Announcer (00:01): From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

Stephen Winick (00:29): Welcome to the Folklife today podcast. I'm Stephen Winick and I'm here with my colleague, John Fenn.
John Fenn: Hello everyone.
Stephen Winick: We're folklorists at the American Folklife Center or the library of Congress. John is the head of research and programs and I'm a folklife specialist, as well as the creator of the blog folklife today, which you can find at blogs.loc.gov/folklife.

John Fenn (00:50):
And today on the folklife today podcast, we're going to talk about another hidden folklorist. As we've explained before, hidden folklorists include people whose contributions to folklore are generally overshadowed by their work in other areas. So the spy and detective Allen Pinkerton, or the broadcasting icon Alistair Cooke.

Stephen Winick (01:08):
Right! But in the idea for hidden folklorists, I was also inspired by the book and film Hidden Figures and by some public events that we held at the Library, which focused on that story as well. So there are also hidden folklorists whose folklore work wasn't recognized enough because of racism or sexism or other forms of discrimination.

John Fenn (01:27):
In this episode, we're going to look at the great poet novelist and playwright, Langston Hughes, who you could say fit into both of those groups himself.

Stephen Winick (01:36):
That's right. And we've got a couple of guests we're going to talk to about Langston Hughes. The first is our colleague from out west Langston Collin Wilkins. Langston is a native and a scholar of Houston, Texas, who currently works for the
Center for Washington Cultural Traditions in what we like to call the other Washington, Washington state. So welcome to the podcast, Langston.

Langston Collin Wilkins (01:57):
Oh, thank you. Happy to be here.

John Fenn (01:59):
Before we ask you about Langston Hughes, tell us a little about yourself and your own research.

Langston Collin Wilkins (02:05):
Yeah. As you said, I'm a native of Houston, Texas born and raised there, native Texan. I'm currently living out here in Washington state as the, I guess, quote unquote state folklorist: director of the center for Washington cultural traditions, which is a program co-sponsored by the state humanities council and the Washington state arts commission. But also I research in the areas of African-American folklore urban folklore street culture, hip hop culture and car culture and all that good stuff. You know, my doctoral dissertation was on the Houston hip hop scene, looking at the impact of space and place on music making there. I'm currently revising that into a book format. So cross your fingers that should be coming out at some point. So yeah, I think that's who I am. Sound sounds

Stephen Winick (02:58):
Great. And we should mention Langston that your lecture in our Benjamin buckin series on that topic is online as a webcast and people can find it by searching for Langston Wilkins on the library of Congress website. So by now it's become kind of the elephant in the virtual room. We're doing a podcast to talk about Langston Hughes and our first guest is actually named Langston. And that's not a coincidence as it.

Langston Collin Wilkins (03:23):
No, not at all. Yeah. so I was absolutely named after Langston Hughes. I can't take credit for that. It was my parents doing my dad was a playwright. He got his degree in theater and and he brought across genres and Langston Hughes was one of his favorite writers. So that's where I got my name from. I grew up with a whole volume of Hughes's works in the household. I still remember this old tattered collection of his poems that used to hang out on the shelf. So yeah, yeah. He's I was named after Langston Hughes and he's always been someone who whose work has kind of guided my path.
Stephen Winick (04:06):
So tell us, what is your sense of Langston Hughes, his importance to American culture generally?

Langston Collin Wilkins (04:14):
Hmm. Yeah, that's a heavy question. I think, you know, he, he's, his impact is dynamic. You know, I see him as one of the chief storytellers of black life in America, you know, at least across the first part of the 20th century his work really documented the struggles and the triumphs and the resiliency of working class African-Americans and, you know, I, I see him and I know we'll talk about this as sort of a ethnographer who documented black life and then wrote across the genre. Right. So, yeah, I think you know, Hughes's work really offers incredible insight into the attitudes practices and general culture of black people, especially under the weight of systemic oppression.

Stephen Winick (05:10):
So in Langston Hughes’s compendium The Book of Negro Folklore, there's a chapter called the jazz folk and I see some parallels between the way Hughes viewed jazz as a whole culture, not just a musical genre and your own work on Houston hip hop. Could you comment on that a little bit?

