

UCLA

Library Prize for Undergraduate Research

Title

Between Art Song And Activism: The Black Feminist Legacy of Bonds and Hughes

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6bf226mt>

Author

Reavis, Samantha

Publication Date

2025-11-05

Undergraduate

Between Art Song and Activism: The Black Feminist Legacy of Bonds and Hughes

- Margaret Bonds' and Langston Hughes' friendship and collaborations as a reflection of
Black feminism
- Musical analysis of Bonds' setting of *Negro Speaks of River* and *Three Dream Portraits*
 - Bonds' and Hughes' identity as racial liberators
 - Analysis of Bonds' and Hughes' personal correspondences
 - Bonds' use of Black "vernacular" idioms in her music

Abstract:

In this research, I examine the music of composer Margaret Allison Bonds and her collaborations with poet and social activist Langston Hughes. Drawing on Black feminist thought, I assert that the collaborations of Margaret Allison Bonds and Langston Hughes exemplify the importance of artistic collaboration between Black men and Black women in struggles for racial liberation and the significance of the experience of Black women in artistic expressions of Black vernacular culture. I also plan to expand on previous literature's analysis of the unique role Black women played in fostering artistic relationships and connection during the respective Black Renaissances of Harlem and Chicago. My analysis will draw on a meta-synthesis of literature on both Margaret Allison Bonds' and Langston Hughes' artistic outputs, as well as works with archival materials such as correspondences between Bonds and Hughes, original musical scores, and program notes. I will also consider musical quotes, form, rhythm, melody and harmony. In this study, I especially consider Bonds' use of Langston Hughes' poems "Minstrel Man", "Dream Variation" and "I, Too" in her song cycle *Three Dream Portraits*. I argue that Bonds' longstanding musical relationship with Hughes represents an artistic anti-racist, Black feminist mutual aid network and creative safe space. I contend that Bonds' and Hughes' work together creates a nuanced image of the Black experience, and, by merging the European art song with the Pan-Africanism of Harlem Renaissance literature, the pair uniquely reconcile their African American heritage and identity with their artistic affinities for European classicism and tradition. This project will address a gap in musicological work in regards to Black feminist theory and the collaborations between Black men and Black women in twentieth-century classical music. **Lastly**, I suggest further research on these unique artistic

collaborations between Black women and men during the Black Renaissances of the 1920s and 1930s, and how this has shaped continued expressions of Black vernacular tradition.

Introduction:

Margaret Allison Bonds (1913–1972) emerged as a composer during one of the most turbulent moments in American history: the entrenchment of Jim Crow segregation and the rise of Black artistic and political movements in Chicago and Harlem. As a pianist, composer, and cultural mediator, Bonds forged a career that merged Euro-American classical traditions with African American vernacular idioms, while simultaneously advocating for racial pride and gender equity. In her decades-long collaboration with poet and activist Langston Hughes, Bonds created works that not only celebrated Black cultural expression but also modeled the possibilities of Black feminist artistic practice.

Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins’ framework of Black feminist thought, this paper interprets Bonds and Hughes’ creative partnership as a “safe space” in which Black women’s knowledge, creativity, and survival strategies flourished despite the exclusionary structures of American classical music. Bonds’ music and her correspondence with Hughes demonstrate how Black women fostered intellectual and creative networks that challenged both white supremacy and patriarchy. In particular, Bonds’ art song settings of Hughes’ *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* and *Three Dream Portraits* exemplify how African American composers reshaped European forms like the Lied and *mélodie* into vehicles for racial liberation, feminist critique, and communal affirmation.

By situating Bonds and Hughes within the broader Black Renaissances of Harlem and Chicago, this paper expands the narrative of twentieth-century art song. I argue that Bonds’ role

as both composer and feminist interlocutor disrupts the masculinist emphasis of Harlem Renaissance historiography and highlights the central role of women's creative labor in shaping Black modernist expression. In doing so, this paper reframes the Bonds–Hughes partnership as a model of Black feminist collaboration that continues to resonate in musicological and activist discourses today.

