

Paul Breman and the Heritage Collection of Black Literature and Culture

PAUL BREMAN (1931–2008) was born in the Netherlands and read English at the University of Amsterdam. As a young man, he loved blues music, and from this, as he later put it, “*theorized* the existence of black poetry, thinking that any group comfortable with the strict poetic discipline of the blues just *had* to produce more ‘formal’ poetry at a different stage of development.” He pursued its study, encouraged by a meeting with the Dutch scholar Rosey Pool, long a champion of black poetry, though the works Breman wanted to read were hard to come by. “At the end of the German occupation [of the Netherlands during the Second World War]”, he recalled, “someone in Amsterdam had printed a very handsome edition of some Langston Hughes poems – but he turned out to have very little else.” By 1952 Breman read the poets Margaret Walker and “Shake” (for Shakespeare) Keane, and on his first trip to London bought Countee Cullen’s *The Black Christ* and Langston Hughes’ *Fields of Wonder*. He was also able to obtain Peter Blackman’s *My Song Is for All Men* and Peter Abrahams’ rare book of poems, *A Blackman Speaks of Freedom!*

Paul Breman, 1931–2008

Typed letter (carbon copy) to Rosey Pool,
April 4, 1954

Rosey E. Pool, 1905–1971

Beyond the Blues: New Poems by American Negroes
Selected and introduced by Rosey E. Pool
Lympne, Kent: Hand and Flower Press, 1962

Langston Hughes, 1902–1967

Lament for Dark Peoples and Other Poems
[Amsterdam: Jeroen Driessen], 1944 [i.e. 1945]
No. 1 of 50 copies printed on special paper

Margaret Walker, 1915–1998

For My People
Foreword by Stephen Vincent Benét
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942

Ellsworth McGranahan Keane, 1927–1997

Ixion: Poems
[Georgetown?] British Guiana: Master Printery,
1952

Countee Cullen, 1903–1946

The Black Christ and Other Poems
Decorations by Charles Cullen
New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929

Langston Hughes, 1902–1967

Fields of Wonder
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947

Peter Blackman, 1909–1993

My Song Is for All Men
London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1952

Peter Abrahams, b. 1919

A Blackman Speaks of Freedom!: Poems
[Durban, South Africa: University Printing
Works, 1940?]

Dark Testament
London: George Allen & Unwin, 1942

In 1948 BREMAN made his first translations of black poetry, in the Dutch literary journal *Podium*. They were “dreadful”, he thought, “but the novelty factor carried them through”. In 1957–8 he and Rosey Pool combined their translations for a bilingual (English and Dutch) anthology of black poetry, *Ik zag hoe zwart ik was (I Saw How Black I Was)*.

By then, in 1953, Breman began a career as a bookseller, eventually specializing in antiquarian books. At the same time, he maintained a connection with black music, met visiting American musicians, and wrote articles and then books. His *Spirituals* was published in 1958, and *Blues* in 1961. In 1959 he moved to London, “where personal contact became easier and more frequent” with others in the field, such as fellow collector Arthur Spingarn, poet Gwendolyn Brooks, and the leading black intellectual and civil rights advocate W.E.B. Du Bois, with his wife, Shirley Graham, also an author and activist.

Paul Breman, 1931–2008

*Spirituals: Noord-Amerikaanse
geestelijke volksliederen*

Introduction, translation, and notes
by Paul Breman

The Hague: Servire, 1958

*Blues en andere wereldijke volksmuziek
van de Noordamerikaanse neger*

Collected, introduced, and annotated by
Paul Breman

The Hague: Servire, 1961

Rosey E. Pool, 1905–1971

Paul Breman, 1931–2008

*Ik zag hoe zwart ik was: verzen van
Noord-Amerikaanse negers*

Edited by Rosey E. Pool and Paul Breman

The Hague: Bert Bakker, 1958

Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917–2000

A Street in Bronzeville

New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945

W.E.B. Du Bois, 1868–1963

The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches

London: Archibald Constable, 1905

Selected Poems

Accra, Ghana: Ghana Universities Press, 1965

Photograph of W.E.B. Du Bois during a visit to
the Netherlands, September 1958

Photograph of Paul Breman (at podium)
introducing W.E.B. Du Bois, September 1958

Paul Breman, 1931–2008

Typed letter (carbon copy) to W.E.B. Du Bois,
February 3, 1956

Shirley Graham, 1896–1977

Typed letter signed to Paul Breman, February 11,
1956

Paul Breman, 1931–2008

Typed letter (carbon copy) with manuscript
addition, to Shirley Graham (Mrs. W.E.B. Du Bois),
February 15, 1956

“Since 1947”, Breman wrote in his letter of February 3, 1956, “I have been specializing my English studies on Negro literature, U.S. mainly, now also West Indian, Brazilian, and African as far as there are English or French writing authors. This specialization proved a bit difficult here in Holland, where virtually no material is available. However, I have managed quite well with a limited supply – which, after all, suited my financial status more. Although I hope some day to be able to make my interest the subject of a thesis, all is merely a hobby – there is no sentimentality about the approach.”