Langston Collin Wilkins (05:27):
Absolutely. Yeah. So similar to Hughes's concept of the jazz folk and I think LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka also kind of dealt with this in his concept of the blues people. Yeah. I see hip hop as not just a music, but a way of life, right. It's a system of expressions and attitudes and practices and social relations. Right. And so, you know, in Houston, you know, I, my doctoral was originally going to be about, you know, hip hop as a cultural system, right. Looking at how language and dress and music and even cars kind of work together to the create this general sense of being right. And that's how I see hip hop. I think you know, if you look at something like jazz folk and blues people, and I guess the hip hop generation, right. You know, there's a kind of a misunderstanding about black life, right. You know, I think in our fields, we like to break practices up into different disciplines and genres, but that's not really the way it works. All of these practices, interrelate and and work together to create, you know, and shape who we are and our sense of being. And so that's how I see hip hop. And I think that's how he, Hughes, saw jazz.

John Fenn (06:53):
Now, as we announced at the top of the episode, Langston, we are looking at two kinds of hidden folklorists in the, in this series. Those whose folklore work was obscured by their own work in other fields and those whose folklore work has perhaps undervalued or excluded because of racism or other kinds of discrimination. What's your take on where Langston Hughes falls in relationship to the field? You know, because of structural exclusion or other things.

Langston Collin Wilkins (07:22):
Yeah. I think you know, his contributions have fallen victim to the same type of racism that other black folklorists work have, and, and that's true for other folklorists of color as well. I think at least in the field of folklore and related fields, that racism comes in the form of disciplinarity, right. And trying to protect the genre and all this gatekeeping. Right. And so there's very strict racist definitions about who is a folklorist and what's considered folklore work. And so I think that's in part why people like him and you know, his collaborator Zora Neale Hurston, you know, have been excluded from our field when, in reality, you know, they're, they, their work is folklore work. They were out there, you know, doing participant observation, right. And collecting songs and tales and materials, and then writing across genres. Right. So, yeah, I think it has to do with, you know, this legacy of racism in the field. And I'm glad that, you know, the work of the American Folklife Center, and I know AFS is doing the folklorist of color exhibit. I'm glad we're starting to, you know, highlight the long legacy of, you know, black and people of color’s, contributions to the field.

Stephen Winick (08:49):
Yeah. Here at the American Folklife Center, in the library of Congress, we particularly love Zora whom you mentioned, because we have a number of recordings of her singing songs that she collected. And partly that had to do with institutional racism too, because she was collecting in the segregated south and couldn't actually use the recording equipment. So they had to come to her and have her re-sing the stuff that she'd that she'd collected from other people. So it was a big part of our history, just like American history. And and we're really glad to talk about people like Langston Hughes and their importance. So is there anything else you think people should know about him and his relation to our field,

Langston Collin Wilkins (09:30):
His folklore work deserves more attention. And I think we also need to see that it's-at the root of all of his work is our field, you know, folklore. I mean, all of his poems, his plays, his novels and his non-fiction work stem from, you know, his
connection to the people and his documentation of the people and that his folklore work in is very much worthy of study in our field.

Stephen Winick (09:59):
Well, we totally agree. And we're so glad that you were able to be with us. So thanks so much for being with us. It's been a real pleasure to have you on the folklife today podcast.
John Fenn:
Absolutely.
Langston Collin Wilkins: Thank you.
Stephen Winick:
You know, John, I remember that in our last episode, we featured the poetry slam team put together by the organization split this rock. And that organization is named after a poem that Langston Hughes wrote based on a version of take this hammer. So let's hear a favorite version from the archive, which is Mississippi John Hurt’s “Spike Driver Blues.” He played this at the Library of Congress in 1963.