Margaret Allison Bonds was born in 1913, during the height of the post-Reconstruction Segregation Era, to Monroe Alpheus Major, a Black physician and activist, and Estelle C. Bonds, a church musician and member of the National Association of Negro Musicians¹. Her childhood home served as a beacon of Black intellectual and artistic excellence, with her mother regularly hosting Black composers and musicians like Abbie Mitchell, Lillian Evanti, and Will Marion Cook. Bonds began her musical education studying piano under the Coleridge Taylor Scholarship, and, at the age of thirteen, began to study composition with two of the 'giants' of African American classical music — William Dawson and Florence Price, teaching Bonds that she could combine Eurogenetic Art Music with African retentions².

At sixteen, Bonds began attending Northwestern University, pursuing degrees in piano and composition³. Laden with the meritocratic philosophies of Booker T. Washington, Bonds came into university with the hopeful belief that her race would not be a barrier to the concert stage. However, she quickly realized that both her race and gender affected how her musical output would be heard by audiences⁴. Bonds experienced enormous racial prejudice at

¹ "Margaret Bonds: Composer and Activist". Georgetown University Library. Archived from the original on September 17, 2020.

² Kilgore, Alethea N. *The Life and Solo Vocal Works of Margaret Allison Bonds (1913-1972)*. Florida State University, 2013; term "Eurogenetic art music" is coined by Dr. Robert Reigle to refer to Western classical music of the common practice era.

³ "Margaret Bonds | Encyclopedia.com". *encyclopedia.com*. Archived from the original on February 17, 2023.

⁴ Tammy L. Kernodle, "Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship," YouTube Video, 51:06. September 27, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsYFRs39PSY>.

Northwestern, which was still segregated. The young composer was not allowed to live at the university or use the swimming pool. It was here that Bonds first encountered the resilient poetry of Langston Hughes, where she found realistic yet empowering portrayals of the African American experience;

“I was in this prejudiced university, this truly prejudiced place...I was looking in the basement of the Evanston Public Library where they had poetry. I came in contact with this wonderful poem, ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’, and I’m sure it helped my feelings of security. Because in the poem he tells how great the Black man is. And if I had any misgivings, which I would have to have - here you are in a setup where restaurants won’t serve you and you’re going to college, you’re sacrificing, trying to get through school - and I know that poem helped save me.”⁵

Bond’s Dream Cycle and The Beginnings of a Symbiotic Partnership:

Ten years after her original encounter with Hughes’ work, Bonds met the poet at the house of Tony Hill, a Black ceramics artist.⁶ Shortly afterwards, Hughes attended Estelle Bonds’ gathering of Black artists. These gatherings served as communal alternative spaces for Black artists to engage, intellectualize, and create, free from the burden and interruption of institutionalized whiteness in mainstream artistic and performative spaces. These places were especially important for Black female artists. As musicologist Tammy L. Kernodle notes “it was in the living rooms and at kitchen tables that Black women transferred the knowledge that was key to their survival and negotiation of white and male-centered spaces”. With both artists seeking to use traditional European artforms to express a postwar Black consciousness, Bonds

⁵ Almon, Margaret (February 13, 2017). "Margaret Bonds Archives – Margaret Almon". Archived from the original on April 23, 2024.

⁶ Hatch interview, p 8, CBMR

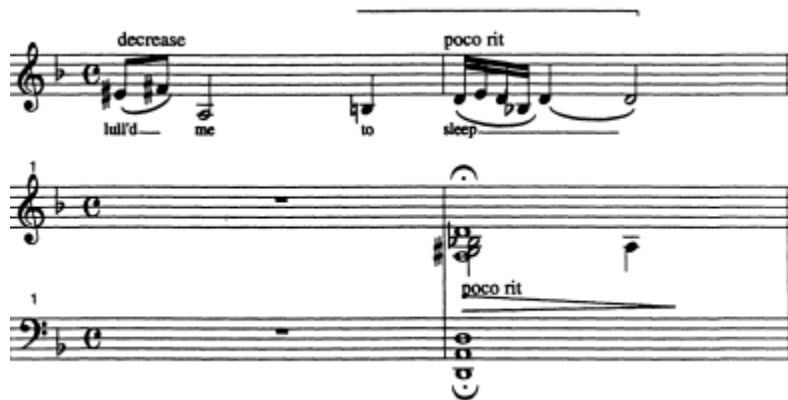
and Hughes quickly became kindred collaborators, building an artistic relationship built on mutual respect and a shared sense of political obligation as artists.