FROM THE MIDDLE of the 1950s Breman “had an ever-increasing amount of correspondence with black writers in America, mostly those of the Harlem Renaissance”. This flowering of black urban culture, also known as the “New Negro Movement” after Alain Locke’s 1925 anthology, reached its peak in the late 1920s, but some of its most important figures continued to produce, among them poets Arna Bontemps, Sterling Brown (Williams College Class of 1922), Countee Cullen, William Waring Cuney, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay. Most notable in the present collection of Breman papers are a series of letters, with various literary and photographic material, exchanged with Langston Hughes – the man who “just *was* ‘Negro poetry’ whenever that nebulous concept was mentioned at home or abroad” – and a much larger file of typescripts and manuscripts regarding Waring Cuney, whose poems Breman himself edited in a limited edition (*Puzzles*, 1960).

Langston Hughes, 1902–1967

Arna Bontemps, 1902–1973

The Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1949: An Anthology
Edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps
Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1949

Alain Locke, 1885–1954

The New Negro: An Interpretation
Edited by Alain Locke
Book decoration and portraits by Winold Reiss
New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925

James Weldon Johnson, 1871–1938

The Book of American Negro Poetry
Chosen and edited, with an essay on the Negro’s creative genius, by James Weldon Johnson
New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922

Claude McKay, 1890–1948

Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay
 (“Morning Joy”, “Africa”)
With an introduction by Max Eastman
New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922

Sterling A. Brown, 1901–1989

Southern Road: Poems
Drawings by E. Simms Campbell
New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932

Countee Cullen, 1903–1946

Manuscript poems written in Sara Teasdale, *Rivers to the Sea* (1922), inscribed by Cullen to his wife, Yolande (daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois): “Hoping that these ecstatic notes will tune her harp and set a song upon her lips”

Paul Breman, 1931–2008

Typed letter (carbon copy) to Langston Hughes,
January 10, 1954

Langston Hughes, 1902–1967

Typescript poems
Inscribed to Paul (Breman) by the author

Typescript poem, “The Backlash Blues”
Inscribed to Paul (Breman) and dated
October 1966 by the author

Photograph of Langston Hughes
Inscribed by Hughes to Paul (Breman),
February 25, 1954

Typed letter signed, to Paul Breman, May 8, 1954

Typed letter signed, to Paul Breman, May 29, 1954

The Weary Blues
Introduction by Carl Van Vechten
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926 (1935 printing)
Dust-jacket art by Miguel Covarubias

The Dream Keeper and Other Poems
Illustrations by Helen Sewell
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954

William Waring Cuney, 1906–1976

Puzzles

Selected and introduced by Paul Breman

Woodcuts by Ru van Rossem

Utrecht: De Roos, 1960

One of 175 copies; out of series,
specially printed for Paul Breman

Selection of typescript poems,
signed and dated by Waring Cuney

Paul Breman, 1931–2008

Typed letter (carbon copy) to Waring Cuney

May 18, 1954

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IN MAY 1959 Paul Breman wrote to Waring Cuney: “For some time I have been thinking of issuing a series of smallish well-printed books of poetry by U.S. Negro authors. I want to print Robert Hayden’s latest verse, Sterling Brown’s second book, reprint the George Moses Horton broadsides, and make an anthology of the younger poets.” Having failed to interest major English publishers in Robert Hayden’s poetry, Breman decided to publish it himself, thus beginning the Heritage Series of Black Poetry. He chose the name *Heritage* because “the poet is a bridge between past and present, and also between present and future – he uses a heritage, and leaves one – his work is ancient, contemporary, and timeless”. Twenty-seven titles appeared in booklet form between 1962 and 1975; Robert Hayden’s *A Ballad of Remembrance* was the first. The series was later revived with nine pamphlets, issued from 1993 to 2001. The “PB” logo that frequently appears was designed by the Dutch typographer Frits Stoepman, who also recommended use of the Gill Sans typeface.

Particularly notable is the second booklet, *Sixes and Sevens*. “This was intended to be an anthology of relatively ‘new’ poets”, Breman recalled, “the generation after the Hughes and Bontemps anthology” of 1953, which dealt with black poetry from 1746 to 1949. Six poets (Ray Durem, Calvin C. Hernton, Conrad Kent Rivers,

Audre Lorde, George R. Bell, and James W. Thompson) were invited to provide, to accompany their poems, a “statement” about their reasons and aims in writing, and the place of race in their writing and thought. Smaller selections from the work of seven other poets (Willard Moore, James A. Emanuel, Russell Atkins, Raymond Patterson, Percy Johnston, Allen Polite, and Charles Anderson) were included without statements. Breman later felt that Russell Atkins should have been included among the “six”. None of these “had yet had a book of their own published, although one or two had small privately printed pamphlets. This remained the main aim of Heritage: to present new poets, give them a platform from which to take off. . . .”