Mississippi John Hurt (11:37):

Take this hammer and carry it to my captain
Tell him I'm gone, tell him I'm gone, tell him I'm gone
Take this hammer and carry it to my captain
Tell him I'm gone, just tell him I'm gone, I'm sure is gone

This is the hammer that killed John Henry
But it won't kill me, but it won't kill me, but it won't kill me
This is the hammer that killed John Henry
But it won't kill me, but it won't kill me, ain't gonna kill me

It a long ways from East Colorado
Honey to my home, honey to my home, honey to my home
It a long ways to East Colorado
Honey to my home, honey to my home, that where I'm going

John Henry he left his hammer
Layin' side the road, layin' side the road, layin' side the road
John Henry he left his hammer
All over in red, all over in red, that's why I'm gone
John Henry was a steel driving man
But he went down, but he went down, but he went down
John Henry was a steel driving man
But he went down, but he went down, that's why I'm gone

Stephen Winick (13:51):
Again, Mississippi John Hurt, “Spike Driver Blues,” a song known in one form or another to the poet Langston Hughes. Now we're going to be joined by Sophie Abramowitz, who has done some specific research on the connections of Langston Hughes to our own archive here at the library of Congress at the American Folklife Center. Sophie is a postdoctoral fellow at Brown University and the recent PhD graduate of the University of Virginia. And she's the author of a blog post at Folklife Today about Langston Hughes. So welcome Sophie.

John Fenn (14:24):
Hey Sophie. It's great to have you! You open your blog post with an account of Langston Hughes meeting with Vachel Lindsay. That story is sometimes told in a way that's misleading. So why don't you tell it to us as you see it?

Sophie Abramowitz (14:39):
Sure. In 1925, Hughes was living in Washington, DC. His mother lived nearby and he supported them both actually by working as a bus boy at the Wardman Park hotel. At that point he was 23 years old and about to publish his first and probably now most famous book of poems called The Weary Blues. Under the imprint of Alfred A. Knopf. From this collection, he has transcribed three poems that he slipped onto the table where Vachel Lindsay was eating dinner. Vachel Lindsay was by this time, a very famous sort of elder poet engaging in writing that produced experiments with sound, and Lindsey loved the poems, which were “Jazzonia,” “Negro Dancers,” and “The Weary Blues.” He publicly performed all three of them at the same hotel, the following night. And the stories now often recounted from here that Lindsey discovered Hughes. But to tell it that way would be to reproduce this racist myth of discovery that you see often early anthropology and in folklore, which discounts the life of the artist before their interactions with white people, usually who encourage their particular kind of fame. So with his book of poetry out for publication, a piece already published in The Crisis, which was the NAACP newspaper famously founded and edited by W.E.B. Du Bois, and the second job as a researcher for the famous historian Carter G. Woodson he was, was already doing okay!

Stephen Winick (16:14):
Thanks. And you know, that story is the founding myth for a number of institutions here in the DC area, including the restaurant chain, Busboys and Poets. So to get a clear picture of it is fun for me and John and our colleagues here in the DC area. So in your blog post, you argue that really at the core of Langston Hughes’s work was experimenting with folklore. And you begin with song collecting. Expand on that, if you would.

Sophie Abramowitz (16:41):
Yes. And I would expand that idea that folklore is at the core of Hughes's work to say that I now believe that Hughes’s principal commitments throughout his life were constellated as songwriter, song collector, and historian of black music, with musical attentions that were as sustained and ravenous as they were generically and geographically diverse. I believe that he dedicated his life to music and as to his folkloric work, he's consistently collected creatively with the intention, not of recording empirical data, but instead of adapting his materials into art that could capture the rhythm wit and humor that he heard in black folk expression. Like Zora Neale Hurston, he fundamentally challenged the dominant white supremacist notion that black folklore was archaic. Instead he saw it as the animating force of the folk's momentum toward modality. So in June of 1927, which is just a year after The Weary Blues is published, Hughes followed Zora Neale Hurston's advice and set off on a self-styled collecting trip through the Southern us and the hemispheric south.

Sophie Abramowitz (17:54):
Hughes traveled through the red light district in Memphis, into Vicksburg, Mississippi transcribing verses from a stevedore named big Mack, all the while recording idiomatic vernacular in his notebook, which Hughes continued to do three years later on a trip to Cuba and labor camps in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He apparently recorded some songs that I have not been able to find. He actually ran into Hurston in Mobile, Alabama, and they continued their field recording trip together from there. In Savannah, Georgia, the two friends and collaborators spent time recording in some form, the guitar pickers and the blues men on the docks. And I would say also that it's essential at this point to note that the black folklore that Hughes researched and collected was not only in the service of producing source material. It was the inspiration for his work in form and in spirit.

