

Abstract for the Conference on African American Culture and Experience, 2015

“Need[ing] to Come Up in the World”: *Not Without Laughter* and the Self-Made Man

Christopher Allen Varlack  
University of Maryland, Baltimore County | Department of English  
1100 Hilltop Circle  
Baltimore, Maryland 21250  
E-mail: [cvarlack@umbc.edu](mailto:cvarlack@umbc.edu)

In her 1998 critical work, *When Memory Speaks: Exploring the Art of Autobiography*, Jill Ker Conway emphasizes the impact of Benjamin Franklin in creating another archetypal male life script—one that essentially “preempted much of the foreground of nineteenth-century male autobiography” (19). That pattern to which she alluded is that of the self-made man—a script she later traces in the autobiographical works of Frederick Douglass as well, both authors weaving impassioned “narrative[s] of self-creation within a society in which property and status were defining elements of the self” (23). This theme of self-creation, however, is not only found in the non-fiction works of the past. Fictional depictions of imposture and self-making are laden in American literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance where issues of property and status remained at the epicenter of the era’s ongoing social and cultural debate.

In his 1930 novel, *Not Without Laughter*, for instance, Langston Hughes describes the character of Sandy Rogers, an African-American boy reared in rural Kansas at a time when the African-American people were afforded second-class citizenship at best. Throughout the novel, Sandy finds himself torn between two traditionally competing impulses: the desire to be a great man like Booker T. Washington and forge his place in the world or the need to pursue the life of the mind like W. E. B. Du Bois. While these two perspectives were most often at odds in the cultural conversation of the time, Hughes instead uses Sandy as the fusion of two necessary and valuable ideologies, avoiding a critical flaw that J. Martin Favors later cautions against in *Authentic Blackness: Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*. According to Favors, “privileging certain African American identities and voices over others” severely restricts the scope of “intellectual inquiry into the construction of racial identity” (3). In this novel and his other seminal works, Hughes attempts to correct this flaw.

*Not Without Laughter* is then the multi-faceted story of self-creation and the struggle both within and without to forge a racial identity distinct from what W. E. B. Du Bois has termed “group imprisonment within a group” (67). This proposed paper will examine themes of black identity and community formation within this novel as a means of uncovering Hughes’ redefinition of “the New Negro” in constant construction and revision by Harlem Renaissance authors of the early to mid-twentieth century. By examining the character of Sandy Rogers and the ideologies that shape his definition of self, we can better understand the notions of property, status, and class that have historically complicated this discussion of the black identity and the self-made man.