In 1936, Bonds returned to Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", setting it to music⁷. Literary scholar Christopher C. De. Santis notes that the poem reflects the Black "experience and history, though often oppressive" that "have not extinguished but rather emboldened the development of a soul, the birth of an immortal self, the proud 'I' that now speaks to all who listen". Written a decade after she first encountered the poem as a student at Northwestern, this composition reflects both personal resilience and a collective assertion of African diasporic identity. Hughes' text connects the Black subject to ancient rivers — the Nile, Congo, Mississippi, Euphrates — grounding African American history in a transhistorical, global geography. Bonds' setting mirrors this expansiveness. The piano accompaniment pivots around a recurring motif, a unifying gesture that suggests the continuity of Black cultural memory across disparate geographies. Wide intervallic leaps in the accompaniment evoke the physical breadth of rivers while also demanding virtuosic energy from the performer, symbolizing the endurance required of Black subjects in oppressive contexts.

At moments, Bonds' writing recalls "exoticized" musical gestures of early twentieth-century Euro-American modernism — such as the open fifths that accompany the Nile — but she subverts this by reframing such gestures as celebratory rather than reductive, anchoring them in Black pride rather than Orientalist stereotype. Most strikingly, when the text references the Mississippi, Bonds introduces a syncopated left-hand "stride" figure, unmistakably tied to Black vernacular pianism. Here, she collapses the divide between classical and popular idioms, asserting the cultural authority of jazz within the concert hall.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMqrTyVPa0s>

Compared to Florence Price’s settings of spiritual texts — which often concealed vernacular idioms within Romantic textures — Bonds is more overt. Her rhythmic inflections announce jazz as central to Black self-representation. By aligning Hughes’ diasporic poetics with vernacular musical gestures, Bonds asserts the capacity of Black women composers to translate lived experience into concert music, offering a feminist intervention into a male-dominated art song tradition.



Bonds continued this project nearly twenty years later in 1959, the year of the “Negro Boys Industrial School Fire” in Arkansas, where 21 Black teenagers died in a locked dormitory fire at a segregated reform school. Bonds provided a musical setting for “Minstrel Man”. This poem reflects DuBois’ radical idea of ‘double consciousness’, highlighting the way the stereotypical Black man (‘minstrel man’) is seen in white society...”wide with laughter, deep with song, gay with dancing,” which conceals the suffering, pain, and inner cry brought about by daily violences of white supremacy. As noted by musicologist Penelope Peters, the irony of the narrator’s minstrel performance lies in that he must continue “dancing to the tune of white society, in effect enacting a parody of his talents instead of being allowed to express his artform honestly”. To musically recreate this ‘double consciousness’, Bonds utilizes modal mixture, juxtaposing the minor and major modes of the song’s tonic. Bonds also incorporates the B flat

Dorian and Aeolian modes, echoing back to the church modes and pentatonic harmonizations of Black folk spirituals, seamlessly integrating a distinct African American idiom into a Eurogenetic art music context.