John Fenn (18:49):
This is such fascinating insight, Sophie, and, you know, speaks to the research you've been doing. What kind of material are you finding in Hughes's early field notes

Sophie Abramowitz (19:00):
Within the framework of creative black folklore, Hughes’s interests were pretty wide ranging. In Decatur, Alabama, he laid out the chorus of what he called—and this is a quote—“the blind man playing his guitar and singing the sermon of what he calls or who he calls a old man named uncle John,” and that same old man's daughter’s gospel shout in Huntsville. A story called “The Cat Tail” that Hughes heard in someone named Mr. Herndon’s drugstore appears in his journals before a series of short diary entries that shift between poetry and transcription. Also one unsung cool thing about Hughes is his life as a prolific doodler, the journals have a couple pictures and diagrams with things that he's seen, but all over his papers, you see these little drawings. And three years after that first trip, he was traveled to Cuba. As I mentioned, where he flooded his travel notebook with personal chronicles about the live performances that he attended.

Sophie Abramowitz (20:02):
These are the Orchestra Marianoa, a medley of cornetin, maracas, the bongo, piano, claves, guitar de tres cuerdas, guayo, violin and flute at the Club Occidente. He also frequently translated the poetry of Nicolás Guillén, who he encouraged to incorporate the rhythms and themes of Guillén’s national Cuban folk music, the son, in his poetry in a mode reminiscent of Hughes's own use of blues and jazz rhythms in his poetry and his other work. So these field notes and transcriptions are evidence not only of Hughes's investment in the poetry of vernacular black cultures and languages, but also of the formal experimentation that he sees and hears in black folklore, which he revivified in these transcriptions, in his poetry and in his many, many other forms of writing.

Stephen Winick (20:58):
So as he went on to become an essayist and anthologist, you point out in the blog, that he continued to collect songs all along.

Sophie Abramowitz (21:08):
Yes, as he continued to write poetry fiction and plays and nonfiction criticism, music, and literary reviews, and librettos, Hughes always continued to collect songs. I'd also go as far as to say that his archival work characterized roughly the last 25 years of his life. From 1948 until his death in 1967, Hughes edited and
compiled 15 anthologies, including The Book of Negro Folklore, which he collected, compiled, and edited with Arna Bontemps and published in 1958. Beginning in roughly the late 1930s, he also wrote hundreds of songs, librettos, and song poems, and he archived his own work as well to be preserved at the Beinecke rare book and manuscripts library at Yale University. In these different practices, collection was both an action, and in itself a form of representation. Again, Hughes is always thinking of formal experimentation and folklore together as one.

John Fenn (22:13):
So Sophie, you make the point that scholars have failed to look closely at the way Langston Hughes collected and organized his sources. What do you think is behind that?

Sophie Abramowitz (22:24):
Yeah, I think Hughes’s commitment to the intertwining practices of collecting and organizing his sources is difficult to overstate. His collection is a form of curation. One reason for the oversight you mentioned is that the field of folklore is really fraught. As you both know, it has a history that’s steeped in fetishism, primitivism and racism. Folklorists have justified the collection and preservation of Back cultural production as if it were inherently oppositional to modernity. And this was particularly the case in the time that Langston Hughes was working. Where so called modern advancements have been historically coded as white, blackness at the time Hughes began writing was often categorized as being somehow pre-modern and fixed. And you know, this is a genocidal logic. If an entire identity group of people are considered under white supremacy to be outside of modernity, their death under Jim Crow can be rationalized. Also during Hughes's lifetime, I think it's worth mentioning that the field was largely closed to practitioners of color, not entirely, but largely. By contrast Hughes was a poet of black vernacular language, diasporic music, and modernist experimentation. By pivoting from the dominant attitudes of preservation and cultural purity that undergirded folklore as a practice, Hughes embraced a modern, urban vision of black folk on his own terms.

Stephen Winick (23:53):
And I think this is where your idea of calling him an experimental folklorist comes in, is that right?