The Heritage Series of Black Poetry

Edited and published by Paul Breman

London, 1962–1975

Heritage Black Poetry Pamphlets

Edited and published by Paul Breman

London, 1993–2001

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ALTHOUGH HIS FOCUS was on black poetry, Paul Breman’s collecting also embraced fiction and drama, music, broadsides, magazines and journals, recordings, and related reference works. Nor was he limited to the present day, but looked also to earlier black poets, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar. Anthologies comprise a large part of the Breman collection, and illustrate the international spread of interest in black literature: note especially the early examples *Afrika singt: eine auslese neuer afro-amerikanischer Lyrik* (Vienna, 1929) and *Negerliederen* (Hilversum, Holland, 1934). In this category also is Paul Breman’s own second anthology, much longer than *Sixes and Sevens* and with a wider scope: *You Better Believe It: Black Verse in English from Africa, the West Indies and the United States* (1973). Most of the archive of his Heritage Series went to the Chicago Public Library, but many papers remained with Breman and survived in his estate.

WHEN WILLIAMS COLLEGE received the Breman collection in 2012, it joined institutions such as Yale and Harvard, Howard University, the Library of Congress, and the New York Public Library as an important destination for students of black literature and culture. Breman's collection had been brought to the attention of Robert Volz, then Custodian of the Chapin Library, by Darra Goldstein, Willcox B. and Harriet M. Adsit Professor of Russian, who is a friend of Paul Breman's widow, Jill Norman. Mr. Volz recognized, and all agreed, that the books and other items Breman had collected, or that he himself created, had enduring value to scholarship and would complement literary and historical materials already in the Chapin Library. With this display, we celebrate Paul Breman for his achievements and we welcome his collection to Williams for the support it will give to teaching and learning.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1872–1906

Candle-Lightin' Time

Illustrated with photographs by the Hampton Institute Camera Club and decorations by Margaret Armstrong
New York: Dodd, Mead, 1902

Howdy Honey Howdy

Illustrated with photographs by Leigh Richmond Miner
Decorations by Will Jenkins
New York: Dodd, Mead, 1905

Poems of Cabin and Field

Illustrated with photographs by the Hampton Institute Camera Club and decorations by Alice Morse
New York: Dodd, Mead, 1901

Frank Marshall Davis, 1905–1987

I Am the American Negro

Chicago: Black Cat Press, 1937

Black Man's Verse ("Cabaret")

Chicago: Black Cat Press, 1935

Russell Atkins, b. 1926

Objects

Eureka, California: Hearse Press, [1963]

Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917–2000

Jump Bad: A New Chicago Anthology

Presented by Gwendolyn Brooks

Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971

Anna Nussbaum

Afrika singt: eine auslese neuer afro-amerikanischer Lyrik

Edited by Anna Nussbaum

Vienna: F.G. Speidel'sche, 1929

Martien Beversluis

Negerliederen

Translated, edited, and written by

Martien Beversluis

Hilversum: Boekenvrienden Solidariteit, 1934

Langston Hughes, 1902–1967

Poems from Black Africa

Edited by Langston Hughes

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963

Paul Breman, 1931–2008

You Better Believe It: Black Verse in English from Africa, the West Indies and the United States

Selected and annotated by Paul Breman

Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973

Selections from periodicals collected by Paul Breman: *The Free Lance*, *The Journal of Black Poetry*, *Freedomways*, and *Black Orpheus*.

Arna Bontemps, 1902–1973

Anthology of Negro Poets in the U.S.A.: 200 Years

Read by Arna Bontemps

New York: Folkways Records, 1955

American Negro Poetry

Edited and with an introduction by Arna Bontemps

New York: Hill and Wang, 1963

LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), 1934–2014

Blues People: Negro Music in White America

New York: William Morrow, 1963

Sebastian Clarke (Amon Saba Saakana)

Black Woman Birth

Drawing by Errol Lloyd

[London]: Frank John, 1970

The exhibition Paul Breman and the Heritage Collection of Black Literature and Culture was shown in the Chapin Gallery of Sawyer Library at Williams College from July 27 to September 25, 2015. Unless otherwise cited in these labels, quotations by Paul Breman are from his Heritage Series of Black Poetry, 1962 to 1975: A Memoir (2006). All exhibits were acquired by the Chapin Library of Williams College from the estate of Paul Breman, through the generosity of his family. The exhibition design and label text are by Wayne Hammond, Chapin Librarian.