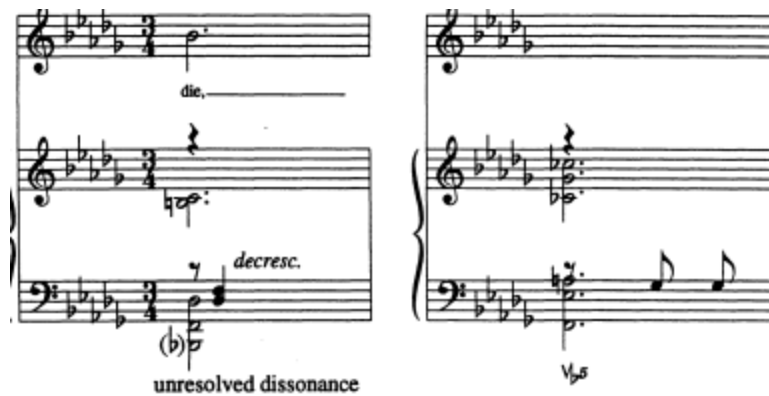
The musical score is written in 3/4 time and features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The tempo/mood is marked *mf* (mezzo-forte). The lyrics are: "Be - ...pain - so wide with laugh - ter". The piano part includes a first ending bracket and a second ending bracket. The harmonic analysis at the bottom indicates a V₁₁ chord and a I chord.

Be -

...pain - so

wide with laugh - ter

V₁₁ I



The next art song in Margaret Bond's *Dream Cycle* is her setting of *Dream Variations*, a Hughes poem that represents the narrator's dream of freedom from the oppression of white hegemonic society. Hughes imagines freedom as rest, play, and joy within Black community: "to fling my arms wide in some place of the sun." The contrast between oppressive daylight and liberating night embodies the temporal rhythms of labor and reprieve in African American life. In the poem, Hughes contrasts the gentle, tender, darkness of the Black community to the harshness of white supremacy.

The narrator dreams of freedom "in the sun" — that is, freedom in a society dominated by whiteness. Hughes even distinguishes the "gentle night" and "sunny day", expressing the reality of the Black worker as commodity. Even post-slavery with the sharecropping industry, there was a differentiation between work-related oppression during the day, and the freedom and community enjoyed by Black people at night when they could gather together in safe, collaborative spaces built on solidarity and mutual aid. The piece resists a clear tonic, mirroring the unattainable nature of the dream. Yet stability emerges at moments of affirmation — "dark like me" — as if to suggest that Blackness itself offers grounding. The piece also incorporates complex jazz harmonies - Bonds employs quartal harmonies, tritone substitutions, and jazz extensions (9ths, 11ths, 13ths), echoing the harmonic palette of Duke Ellington or Thelonious Monk. By integrating these into art song, she elevates jazz from "popular" genre to vehicle of

philosophical depth. These musical allusions force listeners to acknowledge jazz as a major Black American cultural force.

The image displays three systems of musical notation, likely for a jazz composition. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff, with treble and bass clefs). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and the time signature is 12/8.

System 1: The vocal line begins with the lyrics "right comes on good - ly -" followed by a long note, then "dark like me," followed by another long note, and finally "That is my". The piano accompaniment features a series of chords in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand, marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic.

System 2: The vocal line continues with the lyrics "dream". The piano accompaniment continues with chords and a melodic line, also marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic.

System 3: The vocal line continues with the lyrics "black like me;". The piano accompaniment continues with chords and a melodic line.

mm. 9-10

rest at cool evening— beneath a tall

p

sun, Dance!, Whirl!, Whirl— till the day is

cresc.

Night com - ing ten - der - ly, — black like me; —

Night com - ing ten - der - ly, — black — like me.

To end the song cycle, Bonds chose the Hughes poem “I, Too”. This poem, the latest of the three works, foreshadows the militant resistance of the Black Power movement, decades later.

The narrator expresses radical autonomy, asserting that “Nobody’ll dare/Say to me, ‘Eat in the kitchen’.” The narrator also takes ownership of his contribution to American culture, with not just the hope, but the assertion that one day this will be recognized by the dominant, white society.

“Someday they’ll see how beautiful I am. I, too am America”.

Reflecting the growing militancy in Hughes’s poetic output and the Pan-Africanism nascent in the beginnings of the Black Power Movement, Bonds’ setting of “I, Too” more overtly incorporates African American musical idioms from folk spirituals, jazz, and the blues. She uses improvisatory-like vocal lines, ostinato licks in the piano, blues harmonies, and call and response between the piano and singer. This effectively gives the voice complete rhythmic freedom, a parallel to the demands of Hughes’ radical poetic work.

