston has died. So, five weeks after Langston Hughes's death, the poem, now song, is being performed by Simone at the Newport Jazz Festival before an audience that has never heard it, because it still hasn't been recorded. It hasn't been released on vinyl. The *Crisis* magazine is claiming this as one of Langston Hughes's last poems [he] ever wrote or submitted. That's not completely true, but they publish it in June. It becomes a broadside press out of Detroit in July, and this poem starts to get immediately linked as if it were Langston Hughes's last statement on things in America, and what a statement it is.

Simone starts playing "Backlash Blues" July 1st 1967, and you can hear the audience. They can't even wait until the end of the full verses. There's a copy that's buried at the Library of Congress; and in it, the audience is just ecstatic before she even ends these verses—they're loving it. She names Langston Hughes, talks about meeting him there. And what starts to happen is, because she's working this through, she starts to make alterations any great musician or performer would make, [thinking about] what works with the music?

What changes? And from 1966 at the Philharmonic, all the way to 1976, you get all these wonderful iterations [of the song]. Here's a few of them.

By the time she performs in 1968 at the Westbury Music Festival, she's added a whole new verse in the middle of it, where she talks deliberately about her relationship with Langston Hughes. That becomes her way of kind of asserting herself and changing the lyrics. By 1969, at the [Harlem Cultural Festival], in the middle of that verse, she says that Hughes told her to "sock it to 'em where they live, so they have no place to hide," keeping with the language of the times. Just a little bit later when she's in New Jersey, she'll say, "Be sure to tell them what's happenin'." And by 1976, she said, "So we have no place to hide behind all them strange hats." So, she found this space to really improvise on it and alter it in any number of ways. And by 1976, when she releases it on an album again in 1976—it comes out [initially] in August of 1967, so people can finally hear it on vinyl—she is co-credited as a writer of the song. The song will say, "by Hughes and Simone." She's added this verse. She's altered things in this particular way.

The last thing I want to say on this is, I think, noteworthy. So many people have looked at the music. A few people understand the poem, but I don't know if enough people have really actually looked at the poem carefully. This poem is very interesting, contemporaneous to what's going on. It's October of 1966, and he is already talking about the Vietnam War. We have many touchstones for this; but for many of us, the moment is that great April 4, 1967, speech by Dr. King at Riverside [Church], where he stands out against the Vietnam War. Hughes had actually spoken out against the Vietnam War two months earlier at UCLA, and it's on record and on audiotape. You can listen. So, in 1966, he's already talking about how wrong it is that people are being sent to Vietnam, and his references to yellow are about this notion of Vietnamese, right? And with the subtitle of *Summer of Soul* being when the revolution could not be televised, one way to understand Hughes's third verse is that he's saying the world is big and black and brown and beige and round. And all the world is going to make Mr. Backlash pay someday. This is a very revolutionary poem that the notions of our collective souls spread across the globe as people of color, black, brown, beige. You're going to feel it. It's an important statement. I think it's one of the reasons why Simone was so attracted to it.

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