Sophie Abramowitz (23:59):
The scholar Meta DuEwa Jones speaks to this designation by dissociating Langston Hughes from the misunderstanding that frames him as what she calls “a totemic figure whose pedestal is primarily built on his ‘authentic’ rendering of African-American forms of vernacular and musical expression.” This emphasis, which is partially born of a desire for a kind of Black simplicity rooted that’s rooted in racism, has played a role in over-simplifying his body of work. Of course, “authenticity” was never his goal to begin with. Hughes’s form of creative folklore pushed against the often-naturalized relationship between primitivism and black art, repositioning Black folk as the harbinger of modernity.

Now Hughes was far from being the only under-recognized Black folklorist. There was also John W. Work, Lewis Wade Jones, Louise Bennett, and Emma Julia Cooper (and of course, the more well-recognized Zora Hurston).

This work can be emplaced in the work of the Harlem Renaissance to embrace black “folk” culture as the origin and source of creative brilliance in black artistry. Because by the 1920s black vernacular language rendered in dialect was so deeply entrenched in the forms and symbology of minstrelsy, this embrace was not total. “New Negro” artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance took varying approaches to the problem of embracing black “folk” culture for both white and black audiences. One response was to laud black “folk” culture as an origin point that modern black people were currently evolving from: for example, embracing black spirituals as raw material to be rearranged by the growing number of black choruses like the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Another was Hughes’: to embrace different forms of Black diasporic vernacular itself.

John Fenn (26:19):
Now Hughes's engagement with jazz is something we noted with our previous guest in line with what you're thinking here. So what stands out to you?

Sophie Abramowitz (26:27):
Yeah, there's so much to say about this; in addition to the jazz poetry for which he’s now famous, Hughes reviewed and wrote liner notes for jazz albums, wrote dramas that incorporated jazz, and even wrote lyrics for jazz songs. My favorite jazz piece of his is probably his freeform poetic newsreel-turned-poetry book called Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz.

It’s just such a great monument of - and really testament to - Hughes’s experimental folkloric practice. It uses formal experimentation that mimics and riffs on jazz timing, interpretation, and freestyle to produce something that brings together narrative, political commentary, song, musical notation, geography,
poetry, and toasts. It’s just wildly, brilliantly experimental, orchestrated to challenge the world as he knew it and totally rooted in vernacular sources—just like jazz.

Stephen Winick (27:29):

So those are all great points about the way Langston Hughes diverged from previous models of African American folklore practice made by our guests, Sophie Abramowitz. Of course, we're particularly interested also in his association with our archive. So what can you tell us about that Sophie?

Sophie Abramowitz (27:48):

So his papers are mostly at the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University, but some are also the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center. I write in my piece for the AFC’s Hidden Folklorists Series about his fascinating correspondence with Alan Lomax. Lomax compliments Hughes on Hughes’s transcription of Dupree Blues, and says—and this is a quote— “I should greatly appreciate any scrap, fragment, stanza or version of any Negro folk song you know, whether it has ever been published or not and let me assure you that if the Archive of American Folk Song can be of any assistance to you that is within the scope of its procedure.”

In Hughes’ reply, he asserts himself as an expert of the Black folk material that Lomax requests from him; mentioning his version of Frankie and johnny, describing where he first heard Dupree Blues, and importantly, asking, and I’m going to paraphrase: “please be so kind as to indicate [the source of the transcriptions I send you] so people won’t maybe think I shall have robbed the Am. Ballads should they come across them in a script of mine.”

John Fenn (29:11):

So as you noted, Hughes asserted himself, quite rightly as an expert of black folklore, and of course defending his collection against the perception dominant in the time, but maybe afterwards, then it might belong to someone else. What was the scale of his collection at that point? How much had he done?

Sophie Abramowitz (29:29):

So by my estimation, the scale was very large. He sites in multiple places, a trunk full of papers that contain his folk material and elsewhere he cites the so-called folk material that's kept in his files and his bookshelves. For example, in a letter to Edward H Dodd, Jr at the publisher Dodd, Mead and Company, he estimates that about half of his so-called folk material from those files and those bookshelves is
unpublished. So it's hard to even imagine since so much of that work is published, what's now left over.