Compared to Bonds’ earlier *Rivers* setting, *I, Too* is unapologetically rooted in African American idioms rather than hybrid gestures. In doing so, it mirrors the trajectory of Black political movements: from the cultural pride of the Harlem Renaissance to the confrontational resistance of the late 1950s.

The musical score for "I, Too" is written for voice and piano. It is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The score is divided into two systems. The first system shows the vocal line with the lyrics "Eat in the kitchen" and the piano accompaniment. The second system shows the vocal line with the lyrics "Someday they'll see how beautiful I am" and the piano accompaniment. The piano part features a prominent ostinato lick in the right hand, which is repeated throughout the piece. The vocal line is characterized by improvisatory-like phrasing and a call and response structure with the piano. The score includes various musical notations such as treble and bass clefs, key signatures, time signatures, and dynamic markings like *p* (piano) and *f* (forte).

The image shows a musical score for the song "I, Too, Sing America" by Langston Hughes. The score is written for two voices, Trophe 1 and Trophe 2, in a key of C major with a 4/4 time signature. The music is divided into three phrases. The lyrics are written below the notes, and the melody is indicated by a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#).

1st Phrase

Trophe 1: I, too— sing A mer-i-ca,
Trophe 2: To mor row— I'll sit at the ta ble when com-pan-y com

2nd Phrase

Trophe 1: They send me to eat in the kitch-en when
Trophe 2: No-bod-y - 'll dare say to me "Eat in the kitch-en" then,

3rd Phrase

Trophe 1: But I laugh—and eat well and grow strong—
Trophe 2: Be-sides— they'll see how beau-ti-ful I am—

The Correspondences of Bonds and Hughes: Artistic Collaboration Beyond the Gender Divide

Over a thirty-year long friendship, Bonds and Hughes exchanged over 200 letters, the contents of which reveals an intimate and synergetic artistic relationship and deep friendship. Analysis of these correspondences offers us the “stories, thoughts, and inspirations” behind these artists collaborative works (Martin 2019).

When looking at the correspondences between Bonds and Hughes, there is a clear feminist consciousness at work in the collaborations and friendship between the two artists. In her theory of Black feminism, Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes friendship in Black communities as a survival strategy against both racism and patriarchy. Bonds’ letters exemplify this praxis. Her candid exchanges with Hughes reveal a rare safe space in which she could articulate her frustrations as a Black woman in the classical music world — attending an ASCAP meeting where she was “the sole woman of color,” or expressing her “grave responsibility” to represent others like her. Within these letters, we see Bonds negotiating her professional anxieties, but also

affirming her own worth. Hughes' willingness to receive these confessions and amplify her work suggests a model of male allyship rooted in feminist solidarity

In a letter to Hughes, Bonds made clear her appreciation of the poet's overt solidarity with Black women, particularly in his poem *Mother to Son*, which is written in the perspective of a Black mother, and the story "The Blues I'm Playing" in *The Ways of White Folks* about a blues pianist, Osceola, and her complex relationship with her white male patron:

You (Langston) are the one who wrote about the Negro mother and the Crystal Stair, aren't you? Well I'm in it, and I'm living it, and I'm loving it, and in so many ways I'm Oceaala too.⁸

Along with promoting the music of Black artists, Bonds and Hughes were involved in promoting the music of women composers as well, which Bonds refers to as a feminist project in a letter to Hughes:

I have lived with and searched the Bordewijk Roepman Sonata ever since you gave it to me.⁹ Yesterday I played it for the first time. The audience loved it! The applause was stupendous. It will now become a permanent part of my repertoire. I am pleased that people love it, for I'm enough of a feminist to enjoy sharing honors with a women composer. The music is not great - but its good and its truly beautiful. Johanna is truly very talented- and there is no telling to what heights her talent might take her.

In an era of rampant misogyny, Bonds' correspondences with Hughes showcase a Black feminist autonomy. Bonds was not afraid to express criticism of Hughes and other male artist's works, embracing her equality and the value of her artistic opinions and critiques. In one letter,

⁸ Bonds to Hughes, 23 November 1966, JWJ

⁹ Bonds to Hughes, 18 September 1950, JWJ

Bonds unabashedly criticizes Hughes's project with composer William Grant Still *Troubled Island*;

I hope one day you'll be very "choosy" about what you can accept from your composers. Why don't you take a music course at U of C...you should've never let Still get away with that tripe.¹⁰

As a Black female artist, Bonds' story as an integral part of the Black Renaissance remains largely unsung, while Langston Hughes has gone down in history as one of the most famous authors of the twentieth century. However, in his collaborations with Bonds, Hughes strategically used his privilege in the Black community as a male to promote her important music, even promoting her music abroad in Africa which led to international performances of several of her pieces. Hughes, even with his greater fame, saw Bonds as an equal artist, deliberately referring to his works with her as "our songs" and "our show". Bonds understood the importance of her work being performed given her positionality as a Black women;

Performances are very important to me today...Tuesday I attended my first ASCAP meeting. I observed that there were few women present, and that I was the sole woman of color. This makes me feel a grave responsibility.

Bonds and Hughes as Racial Liberators:

Growing up in a politically-active family, Bonds was socialized by the strong women in her family with feelings of racial pride and Black power:

My mother's mother, Margaret Ann Bonds from babyhood taught me to be proud of my African ancestry. Everytime an African came to lecture in Chicago, where I was born Margaret Ann bundled me up and took me - she 'brainwashed' me with the idea that Africans are superior

¹⁰ Bonds to Hughes, 23 May 1949, CBMR.

people - that African dyes never fade, that African men can row boats in the face of forceful waves, that Africans can weave cloth that outlasts the cloth of any other people of the world, that Africans can swim turbulent rivers and survive because of their virility, etc., etc., etc.,...¹¹

Bonds' early childhood experiences were rooted in a Pan-African consciousness where Bonds was made aware of her connection to the 'motherland' - Africa, and was inculcated with a strong sense of identity, political consciousness, and Black pride. This intergenerational transmission of racial pride exemplifies what Patricia Hill Collins identifies as a central feature of Black feminist thought: knowledge as communal, matrilineal, and tied to survival. Bonds' Pan-African sensibilities thus came not only from intellectual engagement but from the feminist labor of foremothers who insisted on affirming Black identity in hostile contexts. In contrast, Hughes' household was mired with internalized anti-Blackness; as the poet recounts, "My father hated Negroes. I think he hated himself too, for being Negro. He disliked all of his family because they were Negroes."¹² This experience demonstrated the harrowing effects of White Supremacy on the Black psyche to a young Hughes, who, from a young age, felt a responsibility towards his racial brethren. Langston Hughes biographer Arnold Rampersad notes that because of his racially-isolated upbringing, Hughes felt like both an outsider and insider in the Black community, which drove him to "seek the love and approval of the race".

Despite their disparate upbringings, both Bonds and Hughes felt a connection to Africa, especially as a source of artistic inspiration. In a letter to Bonds, Hughes describes meeting African musicians during his 1966 visit to Senegal:

¹¹ Margaret Bonds, handwritten essay, undated, box 5, folder 12, BFC

¹² Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 142

Dear Margaret - Leonard, Duke, Martina, Arminita, Jester Hairston, Etta, Zelma, George, Fela - lots of music folks in Dakar for the festival - which was a month long wonder. Now I'm off to Ethiopia for Liberation Day. Salaam!¹³

While Bonds was never able to travel to Africa, she did make a point to experience African culture in New York City. In a letter to Hughes, she details her experiences at the 1964 New York World's Fair, highlighting her experience in the 'African Pavilion';

So Djane and I read "Uncle Langston's" column in the Post and he said we should go to the African Pavilion...we visited Susie [the giraffe] first....then we went to the Tree-House Restaurant . . . Each one of us had a different meal – so between the three we had chicken, beef, curry, peanuts, mangos, papaya...I liked the peanut soup so I'm going to learn how to make it – should be healthy.¹⁴

These exchanges position their collaboration within what Paul Gilroy terms the "Black Atlantic" — a transnational cultural circuit where art, politics, and diasporic identity circulate and reinforce one another. For Bonds, these correspondences with Hughes served as a way of participating in global Blackness from a location of double marginalization — as a woman in classical music and as a Black artist in a racist industry. Her Pan-Africanism was therefore not abstract but embodied: she located herself in a lineage of Black women whose creativity was inseparable from community responsibility.

Bonds and Hughes' work together was overtly political, reflecting Black Power politics and Black liberation theology. Bonds and Hughes collaborated on the cantata *Ballad of the Brown King*, which was written in honor of the biblical African king Balthazar, from the story of the birth of Jesus. Hughes wrote that the piece was meant to "reinforce the image of African

¹³ Hughes to Bonds, 5 May 1966, BFC

¹⁴ Bonds to Hughes, 2 September 1964, JWJ.

participation in the Nativity story.” Bonds attempted to design a “Brown King Doll” as part of the promotion for the piece, hoping that having a visual representation of Balthazar would “tell Negroes how great they are”.¹⁵ The composer truly believed in the importance of the piece for the Black community:

Every musician with a Brown face who has heard the ballad is promoting it - the little ones, the medium ones, and the big ones...I remind you, once again, that you and I together have given the dark youth of America a cantata which makes them proud to sing.¹⁶

The pair also exchanged postcards with pictures of the three kings. In one letter to Hughes, Bonds expresses her Black-centered theology, commenting that she regrets buying a postcard featuring white portrayals of the king;

I never would have bought three white kings! Maybe I'll color one's face red.¹⁷

This project can be situated within what womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant would later describe as Black women's liberation theology — a theology centered on affirming Black people's presence in sacred narratives as a source of empowerment¹⁸. Bonds' statement that *Ballad of the Brown King* made “dark youth of America proud to sing” underscores the feminist stakes of the work: she saw herself as responsible for nurturing the next generation through cultural affirmation.

While Hughes is remembered as a race man and poet of liberation, Bonds' equal role as a liberator has too often been minimized. Yet her letters, compositions, and pedagogical commitments show that she conceived of her art as service to her people. Her comment at ASCAP — noting her solitude as the only Black woman present and feeling a “grave

¹⁵ Bonds to Hughes, 15 October 1960, CBMR.

¹⁶ Bonds to Hughes, 7 July 1961, CBMR

¹⁷ Bonds to Hughes, 21 December 1966, JWJ

¹⁸ Grant, Jacquelyn. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.

responsibility” — encapsulates this feminist consciousness. By writing politically resonant music like *Ballad of the Brown King* and her settings of Hughes’ poetry, Bonds enacted what Collins describes as “Black women’s activist tradition”: creating safe spaces and cultural artifacts that sustain collective survival.

Bonds, Hughs, and Black Feminism

In the seminal work *Black Feminist Thought*, theorist Patricia Hill Collins defines Black feminism as an examination of the lived experiences of Black women and embracing the empowerment and collective resistance of these women. In her discussion of the survival methods of Black women in a racist, misogynistic society, Collins highlights the formation of “safe spaces” — spaces where “Black women can subvert the behavioral expectations put on them by society” which “help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but within African American institutions”. Through an analysis of Hughes’ and Bonds’ personal correspondences, as well as their shared collaborations (especially *Three Dream Portraits*), it is clear that this friendship served as a safe, fostering, creative space for Bonds to express herself as a Black female artist in a time of rampant misogyny. Throughout their musical partnership, Hughes and Bonds used their collaborations to advocate for their liberatory politics and to use European musical forms to express a distinctly Black consciousness.

Conclusion: Bonds, Hughes, and Black Feminist Methodology

The collaboration between Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes exemplifies how Black art in the twentieth century could function simultaneously as personal refuge, political resistance, and feminist praxis. Through her art song settings of Hughes’ poetry — from the diasporic

breadth of *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* to the militancy of *I, Too* — Bonds forged a compositional language that wove together European forms and Black vernacular idioms. In doing so, she challenged entrenched hierarchies that excluded African American musical expression from classical canons, and asserted that Blackness itself could be the generative source of modernist innovation.

Equally significant are the letters exchanged between Bonds and Hughes. These correspondences, when read as part of a Black feminist counter-archive, reveal a safe space in which Bonds articulated her frustrations, ambitions, and critiques without fear of dismissal. Hughes' receptivity to her candor, and his insistence on describing their works as "our songs," underscores how their partnership modeled cross-gender solidarity in the Black intellectual tradition. In this sense, their friendship embodies Collins' definition of Black feminist thought: the creation of spaces where marginalized voices are affirmed, and where artistic collaboration becomes a tool of survival and empowerment.

Their explicitly political works, such as *Ballad of the Brown King*, extend this feminist vision into liberation theology and global Black consciousness. Bonds' insistence that young Black performers needed stories and images of their greatness reflects the womanist imperative to nurture the community through culture. Even without traveling to Africa, her diasporic engagements through Hughes' letters, performances, and her own participation in cultural showcases demonstrate her alignment with the transnational politics of the Black Atlantic.

Taken together, Bonds and Hughes offer a model of artistic practice that is not simply interracial or even intergenerational, but fundamentally Black feminist in its methodology. Their partnership redefines art song as a medium of racial pride, feminist critique, and communal care.

For musicology, their story compels us to recognize how Black women's creativity and intellectual labor shaped the soundscape of liberation, and how friendship across gendered lines can produce artistic safe spaces with lasting political impact.

Future research might build on this by exploring other overlooked partnerships between Black men and women in twentieth-century music, illuminating the ways these collaborations expanded vernacular traditions, reconfigured European forms, and cultivated feminist strategies of resistance. To study Bonds and Hughes together is not simply to recover a historical friendship, but to glimpse a methodology: one in which art is inseparable from activism, and in which Black feminist consciousness ensures that music remains a site of survival, pride, and liberation.

Works Cited

Martin, Allegra. *Expressions of African American identity in the cantata "Simon Bore the Cross" by Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes*. Diss. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2019.

Peters, Penelope. "Deep Rivers: Selected Songs of Florence Price and Margaret Bonds." *Canadian University Music Review* 16.1 (1995): 74-95.

Almon, Margaret (February 13, 2017). "Margaret Bonds Archives – Margaret Almon". Archived from the original on April 23, 2024.

Tammy L. Kernodle, "Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship," YouTube Video, 51:06. September 27, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsYFRs39PSY>.

"Margaret Bonds | Encyclopedia.com". *encyclopedia.com*. Archived from the original on February 17, 2023.

Kilgore, Alethea N. *The Life and Solo Vocal Works of Margaret Allison Bonds (1913-1972)*. Florida State University, 2013

"Margaret Bonds: Composer and Activist". Georgetown University Library. Archived from the original on September 17, 2020.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Grant, Jacquelyn. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.

Griffin, Farah Jasmine. *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2013.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2019.

Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Abbreviation:JWJ

Helen Walker-Hill Papers. Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College, Chicago.

Abbreviation: CBMR.

This collection includes: Bonds, Margaret. Interview by James Hatch. Transcription. December 28, 1971, Inner City Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA.

Margaret Bonds Papers (GTM-130530). Booth Family Center for Special Collections,Georgetown University Library, Washington, D.CAbbreviation: BFC.

Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers: For Marian Anderson,” Folder 184, Marian Anderson Collection of Music Manuscripts, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania Libraries

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*.Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Kernodle, Tammy L. “‘When and Where I Enter’: Black Women Composers and the Advancement of a Black Postmodern Concert Aesthetic in Cold War Era America.” In “Colloquy: Shadow Culture Narratives: Race, Gender, and American Music Historiography,” *Journal of American Musicological Society* 73, no. 3 (2020): 770-776