Stephen Winick (30:12):
So that's, that's fantastic. And if you look in the book of Negro folklore, you find some great things like rent party invitations from Harlem in the 1930s, which customarily followed a predictable pattern and had a little rhyme on them. And he was ahead of his time and thinking of these written down and printed up items as folklore, like what came to be called Xerox lore a few years later. So it's not just traditional folklore, but really cutting edge stuff that Langston Hughes was doing back at the time that he published his folklore work. So getting back to Dupree, you found some new evidence relating to that song, didn't you?

Sophie Abramowitz (30:52):
For me, this was the most exciting thing that I was able to find at the American Folklife center because while Lomax had promised to incorporate, Hughes’s collected variants of Dupree Blues into American Ballads and Folk Songs, it doesn't appear in the first volume. It does show up in volume two, Our Singing Country, which is from 1941. And in that volume, Dupree Blues is attributed to “Langston Hughes, who heard it and Cleveland in 1936.” So this is a victory for Hughes, I think. But I couldn't find the original transcription. Where I ended up finding Hughes's collected folk songs was in one of Lomax’s self labeled miscellaneous folders and the American Folklife Center’s Alan Lomax collection. It was titled “American Negro blues collected by Langston Hughes” with “I” and “II” written in Roman numerals across the headers of the first two pages.

Sophie Abramowitz (31:54):
The transcription seems to be either a performer synthesizing a number of blues refrains or of Hughes patching them together into his own song. The second is a collection of song fragments labeled by location. The third is titled “Bits of Negro folk songs collected by Langston Hughes.” On these folkloric transcriptions, Hughes uses the same formatting decisions I've seen him use unique to his own drafts of songs and his miscellaneous papers at the Beinecke. so I just want to emphasize how incredible that is. He uses these kinds of hashtags to bisect the page, and I've only seen him do this in the folklore transcriptions and in his song drafts. So these transcriptions and brainstorms appear in these two places and their similarities, I think, speak directly to the generative creative exchange that he's produced between his songwriting and his song collecting. This is direct formal evidence of their relationship. So while the original transcription of Dupree Blues
is still missing, this collection we see at the American Folklife Center is probably only a fraction of the work that he's collected, but didn't catalog throughout his entire life. And honestly, who knows what else people will find if they keep looking?

John Fenn (33:17):
Yeah, it's just such rich stuff and you've, you've tipped us off to some really cool things. We'll have to keep an eye out for that full transcription if it ever turns up amongst the Lomax papers that are being transcribed through “by the people” and in other platforms at the library. So here's the big question, Sophie: given everything you've taught us today and talked about, why do you think it's important that we acknowledge Langston Hughes’s connection to folklore today?

Sophie Abramowitz (33:45):
That acknowledgment pays respect to the work to which he was committed for the majority of his lifetime. Still, it doesn’t tell his entire story. Hughes’s commitment is to what Zora Hurston had proclaimed in her letter to him early in their correspondence. She wrote: “Negro folklore is still in the making. A new kind is crowding out the old.” This is where Hughes’s commitments lay: in the visionary futurity of black folkloric creativity.

John Fenn (34:21):
Wow. Well, Sophie, thank you so much for being a guest on the podcast today.

Stephen Winick (34:25):
Yeah. It's been really great catching up with you, Sophie. Thanks for coming.

Sophie Abramowitz (34:29):
Yeah, it's been fun. Thank you. Bye!

Stephen Winick (34:32):
Of course, Langston Hughes only sent Alan Lomax the WORDS to Dupree, so they had to print it with someone else's tune. Luckily John Lomax recorded the song several times at the penitentiary at Raiford, Florida, and they used one of those tunes for the book. We're going to have one of those singers sing us out of this episode.

John Fenn (34:51):
But first let's say, thanks once again to Sophie Abramowitz and Langston Collin Wilkins, as well as all the colleagues there at the library of Congress who helped us deploy this podcast.

Stephen Winick (35:00):
So again, we're paying tribute to Langston Hughes and his work as a song collector, a songwriter, and an experimental folklorist: another hidden folklorist here on the folklife today podcast. And to sing us out, here's a song we know Hughes loved and collected himself more than once. It's Dupree blues as sung by Buena Flint.

Buena Flint (35:32):
[sings “Dupree Blues”].

Announcer (38:05):
This has been a presentation of the library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov