Remapping Black Internationalism during the 1930s

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

Concerned with the spaces, places, and scales of Black internationalism during the Depression years, this thesis reframes our understanding of Black politics by exploring the internationalisms of African American intellectuals with roots on the US West Coast. Focusing both on global travel and local political activism, the thesis remaps Black globality in two ways. First, it focuses on non-Atlantic geographies of Black internationalism. In the Soviet Union, across Asia and the North Pacific, Black travellers rearticulated their relationship with US capitalism and modernity, reimagined their position in global cultures and structures of empire, and negotiated international networks of state surveillance. Second, the thesis roots these stories of internationalism in the US West Coast's multiracial communities, where conceptions of global community developed in conversation with Communist radicalism and progressive nationalism. Black engagement with the militant, multiracial California Communist movement of the early 1930s manifested the expansive sense of solidarity of such Afro-cosmopolitan figures as Langston Hughes and journalist and lawyer Loren Miller. The collapsed distinction between interracial and international politics continued to be evident, as Leftists and Black activists shifted their rhetorical and strategic emphasis to a civic-nationalist Americanism during the Popular Front period and beyond.

In tracing this history, the dissertation foregrounds less canonical contributors to the Black internationalist tradition, including domestic worker-turned-travel writer Juanita Harrison and Popular Front novelist William Attaway. The thesis helps to reconceptualise the relationship between the domestic and the global in American history, understanding multiracial organising and New Deal nationalism as entangled with the politics of transnational solidarity. It foregrounds the interwoven dynamics of Black transnationality and American nationality, tracing an errant geography of internationalism that is as intensely localised as it is globetrotting.

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Introduction

The glass case was filled with curiosities. Tea leaves from Burma, a photograph of a woman in a black Turkish veil, ungrammatical letters despatched from locations around the world, all accompanied by large, handwritten labels. The young man's eyes scanned the items while he held a camera tightly in one hand. The first caption introduced the exhibition: 'THIS IS THE TRAVEL DIARY OF AN AMERICAN NEGRO WOMAN WHO WORKED HER WAY AROUND THE WORLD IN TEN YEARS.'[1] No copies of the book being promoted by the exhibition were left in the library. As he stood in the reading room several people – a young Black family, a light-skinned older woman, an elderly Japanese man – paused to peer into the cabinet. The young man lifted the small Leica to his face, framed the picture through the sight and snapped. He looked in the direction of the librarian at reception, gave her a smile, and walked back out onto Central Avenue, sauntering along the sidewalk and enjoying the familiar California sun. As he walked, his thoughts stayed with the woman whose souvenirs and correspondences were being exhibited at Vernon Branch Library. She was now living in a tent in Honolulu and, despite her inclination to anonymity, he knew that she would enjoy seeing the photograph of the exhibition as it displayed the life that she had made for herself. The folks around South-Central Los Angeles were hopeful that Roosevelt would stick around in the White House and that he could make the New Deal work for them, but in the meantime they needed all the positive stories of Black life they could find. Perhaps he would include a note to this effect when he sent her the photograph. Recalling the peculiar address that he would have to write on the envelope, he smiled: Miss Juanita Harrison, Villa Petit Peep, Waikiki Beach, Hawai'i.[2]

It was 1936. The exhibition was removed as the year sank into its autumn. Miriam Matthews, librarian at Vernon Branch of the LA Public Library, was delighted at the enthusiastic reception of

[1] Material related to Vernon Library exhibit on Juanita Harrison's book, 1936, UCLA, Charles E. Young Research Library, Alice M. Foster papers (AFP), box 1, folder 3.
[2] Miriam Matthews to Alice M. Foster, 6 October 1936, AFP 1:2.

Juanita Harrison's *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World*. A record of a working-class Black woman's extraordinary travel stretching from London to Taiwan, Matthews was pleasantly surprised that months after its release there was still a waiting list to read Harrison's account of global travel. The book's circulation had been aided by the exhibition, which had been on display all summer ('a long time record for our library exhibits', she noted), and Matthews expressed her gratitude to the author's friend, Alice Foster, for offering the materials.[3]

Matthews had been hired by the LA Public Library in 1927, the first Black librarian there.[4] She had moved to the Vernon Branch in 1934 and the following year joined the Community Coordinating Council, a 'common ground' for 'people of all races' to 'express their concerns and use administrative authority to meet and achieve action.'[5] Her subsequent career at LA Public Library saw her collaborate with major men of letters (Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps) in setting up theatre groups for teens; she engaged in professional activism against the illiberal attitudes of anti-Communists in defence of intellectual freedom and even pioneered dedicated celebrations of Black history with a Negro History Week.[6] Harrison's book, and the artefacts of her peripatetic life, provided an opportunity for Matthews to advance her professional agenda as a librarian: to foster literary culture, local community cohesion, and an understanding of Black history.

Juanita Harrison's globetrotting worldliness and Miriam Matthews's work to connect such globetrotting with a multiracial American locale encapsulates the dynamic which this thesis seeks to describe. Global travel engaged African Americans with cultural difference and political possibility in new ways, even as it was also mirrored in the US – and particularly in contexts such as the West Coast,

[3] Miriam Matthews to Alice M. Foster, 6 October 1936, AFP 1:2.
[4] Stephanie Shaw, *What A Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 232-3.
[5] Robin D.G. Kelley, Interview with Miriam Matthews, UCLA Library, Center for Oral History, Tape 3, Side One, 26 October 1985 <http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/viewTextFile.do?itemId=1927971&fileSeq=5&xsl=null> [accessed 17/08/2018].
[6] Kelley, Interview with Miriam Matthews, Tape 3, Side One, 26 October 1985 and Tape 6, Side One, 11 November, 1985; Myrna Oliver, 'Miriam Matthews, 97; Pioneering L.A. Librarian Was an Expert in Black History', *LA Times*, 6 July 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/jul/06/local/me-matthews6> [accessed 17/08/2018].

shaped by multiple overlapping migrations – by multiracial cultural-political formations. Black internationalism was genuinely global but its sense of expansive solidarity and cultural cosmopolitanism was also intricately woven into the fabric of US multiracialism as it developed through the institutions of the Left and the New Deal during the Depression years. These dynamics, with their inherent tensions and contradictions evolved in and through the West Coast during the 1930s. There, African Americans might interact with the region's bloody history, its peculiar process of racial formation, and its significance in generating American national identity. They might equally encounter writers, artists, and organisers from across the Asian diaspora, the US-Mexico border, and Indigenous reservations. The West Coast was replete with symbolism of American civilisational achievement, but it was also rich with transnational connections that might produce powerful challenges to the American state. The American West Coast was a site of national rootedness, where visions of America frequently took on multiracial valences, and a part of migratory circuits spanning continental America and Asia as well as the Atlantic world. African Americans were co-creators of this world, being rooted in the region by small-but-growing Black communities and travelling through it as they participated in domestic and global migratory circuits.

The West Coast offers a vantage point from which the dimensions of Black internationalism can be re-envisioned and a starting point from where a new narrative of international Black political culture is set in motion. Routed through and grounded in the American West Coast, the substantive arguments in the thesis nevertheless are not strictly regional, nor is the narrative bounded by American borders. Following the trajectory of internationalist African Americans from the West Coast necessitates tracing errant routes through the US and the world and helps to produce a non-Atlanticist geography of Black mobility. The Atlantic world of incipient capitalism made the Black diaspora, and the diaspora has been continually reproduced and revolutionised through those transatlantic connections. But the routes of Black diaspora have not been limited to a series of Atlantic locations. Black subjects were part of global 'overlapping migrations'; subjects of a modern world that far

outgrew the Atlantic crucible in which the diaspora originated.[7] By taking up 'the globality of the [African] diaspora-in-the-making', this study helps to weave histories of African America into 'a world history from below'.[8] Its 'map' of African diasporic consciousness is one which 'overlap[s] and co-exist[s]' with others covering the American West and the non-Western world.[9]

In the interwar period, the key locations for Black diasporic culture have typically been understood as urban centres, particularly port cities, in the Atlantic world. On the American side, one might list New York (especially Harlem), New Orleans, Port-au-Prince, Havana; in Europe, London, Paris, Marseilles, Hamburg; in Africa, Dakar, Accra, and Lagos.[10] Among these, Adom Getachew has identified Paris as the 'center of Black internationalism' until the Second World War, during which time London emerged as the new 'capital' of the Black Atlantic.[11] Black internationalism, then, has been a product of the extraordinary mobility of the modern era – a mobility which commonly serves to centre stories of educated and economically privileged men. In this thesis, however, a remapped Black International skirts routes quite distant from the nodes of Atlantic life and sets mobile middle-class men in the context of protest movements by worker-migrants and politically engaged (and sometimes also peripatetic) women.[12] Here, a different series of metropolises become central: Los Angeles and San Francisco, Moscow and Tokyo, Hong Kong and Honolulu. Like the Atlantic nodes of

[7] Earl Lewis, 'To Turn as on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas', *The American Historical Review*, 100:3 (1995) 765-787.
[8] Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D.G. Kelley, 'Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World', *African Studies Review*, 43:1 (2000) 11-45 (p. 26).
[9] Lisa Brock, 'Questioning the Diaspora: Hegemony, Black Intellectuals and Doing International History from Below', *Issue*, 24:2 (1996) 9-12 (p. 10).
[10] An expansive version of this geography can be found, for instance, in Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), p. 23.
[11] Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 5. On Paris and London as capitals for anti-colonial radicalism, see Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).
[12] I am not, incidentally, the first to consider discourses of Black internationalism as mapping exercises. See David Featherstone, 'Black Internationalism, Subaltern Cosmopolitanism, and the Spatial Politics of Antifascism', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 103:6 (2013), 1406-1420 and Maria Christina Ramos, *Mapping the World Differently: African American Travel Writing About Spain* (Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2015).

Black internationalism, these were 'urban metropoles' at the centre of imperial (or otherwise transnational) formations. They helped to expand 'the realm of the possible for people around the world' even as they 'were also manifestations of colonial power.'[13] It was not only port cities which were deeply embedded in the transpacific world, however. Alongside these, rural territories – from the Central Asian steppe to the fields of California – hosted travelling African Americans. There, too, Black subjects confronted cultural difference, contended with imperial power, and generated political imaginaries.

To conjure Atlantic maps of Black globality is to summon Paul Gilroy's conception of African diaspora as a 'counterculture of modernity'.[14] Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* has become a text of unique significance in scholarship invested in transnational histories and sociologies of Black life and of modernity in general. This thesis is not intended as a challenge to the foundational significance of Gilroy's work though I have refrained from foregrounding the Atlantic diaspora as a way of conceiving Black internationalism. Gilroy's emphasis on transatlantic circuits is geographically confining and is often conceptually inadequate for this dissertation, which considers the diversity of imagined communities posed by African Americans during the 1930s.[15] In the chapters that follow, we will encounter Black affiliations with American nationalisms, proletarian internationalism, and an idiosyncratic feminist cosmopolitanism. Of course, these do not render Gilroy's Atlantic diaspora inessential for a general conception of Black globality but they cannot be fully covered by the Black Atlantic umbrella.

In responding to diaspora frameworks, this study has much in common with the work of Eve Dunbar, who has already begun to consider the interpenetration of the national, regional, and international in Black literature. Dunbar has identified the 'constant coupling of national and

[13] Dorothy B. Fujita-Rony, *American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle and the Transpacific West, 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 27.
[14] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).
[15] Neil Lazarus, 'Is Counterculture of Modernity a Theory of Modernity?', *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 4:3 (1995) 323-339.

international settings and concerns' in the work of several African American writers as 'a method for disallowing the privileging of either the national or the international'. Dunbar uses 'the region' to 'think through the work done by black writers […] as they stayed tied to America and worked abroad'. She differentiates the 'antinationalist paradigm' of Black internationalism from the diasporic discourses identified by Gilroy, which might occlude modes of belonging including 'nationalism, cosmopolitanism, [and] Third World solidarity'.[16]

This study shares Dunbar's interest in region but proceeds from a literal geographical zone: the American West Coast. Through an understanding of this region as constitutive of nation but also as profoundly transnational, I examine Black ideological engagements between the local, the national, and the global. In both its urban and rural areas, the American West Coast was a transpacific contact zone where different diasporas were imbricated in a set of migratory circuits spanning Mexico, the United States, Japan, China, and beyond. If Linebaugh and Rediker established the Atlantic world as 'motley', the Pacific was scarcely less so.[17] The people who constituted it as such were 'both objects and agents of modernity' – and they were frequently 'conceived as racial threats to US national progress'.[18] The cross-cultural currents of which they were part were capable, too, of producing major political disruptions, seen in the 1903 Oxnard Beet Workers Strike and the 1933 El Monte Berry Strike.[19] As a social world – a product of and threat to Western modernity, a fundamentally cosmopolitan space, a crucible of racial capitalism – the transpacific contact zone shared a great deal with the Black Atlantic. In the West Coast, the 'naked imperial ambitions' of the American state were

[16] Eve E. Dunbar, *Black Regions of the Imagination: African American Writers between the Nation and the World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), pp. 7-9.
[17] Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Slaves, Sailors, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 164.
[18] Lauren Chase Smith, 'Diversions of Progress: Popular Culture and Visions of Modernity in the Transpacific Borderlands' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California San Diego, 2012), p. xv.
[19] On class struggle in the transpacific borderland, see Tomás Almaguer, 'Racial Domination and Class Conflict in Capitalist Agriculture: The Oxnard Beet Worker's Strike of 1903', *Labor History*, 25:3 (1984), 325-350 and Yo Tokunaga, 'Japanese Farmers, Mexican Workers, and the Making of Transpacific Borderlands', *Pacific Historical Review*, 89:2 (2020), 165-197.

exposed even as the United States could be 'displace[d] […] from the center of critical analysis.'[20] Conceiving the multiracial population of the American West Coast as participants in such a motley transoceanic and border-crossing world helps to recast the relationship between interracialism in America and transnational solidarities beyond it. In turn, situating African Americans within it helps to point to different routes of Black globality.

The production of a more expansive and global history of Black internationalism is only part of the aim of the thesis, however. By tracing Black travel and politico-cultural engagement beyond the Atlantic and centring the American West Coast, the thesis throws into relief the particularity of *African American* (rather than Black) internationalism. This focus on African Americans should not be read as an attempt to reduce African-Caribbean, African-European, African-Latin American, or African interventions to a marginal position, nor should it be taken as an attempt to dwell on intra-Black ethnic divisions. Taking up the understanding of diaspora as 'a discursive tradition' defined by difference, the African American emphasis here is intended to interrogate the challenging coarticulation of nationalist and internationalist ideologies, and of racial and ethnic identities, in the context of the Jim Crow-era United States.[21] It helps to consider 'the particularity of the African American experience', even as African American subjects endeavoured 'to escape the parochialism' of segregationist America.[22]

Scholarship on Black Caribbean internationalists has frequently foregrounded the Caribbean origins of the anti-racist and anti-colonial politics of Claude McKay, Claudia Jones, or CLR James.[23] The

[20] Camilla Fojas and Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr., 'Introduction', in *Transnational Crossroads: Remapping the Americas and the Pacific*, ed. by Camilla Fojas and Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), pp. 3, 5.
[21] Brent Hayes Edwards, '"Unfinished Migrations": Commentary and Response', *African Studies Review*, 43:1 (2000), 47-50 (p. 49).
[22] Eve Dunbar, *Black Regions of the Imagination: African American Writers between the Nation and the World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), p. 7.
[23] Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1999); Lara Putnam, 'Nothing Matters but Color: Transnational Circuits, the Interwar Caribbean, and the Black International', in *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International since the Age of Revolution*, ed. by Michael O. West, William G. Martin, and Fanon Che Wilkins (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 107-129; Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Carol Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); *Marxism, Colonialism, and Cricket: C.L.R. James's Beyond a Boundary*, ed. by David Featherstone

same level of interrogation has less frequently been given to the operation of Americanness. Jamaican Claude McKay's visit to England, for instance, has routinely been discussed as a revelatory encounter with the colonial mother country; much less interest has been evinced for mirrored visits of African American intellectuals, such as Langston Hughes and WEB Du Bois, to US colonial possessions like Hawai'i.[24] Here, the emphasis on the stakes of Black citizenship within the US will serve to highlight how empire was operative both as an object of opposition for African Americans and as conditions integral to their Americanness.

This raises questions about how Americanness is conceived here. In the first instance, my understanding of American nationalism as an ideological phenomenon is shaped by Gary Gerstle's description of a community that can be both exclusionary and universal. Distinguishing between civic and racial versions of US nationalism, Gerstle describes a contest between Americanness as understood in terms of a 'democratic universalism' and an 'ethnoracial' definition of 'a people held together by common blood and skin color and by an inherent fitness for self-government.'[25] Of course, these two nationalist ideals were not always incompatible: there has always been 'an exclusionary tendency within the civic nationalist tradition', commonly bound up with anticommunism, an important qualification for this thesis given Black participation in the Communist movement and attempts to merge radical protest with civic nationalist ideas.[26]

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and others (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Jerome Teelucksingh, *Ideology, Politics, and Radicalism of the Afro-Caribbean* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[24] These brief visits nevertheless demonstrated African Americans' ambiguous positionality in this colonial dynamic. A partial exception might be made for Zora Neale Hurston, whose visit to Haiti to conduct ethnographic work has provoked some nuanced considerations of her American nationality. See for example, Eve Dunbar, 'Woman on the Verge of a Cultural Breakdown: Zora Neale Hurston in Haiti and the Racial Privilege of Boasian Relativism', in *Indigenous Visions: Rediscovering the World of Franz Boas*, ed. by Ned Blackhawk and Isaiah Lorado Wilner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 231-57. On Claude McKay in England, see Winston James, 'In the Nest of Extreme Radicalism: Radical Networks and the Bolshevization of Claude McKay in London', *Comparative American Studies*, 15:3-4 (2017), 174-203; Anne Donlon, '"A Black Man Replies": Claude McKay's Challenge to the British Left', *Lateral* 5:1 (2016); Wayne Cooper and Robert C. Reinders, 'A Black Briton Comes "Home": Claude McKay in England, 1920', *Race* 9:1 (1967), 67-83.

[25] Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) p. 4

[26] Gerstle, p. 7

Gerstle's description of American nationalism does not, however, adequately account for its essentially settler-colonial character and its imperial history. To understand these, we must turn to more radical historians. Nikhil Pal Singh submits that the historic high-point of civic nationalist commitment, in the period of the Second World War, was characterised not only by a racialised anticommunism but by a failure to amend 'the cultural and political legacies of unreconstructed racial hierarchies' – indeed, he suggests they were deepened.[27] These hierarchies were, of course, multiple, and beyond the subordination of Black Americans also included the alienation of Asians from US citizenship and the colonisation or removal of Indigenous people and Mexicans. Civic nationalism, while inclusive, therefore, was certainly not always emancipatory.

On this point, Manu Karuka intervenes. Even conceiving of the US 'in national terms', Karuka argues, 'is to naturalize colonialism. There is no "national" territory of the United States. There are only colonized territories.' In law and economy, too, Karuka insists that the US has always, and continues to be, an imperial formation. The American state 'maintains control over its "domestic" territories at the nexus of war and finance.'[28] Karuka recalls for us the status of the US as a colonial power at its inception and at each moment of its renewal (including, I might add, periods such as the Second World War when racial inclusivity was inscribed a national principle).[29] He also draws us toward a final pair of contributions. Amy Kaplan has posited that 'the dynamics of imperial expansion' have helped to 'unsettle the ever-shifting boundaries between the domestic and the foreign' in American history, and similarly Daniel Immerwahr has instructed historians of the US to 'look beyond the logo map' of mainland America to an expansive view of the nation.[30] Both Kaplan and Immerwahr draw attention to the shifting of sovereignties and the variety of places under US jurisdiction.

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[27] Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 113.
[28] Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), p. xii.
[29] Karuka, p. 197.
[30] Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (London: The Bodley Head, 2019), pp. 9-10. A scathing commentary on Immerwahr's work, highlighting its problematic aspects

Taken together, Singh, Karuka, Kaplan, and Immerwahr provide an opportunity to cast our understanding of the United States as domestically colonial as well as transnationally imperial. As such while I refer to an American nation, I do so with an understanding of its always-colonial character, not to normalise this coloniality but simply to acknowledge this US settler-colonial state's achievement of a meaningful national identity. African Americans were frequently reluctant to disaffiliate wholesale from this American nation, understanding their fate as being dependent on making determined claims to citizenship of it. When they incorporated claims about American exceptionalism into their writing, they were often more interested in achieving their own infusion into the US nation than they were in affirming exceptionalist claims.[31] However, the consequences of Black claims to Americanness for their anti-colonial and anti-racist politics was at times problematic, and difficult political trade-offs emerge as a consistent theme of this thesis. To map African American internationalism through the American West and the Pacific world is therefore to foreground the ambivalences of their Americanness, to review their sometimes-difficult relationship with anti-colonialism, and to expose new networks and moments in their radical activism.

The specific relations between internationalisms and nationalisms during the 1930s deserves clarification. Some historians have sought to recover the 1930s as 'the international decade', but even so it is commonly associated – in American studies, at least – with the related growth of regionalist and nationalist ideologies that helped consolidate the New Deal order that persisted through subsequent decades.[32] Reformulation, contestation, and decisive assertion of American nationalism certainly marked these years. This process also had a bearing on the Black freedom struggle: it was through the New Deal reform agenda that the struggle for Black civil rights re-entered national

though somewhat overstating its shortcomings, can be found in Paul A. Kramer, 'How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire', *Diplomatic History*, 42:5 (2018), 911-931.

[31] Singh, p. 126.

[32] Marc Matera and Susan Kingsley Kent, *The Global 1930s: The International Decade* (New York: Routledge, 2017); David Eldridge, *American Culture in the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 171; Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

politics.[33] It was only with the Second World War, Penny Von Eschen contends, that a seminal moment of internationalism was reached, marked in the 1940s by the victories of anti-colonial struggles in India and China and by the creation of a new international order shaped around US-Soviet dominance.[34]

Numerous studies nevertheless emphasise the prevalence of internationalist visions in the Depression years, particularly in the Communist and Black Nationalist movements.[35] These two trends merged and competed in the most famous and influential moment of Black internationalist engagement during the 1930s, the movement against the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia, which helped give shape to the anti-colonial movement of later years. This movement helped to forge an antifascist national front while also inflaming Pan-African and anti-colonial sentiments.[36] Traditionally viewed as a moment of breakdown in the international order, recent studies have emphasised the continuities in the racialised global order exposed by the war, and the robustness of liberal internationalism.[37] By routing Black internationalism away from Africa, however, this thesis traces a

[33] Singh, p. 103.
[34] Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
[35] Works covering African American internationalist engagements in the 1930s are referenced extensively throughout the thesis, but among the significant contributions which are not discussed in some detail later are Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and US Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature Between the Wars: A New Pandora's Box* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003); William Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communist between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Keisha Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Margaret Stevens, *Red International and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919-1939* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism*, ed. by Keisha N. Blain and Tiffany Gill (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
[36] Getachew, p. 22.
[37] Getachew, pp. 19-22; David Petruccelli, 'The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: The Legacies of the League of Nations Reconsidered', *Journal of World History*, 31:1 (2020), 111-136; Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

different trajectory. Here, African American's internationalist political commitments were folded into – and partially preserved in – their turn to New Deal nationalism.

African American claims on citizenship carried with them visions and critiques of the United States, as a land whose universalist promise was also being denied to other racialised, migratory subjects. If New Deal reforms encouraged African Americans to pitch their demands for freedom into discourses of American civic nationalism, Black activists did so while smuggling expansive, transnational solidarities into their patriotic protests. At the same time, Black interventions into discourses of American nationalism also frequently came with compromises to their internationalist anti-racism and exposed the incompleteness of their anti-racist project. Even in those respects that the 1930s really was a period of nationalist assertion, therefore, it was also, simultaneously, a period of cosmopolitan commitment and expansion in the dimensions of multiracial solidarity. Understanding this period in these ways, far from reifying the 1930s as an exceptional decade, clarifies the relation between the political articulations of the Depression years and those that came after. This relationship was characterised by both the sublimation of liberatory impulses and the survival of other political-cultural affinities. Though the historical dialectic presented therefore mostly plays out in a single decade, its dynamics are understood not to be bound by an ultimately arbitrary and abstract ordering of historical time.

Thus far, I have discussed Black globality primarily in terms of 'internationalism' and conceived of the West Coast as 'transnational' without adequately defining either Black internationalism or transnationality, or the conceptual space between them and their relation to concepts like 'diaspora' and 'cosmopolitan'. To clarify: I understand Black internationalism to be a set of practices by which people racialised as Black have globalised their subjectivities and struggles. It is, as such, practical and conscious at the same time, a kind of *praxis*, though not necessarily a revolutionary one; it is inextricably conditioned by race-making and is genuinely worldwide in its dimensions. It is not bounded by ideology, class, or gender, though it is always conditioned and formed by them. Above all,

Black internationalism is an imperfect lexical approximation to a sprawling set of realities. Its paradigmatic form has been Pan-Africanism, which imagines a community among all people of African descent, and 'is concerned with the[ir] social, economic, cultural and political emancipation'.[38] But Black internationalism is far more diverse than this, and its variants have come to be known by a dazzling variety of names. In the course of the research for this dissertation, I have encountered Black, coloured, subaltern, and Afro- cosmopolitanism, Afro-planetary visions, Black feminist internationalism, race woman internationalism, and Black empire.[39] Each clearly relate to the commonly-used catch-all Black internationalism, but their precise relation to it is not always explicitly discussed by the writers coining these terms, and how they relate to and differ from one another can be even less clear. In turn, variations on the Black internationalist theme represent responses of different kinds to the diaspora conception of Paul Gilroy and to the advent of transnationalism as a prominent adjective for being beyond the nation-state.

In what can feel like a word soup of Black globality, the ease of relying on the common favourite 'Black internationalism' is attractive and I have accepted it as an apt summative term. However, a summative term is scarcely adequate alone for a study of this type. At numerous moments in this thesis, other descriptors are deployed with the intention of providing the maximum precision in analysis. When I discuss cosmopolitanism, for instance, I am pointing at an ethical disposition, a

[38] Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 2. Adi opposes Pan-Africanism to Black internationalism, which he dismisses as 'fashionable mainly in some academic circles in the United States' but never 'widely used' by its historical subjects or by contemporary activists (pp. 4-5). Evidently, in this dissertation Black internationalism is understood as a useful term for a set of solidarities that were not necessarily centred on Africa, were not always commensurate with the unity of African peoples, and which grew beyond the African diaspora. While none of the subjects here would have identified as Black internationalists, they would equally not have identified with Pan-Africanism, nor would Pan-Africanism be an accurate descriptor for the expansive communities they constructed.

[39] Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Alan Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); David Chioni Moore, 'Local Color, Global "Color": Langston Hughes, the Black Atlantic, and Soviet Central Asia, 1932', *Research in African Literatures*, 27:4 (1996), 49-70; Cheryl Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945-1995* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Umoren; Stephens.

mode of cultural engagement, and a worldly condition which may not necessarily signify a break from national or racial rootedness.[40] Transnationalism, meanwhile, has been popularised by an academic vogue that responded to the advent of a hyper-globalised capitalism in the 1990s.[41] Even so, it describes conditions of existence that far predated the globalising push of the post-Cold War era, particularly those of migratory, diasporic, and border-dwelling peoples.[42]

Expanding the Black internationalist canon

By changing the geography of Black internationalism, this study also changes the personnel. The prominent agents in this story of global travel and cosmopolitan rootedness include Loren Miller and William Attaway, Susie Revels Cayton and Arna Bontemps, Sargent Johnson and Juanita Harrison. Each of these individuals made substantial literary and intellectual contributions to an archive of internationalism. Their profile in academic studies of the period nevertheless remains relatively low, and when they have been discussed, the internationalist dimensions of their work has not been adequately covered.[43] This dissertation mobilises each of their archives to consider the developing relationship between African Americans, the US, and the globe.

Routing Black internationalism through the West Coast has meant imposing a productive restriction on my source base. It has compelled me to expand my conception of intellectual work beyond that undertaken by traditional literary-political figures to include the travel writing of a semi-

[40] See Kris Majapra, 'Introduction', in *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*, ed. by Sugata Bose and Kris Majapra (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
[41] Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2009) p. 2. Perry Anderson has described transnationalism as a form of internationalism 'characteristic of capital in the last decades of the twentieth century'. See Perry Anderson, 'Internationalism: A Breviary', *New Left Review*, 14 (March-April 2002), p. 20.
[42] C.A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, '*AHR* Conversation: On Transnational History', *The American Historical Review*, 111:5 (2006), 1441-1464. Transnationalism and its relation to diaspora is helpfully discussed in Thomas Faist, 'Diaspora and transnationalism: What Kind of Dance Partners?', in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, ed. by Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 9-34.
[43] Three of these figures have been subjects of biographical studies; others have been discussed in various contexts; none have won prominence as internationalist practitioners. See Amina Hassan, *Loren Miller: Civil Rights Attorney and Journalist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015); Richard S. Hobbs, *The Cayton Legacy: An African American Family* (Seattle: Washington State University Press, 2002); Kirkland C. Jones, *Renaissance Man from Louisiana: A Biography of Arna Wendell Bontemps* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992).

literate domestic worker and the sculptures of a Harlem Renaissance artist based in the Bay Area. This dissertation engages with intellectual work in forms as diverse as novels and short stories, personal correspondences and newspaper articles, memoirs, essays, sculptures, musical compositions, a playscript, a film scenario, and, as we have seen, a library exhibition. Much of this work was, for a variety of reasons, unpublished in its time, but there is also a great deal of my archive which is published. Together, these documents expose each other's incompleteness and raise questions about the circumstances that produced such differences between private and public expression.

The archival materials I use are derived in the main from the personal papers of my subjects and those of their close associates, but these personal collections are supplemented by periodicals and secondary literature. Perhaps the greatest challenge in curating this archive of West Coast internationalists has been in managing the imbalances in the size of different collections: imbalances which have usually mapped onto differences in social power and public prominence. These imbalances are intensely gendered and also class-based. Collating my primary materials and writing the dissertation, I have nevertheless sought to create a narrative which balances between collections, enabling historical actors with different kinds of social power and different levels of prominence in historical memory to speak – as far as possible – with equal force and regularity.

The intellectual history of Black internationalism has, for the most part, so far been a conversation between a relatively small set of interlocutors. Anglophone African-Caribbean men such as Claude McKay, CLR James, George Padmore, and Marcus Garvey have loomed very large in the literature, with Black Caribbean women such as Claudia Jones and Amy Jacques Garvey attracting greater attention over the past two decades.[44] Among the African Americans who have typically dominated

[44] Stephens; *Marxism, Colonialism, and Cricket*, ed. by Featherstone and others; Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*; Marika Sherwood, *Claudia Jones: A Life in Exile* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1999); Ula Y. Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press); Teresa Zackodnik, 'Recirculation and Feminist Black Internationalism in Jessie Fauset's "The Looking Glass" and Amy Jacques Garvey's "Our Women and What They Think"', *Modernism/Modernity*, 19:3 (2012), 437-459; Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

histories of interwar internationalism, WEB Du Bois is a singularly dominant figure, with Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, George Schuyler, and William Patterson also drawing focus in major studies.[45] Again, it is only recently that women including Eslanda Goode Robeson, Thyra Edwards, and Louise Thompson Patterson have been subject to extensive discussions as political actors in their own right.[46] Approaching the subject with a focus on the West Coast, I have relied on a different set of archives and have made otherwise obscure individuals into central protagonists. The discourse and practice of internationalism, I contend, included many individuals who were not central to Atlantic literary and political networks; their lives coursed through other circuits and they lived in locations with closer links to Mexico or Japan than to Paris or Port-au-Prince. These figures were not necessarily obscure in their time, but they have been made peripheral in much of the historical literature.

WEB Du Bois, the seminal internationalist of Black America, is himself rendered here as a peripheral presence. In part, this is justified by Du Bois's firm roots in the East of the country. For a thesis concerned with the relation between global Black politics and the American West Coast, tending to focus on activist-intellectual networks in California and Washington, Du Bois's significance was as a relatively remote point of reference, not as a discussant himself. More regrettably, I have refrained from considering Du Bois's global travels during the 1930s, which encompassed several locations relevant to this study. This exclusion ought not to be read as a denigration of their importance as

[45] Moore; Stephens; Gerald Horne, *Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary* (London: Pluto Press, 2016); Gerald Horne, *Black Revolutionary: William Patterson and the Globalization of the African American Freedom Struggle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Nico Slate, *The Prism of Race: WEB Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and the Colored World of Cedric Dover* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Roderick Bush, *The End of White World Supremacy: Black Internationalism and the Problem of the Color Line* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Etsuko Taketani, 'Colored Empires in the 1930s: Black Internationalism, the US Black Press, and George Samuel Schuyler', *American Literature*, 82:1 (2010), 121-149.

[46] Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Gregg Andrews, *Thyra J. Edwards: Black Activist in the Global Freedom Struggle* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011); Keith Gilyard, *Louise Thompson Patterson: A Life of Struggle for Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

moments of African American engagement with global affairs, but as evidence of the richness of the archives of Black internationalism beyond Du Bois.

By collating several figures, who often shared networks but did not necessarily know one another personally, and combining them into a single narrative, it is possible to expose more of the diversity and breadth of African Americans' global engagement, to explore some of the disjunctures between internationalist practitioners, and also to make generalised conclusions with greater confidence and nuance. While the focus is therefore not on making biographical interventions, biography is a component part of my approach here. 'Biography', Barbara Foley has written, 'supplies the particulars enabling us to grasp the writer's relationship to the general'.[47] It is in this spirit that the narrative here sometimes indulges biographical detail: in a thesis concerned with place and space, the contributions made by each individual is understood in relation to the geographical particulars of their lives. Rather than simply aggregating biographies, however, each of the central characters here emerge from their shared routes through America and the world and are often connected by common intellectual networks and political imaginaries. For the most part, the thesis engages Black Americans with roots in the West Coast but whose travels and writings discussed political cultures nationally and internationally. Biographical narrative is used to illuminate salient aspects of their intellectual work and to examine historical linkages.

The thesis is not simply a story of commonality and linkage, however. Throughout, difference and divergence emerge as features of Black internationalist discourse. One thing that becomes clear is that, while the emergence of the Communist Left as a key force in internationalist Black politics was one of the most novel developments in 1930s Black life, it was not the case that the 1930s was a decade of uncomplicated Leftist dominance. There continued to be a great deal of divergence from Leftist frameworks in this decade, as well as slippages between Communist and other modes of

[47] Barbara Foley, *Jean Toomer: Race, Repression, and Revolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), p. 6.

internationalism. Just as studies have increasingly depicted a radical 1940s, so in this thesis the 1930s emerges as less straightforwardly Red.[48]

A collective but not wholly congenial picture therefore emerges from this survey of intellectual contributions to internationalist practice on the West Coast. It demonstrates the geographical and ideological breadth of Black diasporic culture, but also points to moments when diaspora does not adequately capture the scope or shape of African American political articulations, what might be called 'black universalist discourses.'[49] The communities imagined by the subjects whose global circuits are traced here take numerous forms, and slippages recur between African Americans' racial 'nation' and their civic nationhood, between their internationalist commitments and more parochial concerns, between multiracial convergences and transnational alliances, between revolutionary-proletarian and populist-reform conceptions of social change.

The interpenetration of these different, and sometimes conflicting, imagined communities exposes the different political and cultural currents of African American life in the 1930s. It also helps to reveal an historical arc which sees the Depression years as a period when African Americans made very decisive but also some more ambivalent internationalist interventions. The discourses of these years led the way for the more robust Third World and multiracial alliances of later decades, but they were also enveloped into, and helped to remould, American nationalism during a moment of deep crisis. If, as the title proposes, the thesis charts a map of Black internationalism, then I have adjusted the scale of this map to enable coverage of the variety of solidarity practices evident in China and Carmel, in Soviet Russia and San Francisco's Russian Hill.

[48] Von Eschen; John Munro, *The Anticolonial Front: The African American Freedom Struggle and Global Decolonisation 1945-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Nicholas Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together: African Americans and Apartheid, 1945-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation 1941-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[49] Edwards, '"Unfinished Migrations": A Commentary', p. 50

Langston Hughes

Expanding the existing canon of internationalist intellectuals is one contribution made in the thesis, but in order to cohere chapters that address common themes, moments, and places, this has been balanced with a singular focus on the canonical Black internationalist, Langston Hughes. At the centre of many of the networks of internationalism on the West Coast, Hughes provides a narrative, thematic, and archival girding for the thesis. He connects otherwise separate figures and helps to direct the discussion at key moments. At the same time, setting Hughes in a wider network of cultural producers who were grounded personally or intellectually in the West helps to open different interpretive possibilities on his archive and makes possible a consideration of the real variety and subtlety in African American negotiations of global and national politics. The importance of these West Coast geographies and networks for Hughes's internationalism open new paths through his archive that have not been pursued by other scholars.[50] I have sought to use Hughes's archive, then, not only to shed new light on Hughes's own experience or outlook but on the wider, international scope as well as the local anchors of Black cultural politics. I have taken a route *through* Hughes's archive to arrive at a *collective* history, attending wherever possible to his social milieu and to his professional collaborators. Like the other figures considered in this thesis, my discussion of Hughes requires some biographical sketching. I will provide this here to further develop a sense of his place in this project.[51]

Born and raised in the Midwest by his mother, grandmother, and family friends – his father moved to Mexico when he was young – Hughes was acquainted at an early age with Black traditions of

[50] Hughes's internationalist 1930s is discussed in most works covering the literary Left of this period. See Dawahare; Moore; Maxwell; Slate, *Prism of Race*; Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time*; James Edward Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Jennifer Wilson, 'Queer Harlem, Queer Tashkent: Langston Hughes's "Boy Dancers of Uzbekistan"', *Slavic Review*, 76:3 (2017), 637-646; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997); Jonathan Scott, *Socialist Joy in the Writing of Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006).
[51] The following sketch is taken entirely from Arnold Rampersad's authoritative biography: Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes Vol. 1, 1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

resistance: his ancestors included notable abolitionist fighters Lewis Leary and Charles Langston. At school in Cleveland, Ohio, he fostered his talent as a poet, and on visiting his father in Mexico at age 20, he penned 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers', a poem which announced him as a major emergent voice of the New Negro Renaissance. Moving to New York to study at Columbia University, Hughes gravitated strongly to the Harlem intellectual set and dropped out of Columbia after a year. Through the 1920s, he composed poems based in the speech rhythms and musical culture of African Americans and travelled to Africa and Europe. From 1927, he won the patronage of a wealthy white woman, Charlotte Osgood Mason, under whose influence he authored his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*. In 1930, he made a dramatic and traumatic break with Mason for several reasons, including her primitivist interest in him, her aversion to protest literature, and the fallout from Hughes's disastrous collaboration with Zora Neale Hurston.

After the break with Mason, Hughes travelled to Cuba and Haiti, and on returning to the US began to strengthen a long-evident sympathy with the literary Left in and around the Communist Party. On journeying across the country reading poems to Black audiences, he became increasingly vocal about the case of the Scottsboro youths. These were nine Black men and boys, accused by two white women of rape and sentenced by an all-white jury to death. Their legal appeal was the subject of a high-profile fight in 1931 between the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Communist Party's legal front, the International Legal Defense (ILD). The ILD won out and launched a militant campaign in defence of the accused. Hughes became one of many African Americans who were impressed by the Communists' handling of the case and were won to Communism (*de facto* if not *de jure*: Hughes was very closely associated with the Communists and openly advocated for revolutionary socialism along Marxist lines, but he probably never joined the Party).[52] In 1932, Hughes departed for the Soviet Union as part of a filmmaking expedition, and over the following year travelled

[52] Rampersad I, p. 215. Hughes's closeness to the Communists was evident in the number of Communist-led organisations he readily lent his name to as well as in numerous published writings, but there were always some political differences. For instance, he never expressed sympathy for the Black Belt thesis, in which the Communists claimed African Americans were a national minority with a rightful homeland in the US South.

extensively in Asia, before returning to the US in 1933 and living for a year on the West Coast. On his father's death, Hughes went to Mexico, where he spent another year, before moving back once again to America, where he remained until 1937. At the invitation of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Hughes departed to report for the Black press in Spain, where civil war was raging between Franco's fascists and Soviet-backed Republicans.

This stint in Spain brought an end to an extraordinarily peripatetic decade for Hughes, who still did not settle into a stable home until buying a house in Harlem in 1948.[53] The intervening years saw him develop his beloved character Simple and negotiate complex wartime and early Cold War politics. He began to distance himself from the Communist Party while retaining an undimmed admiration for the Soviet Union. In the Cold War years, Hughes continued to write poetry of protest addressing US racism, and he embraced his position as a leading figure of African American letters and of Black literature globally.[54] By the time of his death in 1967, he had not only corresponded with, championed, and influenced most of the prominent African American writers of the mid- and late-twentieth century, but had shaped the development of literature across continents and languages.

This biographical outline helps to suggest a reason beyond archival convenience for Hughes's centrality in this thesis: that is, aside from the individual and particular nature of Hughes's experience, his life journey is peculiarly well-suited to charting a much wider historical dialectic, spanning the late 1920s through the 1940s. Hughes's personal crisis amidst a split from his patron and mother-figure, Mason, coincided with the advent of a global economic depression. His turn to the Communist Left and a class-struggle perspective matched a wider political reorientation in America, the revolutionary tenor of which was later arrested by the success of the New Deal, which (abetted by the Left's turn to Popular Front politics) effectively dampened anti-capitalist resistance. With the start of the Second World War, Hughes participated as a writer in the antifascist war effort, though with one eye on the

[53] Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes Vol. 2, 1941-1967: I Dream A World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 146.
[54] See Rampersad II.

opportunities for democratization at home, and in the 1940s he began to decisively distance himself from international Communism (if not from radical Left politics as a project of social transformation, which always overgrew organizational affiliations). These moments from his biography map onto wider processes of American history during the middle decades of the century. The collapse in the political and economic order began in October 1929, and in the early Depression years a deep social crisis and new political possibilities emerged. There followed a period of struggle and forced compromises through 1933-5; modest stabilization after 1935; the renewal of bourgeois hegemony in America on a different basis, first with the mid-decade success of New Deal reforms and later with the antifascist war effort of 1941-5; a huge trade union struggle for social-democratic reform in 1945-6; and the emergence of a new terrain for Black struggle with the anti-colonial revolutions and anti-racist movements of the Cold War era.[55]

The later period of Hughes's life, coinciding with the Cold War and the era of decolonization proper, lies outside the scope of this study, but one episode requires some more detailed discussion: Hughes's investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1953 and the impact of this experience on his authorship of a second volume of memoir, *I Wonder as I Wander*. Hughes had been the subject of anti-Red controversy since 1933, and from 1941 he attempted to publicly distance himself from his most provocative revolutionary material. His gradual withdrawal from the Left through the 1940s was in part a result of the impact these controversies had on his ability to earn money from speaking engagements, formerly Hughes's most reliable and lucrative source of income.[56]

Nevertheless, in March 1953 he was summoned at short notice to Washington, DC, to testify about his former association with Communism. Hughes approached the initial closed hearing in an evasive manner. As it became clear that an admission of past sympathy for Communism did not

[55] Denning, *The Cultural Front*; Von Eschen; Munro; Lipsitz.
[56] Rampersad I and II; David E. Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?: Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 112.

constitute self-incrimination and that the investigators were more interested in the issue of pro-Communist literature being purchased for the Overseas Libraries Program, Hughes took a more cooperative and conciliatory approach. In the televised testimony, Hughes politely offered repudiations of his pro-Communist stances, though he avoided naming former associates who were members of the Party.[57] At the close of the hearing, Senator McCarthy gave Hughes a wink, signaling the extent of Hughes's accommodation to Cold War politics (also evident in Hughes's controversial expunging of Paul Robeson and WEB Du Bois from his non-fiction books for children published during the early-to-mid-1950s).[58] McCarthy had won Hughes's cooperation in his campaign to withdraw the books of pro-Communist writers from overseas libraries, and Hughes had given answer to the charges of the anti-Communists who had dogged his career and hurt his livelihood for so long, without having to cross his own moral line of yielding names for McCarthy's blacklist.[59]

Hughes's repudiation of his Communist commitment has commonly been regarded as a humiliating retreat, condemned in more or less severe tones by his major biographers and by some correspondents at the time, but more recently the subtle dynamics operative in the interrogative process have produced a less harsh judgement on Hughes's conduct.[60] Perhaps the best test of whether his political daring was intact came soon after the hearing. With publicity swirling around him, a publisher to invited Hughes to produce a long-promised second volume of memoir, following 1940's *The Big Sea*. The sequel had been in gestation since 1941: a fact which has not been accorded its due significance in other accounts. Much as Ralph Ellison's tortured authorship of *Invisible Man* must be understood through his gradual evolution away from Marxism through the 1940s, so Hughes's difficulty in producing a narrative of his 1930s life was conditioned by his changing relationship with

[57] See Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?*, chapter 5.
[58] Rampersad II, p. 259.
[59] Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?*, p. 142.
[60] The recent revisionism has been led by David Chinitz, who responds to the judgements of Hughes's biographers, Faith Berry and Arnold Rampersad. See Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?*, p. 113. Quotes from Hughes's incensed readers can be found in Rampersad I, pp. 259-60.

Communism.[61] The HUAC investigation yielded a contractual opportunity for Hughes to write the memoir, but, just as importantly, it gave necessary closure to the controversy over his Leftist affiliations, making a political breach for Hughes to narrativize the 1930s as his Red decade.

The very substantial manuscript that Hughes eventually submitted came to be titled *I Wonder as I Wander* and was published in 1956. This book constitutes an indispensable archive of his life spanning 1930-7, providing a narrative of his travels in Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, Spain, France, Russia, Central Asia, Japan, China – and the US. Detailed but circumspect, the book does not wholly conceal his sympathies though it certainly minimizes Hughes's political activities. A peculiar achievement, *I Wonder as I Wander* is a memoir that avoids reflections on Hughes's personal life and a narrative that encompasses his radical politics while evading discussion of their depth and significance.[62]

For the historian seeking to access Hughes's 1930s, *I Wonder as I Wander* is an open path, though one riddled with potholes. It is a text that requires careful negotiation to ensure that the obfuscation imposed by Cold War-era imperatives is not reproduced and his Red politics are visible in full colour. At the same time, the text marks some of the real continuities carried forward from Hughes's Communist period. His social commentary at key moments in the memoir – such as during the visit to Haiti – substantially reproduces the impressions recorded in his reportage from the time. Most remarkably, in his record of the Soviet Union, post-HUAC Hughes made repeated favourable comparisons with the US and appeared unashamed of his past apologetics for Stalinism, neglecting to offer critical comments on famine, terror, and antisemitism in the USSR. In the extensive references from *I Wonder as I Wander*, scattered throughout this thesis but concentrated in the middle chapters, I therefore use the memoir both to evidence Hughes's radical politics and to interrogate his Cold War-era obfuscations.

[61] Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
[62] Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

Structure

Concern that Hughes might 'swallow' this study, given his substantially larger archive compared with the other subjects, have guided its structure. 'Remapping Black Internationalism during the 1930s' begins by considering racial geographies within America across the early to mid-twentieth century, but particularly in the interwar years. It describes how outposts of Black life were established at the westernmost edge of the American mainland, highlighting the political communities formed there through the lives of Charlotta Bass and Susie Revels Cayton. These are set in the context of political imaginaries that were transformed by the Great Migration and the rise of new political movements (Garveyism, and increasingly also Communism). The commonplace identification of racial authenticity with the US South will be interrogated, and the spectral threat of 'Southernising' the West will be visualised through the work of three Black male intellectuals: William Grant Still, Sargent Johnson, and Arna Bontemps. The chapter considers the ways that the ideologies of American nationalism and Black nationalism were articulated as expansive solidarities which sought to exceed inherently limited communities.

The second chapter takes us to the movies, but uses this outing to explore the shape of Black radicalism during the Depression years. It focuses on the 1932 film-making expedition undertaken by 22 African Americans who departed the US for the USSR to make a film on American racism titled 'Black and White'. The chapter charts the entwined life-paths of several New Negro internationalists, following them through the West Coast, where they were frustrated by the lack of opportunity in Hollywood and where many personal networks were developed, and into Russia. In European Russia, African American visitors were involved in circles of artistic avant-gardism and the social bonds formed in the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York were remade as shared commitments to socialism. In its final part, the chapter considers how the evaluations of Soviet modernity made by the sojourners were measured against Californian symbols of capitalist invention. The chapter examines Black

perspectives on technological and artistic avant-gardism, African Americans' discursive construction of an anti-racist socialist modernism, and the routes of both between California and Moscow.

For Langston Hughes, the international sojourn did not end in Western Russia. The third chapter foregrounds Hughes and another Black traveller, Juanita Harrison, in their travel through Asian and North African contexts. It regards these colonized and frontier spaces as providing opportunities to remodel Black identity and its relation to gender, class, and citizenship. Such travel could be generative of a Black radical politics which, as Cedric Robinson has observed, is founded in part on a civilizational critique of Western society and racial capitalism.[63] Certainly, it helped solidify political and cultural affinities with Asia. At the same time, however, the chapter exposes the ways that Hughes and Harrison reproduced civilisational discourses in their Orientalist narratives. At 'the dark frontiers of progress', African Americans fused civilisational critique and cross-cultural literacy with modernist sensibilities.

In the next chapter, the story of global Black travel is moved to yet another region: East Asia and the American Pacific. Centring Hughes and Harrison again, Black travellers' confrontations with a hostile authoritarian state, Japan, and their differing responses to persecution are highlighted in terms of surveillance and the contested history of Black radicalism. The Black Pacific will be recovered, via Harrison's defiantly joyful practice and writing of travel, as a feminist geography.[64] As the discussion moves back toward American soil with Hughes's and Harrison's respective arrivals in Hawai'i, the picture of Black protest in the Pacific will be complicated. The blindspots in their narratives of Hawai'i will expose some ambivalences in their attitude to the US's own status as a colonial power. The chapter limns a Black Pacific characterised by subterranean activism, shadowed and circuitous disclosures of truth, and elisions in anti-colonial discourses.

[63] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 71-2.
[64] Contra Etsuko Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative: Geographic Imaginings of Race and Empire between the World Wars* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014), p. 28

In the fifth chapter, our story returns to US soil proper. Though its subject becomes more intensely localised, the concern remains for identifying the dynamic currents of racial, national, and international ideologies. This chapter considers the participation of Hughes and journalist and lawyer Loren Miller in California's multiracial protest movement, with a focus on the strike wave of 1933-4. It examines the relationship between multiracialism, proletarian internationalism, and nationalisms in their work, particularly Miller's journalism and Hughes's collaborative play with Ella Winter. It seeks to situate these interventions at the crossroads of the revolutionary Black Atlantic and the radical transpacific contact zone. Foregrounding engagements between transnational Black intellectuals and immigrant-worker activists, the chapter also sustains an interest in racialised anti-Red violence.

The sixth and final chapter synthesises numerous of the common concerns of the previous narrative into an in-depth consideration of William Attaway, a novelist of the Black Popular Front. Another non-canonical figure whom I identify as a 'folk internationalist', Attaway's work has been overshadowed by the comparable oeuvres of John Steinbeck and Richard Wright. His participation in the construction of an authentic American folk in two novels, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* and *Blood on the Forge*, will be drawn toward a consideration of the global conception of 'folk' woven through his American stories. Attaway's later biography and the afterlives of his novels will then take us beyond the 1930s. During the Cold War, Attaway's novels were republished as pulp and reimagined as a film-script, their complexity flattened and their protests circulated in sensationalised packaging. His work will be used to consider the faded traces of an inter/nationalist political geography in twentieth-century African American history.

By mapping the Black International in simultaneously globalised and localised ways, this thesis asks questions about the place of Black people in various political communities and, by extension, about strategies for Black liberation. The subjects of the thesis acted on beliefs that positioned them within expansive communities shaped by race, nation, class, ideology, and gender. In articulating their place in the world, they determined that assertions of Black humanity required simultaneous and

connected claims of anti-colonial self-determination, workers' power, and women's agency. In their attempts to make such expansive communities and radical political claims, my subjects also betrayed some of the important differences within Blackness – notably, the importance of Americanness to their political imaginaries and social experience. In these respects, the thesis resonates with contemporary debates over the very possibility of Black liberation. Afro-pessimist thinkers, notably Frank Wilderson, have positioned anti-Blackness as inscrutable, incurable, and universal in the sense of being 'everywhere and always the same'.[65] Internationalism, in this perspective, is therefore merely a sentimental 'talisman' which hides a misanthropic reality: that revolutionary victories, such as those of anti-colonialists in locations like Palestine, would do nothing to diminish the world's anti-Blackness.[66] This thesis challenges such a conceptualisation of African American positionality, and proposes that internationalism has not merely been a talismanic lure but a persistent, contradictory, and multivalent logic in Black freedom struggles.

[65] Vinson Cunningham, 'The Argument of "Afropessimism"', *New Yorker*, 13 July 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism> [accessed 16/7/2020]
[66] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, 2020, p. 240

Chapter 1

Going West, Going South: Imagining and Making Communities on the Pacific Coast

The ways that African Americans imagined their place in global politics were conditioned by their changing locations in American society. The early-twentieth century imagining of a Black nation was shaped by the urbanisation, class differentiation, and regional redistribution of the African American population; at the same time, new opportunities opened to stake claims on American citizenship. One of the effects of the Great Migration and the First World War was a rapid undermining of Jim Crow's parochializing effort, rapidly expanding the horizons of Black life and deepening Black presences in the North and West. In this chapter, I propose to trace some of the ways that Black internationalist politics were formed from processes of intra-national migration and settlement in the multiracial communities of the American West Coast. The Black communities of New York and Chicago both produced cultural 'renaissances' that have helped to establish their primacy in histories of internationalist Black radicalism in America.[1] But on the West Coast, given the proximity of the land border with Mexico, the sizable immigrant communities, and the significance of the region for imagining America's propertied democracy, US nationalist claims were perhaps more acutely felt than anywhere else and there was a profusion of transnational possibilities. As such, the West Coast offered a different set of opportunities and challenges for internationalist expressions. By centring African

[1] Works on Harlem and Chicago during their "renaissance" eras that help to establish these metropolises as central in transnational radicalism are numerous. A selection on Chicago includes Keisha Blain, '"Confraternity Among All Dark Races": Mittie Maude Lena Gordon and the Practice of Black (Inter)nationalism in Chicago, 1932-1942', *Palimpsest*, 5:2 (2016), 151-181; Erik S. McDuffie, 'Chicago, Garveyism, and the History of the Diasporic Midwest', *African and Black Diaspora*, 8:2 (2015), 129-145; Bill Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). On Harlem, there is a very large body of literature that fixates on New York's pivotal role in the 1920s New Negro Renaissance, but among the works that seek to position Black New York within radical transnational networks are Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*; Stevens.

American globality in the West Coast, we reveal the entanglement of incipient internationalisms with nationalist and regionalist tropes. Intricate connections appear, linking the set of perspectives and practices known as Black internationalism as they appeared in the interwar years with the African Atlantic and Asian Pacific, the Jim Crow South and the transnational American West.

In the first instance, this will necessitate a consideration of how the South was constituted as a space of authentic American Blackness by New Negro intellectuals. The compulsion to construct an authentic Blackness in the South was accompanied by an ideological confrontation with the West that presented new challenges and opportunities for positioning African Americans within racial, national, and international communities. Following this, a more detailed account will be offered of Black arrival, settlement, and cultural production in the West. The biographies of two notable women, Susie Revels Cayton and Charlotta Bass, will frame a consideration of the ideological reorientation of Black Westerners toward a multiracial protest culture that challenged the bounds of Americanism. The second half of the chapter will turn to the cultural production of Black Westerners. Three New Negro artists (William Grant Still, Sargent Johnson, Arna Bontemps) working in three different media (music, sculpture, literature respectively) will be considered as they each sought to articulate their racial selves while engaging productively with the diverse and transnational communities in Western locations (Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and the Southwestern borderland). The chapter proposes to detail the articulation of Black internationalist politics with and through discourses around racial authenticity, American nationality, and empire.

The South, the West, and the world

The New Negro movement in the first decades of the twentieth century, and particularly in the years following the First World War, was characterised ideologically by the construction of racial authenticity in a series of discourses among intellectuals in America. This process required considerations of African Americans' place in a global context, and within this global context nowhere

loomed larger than the ancestral motherland of Africa, often referenced metonymically as Ethiopia. Given the unfolding Great Migration of African Americans out of sharecropping rurality and the Jim Crow South, mostly to urban centres in the North, discussions of authentic Blackness also addressed American regional dynamics. In these discussions, the US South was deployed as an approximation of the less accessible originary source of racial authenticity, Mother Africa, and as a metonym for Black rootedness in the American nation. It was 'the seat of authentic *American* blackness'.[2]

The interlocutors in this discourse and its key moments are now familiar to scholars of the New Negro Renaissance. 1926 was the key year. In June, *The Nation* magazine played host to a controversial essay, 'The Negro-Art Hokum', by editor and ex-socialist George Schuyler. Lambasting the Harlem crowd of Black intellectuals and sympathetic whites interested in the anti-racist possibilities of Black cultural production, Schuyler proposed that there was nothing of Africa in Black Americans. In response, Langston Hughes published his essay, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', which proclaimed the liberating power of an art grounded in Black folk traditions. Meanwhile, in *The Crisis*, Du Bois's speech 'Criteria of Negro Art' was published, arguing for the utility of Black art to the project of racial uplift. Fashionably late to this party, Zora Neale Hurston in 1928 penned 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', a dazzling celebration of Black individuality, a bold assertion of femininity, and a quietly conservative spurning of collective struggle.[3] In 1931, Hughes and Hurston came to travel together in the South, Hughes as he toured poetry recitations to Black audiences (still found mostly in that region) and Hurston as she researched an anthropology of Black folk.[4]

Through this period of debate, authentic Blackness came to be identified with rural Southern folk, who were understood as exemplifying the syncretism between survivals of African culture and

[2] 'In an effort to recover that "racial" past, the writer must […] journey back to his or her origins. Ultimately, that would mean Africa as the source of racial identity, but the first stop in the United States would have to be the South.' Martin J. Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 15. For 'the seat of authentic *American* blackness', see Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?*, p. 21.

[3] All these essays are anthologised regularly. See *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, 2nd edn (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004).

[4] Rampersad I, p. 150.

those of European origin. In turn, this yielded new conceptions of the relation between race and nationhood, proving to be a durable paradigm in which Blackness was imagined by a variety of historical agents during the 1930s and beyond. In the influential imaginary of the Communist Party (CPUSA), which gained a substantial following in the Depression years, preoccupation with the South as a site or source of authentic Blackness was rendered as a collective striving for national separation. In 1928, under direction from the Communist International (Comintern) and in parallel with Soviet nationalities policy, the CPUSA proposed that African Americans represented an oppressed national minority who possessed the right to self-determination up to and including the establishment of a sovereign Black state in America. The territory where they imagined this state ought to be built was the 'Black Belt' of counties in the South with majority Black populations. On the cultural front, the corollary of this policy was the anointing of folk culture as possessing a proletarian character that required only the infusion of revolutionary content.[5] Inherent to this formulation, but not exclusive to the CPUSA during these years, was an elision between racial and national communities. African Americans were represented as both a composite part of the American nation with the rightful demands to equal citizenship, and a distinct national community with their own 'public sphere', collective interests, and position in the global order.[6]

As such, while the Black Belt thesis might be understood as originating in its programmatic form through political negotiations at the Communist International, it was part of a wider dispute about the relation between race and nation which had origins in the period of struggle following the First World War.[7] Barbara Foley has argued that, in these years, a 'metonymic nationalism' underpinned the emergent radicalism of the New Negro movement. Associations of Blackness with (Southern) soil provided a lever for the rapid transformation of an insurgent class-struggle anti-racism,

[5] Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working-Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996) and James Edward Smethurst, *The Red New Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[66] Singh, pp. 50, 59.

[7] See, for instance, Maxwell; Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1957); Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: African Americans and Communism, 1917-1936* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), chapter 5.

which crested in 1919, into an elitist culturalism, which came to be celebrated as the Harlem Renaissance, wherein the folk was sentimentalised.[8] 'The political price of this aspiration to cultural pluralism', she argues, 'was the conversion of the sharecropping "peasant" – a potentially revolutionary figure when analogized with its Soviet counterpart – into the culture-bearing "folk."'[9] With a new turn to the Left in the 1930s, Communists appropriated this Southern folk for revolutionary ends.

Foley's account relies on an imagined geography that excludes the West as important and operative. She argues that the triumph of nationalist over proletarian politics in the 1920s was achieved by transplanting the narrative of American citizenship won through the settlement of the West onto the African American Great Migration out of the South. Alain Locke in his influential essay 'The New Negro', which announced the close of the initial radicalism of the movement according to Foley, represented these migrants as legitimate Americans because in their movement north they became pioneers.[10] Foley's persuasive description renders Black movement westward not only marginal, but irrelevant: it was not by settling the West but by moving north, and by asserting their rootedness in the South, that African Americans proved their right to full citizenship. The South was metonymic for African Americans' simultaneous racial and national authenticity, rooting them in a vernacular culture with links back to Africa and giving them a claim to national belonging in America. What need, then, would African Americans have of the West?

The picture Foley paints is persuasive, yet the West cannot be so easily minimised. The West was, after all, even more bounteous a field for nationalist metonyms (albeit of a different kind) than the South: it was, according to one of its most distinguished historians, 'the national region most associated with optimism and opportunity' and therefore the 'gap between expectation and results

[8] Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).
[9] Foley, *Jean Toomer*, p. 5.
[10] Foley, *Jean Toomer*, p. 6.

was […] a version of the national gap, a version written in bigger, boldface, exaggerated type.'[11] While it took African Americans even further geographically from Mother Africa, it was a region with its own transnational quality and political possibility, 'a crossroads of the Atlantic and the Pacific worlds shaped by globe-spanning structured transformations and multidirectional entanglements'.[12] The West Coast encompassed porous borders with Mexico to the south and Canada to the north and was an open gateway to the vast expanse of the Pacific. It could be rendered as a synecdoche for America or as a world-facing borderland. It might be seen to represent premodern rurality, with its dramatic landscapes and agricultural life, or the cutting edge of technological modernity, visible in the expanding metropolises and booming industries. Its greatest urban sprawl, Los Angeles, was 'at the forefront of the nation's "racial frontier"', where the formation of racial communities and identities occurred in a 'quadrilateral pattern' encompassing 'white, Black, Asian and Mexican Americans.'[13]

In this context, the impulse to 'discover' authentic Blackness in the South was not universally felt or uniformly expressed. Blackness could look and feel different in a region where African Americans were often the smallest ethnic group and were far from the only group racialised as non-white and therefore unwelcome. The peculiar process of racial formation in Los Angeles and much of the West opened possibilities for African Americans to assert their Americanness more forcefully (often against other racialised groups such as Indigenous people and Mexicans), to disidentify from their ethnic background completely and pass as members of some other group, or simply to carve out an African American community in a place remote from the site of their collective trauma.[14]

[11] Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: WW Norton and Co., 1987), p. 152.
[12] Janne Lahti, *The American West and the World: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 2-3.
[13] Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 12
[14] Carey McWilliams quoted in Kurashige, p. 12. On African Americans passing for Mexican in the borderlands, see Gerald Horne, *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 49-50

The demographics of the West Coast, as a region of multiple overlapping diasporas, were not politically inert facts. The Coast was a vibrant territory where popular movements routinely spilled over national borders and political organising was often focused on international issues. For instance, revolutionary convulsions in Mexican society spanned the 1910s and continued to echo through decades. The radical movements that came out of them paid no heed to the American border. Hence, the history of the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in America would be incomplete if it did not reckon with IWW engagement with the anarchist Magonistas – an encounter which even brought a small number of African Americans to Baja California, Mexico, for an ill-fated revolutionary insurgency in 1911.[15] These solidarity networks also extended to Asian revolutionaries on the Coast. The Indian nationalist-revolutionaries organised in the Ghadar Party were headquartered at San Francisco, and Har Dayal, one of the Ghadar leaders, was also a supporter of the IWW and the Magonistas.[16] Meanwhile, populations of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos circulated news and opinion about their respective home countries and their conditions in America.[17] Histories of regional radicalism have only recently begun to register the West as a significant arena for American Leftism in the early twentieth century.[18] The imagining of the South as authentically Black was always strongly inflected with a class politics fixated on the working poor, whereas this picture of a radical and transnational West raises new questions about its place in the history of African American politics.

[15] Horne, *Black and Brown*, pp. 135-37. For an illustrative biographical sketch of such Black internationalist radicals in the West, see Horne, *Black and Brown*, p. 209

[16] Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 65

[17] See Kurashige, pp. 77-90; Kornel Chang, 'Mobilizing Revolutionary Manhood: Race, Gender, and Resistance in the Pacific Northwest Borderlands', in *The Rising Tide of Color: Race, State Violence, and Radical Movements across the Pacific*, ed. by Moon-Ho Jung (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 72-101; Josephine Fowler, 'The Activism of Left-Wing and Communist Chinese Immigrants, 1927-1933', in *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture*, ed. by Sucheng Chan and Madeline Y. Hsu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 91-131; Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988); Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[18] *Regionalists on the Left*, ed. by Michael C. Steiner (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013); *Left in the West: Literature, Culture, and Progressive Politics in the American West*, ed. by Gioia Woods (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2018).

Gender also helped to constitute these ideological permutations. Projections of American nationhood onto the West were at the same time impositions of a gendered order, in which the confrontation between 'civilisation' and 'savagery' at the frontier was generative of a white American masculinity. This white American masculinity was imagined in relation to Blackness, being defined against Black men who were either fetishized for their apparent primitiveness and savagery or denigrated as inferior, childlike, and unintelligent. Asserting Black citizenship in the New Negro era therefore commonly involved asserting Black manhood, evident variously in the self-presentation of the iconic pugilist Jack Johnson and the imperial stylings of Garveyism.[19] Corollary to the assertion of Black manhood was an insistence on Black women's role as nurturers of the race.[20] Of course, these gendered ideologies did not go unchallenged – far from it – but they remained dominant and normative even in the so-called Red Decade of the 1930s.[21] How African Americans engaged the American West was informed by this gendered and raced ideological order, where Americanness was achieved at the frontier between 'civilized' modernity and 'savage' primitivism.[22]

One further function of routing questions of Black authenticity, national belonging, and international solidarity through the West is to help foreground American imperialism as an operative, indeed a salient, aspect to each of these. In the West, where significant communities of Indigenous people continued to live in reservations and histories of US-Mexican conflict were present, American nationality could not be separated from its imperial foundations. Equally, the sizable communities of

[19] See Stephens and Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
[20] In the Garvey movement, 'the health and progress of the race, and ultimately of the black nation' was understood to depend on 'efficient, virtuous mothers and stable homes.' See Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) p. 121. On the connections between Black migration and gender, see Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin?: The African-American Migration Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). See also, Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).
[21] The literature on Garveyite and Black nationalist women's feminism has grown significantly in recent decades. Major studies include Taylor; Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008); Blain, *Set the World on Fire*. On gender in the 1930s Left, see Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).
[22] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973).

racialised minorities often helped to give West Coast radical politics an internationalist and anti-imperialist hue. This study therefore asks what significance was taken on by the articulation an authentic Black identity in contexts where African Americans lived cheek-by-jowl with other racialised groups whose racialisation developed differently than their own – via arguments about migration, language, culture, and labour – and who possessed other transnational connections. How, for instance, did African Americans negotiate their striving for full and equal citizenship in America given the US's ongoing history of continental displacement and international domination? And what iterations of internationalist solidarity were practicable on the West Coast given its distinctive – not to say exceptional – geography, demography, and political culture?

Careful examination of Black belonging in the West Coast quickly develops from questions of local racial communities, interracial relations, and national affiliations to address transnational or cosmopolitan subjectivities and global political engagements. This requires a careful understanding of the significance of Black Leftism in catalysing multiracial and internationalist politics and paying attention to the ways that migratory circuits far beyond the Atlantic shaped Black understandings of race and nation.

Arrivals

While much African American migration into the West did not occur in happy circumstances, many of the arrivals were mobilised by genuine hopes for a better life. Small numbers of Black people had been resident in Western states, including on the West Coast, for centuries. Their proportionate size as a community in coastal cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco only surged during and after the Second World War due to the availability of work in war industries, but there was a steady stream of migration through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The communities African Americans established were disproportionately urban, with San Francisco and Los Angeles being the primary destinations of Black migrants, alongside growing and relatively prosperous

populations in cities of the Northwest including Portland and Seattle. There were, however, groups of African Americans scattered across towns and cities in the region.[23] By offering a very brief overview of this history of settlement, some key questions can begin to be asked about the place of African Americans in racial, national, and international community formations during the early-mid twentieth century.

Realtors advertised Western cities and towns to African Americans as a viable escape from the conditions of impoverishment and racialised violence prevalent elsewhere in the country. In cases like San Francisco and Seattle, the reputation was enhanced by the mystique around these cities as uniquely tolerant locales.[24] Many African Americans who took up the offers of advertisers and made the move out West did so in the expectation that they would face less prejudice and greater opportunities for social advancement. In some respects, life really was different – and better – in the West during the first decades of the twentieth century. The historical racial liberalism of Western state legislatures like that in California – where racial segregation in schools had been formally banned and even an anti-discrimination law passed in 1893 – helped generate its reputation for freedom.[25] When WEB Du Bois first visited, he reported that Black Angelenos were 'the most beautifully housed group of colored people in the United States' and 'there [was] no freer city in America' than Portland.[26] African Americans enjoyed far higher rates of home ownership in California, and even engaged in real-estate speculation.[27] In many of the West Coast centres, they had plentiful opportunities to gain employment and were not segregated as strictly as in the South.

[23] Douglas Flamming, *African Americans in the West* (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2009); Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Albert S. Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993); Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).
[24] Broussard, p. 2; Taylor, *Forging of a Black Community*, p. 14.
[25] Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 15.
[26] WEB Du Bois, 'Colored California', *Crisis*, August 1913, p. 193; WEB Du Bois, 'The Great Northwest', *Crisis*, September 1913, p. 238.
[27] Sides, p. 13.

In fact, West Coast cities were characterised by a rare cultural mixture, as Black Americans settled alongside migrants from Mexico and Japan, China and the Philippines, southern and eastern Europe, as well as poor whites from elsewhere in America.[28] Many African Americans, including the noted sociologist Charles Johnson, believed that the large groups of 'oppressed nonwhites' helped to reduce the level of hate directed at Black residents.[29] At the grassroots, though some urban areas developed reputations as enclaves of particular ethnic groups (LA's Central Avenue and Seattle's Central District were the heart of their respective cities' Black community, and numerous cities developed Chinatowns and Little Tokyos), the reality of working-class life even in these neighbourhoods was cosmopolitan. According to one historian of LA, 'what distinguished Central Avenue was not the area's Negro-ness, […] but rather the stunning ethnic and racial diversity of the place.'[30] In Seattle, even the onset of segregationist practices in the interwar years did not 'transform the Central District into a teeming racial ghetto': in 1935, one major street in the so-called Black enclave had a population that was 68% Asian.[31] The political potential of such interracial mingling was clear. In the West Jefferson district of Los Angeles, 'shared experiences with white racism […] created a nascent sense of interethnic solidarity', where 'Black and Japanese Americans generally held favourable views of each other'.[32] In this developing cross-racial community, children were an important vanguard, mixing with relative freedom, befriending one another across ethnic lines, and seeming to hold out a promise for the future.[33] Shared living conditions gave rise to interracial sympathy, though it did not automatically produce a multiracial anti-racist movement.

For all the relative freedom and privilege available on the West Coast, 'the color line [was] there and sharply drawn.'[34] Black residents of the American West still faced everyday prejudices and

[28] Flamming, *African Americans in the West*, p. 107; Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, p. 99.
[29] Emory Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles: Ideology and Community in the American Garvey Movement* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies University of California, 1980), p. 30.
[30] Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, p. 98.
[31] Taylor, *Forging of a Black Community*, pp. 86-7.
[32] Kurashige, p. 62.
[33] Kurashige, p. 62; Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chapter 4.
[34] Du Bois, 'Colored California', *Crisis*, August 1913, p. 194.

systemic discrimination. Jobs were widely available, but only in a narrow range of industries and always at the lowest rates of pay.[35] Strict segregation was not in place, but the threat of the West becoming Southernized constantly lurked. After 1915, when *Birth of a Nation* was screened across the country to the consternation of activists in the NAACP, Klan attacks renewed, and in cities like Los Angeles, the question of housing was a primary flashpoint. African Americans struggled to defend their right to own their homes and fought a losing battle against racist housing covenants.[36] When these segregationist provisions were introduced by the real-estate industry through the 1920s, they resulted in increasingly strict racial divisions. The reality of African American settlement in the West was certainly more mixed than the advertised picture allowed, therefore; Douglas Flamming has gone so far as to dismiss the postcard picture as 'largely bunk'.[37]

In a context of such ethnic diversity, anti-Black racism was certainly not the only – indeed, not necessarily the most common or politically effective – form that racism took. There was a long and violent history of anti-immigrant, and especially anti-Chinese, prejudice on the West Coast. Anti-Chinese prejudice was the primary animus for large riots in cities across the region throughout the nineteenth century, notably the 1887 riot in San Francisco. The demand for Chinese exclusion was taken up by organisations that might be expected to resist such calls. Even organisations of labour radicalism such as the Workingmen's Party perceived that there was a conflict between the Asian migrant workers and the interests of working-class whites. In 1882, these racist campaigns won a major victory with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act; it was not repealed until 1943.[38]

[35] Sides, p. 22.
[36] Flamming, *African Americans in the West*, pp. 116-18; Tolbert, p. 34.
[37] Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, p. 37.
[38] Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Neil Larry Shumsky, *The Evolution of Political Protest and the Workingmen's Party of California* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992). Gyory contests the centrality of the labour movement in the anti-Chinese agitation of the late nineteenth century, but that labour played an important role in sustaining and organising the movement is not disputed.

The issue of Chinese exclusion was tied to questions around Black citizenship, both being centred on the relationship between race, labour, and democracy.[39] In a telling passage addressing the issue of universal suffrage, the author Charles Francis Adams, Jr., wrote in 1869 that such an expansion of citizenship rights would mean government by three racialised proletariats: 'a European, and especially Celtic, proletariat on the Atlantic coast; an African proletariat on the shores of the Gulf; and a Chinese proletariat on the Pacific'.[40] For Adams, the empowerment of these labouring populations was a threat. In the twentieth century, with the growth and uneven enfranchisement of working people, new challenges and opportunities arose in the struggle for greater democracy. For African Americans arriving in the West Coast, the multiplicity of racial antagonisms in the region presented at least two possible responses: they might ally with communities who shared their exclusion from whiteness and their mostly proletarian composition, or they might make a more determined case that they were full Americans whose claim to citizenship was greater than that of immigrants of colour.

Imperial and anti-imperial politics were operative in African Americans' negotiation of West Coast racial politics. Since the Reconstruction era, when both Frederick Douglass, the icon of abolitionism, and Hiram Revels, the first African American Senator, had endorsed the annexation of the Dominican Republic, the attitude of African Americans to the project of empire and, by extension, the treatment of colonised and immigrant populations in America, had been an open question.[41] In the West, the contributions African Americans made to the crushing of Indigenous resistance and to military confrontations with Mexico during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, somewhat set them apart from other minority groups as more reliable agents for American colonisation. But this was always an intensely ambiguous and conditional position, as they continued to be racialised in ways

[39] Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016)
[40] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2014), p. 497.
[41] Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 495,

that rendered them unequal and discriminated against.[42] Nor were such colonial dynamics confined to the nineteenth-century rural borderlands. Dorothy Fujita-Rony has observed that Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles were important nodes of American imperialism during the twentieth century. From these cities, capital was exported and labour was imported from across the Pacific. If African Americans viewed the West as 'a singularly egalitarian place, where opportunity was open to all citizens', the relative significance of citizenship and egalitarianism was contested.[43]

Making (inter)racial communities in the West

The making of political Black communities on the West Coast can be traced through the lives of two of their most accomplished women. The lives of Susie Revels Cayton and Charlotta Bass, both journalists, editors, and activists at the heart of their respective city's Black community, exemplified, in the early decades of the century, many of the real freedoms available to African Americans in the West. Their political development also illustrates how Black attempts to win American liberty for themselves tended to produce increasingly radical critiques of US society. The victories won in the West by anti-Black racists, the onset of the Depression, and changing personal circumstances (not least, greater independence from their husbands who became ill and died) turned these women eventually to the Left. It was through the period of Leftist ascendancy and class-struggle tactics that African Americans in the West entered more durable alliances with other racial minorities and began to articulate more consistent anti-imperialist politics.

The daughter of the venerable Senator Hiram Revels, Susie Revels moved to Seattle in 1896. She had initiated a romance with a freedman named Horace Cayton when they both lived in Mississippi, and the pair sustained contact after he moved West in 1894. She followed him to Seattle, and in July 1896 they were married. Horace Cayton had founded a newspaper called the *Seattle Republican* (1894-1913) when he moved, and in 1900 Susie Revels Cayton was made associate editor

[42] Horne, *Black and Brown*, p. 52; Flamming, *African Americans in the West*, pp. 70-2.
[43] Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, pp. 36-7.

at the paper. Throughout its run she wrote regular contributions, building up a portfolio of short stories. In the early years of the century, the Caytons established themselves as prominent members of Seattle's Black community.[44] Their family grew as Susie gave birth to five children, several of whom would go on to live distinguished public lives of their own. Horace Cayton Jr. became an eminent sociologist associated with the Chicago School, Revels Cayton was a noted labour organiser, and Madge Cayton became a social worker after being among the first African American women to graduate from the University of Washington. Life was not always kind, however – especially to Cayton women. Susie and Horace Cayton's first child, Ruth, died at 22 years old after attempting to give herself an abortion. She left a daughter, Susan, who was raised as one of her grandparents' own. Lillie, the youngest of Susie and Horace Cayton's children, survived a gang rape as a teenager. Her adult years were marred by an alcohol dependency which was finally overcome through Alcoholics Anonymous, for which she became a passionate speaker in her later years.[45]

On moving to Seattle, the Caytons adopted the attitude that this was a 'frontier town, where individualism, ability, and respect for the self-made man' prevailed. In an editorial for his paper, Horace embraced Manifest Destiny for African Americans, urging in the title of one editorial piece, 'Come West, Black Man'. He felt passionately that the West was a new frontier in which Black men could compete on an equal footing with whites, contrasting it with the South, 'where whites waged a "war of extermination"'.[46] Over the years of their ownership and editorship of the *Seattle Republican*, Susie and Horace Cayton sustained these claims in practice, making a successful newspaper that they sold to an increasingly interracial readership. They developed some influence in Republican Party circles and moved into a large house in the exclusive, white-dominated Capitol Hill area. In these years of abundance, they even hired household help from a Japanese servant named Nish, and a Swedish

[44] Hobbs, pp. xiv, 23-50. See also *Stories by Cayton: Short Stories by Susie Revels Cayton, a Seattle Pioneer*, ed. by Ed Diaz (Seattle: Bridgewater-Collins, 2002).
[45] Hobbs, pp. xvi, 58, 95, 188-93.
[46] Hobbs, pp. 24-6.

maid.[47] The Cayton family claimed a full partnership in America's bourgeois freedoms and Horace sought to establish clear class markers between them and their social subordinates, including domestic workers and dark-skinned Black people. Even so, Susie resisted such elitist pretensions, seeking to learn Japanese from the servant Nish, engaging their garbage collector, Mr. Fontello, in intellectual conversation, and embracing Blackness.[48]

For the Cayton family, the frontier in the Pacific Northwest closed in 1913 and this served to further equalise their relations with the working-class immigrants who made Seattle's key industries run. A combination of factors, including but not limited to court battles over segregated housing and attacks on Horace Cayton's honour, led to the collapse of the *Seattle Republican* in 1913.[49] The family were forced to move from their Capitol Hill home, and Horace Cayton eventually managed to establish a new enterprise. *Cayton's Weekly* never achieved the success of the *Seattle Republican* and by the 1920s Horace Cayton Sr.'s journalistic career was effectively over.[50] Susie Cayton now came to know 'working-class Seattle – white, Asian American, Native American, black' on a genuinely equal footing.[51] Her sons, meanwhile, spent time working at sea where they laboured in shifts of up to 17 hours, earned poor wages, and were segregated from the white seamen.[52]

Soon, the family turned their political attentions to the labour movement. Susie did not initiate the turn but her egalitarian values had been in evidence for some years and likely informed her children's Leftism. In 1925, while the second son Revels was convalescing from sleeping sickness, he engaged in conversations with a neighbour who had been active in the revolutionary syndicalist IWW and who shared books by Jack London and Émile Zola. These readings and conversations turned

[47] Hobbs, p. 40.
[48] Quintard Taylor, 'Susie Revels Cayton, Beatrice Morror Cannady, and the Campaign for Social Justice in the Pacific Northwest', in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000*, ed. by Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 189-204 (p. 192).
[49] Hobbs, p. 50.
[50] Hobbs, chapter 4.
[51] Taylor, 'Susie Revels Cayton', in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000*, ed. by Taylor and Moore, p. 192.
[52] Hobbs, pp. 80-1.

Revels to socialism, and he became involved in organisations of the Communist Party including the Young Communist League and the International Labor Defense. He joined the Party and in 1934 stood as a Communist for the city council.[53] In later years, as an eminent sociologist, Horace Jr. would also become associated with the Left in Chicago.[54]

In the early 1930s, with her husband out of public life and Revels throwing himself into radical organising, Susie Revels Cayton gained a new independence that allowed her to take a more dynamic approach to political matters for the first time in her life.[55] She participated in campaign meetings organised by Revels, joined the NAACP, and served as secretary to the Skid Road Unemployed Council. When she joined the Communist Party, she participated fully in both its internal life and its public work. She attended meetings of the Negro Workers Council and the Project Workers Union local, helped to organise the Madison Street branch of the Committee to Free the Scottsboro Boys, and formed a radical sewing group called the Harriet Tubman Club. The work of hosting Communist speakers and performers invited by Party activists fell on Susie, who was given the problematic honorific Mother Cayton by Seattle's multiethnic, radical working-class movement. But this role also meant that she befriended eminent Black radicals including Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson.[56] In her own account, in her mid-60s she was 'having the time of [her] life'.[57]

From joining with her husband in seeking to carve out a life of bourgeois respectability as American citizens at the frontier of imperial America to participating in a movement of working-class anti-capitalist insurgency, Susie Revels Cayton explored the gamut of political responses to African American life in the West. Her life can certainly not be regarded as representative of Black experience in Seattle or anywhere else, but its particularities illuminate some important general features of

[53] Hobbs, pp. 83-95.
[54] Mullen, *Popular Fronts*, p. 10.
[55] Taylor, 'Susie Revels Cayton', in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000*, ed. by Taylor and Moore, p. 192.
[56] Hobbs, pp. 96-7, 99-100; Taylor, 'Susie Revels Cayton', in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000*, ed. by Taylor and Moore, p. 193.
[57] Susie Cayton to Madge Cayton, c. 1936, quoted in Hobbs, p. 100.

African Americans' historical situation in the early twentieth-century West. Having initially enjoyed greater relative freedoms than were available in the South, the vagaries of free-market economics and the sustaining power of American capitalism's racial logic challenged African Americans to adopt more disruptive tactics and present more radical critiques in their quest for the benefits of citizenship. During the Depression years, many made common cause with a labour movement which was being infused by the Marxist analyses espoused by Communist organisers and by anti-racist demands emerging from communities of migrant workers such as Seattle's ambiguously 'American' Filipinos.[58] These political convergences had enduring significance in the making of a multiracial Left.

A similar set of contradictions, and a somewhat different resolution of them, is found when we travel south down the coast to meet Los Angeles's eminent Black newspaperwoman. Born Charlotta Spears in 1879, she grew up in South Carolina and Rhode Island before moving to Los Angeles in 1910. In the city, she took work selling subscriptions to a Black newspaper called the *Advocate*. Asked to take over the running of the paper in 1912 by its dying owner, she soon changed the paper's name to the *California Eagle* and hired JB Bass, who became an editor and her husband. With J.B., Charlotta Bass built the *California Eagle* as a paper that championed social justice for African Americans. Consistent with this professional activism, Bass took up membership in both of the rival uplift organisations of the 1920s, the NAACP and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). When her husband died in November 1934, Bass further expanded the *Eagle*'s activist side. Among the columnists hired in the early 1930s was the Communist Loren Miller (though Bass herself had no sympathy for the Reds at the time), and in her own column, 'On the Sidewalk', Bass commented on social and political problems. In subsequent decades, she entered electoral politics, running on an

[58] See Stephanie Hinnershitz, '"We Ask not for Mercy, but for Justice": The Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers' Union and Filipino Civil Rights in the United States, 1927-1937', *Journal of Social History*, 47:1 (2013), 132-152; Chris Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor: The Pacific Coast Canned-Salmon Industry, 1870-1942* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

independent basis for the city council in 1945, for Congress on a Progressive Party ticket in 1950, and becoming the first Black woman to run for Vice President with the Progressives in 1952.[59]

Before the 1940s, Bass's attitude to Los Angeles's other racial minorities was largely consistent with the xenophobia rampant in California. In 1934, she wrote a column on the race riots in Arizona between whites and Japanese, arguing that it represented a comeuppance for white Americans who had allowed the country to be 'overrun with aliens' while denying Black Americans opportunities for employment.[60] Her attitude was shared by other community leaders. In 1906, politician James Alexander had published an 'Appeal to Reason' which insisted that Blacks should be given priority over Japanese in the competition for jobs, and throughout its years of activism on questions of housing and employment the local NAACP spoke of racism only as a Black-and-white matter. Even when Japanese Americans were interned en masse in 1942, Bass and most other Black leaders initially welcomed the measure before quickly backtracking. Only with the 1943 campaign to free the Sleepy Lagoon defendants – a group of young Mexican men charged arbitrarily with murder – did Bass swing toward a consistent defence of the city's other racial minorities.[61]

Bass's implication in anti-Asian sentiment ought to be regarded not merely as a passive reflection of a prevailing prejudice, but as a constitutive part of one important strategy of Black protest in the transpacific contact zone. In these spaces, the dominance of nativist prejudice provided African Americans with an opportunity to perform their Americanness with displays of national fealty and anti-migrant rhetoric that defined African Americans as rightful citizens as against 'alien' migrants from Latin America and Asia. The fact that Asians and Mexicans were targeted in part because they, like Black Americans and unlike many European migrants, were racialised as non-white was neglected by advocates of this strategy.

[59] Regina Freer, 'L.A. Race Woman: Charlotta Bass and the Complexities of Black Political Development in Los Angeles', *American Quarterly*, 56:3 (2004), 607-632 (p. 609).
[60] Freer, p. 622
[61] Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, p. 360

Of course, the strategy of accommodating American nativism was far from universal. Floyd Covington, a leading member of the LA Urban League, advocated 'a tri-minority relationship, comprising Mexicans, Orientals, and Negroes', and when WEB Du Bois visited LA he welcomed an audience of '2,300 people from the white, yellow and black races.' California focused Du Bois's mind on 'the newest color problem', that of the relation of global East and West; he lamented that the local Black community 'do not realize the bigness of this problem and their own logical position', which he implied was aligned with the Japanese.[62] Perhaps more presciently than Du Bois's pronouncements, among politically active locals, simple necessity produced 'a common front in the battle against white racism and restricted covenants', evident in the series of lawsuits brought to combat their spread during the early-mid twentieth century.[63] Such fronts were indicative of an organic, incipient, multiracial anti-racism and provided historical precedent for the more substantive coalitions of the post-Second World War years, but they did not produce a full articulation of anti-racist and anti-colonial solidarity, nor an organisational form capable of providing greater durability.

The strengthening of Black nationalist currents in the 1910s and 1920s had an ambiguous effect on the crystallisation of interracial movements in the borderlands. Though they did not seek to build durable political coalitions with other minority groups, Black nationalists in the West frequently imagined the American Southwest and northern Mexico as possible locations for Black settlement. In doing so, Mexicans' relatively egalitarian view of Blacks played into the schemes: Black nationalists sought to reward Mexicans for their lack of prejudice by establishing a Black 'civilization and a national life' in the borderlands of Baja California.[64] The embryonic beginnings of such a 'Negro state' were realised by a stream of Black emigrants and occasional settlement projects funded by wealthy businessmen.[65] They were regarded with suspicion by American authorities who feared, amidst war mobilisation in 1918, that these communities would harbour draft dodgers. Some Mexican

[62] Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, p. 360; Du Bois, 'Colored California', *Crisis*, August 1913, p. 194.
[63] Kurashige, p. 58; Sides, p. 18.
[64] Tolbert, p. 38.
[65] Quoted in Horne, *Black and Brown*, p. 82.

authorities, on the other hand, appeared friendly to African American settlers.[66] Such imaginings were not the preserve of marginal figures and could be given somewhat different iterations. Du Bois, when he visited the Pacific Northwest in 1913, was moved by a similar political impulse. He appealed to Black Americans to make Washington – where land was plentiful, the climate alluring, and the Black community eager for new members – into 'a great colored State' within the US. 'Come!', he exhorted readers of *The Crisis*, who he felt could settle Washington as farmers and merchants.[67] In routing their freedom dreams toward such projects of resettlement and state-building, Black nationalists demonstrated that interracial alliances, both contained within and moving beyond the US, might be imagined in the contested borderlands. They also stoked fear from the American state that African Americans were not loyal to the national community. Conceiving of freedom somewhat narrowly in terms of escape from the local stranglehold of white racism, however, they stopped short of building an infrastructure of solidarity that connected anti-Black racism with its other forms and with anti-imperialist and anti-colonial politics in Mexico, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

Such initiatives also indicated that imaginings of Black nationhood were more varied in their geography than was implied by the New Negro preoccupation with the South and by the Communist Party's Black Belt thesis. They encompassed projects for a Black domain in the Mexican state of Baja California and the winning of Washington state for African Americans. Yet it was only with the increased influence of socialists and Communists that Black Westerners' political organising was refocused more decisively toward multiethnic coalitions. The same process popularised anti-imperialist and anti-colonial politics, and fused these with Popular Front politics. The ascendancy of class-struggle strategies and Left-populism during and after the Depression was pivotal in the generation of multiracial and transnational protest, even as it also re-articulated (rather than rejecting wholesale) American nationalism and a South-centric view of Black authenticity. The example of Susie Revels Cayton has demonstrated one way in which this shift played out, as she witnessed the

[66] Horne, *Black and Brown*, p. 82.
[67] Du Bois, 'The Great Northwest', *Crisis*, September 1913, p. 240.

narrowing of opportunities for African Americans in Seattle and gained independence from her husband at a key historical conjuncture. This range of circumstances led her into the Communist Party as an older woman. Charlotta Bass has illustrated the point in a different way. During the Depression years she evinced little sympathy for the Communists, a position which aligned her with nativists who regarded Communism and migrant proletarians as indistinguishable threats. But the adoption of the Popular Front tactic and the formation of a Left-liberal protest culture in the late-Depression years drew Bass to a more friendly attitude.[68] It was with this shift that she also became a sturdy ally of California's multiple minorities.

Black strategies for liberation in the West, whether they sought full citizenship as Americans or imagined a new life outside of the US nation-state, were not automatically sympathetic to other minority groups. The building of an interethnic alliance against racism and imperialism, while certainly imaginable for some far-sighted activists, did not win widespread approval until Black leadership was encouraged to tack decisively to Leftist and class-struggle politics. The emergence of this politics marked, in many ways, an end to the claim that the West was unlike the rest of the nation in its racial politics: the final frontier of Black freedom. But the ways that African Americans registered their conditions in the West, and the political possibilities emergent in it, varied. The cultural production that came from the Black West was always conditioned by perspectives on the American South and by the cosmopolitanism of Western communities. The productive contradictions in this search for Black authenticity in the transnational West will be the topic of the next section.

Nationalist and internationalist imaginaries in the borderlands

The West was a region in which American citizenship appeared at times to trump race in the forming of a social hierarchy. The promise of opportunity held out to African Americans and other subordinated groups appeared, according to Linda Gordon, as a 'chance to become white'. 'The

[68] Shana Bernstein, *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 26.

borderlands confounded the color line, unsettling categories that were thought to be immutable': there were even moments when, Gordon provocatively claims, in parts of the Southwest 'blacks were white and Mexicans were not'.[69] The question then arises: when African Americans identified themselves 'as westerners' and defended their version of 'western values', what did these mean for their Blackness?[70] Unsurprisingly given the above discussion of the South's importance in constructions of African American identity during the New Negro Renaissance, when African Americans sought to articulate the meaning of Westernness they came to do so in relation to the South. For cultural producers during the interwar years, the South was synonymous both with the failure of America's promise of freedom, and with constructions of Black racial authenticity and national belonging. The West, in a parallel construction, epitomised American freedom and Black inauthenticity.

In the following discussion, these constructions will be explored further and problematised by an emphasis on the transnational currents in Black Western cultural production. Three New Negro men produced work which constructed the West via concerns about racial authenticity centred in the South, national and transnational belonging, and masculinity. Their negotiations of these common problems developed along parallel timelines (c. 1920s-1960s), and they engaged with similar intellectual currents (New Negro culturalism, New Deal Americanism, Communism). However, they each produced divergent responses that are worth examining in some detail. They will reveal that anti-racism and anti-colonialism were related but not automatically convergent struggles. Internationalism will emerge as an organic part of Black life in the West but not as the necessarily dominant approach to Black art.

The 'universal idiom': William Grant Still

[69] Horne, *Black and Brown*, p. 68; Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 104.
[70] Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, p. 4

For some African American artists, their settlement and work on the West Coast signified a successful synthesis of consummate Americanness with an undimmed racial authenticity. Composer William Grant Still, for instance, moved from a period of primarily 'racial' themes as a New Yorker during the 1920s to a 'universal idiom' in Los Angeles, which he first visited in 1930 and settled in permanently from 1934. Still, who was nicknamed the 'Dean of Afro-American Music', regarded the move to Los Angeles as a decisive moment in his artistic maturation.[71] Born and raised in the South, Still moved to Harlem after serving in the United States Navy during the First World War. A member of the Talented Tenth championed by Du Bois, Alain Locke, and other intellectuals of the New Negro Renaissance, Still built a career straddling the worlds of commercial and concert music.[72] In his more serious Harlem-era works, such as *Darker America* and *Afro-American Symphony*, he sought to combine vernacular African American music with modernist styles.[73] But from the early 1930s his 'universal idiom' sought to express the full diversity of the American people, setting African American vernacular forms in a wider range of 'American and New World folk music sources, such as cowboy songs, Latin American and Caribbean traditions, music suggestive of Native Americans, and Hispanic missionary music from pre-statehood California.'[74]

Still was fascinated by the cultural mixture around him in Los Angeles and elsewhere in Southern California. A familiar face on Olvera Street (a centre of Mexican life in the city), a fan of mariachi music, and a regular visitor to sites such as the Southwest Museum (which specialised in Indigenous cultures), he absorbed the full diversity of cultural offerings on the West Coast.[75] The first clear expression of Still's new calling to 'serve *all* people' came with his 1941 tone poem *Old*

[71] Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 75.
[72] Jacqueline Codgell DjeDje, 'Context and Creativity: William Grant Still in Los Angeles', *Black Music Research Journal*, 31:1 (2011), 1-27 (pp. 3-4). On Still and the Harlem Renaissance, see Gayle Murchison,'"Dean of Afro-American Composers" or "Harlem Renaissance Man": The New Negro and the Musical Poetics of William Grant Still', in *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradiction*, ed. by Catherine Parsons Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 40-62 (pp. 42-9).
[73] Murchison, in *William Grant Still*, ed. by Smith, pp. 51-9
[74] Murchison, in *William Grant Still*, ed. by Smith, p. 60
[75] DjeDje, p. 19.

California.[76] Intended as a history of the state, the piece 'began with a basic, primitive bit of atmospheric writing', before introducing 'an Indian dance', some Mexican and Spanish themes, and finally an 'American finale'. Still composed the piece very hurriedly, and while critical response was mixed, one critic suggested that *Old California* succeeded in illustrating California's significance 'as a meeting place of racial cultures.'[77] Still gave fuller expression to this range of influences in later operas such as *Costaso* (1950), which was set in the colonial-era Southwest, and *The Pillar* (1956), about a tribe of Indigenous Americans.[78] For him, however, the range of cultural traditions accessible in California were only elements in a nationalist teleology, in which Still's 'universal idiom' expressed America's melting-pot promise.

Still's American nationalism was at times expressed in terms that appeared to minimise his racial consciousness. 'I would like to write music that expresses America', he said, 'rather than confine myself to writing just Negro music.'[79] Yet his oeuvre testifies that his commitment to racial themes that outsized the American nation was sustained throughout his career; the transatlantic African diaspora was an irrepressible presence in Still's Californian Americanism. Among his most significant and most tortured creations was *Troubled Island*, an opera set in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution and taking as its subject the tragic character of Dessalines, revolutionary hero and first ruler of the Haitian Republic. A collaboration with Langston Hughes, who acted as librettist, and Still's wife Verna Arvey, who also contributed to the libretto, *Troubled Island* had its origins in a play Hughes had begun to work on in 1928. The play was produced by the Karamu Theatre in Cleveland in 1936, and after its celebrated reception Hughes reworked the script for Still. The route from authorship to the stage continued to be painfully slow, however; Hughes and Still worked on the play intermittently for several years, and after a false start in 1940 the opera was finally staged in 1949 to a critical

[76] DjeDje, p. 11.
[77] *William Grant Still: A Bio-bibliography*, ed. by Judith Anne Still, Michael J Dabrishus, and Carolyn L. Quin (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 148.
[78] Beverly Soll, *I Dream a World: The Operas of William Grant Still* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2005), pp. 151, 179.
[79] Quoted in Dje Dje, 'Context and Creativity', pp. 20-21.

panning. Rumours circulated around Still's circles that *Troubled Island* was doomed by a racist conspiracy of New York critics and in later years Still himself claimed that it had been a victim of Cold War intrigues.[80] As the first major Black opera, *Troubled Island* nevertheless remains one of the most notable projects of either Still's or Hughes's distinguished careers.

Still's life discloses the entwined fates of American Communism and the radical culture of the Black diaspora. By 1949, Still hardened in his political positioning as a fiercely anti-Communist liberal whose language was that of Cold War Americanism; an attitude that put him at odds with his collaborator Hughes, who was among the most prominent Black Communists during the Depression years and continued to be boldly pro-Soviet for the remainder of his life.[81] But, just as Still's commitment to his race led him toward themes that celebrated Black freedom struggles beyond America, he was also enticed to share the Leftist dreamworld that Hughes attributed to the Haitian revolutionaries, 'where black or white, whatever race you be, will share the bounties of the earth, and ev'ry man is free'.[82]

In the case of William Grant Still, the West Coast presented no threat to his racial authenticity but was an opportunity to pursue a musical mode that embraced Blackness as one cultural tradition in a patchwork of equivalent cultures drawn together in the universalising American polity. This aesthetic philosophy aligned with a nationalistic vision of America as representing universal ideals. Clearly, this exceptionalist perspective could just as easily justify the pursuit of an imperial strategy as align with a domestic civil rights struggle. The ideological implications of Still's 'universal idiom' were made clear in his anti-Communism, which established a limit to America's universalist claim and

[80] Tammy L. Kernodle, 'Arias, Communists, and Conspiracies: The History of Still's *Troubled Island*', *Musical Quarterly*, 83:4 (1999), 487-508.
[81] Smith, p. 195.
[82] Quoted in Soll, *I Dream a World*, p. ix. In his own experience, Still found that the ideal of intercultural integration at the core of his "universal idiom" was actually often easier to achieve outside America than in it. Still's move to Los Angeles occurred amidst the breakdown of a marriage and enabled his acquaintance with the woman who would become his second wife, Verna Arvey. Arvey was white, however, and interracial marriages were illegal in California, so in 1939, when the two decided to marry, they were forced to do so in Tijuana, Mexico. (DjeDje, p. 5).

aligned Still with America's struggle for global dominance. Still's undimmed commitment to Black freedom helped to combine this nationalistic commitment with an interest in global freedom struggles, and even resulted in his attuning at times to Leftist voices.

'Go South, young man': Sargent Johnson

A similar set of concerns produced a very different set of results in the life and work of sculptor Sargent Claude Johnson. Among the leading visual artists of the New Negro movement during the 1920s, Johnson was also alone during these years in being a prominent African American artist living and working in the San Francisco Bay Area. Like many of his contemporaries, Johnson's work was concerned with an authentic representation of Black Americans, but – perhaps more than others – his work also bore overt influences from a range of global cultures that Johnson was immersed in as a Bay Area resident. Unlike Still in Los Angeles, however, Johnson's borrowing from the global cultures present in his metropolitan locale was not in service to an art expressing a melting-pot American nationalism. Instead, Johnson's cosmopolitanism was a complicating aspect of his primary artistic preoccupation, which was to represent the 'pure American Negro'.[83]

Johnson refused to provide commentary on the political contexts for his art, and this aspect of his work was celebrated by Verna Arvey, Still's wife, in a 1939 interview with Johnson for *Opportunity* magazine. Arvey insisted that Johnson was committed to 'racial expression […] to the exclusion of all political expressions' and was resistant to the entreaties from his colleagues to commit himself either to an 'ultramodern' or proletarian style.[84] Arvey was evidently an admirer of Johnson; he shared with Arvey and her husband a distaste for the influence of Communism on art. But unlike

[83] Quoted in Samella Lewis, *African American Art and Artists, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 78.
[84] Verna Arvey, 'Sargent Johnson', *Opportunity*, July 1939, in Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Special Collections Library, William Grant Still and Verna Arvey papers, 81:4. See also Lizzetta LaFalle-Collins, 'African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School', in *In the Spirit of Resistance: African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School*, ed. by Lizzetta LaFalle Collins and Shifra M. Goldman (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1996), 27-68 (pp. 47-8).

Still and Arvey, Johnson's global influences were not hitched to a universalist and anti-Communist narrative of American nationalism. Instead, his work bridged a commitment to racial authenticity rooted in the US South with the global cultures accessible on the Pacific edge of the American continent.[85] While spurning explicit political statements, Johnson became a significant agent in the development of an African American art that cleaved toward anti-colonial politics in the Pacific sphere.

Given some biographical detail, it ought to become clear that Johnson's work should be viewed in the context of American colonial legacies and presences. Johnson was born to parents of Swedish, African, and Cherokee heritage in Boston, Massachusetts in 1887. While some of his siblings lived as Indigenous people or whites, Johnson 'chose to live as a Negro', and spent much of his life seeking to give this identification meaning and nobility. Orphaned in 1902, Johnson's childhood was irregular and peripatetic. Eventually, in 1915, he arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area amidst the Panama Pacific International Exposition, which marked America's growing ambition in the Pacific. By the time of the next such exposition in 1939, the US was a few short years from war and Johnson, among the most celebrated Black sculptors in the country, was invited to contribute some figures to the 'Court of Pacifica', displayed in the shadow of Ralph Stackpole's monumental *Pacifica*. Showcasing 'the wealth of natural and recreational resources available in the nations that border the Pacific', the San Francisco Exposition differed from traditional expositions, as the usual trumpeting of 'the industrial system, empire, and progress' was subordinated to urban boosterism framed through 'an extended allegory about the place of the city in Pacific civilization.'[86] Johnson presented cast-stone Inca figures (see Figure 1) that demonstrated in their angular shapes an indebtedness to 'indigenous Mexican expressions'.[87] Though the sculptures bore no overt political message, they indicated the way

[85] In advancing this argument I owe a great deal to John P. Bowles for the work he has done on Johnson. See John P. Bowles, 'New Negro on the Pacific Rim: Sargent Johnson's Afro-Asian Sculptures', in *"A Long and Tumultuous Relationship": East-West Interchanges in American Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2009).
[86] LaFalle-Collins, p. 49; Andrew Shanken, *Into the Void Pacific: Building the 1939 San Francisco World's Fair* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 12, 14.
[87] LaFalle-Collins, p. 49.

that Johnson's intercultural practice strained against parochial, nationalistic, and colonialist paradigms.

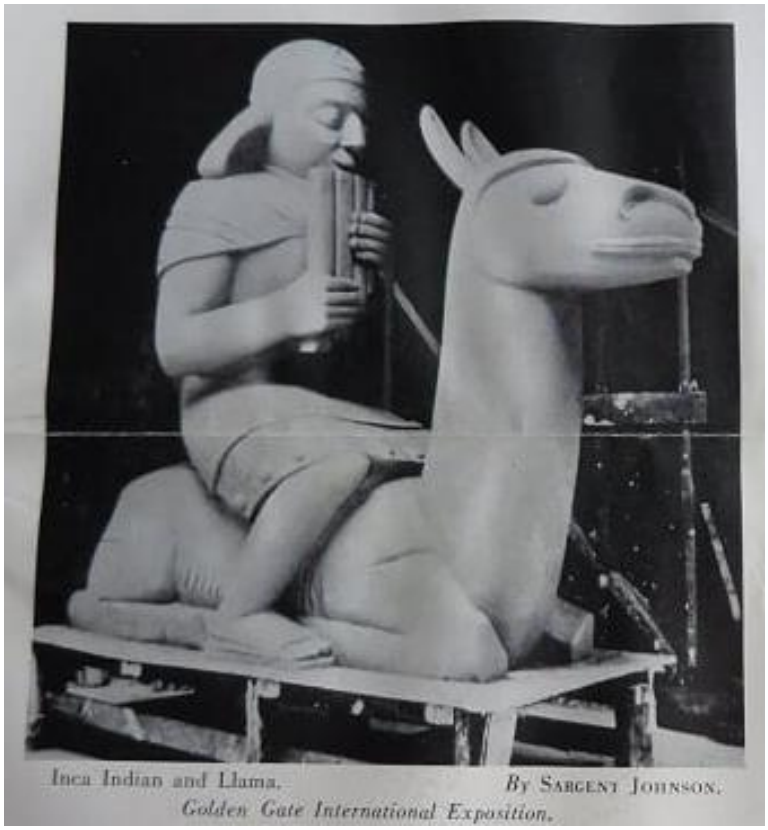

Figure 1: Johnson's sculpture of an Inca astride a llama, produced for the Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939 and featured on the cover of the *San Francisco Art Association Bulletin*, December 1938.

Johnson's contributions to the 1939 Exposition were made possible by the experience and reputation he established through the 1920s and 1930s, building as they did on many years of similarly cosmopolitan artistic practice. Johnson learned his craft as a student at the A.W. Best School of Art and the California School of Fine Art under the tutelage of Ralph Stackpole and Beniamino Bufano. He first won recognition in 1925 for his contribution to a local exhibition, and soon established contact with the Harmon Foundation, which had recently begun to offer prizes and opportunities to Black artists. Johnson exhibited with the Harmon Foundation between 1926 and 1936, first in New York and then across the country. He was awarded prizes by them in 1927, 1929, and 1933, and in 1935 was one of three Black artists exhibited as part of a special feature at the Delphic Studios in New York. During the later Depression years, he was employed by the Federal Arts Project. Johnson sustained a

professional life for another thirty years until his death in 1967, continuing to work in sculpture while evolving his style to incorporate 'totem pole effects' and 'multi-racial themes.'[88]

The range of influences on Johnson during his formative years, spanning the New Negro Renaissance and the Depression, were inseparable from many of the sharp political conflicts of the period. The fallout from the revolution in Mexico took artistic as well as political forms. The muralists whose work were so intimately associated with the upheaval following the overthrow of Porfirio Díaz in 1911 – most prominent among them Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco – drew a significant following north of the border and fostered a particular solidarity with African Americans.[89] Indeed, Rivera may well have had a hand in elevating Johnson's career. Though Johnson was an established name by 1930, the presentation of the First Award for Sculpture to one of his pieces by the San Francisco Art Association was an important milestone for his career, and Rivera was on the awarding jury. The sculpture, *Chester*, was one of Johnson's most unambiguously Africanist pieces, likely inspired by the reserve heads of fourth-dynasty Egypt.[90] According to the intellectual dean of Harlem culturalism, Alain Locke, *Chester* epitomised the relationship between Black America and Africa, characterised by simultaneous identification with the motherland and a marking of 'the distances imposed by history and geography'.[91] Johnson's work would have appealed to Rivera, whose aesthetic philosophy regarded as anathema the deployment of European techniques by non-Western artists, much as Johnson lamented Black artists visiting Europe and returning as 'imitators of Cézanne, Matisse, or Picasso'.[92]

Beyond this accidental moment of contact with Rivera, Johnson was engaged with Mexican art. From the aforementioned Inca figures, with their Mexican-style angularity, through the *Athletic*

[88] E.J. Montgomery, *Sargent Johnson: A Retrospective* (Oakland: The Oakland Museum Art Division Special Gallery, 1971), p. 28.
[89] Raquel Tibol, 'Preface', in *In the Spirit of Resistance: African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School*, ed. by Lizzetta LaFalle-Collins and Shifra M. Goldman (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1996), pp. 9-13.
[90] Bowles, p. 149.
[91] Bowles, p. 147.
[92] Bowles, p. 148; quoted in Lewis, p. 78.

Frieze of 1942, to his latter-day trips in Mexico (where he investigated 'the people and their life styles', visited archaeological sites including Chichen-Itza, worked with Oaxacan clay, and met David Alfaro Siqueiros), Johnson was creatively invigorated by the art produced south of the border.[93] His aesthetic philosophy – which was interested in the 'primitive' and in representing ordinary people without being dependent on the techniques of European modernists – converged with that of Mexico's revolutionary muralists.

Johnson's residence in the Bay Area also exposed him to cultures brought to America from across the Pacific. His first sculpture of note, *Elizabeth Gee* (1927, see Figure 2), depicted a Chinese American playmate of Johnson's daughter and signalled the interracial intimacy of the Pablo Park neighbourhood where he lived with his family in Berkeley. The area housed a growing number of middle-class African Americans alongside many Japanese Americans, and Johnson's home was very near to the local Buddhist temple.[94] He incorporated these influences (global, but derived from his

Figure 2: *Elizabeth Gee* (1927), a portrait of a local Chinese American girl.

Figure 3: *Pearl* (1923-5), a portrait of Sargent Johnson's daughter, in a style evocative of Buddhist sculpture.

[93] LeFalle Collins, pp. 49-50; Montgomery, p. 23; San Francisco Art Institute, Sargent Johnson artist file, Sargent Johnson to Miss Sullivan, 14 February 1945.
[94] Bowles, p. 146

local context) into the work, which was a stoneware figure glazed in the distinctive blue-green of Asian ceramics. His representation of the child was frank and intimate, suggesting Johnson's own familiarity with his Asian neighbours. While her ethnic background was indicated by the hairstyle and facial features, there was no racialised exaggeration.

More unusually, Johnson also incorporated Buddhist influences in a portrait of his own daughter, *Pearl* (1923-5, see Figure 3). Like *Elizabeth Gee*, *Pearl* was sculpted from porcelain and given a blue-green glaze evocative of Asian art. The sculpture bore numerous references specifically to Buddhist art, notably the seated pose of the child, reminiscent of regal Buddhist figures, and the throne on which she sat, which recalled representations of the Buddha. According to John Bowles, it is possible that other aspects of the sculpture were also intended – ambiguously or clumsily – as references to Buddhist traditions. The lotus motif on the base of the sculpture, for instance, recalled 'a popular and auspicious Buddhist image' of pure new souls, represented as babies, seated on lotus flowers. The chubbiness of the figure, meanwhile, may have been an awkward evocation of depictions of the Buddha, who is not in fact traditionally seen as seated and chubby as a child.[95] Bowles further argues that Johnson's interest in East Asian art was not purely aesthetic but also had a political dimension. While working as an assistant to Beniamino Bufano for the Works Progress Administration in 1937, Johnson appears to have done uncredited work on Bufano's large sculpture of Chinese nationalist leader Sun Yat-Sen, the columnar form of which was derivative of Johnson's 1935 *Forever Free* sculpture. Johnson's participation in the inspiration and making of Bufano's celebration of a major anti-colonial figure signals the bleeding of his cosmopolitan artistic practice into more firmly political, internationalist sentiment.[96]

Perhaps paradoxically given the evident cosmopolitanism of Johnson's artistic practice and the attendant political significance of his creative interventions, Johnson insisted that his primary

[95] Bowles, p. 145
[96] Bowles, pp. 151-54

concern was to represent the 'pure American Negro', found not in 'the culturally mixed Negro of the cities, but the more primitive slave type'. Having himself been to the South only once (to New Orleans), Johnson instructed that 'the slogan for the Negro artist should be "Go South, young man."'[97] With this telling injunction, Johnson rendered the Black South a primitive territory in which the masculine New Negro might connect with his racial past and, by doing so, fulfil some variant of Manifest Destiny. Johnson's slogan exposed his implication in a New Negro ideology whose critique of civilisational discourse was limited and partial and whose racial imaginary was prone to masculinist figurations.

It ought to be noted in connection to the latter point, however, that much of Johnson's work achieved sensitive and dignified representations of women. Typical in several respects was perhaps his most famous work, *Forever Free* (1935, see Figure 4), a sculpture in wood whose columnar form figured a Black mother dressed in a white blouse and black skirt, standing straight and holding her head high while two children played at her feet. The piece presented a vision of freedom embodied by the Black woman's strong, reliable, and dignified pose. The centrality of her mothering role –

Figure 4: *Forever Free* (1935).

[97] Quoted in Lewis, pp. 77-8

evident in the etching of the children into the mother's own form – nevertheless disclosed an allegiance to a normative vision of femininity. Johnson's insistence on the importance of Black women's mothering role ought to be understood as correlative of his insistence on racial roots and Black nationhood, both of which commonly relied on assumptions of women's nurturing and domestic role.[98]

There were therefore a series of tensions in Johnson's representational practice that related closely to the core contradiction between his nationalist doctrine, his multicultural context, and – at a psychological level – his own multiracial background. Johnson's art was shaped by his dual affiliation to the modernisms of the New Negro movement heralded by Alain Locke and the self-consciously multicultural modernism of the Bay Area.[99] His art took shape from the circumstance of being a New Negro artist in the cosmopolitan West Coast. Demonstratively, the distinctive and multi-diasporic cultural composition of the Bay Area was operative in the formation of an internationalist Black cultural nationalism, which identified racial authenticity with the US South while deliberately emulating and borrowing from folkish, non-Western, and 'primitive' art amply available in cosmopolitan West Coast communities.[100]

The examples of William Grant Still in Los Angeles and Sargent Johnson in San Francisco each testify to the significance of urban West Coast locales in African American cultural producers' negotiation of nationalist and internationalist politics. For Still, Los Angeles marked the turning point in his adoption of a 'universal idiom' which incorporated the cultural pluralism of Southern California into a music intended to express the American melting pot. Even as Still's nationalist, integrationist, and anti-radical outlook undergirded his music, however, Black Atlantic transnationalism remained

[98] See Anne Stavney, '"Mothers of Tomorrow: The New Negro Renaissance and the Politics of Maternal Representation', *African American Review*, 32:4 (1998), 533-561.
[99] On this dual affiliation, see Judith Wilson, 'Sargent Johnson: Afro-California Modernist', in *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, ed. by Kymberly N. Pinder (New York: Routledge, 2002), 307-320
[100] The co-articulation of Black nationalism with internationalism is hardly surprising or new given the transnational dimensions of the imagined Black nation. It is a theme, for instance, in Blain, *Set the World on Fire* and Higashida.

evident in his work. Johnson's sculpture signified a somewhat different set of tensions. Johnson's attempt to construct an authentic art of African America rested on a simultaneous valourisation of the South and a generous borrowing of techniques and models from Mexico and East Asia. His art expressed an internationalist cultural nationalism that was more grounded in Berkeley, California, than Birmingham, Alabama.

Mudtown and Mexico: Arna Bontemps

If any Black intellectual's life and work successfully straddled the South and the West in the interwar years, it was Arna Bontemps. Born in Louisiana, most of Bontemps's early life was lived in California, first with his family in the Furlough Tract on the outskirts of Watts, then as a student at Pacific Union College in Napa County and a Post Office worker in Los Angeles. An aspiring writer, he made the move to Harlem in 1924 as the New Negro Renaissance was peaking. There, he built a reputation as an accomplished, meditative poet and was one of the few Renaissance writers who settled with a family. When the economic crisis hit, Bontemps departed Harlem for a teaching job in Huntsville, Alabama. He published his first novel, *God Sends Sunday*, in 1931, but this achievement did little to reduce the misery of the Bontemps's time in Huntsville, which was marred by the unavoidable reality of Jim Crow, compounded by the racial tensions stirred by the Scottsboro trials. In 1934, with Arna Bontemps's mind pregnant with an uncharacteristically angry novel of Black revolution in the South, the family drove out to Watts to live temporarily with Bontemps's father. Over a period of months, and amid tensions between Bontemps and his father, he produced *Black Thunder*, a novel of Gabriel Prosser's 1800 slave revolt. Immediately on receiving the advance on his royalties, Bontemps moved with his family to Chicago, where they remained until settling in Nashville in 1943.[101]

As a writer, Bontemps was uniquely preoccupied with the South, but he was also closely associated with the Harlem and Chicago Renaissances and was engaged in a Black Atlantic

[101] See Jones.

internationalism that led him to write several major works about Haiti. These included his third novel, *Drums at Dusk* (1939), which was informed by a Rosenwald Fund-backed research trip to the island nation, and the children's book co-written with Langston Hughes, *Popo and Fifina* (1932). Bontemps's interest in the history of transatlantic revolutionism also led him to emphasise the connections between slave revolts and French Jacobinism in *Black Thunder* – connections whose equivalence with contemporary Communist-led alliances were not lost on him.[102] But Bontemps was also a product of California, which is where he did much important writing about the South, Haiti, and Blackness, and also where his racial imaginary met some unique challenges.[103] In his writing on the West, Bontemps helped to define what the region meant for Black America and explored possibilities for peaceful coexistence among African Americans and other communities in the transpacific contact zone.

For Bontemps, the South was certainly the source of authentic African Americanness, and his writing about Southern Blacks was influenced by no one as much as his great-uncle, Joe Ward, known as Buddy. The source for the protagonist of *God Sends Sunday*, Buddy had been a 'dandy' in his younger days, but when he joined young Arna's family in the Furlough Tract he was a more ragged and older man.[104] Buddy and Bontemps's father, Paul, clashed during Bontemps's childhood, and these arguments became an important feature of his later writings about the South and the West. Bontemps considered the tensions between Paul Bontemps and Buddy to have epitomised a cultural

[102] Bontemps was an associate of Communists during the 1930s even if not himself as openly committed to socialism. On the Black Atlantic dimensions of *Black Thunder*, see Adélékè Adéèkó, *The Slaves Rebellion: Fiction, History, Orature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005) and Michaela Keck, 'Marginocentricity and Cosmopolitan Interconnections of Black Radical Thought in Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder*', *Atlantic Studies*, 14:1 (2017), 37-50. Bontemps's writing on Haiti has also been discussed elsewhere, for example in Maurice Jackson, 'No Man Could Hinder Him: Remembering Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution in the History and Culture of African American People', in *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution: Selected Essays and Historical Documents*, ed. by Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Brown (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 143-4. Unfortunately, Philip Kaisary's *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination* only considers Bontemps as an adjunct to Hughes. See Philip Kaisary, *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination: Radical Horizons, Conservative Constraints* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), p. 42

[103] Douglas Flamming, 'A Westerner in Search of "Negro-Ness": Region and Race in the Writing of Arna Bontemps', in *Remapping the American West*, ed. by Valerie J. Matsumoto and Blake Allmendinger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 85-100; Emily Lutenski, *West of Harlem: African American Writers and the Borderlands* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015).

[104] Arna Bontemps, *The Old South: "A Summer Tragedy and Other Stories of the Thirties* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1973), p. 6.

and ideological division in the Black community that he also rendered as a regional distinction between South and West. Buddy – in Bontemps's telling, the true Southern Black – arrived in Watts with a suitcase full of homely goods including syrup, candy, pecans, and filé to be used in gumbo; he liberally used the N-word, enjoyed minstrel shows, and put stock in 'mumbo jumbo' tales of ghosts and charms. Buddy dismissed California, saying that he would 'rather be down home than here, if it wasn't for the conditions.'[105] Paul Bontemps, Arna's father, was content to reminisce about Louisiana and admitted to homesickness, but insisted that he had 'children to think about – their education.' In California, Paul Bontemps dispensed with 'mumbo jumbo' in favour of Adventism, learning to dismiss ghosts as tricks played by the Devil. When he sent Arna to boarding school, he instructed his son not to 'go up there acting colored.'[106] His father exemplified for Bontemps the 'educated American Negro' who spurned their 'folk heritage' in favour of 'a clean break with the past'.[107] Buddy, by contrast, was unashamed of his folkish ways. In this rendering, Bontemps connected Black settlement in the West, as personified by his father, with a rejection of the 'authentic' folkways of the South.

The association between settlement in the West and the loss of an authentic racial self was not always so simple or linear in Bontemps's writing, however. Important in this respect was his invention of Mudtown, a settlement usually located near Watts and based on the Furlough Tract of Bontemps's youth. He first described Mudtown in the unpublished novel 'The Chariot in the Clouds', but it appeared more famously in his debut novel, *God Sends Sunday*, and later in *They Seek a City* (written with proletarian author Jack Conroy in 1945, expanded and republished as *Anyplace but Here* in 1965). In the first story of Mudtown, 'The Chariot in the Clouds', the semi-rural town was rendered as an 'idealized black space'.[108] Its 'pastoral, preindustrial' character was carried over to *God Sends Sunday*, where Bontemps described 'a tiny section of the deep south literally transplanted', with Black

[105] Bontemps, *The Old South*, pp. 6, 9.
[106] Bontemps, *The Old South*, pp. 8-10.
[107] Bontemps, *The Old South*, p. 11.
[108] Lutenski, *West of Harlem*, p. 92.

folks living uninhibitedly because they were 'removed from the influence of white folks'.[109] In its later incarnation, Mudtown was given a less localised nature, a 'generic' place 'in American life and culture' where the internal dispersal of African Americans across the country was first, tentatively, begun.[110]

If Mudtown is understood as a moment in the development of African America, describing the early phase of Black migration from the South, and as a particular type of Black space, semi-rural and non-industrial, it becomes evident that Bontemps did not see racial authenticity as being automatically diminished in the West. Indeed, in 'The Chariot in the Clouds', when the lead character Alec developed a racial 'patriotism' after living for some time in Harlem, this 'specific racial feeling' was affectively tied to his love for a resident of Mudtown, Beulah. 'She was to him his race. […] More than anyone else she embodied the complete character of his people'.[111] Like Sargent Johnson embodying Black freedom in the figure of a mother, Bontemps saw in this young woman 'a symbol' of Black American tribulations.[112] Even so, Bontemps did commonly associate racial authenticity with the material conditions and cultural signifiers common in the South. 'The Negro writer […] is a product of the Southern condition', Bontemps argued. 'Whether he wills it or not, he reflects the tensions and cross-purposes of that environment'.[113]

It was through this racial imagining of South and West that Bontemps approached the West's contradictory position as a space simultaneously imbibed with nationalist and transnational meanings. Even as he portrayed Mudtown as an authentically Black space, he did not erase non-Black, non-American presences. In 'The Chariot in the Clouds', for instance, one of Bontemps's Black characters, Pig, 'always associated with the Mexicans'. He 'looked much like a Mexican himself and in their

[109] Bontemps, *God Sends Sunday: A Novel* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2005) p. 118. The description was itself a transplantation from 'The Chariot in the Clouds', where Mudtown had been 'small' rather than 'tiny'. See Arna Bontemps, 'The Chariot in the Clouds', p. 76, Syracuse University Special Collections Library, Arna Bontemps papers (ABP), Box 41, digital copy accessed 20/5/2020 courtesy of Emily Lutenski.
[110] Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *Anyplace but Here* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), p. 10.
[111] Bontemps, 'The Chariot in the Clouds', p. 206, ABP 41.
[112] Bontemps, 'The Chariot in the Clouds', p. 206, ABP 41.
[113] Quoted in Jill Leroy-Frazier, 'Othered Southern Modernism: Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder*', *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 63:1-2 (2010), 3-29 (p. 3).

company was frequently taken for one'. Pig 'talked with them in Spanish', and married a Mexican woman, Chona, who only spoke Spanish ('that heathen language', as Pig's mother saw it).[114] This intercultural connection did not diminish Pig's Blackness; however well he adapted to 'Mexican food […] a tortilla against one of Ma Pat's biscuits was just no match.'[115] Bontemps also rendered Los Angeles as multiethnic, including in the Black district around Central Avenue. There, commerce brought Blacks and Chinese together in underground collusion: Ink Mason's barber shop was used by 'the Chinese laundry-man next door' as headquarters for 'the lottery business he carried on among the Negroes.'[116] Indeed, Mudtown itself was not always an American settlement: in a letter to his close friend Langston Hughes, Bontemps referred to a 'little mud town' near a relative's ranch outside Ensenada, Baja California.[117]

In later pieces, the multiethnic character of Western Black settlements took on a less illicit, more nostalgic and idyllic quality. Reminiscing in the shadow of the 1965 Watts riots, Bontemps responded to the construction of the 'Black ghetto' by projecting utopian pasts and alternative futures for African Americans in California. In the 1968 introduction to *Black Thunder*, Bontemps reflected on his writing of the novel in 1934, which he regarded as a somewhat different moment in the swing of time's 'pendulum'. While he acknowledged that in the Watts of 1934 there existed 'frustrations' that remained 'dormant', these did not explode in the same manner as happened in the notorious 1965 riots (and in Gabriel Prosser's 1800 rebellion). Instead, the town Bontemps knew in the Depression years was a peaceful interracial community in which Bontemps's family lived opposite a 'vacant lot' where 'a friendly Mexican neighbor grazed his milk goat', and their house bordered 'a Japanese truck farmer's asparagus field'. 'The air was like transparent gold in those days', he recalled.[118] Similarly, in 1965's *Anyplace But Here*, he conjured – whether from memory or invention is not clear – a 'Mexican

[114] Arna Bontemps, 'The Chariot in the Clouds', pp. 14-15, 21, ABP 41.
[115] Bontemps, 'The Chariot in the Clouds', p. 24, ABP 41.
[116] Bontemps, 'The Chariot in the Clouds', p. 77, ABP 41.
[117] Bontemps to Hughes, 21 April [1934], Yale University, Beinecke Library, Langston Hughes Papers (LHP), Box 17 folder 385.
[118] Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) p. xxii

storekeeper and his pretty daughter Julia', and an 'even prettier colored girl named Alameda who looked more Mexican than Julia.'[119] The implication was of a simple, preindustrial life, lost to hardening racial geographies in the vicinity of Los Angeles.

Bontemps's writing about utopian possibility in the West was not wholly nostalgic, however. In *Anyplace but Here*, the representation of a past idyll was mixed with the promise of a modern social-democratic utopia. In the Furlong Tract where his family had lived, the National Housing Administration in 1941 developed a housing project known as Pueblo del Rio. There, according to Bontemps, a period was enjoyed of interracial mingling and intercultural cohesion. 'Negro, Mexican, white, and Filipino children' played together 'in a wading pool', 'thoroughly integrated' by the architecture designed by Black architect Paul R. Williams. Bontemps described a full community life, with 'classes in home art and family living', 'lawns and garden, day nurseries and playgrounds, community meeting rooms and staff offices' all replacing the 'tumble-down verandas' of his childhood.[120] In this narrative, Bontemps rediscovered the racial frontier – as a place of unique cultural mixture and racial freedom – in the urban geography created by the New Deal state. The Southwestern borderlands once again offered unique opportunities for inter-diasporic connection and interracial living, courtesy of the American variation on social-democratic reform.

It is impossible to ignore the centrality of nationalistic conceptions in this vision. In the description of the Pueblo del Rio idyll, utopia's existence was owed to the intervention of the American state, glossing New Deal nationalism as replete with progressive potential. More generally in *Anyplace but Here*, Bontemps and Conroy limned Black internal migration as an Americanising process. For instance, they equated Black migrants out of the South and white pioneers of the West, in a manoeuvre identical to that discussed above in Alain Locke's 'The New Negro' essay (see page 32). According to Bontemps, the experience of Black migration out of the South 'has a deep meaning for

[119] Bontemps and Conroy, *Anyplace but Here*, p. 8
[120] Bontemps and Conroy, *Anyplace but Here*, pp. 9-10.

all America', 'and just as every man who went West had his own personal reasons, so every Negro who left the South behind was motivated by a set of circumstances peculiar to himself.'[121] Bontemps used Black migration to stake a claim on American citizenship, and imagined a remade nation which embraced its role as a meeting-point for numerous global diasporas. His America was one which embraced an identity as a transnational nation: an agglomeration of displaced peoples and a meeting place for different racial groups.

The only trace of an equivalent utopian sentiment in Bontemps's earlier writing about the West came in 1934, when he and Hughes discussed the possibility of spending some time at a ranch owned by Bontemps's 'brother-in-law's relatives' below the border, in Baja California. 'It would be a grand place to write', he insisted. The area was rich with literary heritage: near to where Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island* and a favourite spot of Peter Bernard Kyle, a popular author and former soldier. Bontemps noted the ranch's proximity to an 'Indian village, Russian village, little mud town, the incomparable beach at Ensenada'.[122] In this telling, the promise of the West – as a place of retreat for artistic creation and an interracial idyll – was more available in Baja California than in America's Golden State.

In Bontemps's reconciliation of transnational and nationalist meanings of the West, a more radical critique of America as a colonial project was lost. The only Indigenous presence in his reminiscences about California was in the prologue to *Anyplace But Here*. Bontemps described a Black resident of the Furlough Tract named Red Eagle, who 'had grown up and lived most of his life among Indians in Oklahoma' and had worked as a cowboy. The figure of Red Eagle was not used to offer any consideration of colonialism, instead producing a discussion of Black cowboys. Bontemps's telling of the story of Black cowboys rested for the most part on a quote from Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones in their 1965 book, *The Negro Cowboys*. There, Black cowboys appeared as romantic heroes akin

[121] Bontemps and Conroy, *Anyplace but Here*, p. 10.
[122] Arna Bontemps to Hughes, 21 April [1934], LHP 17:385.

to the white cowboys who populated films and novels, but the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism was also emphasised: 'even when one of them was praised as "the whitest man I've ever known," he was not white.'[123] Here, Bontemps's portrait of the West was consistently anti-racist, but it did not attempt to contend with colonial realities.

All these threads converged in the unpublished children's story Bontemps co-authored with Hughes, 'Boy of the Border'. Mostly drafted in 1939, the story was likely sketched in earlier writing sessions such as those in 1935 in Watts that produced other children's stories, 'Bon-Bon Buddy' and 'The Paste-Board Bandit'.[124] A tale of a Mexican boy's journey with his uncle and a small group of companions from the northern Mexican state of Sonora to Los Angeles to sell horses, 'Boy of the Border' pointedly minimised the significance of the US-Mexico border, emphasising the continuity between the two countries. On hearing that the group had crossed the border, Miguel exclaimed in surprise, 'it doesn't look any different from Mexico'. Though he still expected Los Angeles to 'look different', Miguel 'was rather glad to find Arizona much like his native State. He didn't feel strange and out-of-place as he had feared'.[125] The natural continuity between Mexico and the US also emerged from a tale told by Uncle Mario about a legendary horse, whose free ranging across North America Mario celebrated. The horse, he said, was 'seen by tribes as far north as Montana and as far south as these Serrano plains of ours.'[126] An additional and likely accidental layer was added to this borderless geography by Hughes and Bontemps's reference to 'Serrano plains', in which they seemingly mistook an Indigenous group in Southern California for an area of northern Mexico.[127] But it was not only the landscape and animals of the region that straddled the border. In Los Angeles, Miguel and his uncle

[123] Bontemps and Conroy, *Anyplace but Here*, pp. 6-7.
[124] Rampersad I, p. 307.
[125] Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, 'Boy of the Border', p. 21, LHP 289:4718.
[126] Hughes and Bontemps, 'Boy of the Border', p. 14, LHP 289:4718.
[127] Given the familiarity of both Hughes and Bontemps with the Southwest, this mistake seems surprising and suggests a residual parochialism even in this transnational text. It is possible that the mistake may have originated with Garth Jeffers, son of Robinson and Una Jeffers, who had herded horses in New Mexico and whom Hughes consulted in writing the story (Rampersad I, p. 374).

stayed with Miguel's aunt Chona and her two adult children in Watts, enjoying the city for several weeks before returning to Mexico.[128]

For similar reasons, the borderland was also a site for interracial and intercultural mixing. While crossing the Colorado River, Miguel befriended 'a freckled boy with carrot-colored hair', and on the other side he met a kindly Navajo man who gifted him a bow and arrow.[129] These moments figured the borderland as a place of harmonious encounter rather than colonisation and conquest, departing from the narratives of American civilisational triumph but not going so far as to confront the bloody legacy of westward expansion. The 'Indians' sighted by Miguel appeared 'very proud and dignified' and happily discussed their way of life with the Mexicans, but their speech was rendered stereotypically broken ('you good boy', 'much good stick, I give you') and they gave no suggestion of antagonism to the US state.[130]

In a more unexpected ethnic cameo, Bontemps and Hughes also wrote 'a company of gypsies' into the tale. They were rendered 'strange people' in ostentatious clothing ('a woman so fat, dressed in so many colors that she looked like a great big pin cushion'), and their relationship with the traveling Mexicans was uniquely conflictual. 'A half-grown boy' among the Romani group broke the bow gifted to Miguel by the Navajo man, and when the boys fought, 'the fat gypsy on the wagon' was uninterested in breaking it up.[131] In this incident, the impulse to provide spectacle and action to the child reader overcame the wish to imagine intercultural encounter as peaceful and enriching. Once more, too, the representation fit established clichés, and Bontemps and Hughes failed to reckon with important historical realities (of Indigenous genocide and Romani enslavement). While Bontemps and Hughes sought to imagine a more just, free, and peaceful world for the young audience of 'Boy of the Border', their anti-racist intervention itself incorporated racial stereotyping and colonial erasure.

[128] Hughes and Bontemps, 'Boy of the Border', chapter 11, LHP 289:4718.
[129] Hughes and Bontemps, 'Boy of the Border', p. 25, LHP 289:4718.
[130] Hughes and Bontemps, 'Boy of the Border', pp. 30-1, LHP 289:4718.
[131] Hughes and Bontemps, 'Boy of the Border', pp. 34, 37, LHP 289:4718.

If Hughes and Bontemps's earlier work for children, *Popo and Fifina*, might be read as 'a didactic text' instructing young African American readers of 'the achievements of the Haitian Revolution', 'Boy of the Border' might, too, be understood as, in part, a didactic story of international and interracial friendship.[132] Bontemps and Hughes's borderland was a place of shared landscapes, easy border-crossing, and dispersed family connections and its representation as such was intended to foster a disposition of hospitality and understanding among its intended juvenile readers. In the story, they attempted sympathetic renderings of several ethnic groups – Mexicans in Mexico and America, Indigenous Americans – often under- or mis-represented in American literature. But their anti-racist sentiment did not produce consistent divergences from racial stereotypes, and did not provide an anti-colonial commentary.

In these respects, 'Boy of the Border' typified Bontemps's enduring but troubled hopes that the West provided a space for successful interracial integration. Though he maintained that the South was the source of an authentic African American folk culture and at times associated the West with a dilution of Blackness, he saw the opportunities in the West for cultural encounter – particularly with other ethnic groups racialised as nonwhite – as unthreatening to Blackness. Indeed, Bontemps was interested in fostering understanding across numerous ethnic and national borders. He figured the West Coast's position as a transpacific borderland as a source of possibility, endorsing the West as a transnational space and a meeting ground of diasporas while also retaining a commitment to a multiracial American nationalism that attempted to adapt colonial and masculinist mythologies of pioneering for anti-racist ends.

The same tangled knot of race and imperialism, national and transnational belonging, Black authenticity and interracial integration, feminine being and masculine becoming, has tied together the work of the three members in the triptych of cultural producers assessed in this section. Working across different mediums – Still in musical composition, Johnson in sculpture, and Bontemps in

[132] Kaisary, p. 42.

literature – but addressing parallel problems, these New Negro intellectuals have helped to frame the discussions that will take place in subsequent chapters about the global and local locations, the various ideological iterations, and the inconsistencies in African American internationalism during the Depression decade. William Grant Still's residency in Los Angeles contributed to his pivot toward a 'universal idiom' that he felt expressed a multicultural America. His universal-nationalist concern was nevertheless accompanied by a vociferous antiradicalism and an undimmed commitment to transnational Blackness. Sargent Johnson explicitly rejected calls for a non-racial or trans-racial art, advocating a Black cultural nationalism that fixated on the South even as he continually engaged with the West Coast's diasporic communities in a cosmopolitan practice that might be read as proto-anti-colonial. Arna Bontemps synthesised a love for the West's transnational dimensions with commitments to African American folk culture and multiracial American nationalism. In doing so, he sometimes compromised the anti-racist and anti-colonial basis of his creative practice. In each of their works, the West offered a specific set of possibilities for using African American cultural and political practice to negotiate their relations to the American nation, to the continental Americas, and to transcontinental ideological currents.

Routing our understanding of Black internationalism through the American West clarifies how doctrines of racial authenticity shaped internationalist discourse through the 1930s and indicates that these doctrines were being impacted by local and regional as well as transnational factors. Black settlement in and cultural production from the West Coast produced engagements with the American nation and with ideas about Black nationhood that were woven into perspectives on America's racialised migrant communities. The expansive solidarities that were so important to anti-racist struggle on the West Coast were constitutive of a politics that reformulated ideas about the American nation, accessing the global via America's overlapping diasporas. What appears is therefore an ideological structuration in which internationalism was produced via the local, the racial, and the national.

Chapter 2

Between Two Citadels: Hollywood, Moscow, and the Construction of Soviet Alterity

Like so many other migrants who journeyed to the Golden State, African Americans were commonly drawn by the promise of wealth. For many writers, the state's most tantalising gold mine was in Hollywood. With the Harlem hub of New Negro effervescence dissipating amidst economic collapse, one of the movement's leading lights, Wallace Thurman, departed for California's filmmaking community. In 1934, he was said to have been earning $250 per week, making him one of the highest-earning Black men in the country.[1] Thurman's trajectory was nevertheless rare among the community of Black writers in America. Thurman was born in the same year as Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes, and he had known Bontemps when they both worked in Los Angeles before each going to Harlem. These contemporaries nevertheless travelled quite different paths from Thurman in the 1930s, though they each saw filmmaking as a tantalising possibility for financial security. While Thurman was receiving his remarkable pay checks for work on films such as *All Tomorrow's Children*, Bontemps insisted to Hughes that more Black writers must make their way into Hollywood: 'we must crash that citadel'.[2] Only months before, insubstantial rumours had circulated that Hughes and Bontemps too would 'write for the movies'. Struggling to finance a trip to Los Angeles, Bontemps commented with irony that he might soon 'be jiggling money'.[3] Regardless of the appeal of Hollywood work for Bontemps, for Thurman it was not a salvation: he died of tuberculosis, aggravated by alcoholism, only months later in December 1934.[4]

[1] Phyllis Klotman, 'The Black Writer in Hollywood, Circa 1930: The Case of Wallace Thurman', in *Black American Cinema*, ed. by Manthia Diawara (London: Routledge, 1993), 80-92 (p. 81).
[2] Bontemps to Hughes, 15 August 1934, LHP 17:386.
[3] Bontemps to Hughes, 25 April 1934, LHP 17:386.
[4] Amritjit Singh, 'Introduction: Wallace Thurman and the Harlem Renaissance', in *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. by Amritjit Singh and Daniel M. Scott III (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 1-31 (pp. 5, 17).

When Hughes did manage to win access to the Hollywood money pot, as a writer for the 1939 film *Way Down South*, it proved a mixed blessing. The process of writing the script, which he did in collaboration with actor Clarence Muse, involved numerous humiliations, and its outcome fit the mould of Hollywood representations of the slave South.[5] After the film's release, Hughes was forced to respond to the bruising rebukes of the Left, circulating a statement titled 'To My Public', which measured the merits of *Way Down South* by breaking down the expenses that payment for the film had enabled him to meet, and compared the project with the acclaimed but financially arid protest play, *Don't You Want to be Free?* 'Starvation is not always amusing', Hughes wrote in exasperation.[6]

Hollywood was, evidently, a formidable citadel of white supremacy in American culture, and in lieu of success in storming this bastion, some African Americans sought access to the cinema industry elsewhere. In Moscow, the Soviet film industry was a precious means of propagandising and making a socialist culture. Leading figures in the Communist Party had for many years expressed their passion for it as a form uniquely suited to social transformation and mass propaganda in a nation mired in illiteracy.[7] Soviet cinema through the 1920s established itself as an avant-garde force, producing a clutch of innovative films suffused with communistic politics and shaped in their techniques (notably, the use of montage) by Marxist philosophy.[8] As the centre of a global Communist movement which was rapidly winning support from anti-colonial revolutionaries, the Soviets – unlike the Hollywood executives – were interested in working with Black artists.[9] Indeed, even as Bontemps

[5] Rampersad I, pp. 368-71.
[6] 'To My People', 6 November 1939, LHP 367:5927.
[7] See, for instance, Leon Trotsky's remarkable article 'Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema', in which he insists on the potential for cinema to play a role in eliminating the related evils of alcoholism and religious superstition. Leon Trotsky, 'Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema', in *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Science and Culture*, (Montreal: Pathfinder Press, 1998), 36-41.
[8] Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed by Jay Leyda, (San Diego: Harvest, 1977).
[9] S. Ani Mukherji, '"Like Another Planet to the Darker Americans": Black Cultural Work in 1930s Moscow', in *Africa in Europe: Studies in Transnational Pactice in the Long Twentieth Century*, ed by Eve Rosenhaft and Robbie Aitken (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 120-141.

enthused at crashing the Hollywood citadel, he wondered whether his outline for a play provisionally titled 'The Soldier's Pass' may give him the 'chance to go to Russia' for a 'Moscow production'.[10]

In this chapter, the cartography of Black internationalism is redrawn to identify connections between California and European Russia. California was an important frontier of American modernity, home not only to Hollywood but also to such monumental projects of technological modernity as Hoover Dam, but this version of modernity was blighted for African Americans by the pervasive racism which denied them the enjoyment of capitalist America's bounties. In Moscow and other centres of European Russia, Black visitors frequently found themselves honoured guests and were thereby drafted into roles as unofficial cultural diplomats of Soviet socialism, helping to discursively construct the USSR as a model of a liberated alt-modernity in their reports and correspondences.[11]

Despite its distance from Atlantic waters proper, and its relative marginality in the African diaspora, Russia occupied a peculiar position in the global imaginary of Black Americans. This can in part be attributed to the parallels in American and Russian historical developments. Both underwent a dramatic – and profoundly incomplete – liberation in 1863, as President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation coincided with Tsar Alexander II's edict proclaiming an end to serfdom in Russia. American emancipation was a more seismic challenge to prevalent class relations, achieved by means of war and revolution rather than legal reform, but both acts represented an attempt to confront the reality of unfree and semi-free labour, mostly agricultural in nature, in vast and powerful nations. Nor did equivalences between the US and Russia begin and end with African Americans' experiences. Like the US, the Russian Empire and later the USSR were multinational polities containing an extraordinary range of cultural traditions, ethnic identities, religious beliefs, and skin pigmentations.[12] This immense cultural diversity was mapped by the ruling ideology of the tsarist period (threads of which were

[10] Bontemps to Hughes, 25 April, 1934, LHP 17:386.
[11] Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line*, pp. 8-10.
[12] Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire: 1552-1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

carried on post-Revolution, particularly in the Stalinist era) onto a hierarchical social ordering. Alongside the oppression of subject nations such as Ukrainians and Poles, the Russian state practiced a virulent antisemitism that took forms easily equated with those experienced by Black Americans: mass violence (pogroms) and spatial segregation (in the Pale of Settlement).[13] Even in its process of expansion and settlement, including the subjection of Siberia's indigenous peoples and the exploitation of its natural resources, the Russian Empire presented parallels with the US.[14]

The mechanisms of social control dominant under tsarism were profoundly disrupted, though not wholly banished, by the Russian Revolution of 1917. The centre of revolutionary power remained in the European metropolises, but the Revolution provoked armed conflicts and political invigoration in the Asiatic South of the former tsarist Empire and in its oppressed Western territories. As a result of the political transformation effected by the Communist government, modernising initiatives targeting established religious structures and entrenched ways of life – impacting issues ranging from land ownership to sartorial cultures – were implemented energetically.[15] In this early period, the Soviet experiment was understood by many international observers as an intriguing, futurist alternative to capitalism rather than as the tragic story of reckless social engineering and totalitarianism that it has commonly been rendered by liberals in the twenty-first century West.[16]

So far as many global intellectuals were concerned, Russia therefore held a double appeal. On the political level, it was the capital of anti-imperial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist resistance. The Communist International was a conduit of unrivalled significance for activists interested in revolutionary politics not only of a socialistic but also an anti-imperial nationalist bent, and the political

[13] Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
[14] Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, 'Introduction: Refiguring Imperial Terrains', in *Imperial Formations*, ed. by Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Purdue (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), p. 4.
[15] Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).
[16] David Brandenberger, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

centre of the Comintern was Moscow. For anyone who imagined themselves part of an insurgent political vanguard, the Soviet Union was therefore an appealing destination. Indeed, numerous African Americans had already made the 'magic pilgrimage' there during the 1920s and had written glowing reports of a society without anti-Black prejudice.[17] At the same time, the USSR was situated prominently in circles of cultural avant-gardism. The films of Eisenstein, the architectural designs of Tatlin, and the poetry of Mayakovsky were defining, totemic moments of Soviet experimentalism in the arts during the 1920s. Even as the country became more closed and autarkic under the Stalinist regime, secure in its power by the early 1930s, it remained engaged in a countervailing project of cultural globalism. The USSR, and in particular Moscow, was therefore a capital location for practitioners of avant-gardism in the arts.[18]

For African Americans emerging out of a period in which Black modernism was characterised by a fascination – among Black artists and, just as importantly, white audiences and patrons – with the 'primitive' and with related nationalist politics, there was a deep lustre in Soviet alt-modernism as both a political practice (vanguardism) and a cultural mode (avant-gardism). The two were related. Black intellectuals often understood that social transformation was a prerequisite for freedom in the artistic sphere, denied as they were the educational access and career opportunities that shaped the modernism of their white American and European counterparts. A political territory which proclaimed to be both anti-racist and culturally open was therefore a magnetising force.

In 1932, this magnetism drew a group of twenty-two volunteers – from various backgrounds, but mostly well-educated African Americans and with a proclivity for intellectual and cultural work – to the USSR for a film project about American racism which avoided 'the sentimentality and buffoonery

[17] See Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (New York: Arno Press, 1969); Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978); Maxwell; Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008).
[18] See Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). The pairing of avant-gardism and revolutionary vanguardism is owed to Steven S. Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 12.

with which the usual Hollywood production on the Negro is burdened'.[19] Within this group, a core of Soviet loyalists and radical activists would emerge who were tied together beforehand by shared origins in or encounters on the West Coast. The emergence of this cadre of Black radicals, via their routes in the West Coast, will be the central narrative in the first part of the chapter. Among this group were not only the famed poet Langston Hughes but also the educator and secretary-turned revolutionary organiser Louise Thompson; the journalist Loren Miller, who would later achieve fame as a leading civil rights lawyer; and the clerk, chiropractor, and activist Matt Crawford. The experiences of these individuals in Soviet Russia helped to deepen or ignite commitments to revolutionary and socialist politics; commitments which they would take back with them and which would help to shape West Coast radicalism over the long term.

Sites of burgeoning but isolated Black communities, America's coastal locales helped to generate a friendship group that ultimately became an influential cadre of Black radicals. This transformation is logged in the rich archive of correspondence within this network, the enduring significance of which has been materialised by the publication of a volume of letters between Langston Hughes, Louise Thompson and her second husband William Patterson, and Matt Crawford and his wife Evelyn (known as 'Nebby'). Compiling and editing this volume, the descendants of the Crawfords and Thompson Pattersons have helped to highlight the role of this network in twentieth-century American radicalism.[20] This chapter will sustain that centrality, though it should be noted that other routes between California and European Russia could be traced: William Patterson, for instance, also grew up on the West Coast, travelled in the USSR, and ultimately became a member of the same network as Thompson, Hughes, Miller, and the Crawfords.[21]

[19] Miller to Henry Lee Moon, 11 June 1932, Pasadena, Huntington Library, Loren Miller Papers (LMP), Box 14 folder 2.
[20] Evelyn Louise Crawford and MaryLouise Patterson, eds, *Letters from Langston: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Red Scare and Beyond* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).
[21] The web of connections among these New Negro intellectuals was intricate indeed: Louise Thompson's first husband was Wallace Thurman, from whom she divorced after six months, in 1929. She married Patterson in 1940. (See Gilyard).

In the latter part of the chapter, the re-emergence of the West Coast in individuals' reflections on their experience of Soviet travel will be explored. In fashioning a Black socialist episteme, the West provided a series of synecdoches for American capitalism. As Black visitors weighed and measured the respective hopes, potential, and perceived reality of life in the European USSR and the USA, they deployed Californian locations in various ways. At times, they appeared as the metonymic stand-in for the failure of American nationalist myth, but more rarely the travellers drew on notions of the West Coast as an exceptional place for escape from the drudgery of American life. The spatial dynamics of Black internationalism were therefore expanded in two ways in European Russia: not only contorting Black Atlantic geographies to include Russia, but also foregrounding the Americanness of key Black engagements with European and Soviet modernism. These versions of the American West will be examined by reference to a series of moments and themes. First, the monumental building projects of the Boulder Dam in Nevada and the Dnieprostroi Dam in Ukraine modelled wildly different versions of modernity. Second, the processes, structures, and experiences of Soviet filmmaking drew comparison with the capitalist practices in Hollywood. Third, California, a state under the heel of fierce anti-union and anti-radical laws, was figured as exemplifying Depression-era threats to the promise of American liberty. Finally, fabled as a land of plenty, California helped to frame a counter-discourse about luxury and scarcity in the binary worlds of American capitalism and Stalinist Communism.

To place Soviet alterity in relation with the West Coast is therefore to consider its salience in the configuration of nationalisms and internationalisms during an age of political polarisation. It leads us to understand the relatively small Black communities in places like 1930s Oakland as indispensable nodes of global Black intellectuality and political radicalism, drawing a more complete map of interwar Black internationalism. The entry of the American West Coast into the centre of Black-Soviet encounters provides an opportunity to present a more complete cast of central characters who, in an episode of avant-garde drama inspired by African American protest, were thwarted in their designs by the intervention of Great Power intriguers. Finally, the place of the West Coast in American

nationalist mythology gave it a special significance in the ideological project of African American socialism.

The players

The 1932 film-making expedition to Soviet Russia undertaken by a group of Black volunteers had as its most celebrated member Langston Hughes, yet the leader and in many respects the most significant personality in the group was its organiser and *de facto* political commissar Louise Thompson. Despite a long and influential career in the politics of protest and revolution, Thompson has only attracted serious scholarly attention in the past decade, becoming more of a focal point in scholarship on the history of women in the Black radical tradition, the subject of a biography in 2017, and more recently considered as a participant in the American West's radical milieu.[22] Both of her husbands, as well as several of her friends including Hughes, have long been a focus of attention. If one approaches the film-making expedition with a cautiousness toward Hughes's celebrity dazzle and an attentiveness to Thompson's agency, her decisive role becomes clear. Thompson's agency is exemplified by her role in mobilising networks of West Coast intellectuals in radical activism.[23] Tracing the origin of these networks necessitates digging into the life stories of Thompson, Matt Crawford, and Loren Miller. At the same time, these biographical vignettes illustrate the emergence of a shared internationalist perspective among them, which helped give rise to their desire for a Soviet adventure and shaped their responses to Soviet life.

[22] McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; Gilyard. In a 2018 essay, Emily Lutenski situated Thompson as a figure of the West. See Emily Lutenski, 'Leaving the West for the Left: Louise Thompson Patterson, the New Negro Movement, and Black Women's Activism', in *Left in the West: Literature, Culture, and Progressive Politics in the American West*, ed. by Gioia Woods (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2018), 335-362.

[23] In conceptualising Thompson's role, I find Diane Fujino's deployment of the notion of "centerperson" helpful. This describes a type of leadership characterised by nurturance and mobilisation of networks. See Diane C. Fujino, 'Grassroots Leadership and Afro-Asian Solidarities: Yuri Kochiyama's Humanizing Radicalism', in *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, ed. by Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 294-316 (p. 294).

Born in Chicago in 1901, Thompson's parents, Lulu and Will Toles, separated when she was an infant.[24] From the age of four onward, her childhood was characterised by a pattern of itinerant migration. Louise's mother was initially drawn away from Chicago by the Cayton family in Seattle at a time when they were at the peak of their wealth and distinction. Susie Revels Cayton appeared to Lulu a model of professional excellence and maternal care, and the connection with the Caytons also left a lasting impression on Louise, whose later radicalism coincided with the participation of Susie and her son Revels in the Communist Party and their front organisations.[25]

Thompson and her mother spent several years living in a succession of small towns across the West, in the states of Nevada, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and California. In these contexts, Louise was frequently the only Black child in the town and was therefore often ostracized by her peers and neighbours. [26] At the same time, she encountered the ethnic diversity of the region. Living in Goldfield, Nevada, she saw her mother temporarily bring a vulnerable Mexican woman into the home, modelling a care and openness with migrants which her daughter later replicated. As a child in the West Louise could equally give in to widespread prejudices, once joining with her peers to taunt a Chinese man as a 'Chink'.[27] In the same town, she also witnessed a strike in 1907, providing an early insight into the labour movement to which she would later devote herself.[28] These years of migration saw Louise's adoption of the Thompson surname as her mother married a man named John Thompson, whom Louise remembered coldly.[29] Finally, Louise and her family settled in the San Francisco Bay Area, where in 1915 she met and befriended Matt Crawford on the playground of the Cole School in West Oakland.[30] A student with real aptitude, she entered the University of California, Berkeley, in 1919 and

[24] Gilyard, p. 7, p. 9
[25] Gilyard, pp. 9-12
[26] Ruth Prago, 'Interview with Louise Thompson Patterson', New York University, Tamiment Library, Communist Party of the United States of America Oral History Collection, Track 1, http://digitaltamiment.hosting.nyu.edu/s/cpoh/item/4035 [accessed 6/3/2019]. See also Gilyard, pp. 12-25.
[27] Gilyard, p. 15.
[28] Gilyard, p. 16.
[29] Prago, 'Interview with Louise Thompson Patterson', Tamiment Library, CP Oral History, Track 1; Gilyard, p. 18.
[30] *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 10.

graduated cum laude with a degree in Business Administration in 1923. Demonstrating her still-developing inclination toward a global consciousness, she minored in Spanish.

While at university in Berkeley, Thompson came under the influence of the local NAACP, attending a meeting presided over by the man who would be her husband many years later, William Patterson. The NAACP founder WEB Du Bois became Thompson's 'cultural, intellectual, political, and moral touchstone', and was important for instilling her with race pride.[31] The tension between that race pride and the difficult compromises often necessary for an African American to make in carving out a career eventually drove her away from California. Thompson's fair complexion and proficiency in Spanish had enabled her to pass for Mexican to gain work as a secretary in the business district of San Francisco. The experience was hurtful, however, and she could not stand to continue pretending that she did not know her Black friends while they all commuted on the ferry across the Bay.[32] In 1925, Thompson moved with her mother back to Chicago, and after a year in Arkansas, she resettled again with a job at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. Employed as an educator, Thompson's year at Hampton was itself an educational experience. She encountered both the possibilities and burdens that came with white philanthropy, and the student strike which paralysed the campus in 1927 similarly impacted her social outlook.[33]

Over the subsequent years as a resident of Harlem at the height of the Black cultural renaissance, Thompson developed a network of friends among the cultured young Harlemites known as the self-proclaimed 'Niggerati'. In 1928, she hurriedly married the novelist Wallace Thurman and, after their estrangement, she took a holiday in Reno, Nevada, where she met and became infatuated with her future travelling mate Loren Miller.[34] Back in New York, having made connections with Alain Locke, she found employment as the stenographer for Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, who

[31] Gilyard, p. 39; Crawford and Patterson, p. 10.
[32] Gilyard, p. 40; Crawford and Patterson, p. 10; Prago, 'Interview with Louise Thompson Patterson', Tamiment Library, CP Oral History, Track 2.
[33] Gilyard, pp. 55-8.
[34] Gilyard, p. 68.

were developing their notoriously ill-fated playscript titled 'Mule Bone'. For complex reasons, this project ended in a traumatic schism between Hughes and Mason.[35] After this break Thompson, like Hughes, became increasingly active in the revolutionary Left, while working for the liberal Congregational Education Society. Having been a founding member of the Friends of the Soviet Union chapter in New York and preoccupied by the case of the Scottsboro boys, the principal campaign for racial justice in America at the time, she was finally charged with leading the effort to organise a group of Black Americans to make a film about American racism for the Soviet-German company Meschrabpomfilm.[36]

While Thompson was concerned with recruiting members to this cultural expeditionary force, Hughes was travelling across the country – focusing on Black communities in the South – delivering a program of poetry. Arranging speaking engagements on the West Coast, he corresponded with his Los Angeles-based acquaintance Loren Miller and the Oakland community activist Matt Crawford.[37] Crawford was a long-standing resident of Oakland whose family was prominent and active in the local Black community, but he arrived in California initially as a migrant from Alabama following a fire that destroyed his father's place of work. His formative years were spent in working-class neighbourhoods across Oakland befriending fellow migrant children not only from the American South but from Italy, Germany, and Britain.[38] As a young man, he was active in the NAACP, in a literary circle called the Phyllis Wheatley Club, and as a member of the Acorn Club forum.[39] In the latter capacity he corresponded with Hughes – whose masterly poem of 1920 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' had made a deep impact on Crawford and his fellows – to invite him to speak in Oakland on his tour.[40] When Hughes arrived, Crawford was living on Acton Street with his wife Nebby (who was also a close friend

[35] See Rampersad I, pp. 182-200; Yuval Taylor, *Zora and Langston: A Story of Friendship and Betrayal* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019).
[36] Gilyard, pp. 72-8; Prago, 'Interview with Louise Thompson Patterson', Tamiment Library, CP Oral History, Tracks 5-6.
[37] See *Letters from Langston*, ed. by Crawford and Patterson, p. 51; Miller to Hughes and Thompson, undated [April 1932], LHP 113:2142.
[38] *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 14.
[39] Rampersad I, p. 238; *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 15.
[40] Rampersad I, p. 238.

of Louise Thompson) and he was working two jobs: as a clerk in San Francisco and as the co-owner of a struggling chiropractic firm in Oakland which he ran with two colleagues.[41] Hughes's speaking engagement had been booked by Crawford via Loren Miller, Hughes's 'representative on the coast'.[42]

Loren Miller had no childhood connection with his fellow Soviet filmmakers, but his origins were somewhat similar to Hughes's in respect to regional identity and class position. He was born in the Midwestern town of Pender, Nebraska, on the edge of the Omaha Indian reservation in 1903.[43] His father was a Black man born into slavery, but he also had German and Irish heritage through his white mother.[44] Pender was a town of migrants, many from German, Swedish, Irish and Italian families, and Miller was at times the victim of their prejudice: he was called 'nigger' while still a child. He was also familiarised with anti-Indigenous stereotypes at this time.[45] The family later moved to Highland, Kansas, where Loren was further educated in the school of American racial prejudice when, for the first time, he experienced segregation.[46]

In 1920, he entered the University of Kansas in Lawrence. His time at university coincided with a wave of intense racial violence across the nation, culminating in the 1921 riots in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and these troubles were compounded by the personal trauma of his father's death at fifty-nine. He was forced to drop out of school for lack of funds, and he worked for a year before returning to the University of Kansas. Miller only completed his sophomore year in Lawrence before moving to Washburn College in Topeka, Kansas.[47] He studied there until 1926, and then moved to Washington, D.C., to study at Howard University. At the same time, he gained some windfall from the New Negro movement, winning the Amy Spingarn prize for art and literature in 1926 for an essay titled 'College',

[41] Rampersad I, p. 238; Crawford and Patterson, p. 15; Matt Crawford to Nebby Crawford, 21 September 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 93.
[42] Hughes to Noël Sullivan, 26 April 1932, University of California Berkeley, Bancroft Library, Noël Sullivan Papers (NSP), 40:1.
[43] Hassan, p. 13.
[44] Hassan, pp. 13-14.
[45] Hassan, pp. 20-22.
[46] Hassan, p. 24, p. 29.
[47] Hassan, pp. 34-36.

which described the struggle that shaped his life for much of the 1920s and 1930s: whether to pursue his ambitions as a writer or practice law. This was likely where Miller first met Hughes, who was a judge in the poetry competition and was on the cusp of publishing his second, seminal collection *Fine Clothes to the Jew*.[48] While at Howard University, Miller benefited from light-skin privilege, but he also grew tired of the colourist culture which marked the Black educational establishment, and he finally completed his education by returning to Washburn College – after a brief run on the railroads – graduating with a degree in law in June 1928.[49]

Miller practiced law in Topeka for a year, but in September 1929, his sister, who had moved with the remainder of his family to California some years earlier, died suddenly. He arrived in Los Angeles later in the month: twenty-six years old and eager to leave the legal profession, he took a job as a reporter for *California News*, one of several Black newspapers in the city.[50] In 1931, Miller left the *News* and joined Charlotta Bass's *California Eagle*, a far better fit for a man with as fierce a social conscience as Miller.[51]

For several years already, Miller had been gaining a reputation as a radical. As early as 1926, he was convinced of Communist analyses of capitalist economics, arguing that the boom that was driving the optimistic mood of the 1920s was bound to end in a crisis. In the occasional correspondence he struck up with Hughes after their meeting, he encouraged the poet to pursue a more stridently anti-capitalist, propagandist line, flattering Hughes even while deriding the Harlem Renaissance as a whole ('you are the only valid artist of that Harlem group').[52] Soon after arriving in Los Angeles, he became involved in two of the major Communist-affiliated front organisations, the International Labor Defence (ILD), and the John Reed Club (JRC).[53] The former was a group concerned with the kind of legal casework which had long been the focus of liberal organisations such as the

[48] Hassan, pp. 36-37; see also Rampersad I, p. 138.
[49] Hassan, pp. 38-39.
[50] Hassan, pp. 41-43.
[51] Hassan, p. 43.
[52] Miller to Hughes, 28 October 1931, LHP 113:2142.
[53] Miller to Hughes and Thompson, undated [April 1932], LHP 113:2142.

NAACP, but with an adrenalizing injection of revolutionary activism focused on mass demonstrations and meetings. It had earned its high profile by leading campaigning around the Sacco and Vanzetti case, which focused the minds of many Leftists in the 1920s. The ILD would continue to be an important part of the 1930s radical left movement – called by Michael Denning the Popular Front – due to its defence of the Scottsboro boys.[54]

The JRC was a circle of cultural workers which provided an incubating environment for art and literature guided by a proletarian ethos and a revolutionary politic. The first and largest JRC was in New York, but during the early 1930s several JRCs would be established on the West Coast and engage in important campaigning work. Alongside Miller, the novelist Sanora Babb was a prominent member of the LA group, and the club was active in such work as sponsoring the display of murals by the Mexican Communist David Alfaro Siqueiros. They also helped Japanese American artists found the Japanese Proletarian Artists' League, which published its own journals, *Proletarian Art* and *Hataraku Hito* (Workingman).[55] The JRC was interracial in its composition, and in its activities it engaged with working-class diaspora communities, manifesting a localised internationalism that was characteristic of the West Coast Left at its best.

Neither Miller's internationalism, nor those of Thompson and Crawford, would remain localised for long. In her work organizing the American Interracial Seminar for the CES, Thompson had sought to help promote interracial understanding and had attempted to take her message to Mexico; she and her group had been turned back in the American South by the threat of a terrorist bombing.[56] The Meschrabpom film project was a new opportunity to foster interracial understanding of a sort that was consistent with Thompson's blossoming socialist conviction. Initially, Thompson appeared doubtful about the likelihood of joining the expedition, tied as she was by her work, her care for her ailing mother, and her limited means.[57] She nevertheless devoted herself to leading the new Co-

[54] Denning, *The Cultural Front*.
[55] Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 209.
[56] Gilyard, p. 73.
[57] Thompson to Hughes, 10 May 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed. by Crawford and Patterson, p. 61.

Operating Committee for Production of a Soviet Film on Negro Life. In the early spring of 1932, Hughes and Miller agreed to join the committee and by May they had confirmed their place in the group.[58]

Thompson took charge of recruiting members to the expedition and she corresponded with Hughes about the mission through April, while Hughes was on the West Coast. In LA, Hughes resided with Miller in his luxuriant apartment on East 24th Street. On 21 April he cheerily read his poems at a church in the city at an event hosted by the LA Civic League, of which Loren Miller's future wife, Juanita Ellsworth, was vice president.[59] Soon after, Hughes lectured to the LA JRC on 'The Social Implications of Current Negro Literature'. Hughes enjoyed LA, but he soon moved on to Northern California and the Bay Area. On 14 May he fulfilled his commitment to Matt Crawford and the Acorn Club, performing for a local audience at Berkeley High School. It was Hughes's 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' which had showed a young Matt Crawford for the first time 'a perspective far beyond the United States'.[60] Now, Hughes's visit opened up a different horizon; he told the Crawfords of the Russia trip and they were captivated by the possibility in it.

While the Crawfords mulled over the Soviet film-making project, Hughes moved on. He lived for a time with a millionaire named Noël Sullivan at 2323 Hyde Street. Sullivan was descended from a founder of the Hibernia Bank and was a leading member of a prominent family which included an uncle in the California state senate. He was a Catholic and a patron of the arts, with an egalitarian attitude on racial matters and 'a political consciousness sharpened by his knowledge of Irish history.' His housekeeper Eulah Pharr was the sister of Juanita Williams, an acquaintance Hughes had made while travelling in the South, and who had encouraged contact between Hughes and Sullivan. In March, Sullivan had invited Hughes to stay with him, and over the subsequent years Sullivan would become a close friend and a generous patron to Hughes.[61]

[58] Thompson to Hughes, 10 May 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed. by Crawford and Patterson, pp. 60-1.
[59] 'So It Seems', *Pittsburgh Courier*, 5 April 1930, p. 2.
[60] Rampersad I, p. 238.
[61] Rampersad I, pp. 238-9.

At the Hyde Street mansion for the final weeks of May, Hughes briefly enjoyed the full privilege and comfort of Sullivan's life. During his stay he received word from Thompson that she would be going to the Soviet Union with him.[62] A week later, he departed San Francisco for engagements in Portland and Seattle. In Seattle, Hughes was hosted by the Cayton family. He befriended Madge, a young leader of the community in the city, and met for the first time her brother Horace, who would later become a good friend when he gained fame as one of the great American sociologists.[63] As Hughes journeyed through the Pacific Northwest, the Crawfords back in Oakland were discussing the Soviet trip. Matt recalled that 'one evening at dinner I was telling my wife, Evelyn, how exciting the trip sounded, how great it would be to travel with Langston and Louise and their friends. She said, Matt, if you really want to go, call Louise.' He did so immediately and sealed his place in the group.[64]

Writing to Hughes about the trip, Thompson asked for his deposit and expressed gladness that Miller – who, not long ago, she had confessed to being in love with – would be going too. 'If we starve', she wrote, referencing the rumours of food shortages in the USSR, 'we will all starve together.'[65] She soon wrote again urgently asking that Hughes, Crawford, and Miller be ready to sail from New York on 15 June. Hughes quickly cancelled the engagements he had made in the Midwest. On 3 June, back in Southern California, he ended the tour with a program at Cain AME Church and the following day he departed with Miller and Crawford for New York in the Ford which had carried him across the country. Aside from a further run-in with Jim Crow on the way, the dashing journey was smooth. The group arrived from sunny California with scarcely any time to spare, and near midnight on 14 June they boarded the *Europa*. From Yuma, Arizona, Hughes had sent Thompson a telegram expressing his

[62] Thompson to Hughes, 16 May 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed. by Crawford and Patterson, p. 62.
[63] Rampersad I, p. 240.
[64] Matt Crawford interview with Arnold Rampersad, quoted in Rampersad I, p. 240.
[65] Thompson to Hughes, 16 May 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed. by Crawford and Patterson, pp. 62-3.

desperate enthusiasm to escape from American racism: 'YOU HOLD THAT BOAT CAUSE ITS AN ARK TO ME'.[66]

Bound together by shared childhood origins in the Bay Area and by common friendship from the start of the film-making expedition, this small unit already had the cohesion of a clique. Over subsequent months, the affection between Louise, Langston, Matt, and Loren would prove to be a solid foundation for a political project which sought to tie the fate of Black Americans to that of the international Communist movement. This project not only altered the geography of the Black Atlantic by encompassing the Soviet Union as an important space for imagining Black liberation but also, and simultaneously, made Black Californian communities central sites for the generation of Black radical networks.

Of course, Thompson, Hughes, Miller, and Crawford may have cohered effectively as a friendship group-cum-socialist cadre, but they were not alone on the *Europa*. With them were eighteen others, generally drawn from the Black middle class, but almost totally lacking in real experience of filmmaking. Among them was Dorothy West, a young member of the Harlem Renaissance set who in subsequent years edited a radical literary magazine, *Challenge*, and who developed a love for Langston while in Russia.[67] The journalists Henry Lee Moon and Ted Poston had little interest in socialist politics but were enthused at the prospect of an adventure in a strange land. The clerk Homer Smith had hopes of settling in Russia, and three members of the group, Sylvia Garner, Juanita Lewis and Wayland Rudd, intended to gain some professional experience in their work as performers. (Juanita Lewis also originated on the West Coast, heralding from Seattle, though she remained outside the circle around Louise Thompson).[68]

[66] Rampersad I, pp. 240-1.
[67] Dorothy West to Hughes, 7 September 1934, LHP 169:3094.
[68] Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 17 October 1932, Pasadena, Huntington Library, Langston Hughes Papers (H-LHP), Box 3.

Beside these, the group included two students from the Hampton Institute, Mildred Jones and Lloyd Patterson; the ex-Party member Thurston McNairy Lewis and the current-CP member, Alan McKenzie, who was the only white participant and was from Long Island; Jamaican agricultural worker Laurence Alberga; social workers Constance White, Katherine Jenkins, and Leonard Hill; Jenkins' fiancé George Sample, who was studying law at Fordham University; Frank Montero of Howard University; and Mollie Lewis from the Teachers' College of Columbia University and who would later be a leading figure in the National Urban League.[69]

After eight days on the *Europa* in which Hughes, Crawford, and Miller recovered from their hurried trip across America by studying Russian and playing games, the boat anchored in Bremerhaven, Germany. They stopped in Berlin awaiting Soviet visas and experienced the indiscriminatory approaches of the city's many prostitutes; Hughes was disgusted by the state of the country under the embattled Bonapartism of Franz von Papen, while Miller noted sighting several Nazi Brownshirts.[70] During a last-minute panic about the status of the visas, and after a late night at an American bar featuring a Haitian entertainer, Thompson was calmed by Hughes and Miller.[71] Their stay was happily brief, though, and the group soon departed for a boat across the Baltic, to Helsinki. The Finnish capital had a wholesome appeal derived from the friendly people, the rides on horse-drawn *droskis*, and the permanent twilight of the white nights.[72] After a night there, the group boarded a train for the final leg of the journey, taking them into the land known to many via John Reed's journalistic account of the revolutionary ecstasy of 1917, *Ten Days that Shook the World*. Arriving at

[69] Rampersad I, p. 242; Meredith L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), p. 137.
[70] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 71; Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 24 June 1932, H-LHP Box 3.
[71] Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 4 July 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, pp. 70-1.
[72] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 73; Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 4 July 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 71.

the border, the group were greeted by a banner imploring 'Workers of the World, Unite', and Hughes left the train to grab a handful of the precious soil of the land where racism was taboo.[73]

Black modernists in Moscow

The first destination of the would-be filmmakers in Russia was Leningrad. On arrival at the train station they were met by a large delegation who gave a rendition of the Internationale with a brass band accompaniment. Speeches were made in Russian, and they were taken to a hotel for a banquet featuring all the luxuries that they had heard were absent under the Soviet system, including chicken and ice cream.[74] Among the welcoming party was Lovett Fort-Whiteman, a Black American Communist and long-time resident of the USSR. Having toured Leningrad quickly, the group were then sent on to Moscow, boarding a Sunday morning train and arriving in time for a grand breakfast at their hotel.[75] Their welcoming party again included those few Black Americans living in the locality at the time, including one eccentric woman named Emma Harris (the 'mammy of Moscow' in Hughes's memoir) and a Chicagoan named Bob.[76]

The group were initially housed at the Grand Hotel, with Hughes, Miller and Crawford sharing a room to which Thompson was a frequent visitor. The four enjoyed shared breakfasts together, using some of the food gifted to Hughes by Sullivan before his departure from San Francisco. Finding on arrival that the script for the film was not yet ready, the group were kept busy with meetings and events including a demonstration in solidarity with the Scottsboro youths at the Park of Culture and

[73] Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 4 July 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 72. See also Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 73, where Hughes displaces his participation in this ritual onto an anonymous group among the expedition, who he says departed to hold and kiss the soil.
[74] Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 4 July 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 72.
[75] See Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 4 July 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 72 and Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 14 July 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 80.
[76] Langston Hughes, 'Moscow and Me', in *Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Vol 9: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. by Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 57; Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 82.

Rest and a rally for Constitution Day at which they were honoured with seats at the presidium.[77] The Russians were enraptured by their strange guests, and though Hughes was unquestionably the star, they were all treated warmly wherever they went. The greatest strain in their relations with ordinary Russians was convincing them that they were in fact Black according to American racial schemes; the Russians considered only the darkest-skinned people to be truly Black.[78]

Although Thompson appears not to have acted on her initial feelings for Miller, the group also experienced dramatic heartaches. The burden of respectably representing the race while being afforded all the freedoms of esteemed visitors in a foreign land bore heavily on many of the visitors, but it was especially hard on those whose intimate lives encompassed same-sex desire. Sylvia Garner, learning that her female lover had left her for a Russian translator, attempted suicide by drinking potassium formaldehyde. She was saved, but the incident was a source of great embarrassment to the other group members who considered it to reflect badly on the race.[79] Meanwhile, Mildred Jones, whom Miller considered was 'made homo-sexual' at a boarding school and 'hates herself because of her abnormality', sparked a relationship with Dorothy West.[80] Such developments suggest that the centring of Hughes in scholarship which outlines the queer contours of this trip misses an important part of that story.[81]

The development of personal dramas was not broken up by a regular work schedule. The scenario was not ready on their arrival, and the group had to wait for it to be translated into English. On translation, it was discovered to be inadequate, containing too many 'Europeanisms' and situations alien to the American racial situation. Hughes was asked to consult on its revision. The time-limit put

[77] Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 4 July 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 73; Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 14 July 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 77; Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 7 July 1932, H-LHP 3.
[78] Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 14 July 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 78.
[79] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 88.
[80] Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 17 October 1932, H-LHP 3.
[81] See Jennifer Wilson, 'Queer Harlem, Queer Tashkent: Langston Hughes's "Boy Dancers of Uzbekistan"', *Slavic Review* 76: Special Issue 3 (2017), 637-646; Kate A. Baldwin, 'The Russian Connection: Interracialism as Queer Alliance in Langston Hughes's *The Ways of White Folks*', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 48:4 (2002), 795-824.

on the project by seasonal change made the delay irksome, but initially it was not a cause for serious concern as the guests enjoyed the sights of Moscow.[82]

From the start, the film-making group – and most especially Hughes – were embedded in the cosmopolitan circles of Moscow avant-gardism. Soviet culture was suffused with a distinctly Russian but world-facing modernism.[83] Translations of modernist texts from across the world appeared in abundance, and Hughes was himself a beneficiary and participant in the Soviet translating vogue. His novel *Not Without Laughter* appeared in Russian while the group were visiting, and he acquainted himself with the woman responsible for the translation, Vera Stanevic. He also consulted with Julian Annisimov, who was working to translate Hughes's poems into Russian.[84] During the course of his stay, Hughes worked with Lydia Filatova to contribute English translations of the futurist poems of Vladimir Mayakovsky, including 'Black and White' and 'Syphilis'. He met the Russian Boris Pasternak and the Frenchman Louis Aragon, translated their work, and helped in translating modern Chinese poems. His own output also took an avant-garde form at times, notably in 'Letter to the Academy'.[85] But the most significant of his engagements with European modernism while in the Soviet Union was his reading of DH Lawrence, which turned him to the short story form and would later yield his collection *The Ways of White Folks*, and his exploration of experimental theatre. He would spend a great deal of time during the summer of 1933 attending shows at various of the theatres in Moscow, and he carried the lessons of the constructivists Meyerhold and Oklopov with him in his future theatrical endeavours.[86]

For the others in the group, contact with Soviet modernism was not as consistent or impactful, but it remained noteworthy. Miller submitted a preface for a Russian anthology of 'colored American poets', and wrote a few pieces for the Russian press.[87] Thompson and he also wrote home with their judgements on the early Soviet sound film, *Road to Life*, which was scripted and directed by a student

[82] Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 7 July 1932, H-LHP 3.
[83] See Clark.
[84] Rampersad I, pp. 246-7.
[85] Rampersad I, p. 266.
[86] Rampersad I, pp. 269-70.
[87] Miller to Nora Miller, 7 August 1932, H-LHP 3.

of Meyerhold, Nikolai Ekk, and was produced by Meschrabpom. The film went on to win numerous awards, and Thompson was 'thrilled' by it.[88] Dorothy West recalled the group being entertained at a party at the house of Sergei Eisenstein, presumably after his return from Mexico having failed to make his film *Que Viva Mexico!* For West, the party ended unpleasantly as a demand by Eisenstein that she dance became an awkward and embarrassing episode which resulted in her tearful exit.[89] The story nevertheless is testament to the rarefied cultural circles in which the American visitors were embedded.

Their own creative project itself emerged from this modernist milieu, albeit in only an abortive manner. Authorship of the various versions of the script was shared by numerous people, among whom the primary writers were the Russian Georgy Grebner and the ambitious young German director Karl Junghans. Beside these, Lovett Fort-Whiteman worked on translating from Russian and may have contributed scenes and ideas, Hughes consulted and likely contributed material to later versions, and other consultants were engaged from the Russian cinematic community.[90] Among the Russians, Vsevolod Pudovkin had directed the ethnographically-informed *Storm Over Asia* only a few years previously, and *Road to Life*'s Nikolai Ekk was also present at the heated discussions that paved the way for the eventual cancellation of 'Black and White'. The initial draft was written by Grebner, translated by Fort-Whiteman, and reworked by Junghans. Appropriately, these drafts bore the marks of both modernist avant-gardism and Stalinist Third Periodism.[91] Director Junghans planned, for instance, to deploy an innovative sound technique known as 'asynchronisation', using sound more as a source of politicised commentary on the narrative than as the medium of dialogue. In one example, racial violence carried out with the blessing of a clergyman would provoke derisive vocalisations from

[88] Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 4 July 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 73.
[89] Galina Lapina, '*Black and White*: The Story of a Failed Film Project', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 13 (2017), 213-246 (p. 229).
[90] Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008), p. 139.
[91] Lee, p. 122.

nearby animal life.[92] Many more essential specifics about the film – the plot, for instance – remain contested.

In the most widely read account of the film, from Hughes's 1956 memoir, it is claimed that the film was to be set in Birmingham, Alabama and concerned Black workers there. The white leading role, set to be played by the eccentric American dancer John Bovingdon, was a union organizer in an interracial union compared by Hughes to the CIO.[93] Against him was pitted the white bosses, who attempted to incite the poor white workers against the interracial union and the Black workers. In Hughes's retrospective telling, through the course of this predictable plot, numerous ludicrous details derailed its connection with reality: a Black servant dances with a white aristocrat at a party; Black capitalists are depicted owning radio stations and these are used to broadcast to the North for aid against the white ruling class in the South; the climax is a race riot in which white workers from the North arrive as saviours, recapitulating a standard envisioning of the Civil War for the twentieth-century context.[94]

Recent work by Steven Lee, based on readings of four different versions of the script across two languages but mostly focused on Grebner's early Russian-language version, has undermined Hughes's rendering of the film as a farce. Admittedly based on the limited evidence available in Russia on African American life, Grebner's script, according to Lee, strove broadly successfully for a factual representation of Black life. It included space for the Eisensteinian technique of montage to effect 'visual and auditory defamiliarisation' and, inspired by Sergei Tretiakov's factographic movie *Roar China*, it contained extensive and accurate information about African American history and culture.[95] Its plot also diverged sharply from that remembered by Hughes in the days of McCarthyism. Set in a

[92] '"Black and White," New Film, Illustrates Class Struggle in USA', clipping, LMP 14:1.
[93] Hughes mistakenly suggests that this interracial union would have been based on 'the incipient CIO' (*IWAIW*, p. 78). The CIO was actually still some years from formation in 1932, and given the Third Period policy of the Comintern, such reformist unions would not have been depicted sympathetically by the Communists. We might better assume that the character was a Communist organiser from one of the new revolutionary unions on which the efforts of the American Communists were focused during the early 1930s.
[94] Hughes, *IWAIW*, pp. 78-9.
[95] Lee, p. 125.

nameless city in the South, the plot in this version of the script concerned a dye factory where managers attempted to pit Black and white workers against one another. It charted the efforts of an interracial group of Communists who forged an alliance between the workers. The management used the charge of rape of a white woman against a Black worker to try again to divide the workers. But this was resisted in a mass demonstration which also incorporated Chinese workers from the laundry. The ending depicted a rousing resistance to retaliatory violence from the Ku Klux Klan.

Certainly, Lee's reading helps to peel back layers of Cold War obfuscation from the politically charged and anachronistic rendition of the script-writing process handed down by Hughes. But much of Hughes's account is corroborated by contemporary material, as well as in a reading of a different version of the script by Glenda Gilmore.[96] Discussion from the time refers to unrealistic 'Europeanisms' and the resultant need for Hughes to help in 'Americanizing' the script.[97] Indeed, Grebner's scenario – on which Lee bases his reading – was said to be especially 'full of inaccuracies regarding American life.'[98] Hughes, writing about the experience while still at the peak of his Communist commitment, referenced heated sessions alongside key figures in Soviet cinema revising 'every scene and every line of dialogue.' Disagreements were multiple, but issues of 'plot and continuity' proved to be some of the most contentious issues.[99] Perhaps the key to the affair is to be found in the translation work and creative contributions of Fort-Whiteman, whose role as mediator between the Russians and Americans did not end happily. Despised by Louise Thompson – as he was by her later husband William Patterson – she described him as an 'awful person' for the role he played in the controversy.[100] Fort-Whiteman later fell out of favour with the Soviet government – in part because of his role during the authorship and the fallout from the 'Black and White' affair – and was convicted of anti-Soviet

[96] Gilmore, pp. 139-40.
[97] Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 7 July 1932, H-LHP 3; Papers regarding the controversy over cancelling of 'Black and White', LMP 26:29.
[98] Papers regarding the controversy over cancelling of 'Black and White', LMP 26:29.
[99] Hughes, 'Moscow and Me', in *Collected Works*, ed by De Santis, p. 58.
[100] Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 24 August 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 85; Roman, p. 142; Gilmore, p. 150.

agitation in 1937. He died less than two years later, in January 1939, while serving a sentence of hard labour in a Siberian prison camp.[101]

In August 1932, though, the ad-hoc group of actors were simply anxious to get to work, having discovered that no work had begun on the scenery and costumes and frustrated by the long-running scriptural disputes.[102] The singing rehearsals which had helped keep them busy since their arrival had gone terribly as, despite the racial stereotypes which prevailed as much in Europe as America, many of the Black visitors could not hold a tune.[103] The hostile international press began speculating about the future of the picture. Meschrabpom had repeatedly delayed the start of filming, and the group were sent for what they were told would be a working visit to the Black Sea. Soon after arriving in Odessa the group discovered that the film had been postponed. Henry Lee Moon, who had stayed longer in Moscow, greeted them as they departed a cruise ship with the declaration, 'comrades, we've been screwed!' He held in his hands a copy of the Paris *Herald Tribune* which in its headline declared that the film had been postponed due to concerns about the attitude of the US government.[104]

'L-Raisers' versus 'Black White Guards'

The group's jolly sojourn had become a subject of international intrigue and hysterical scandal. A senior Meschrabpom official sought to assuage their anger and bewilderment by assuring them that the film was merely postponed due to the script issues. They were offered a tour of the country, the fulfilment of their contracts, and either an expenses-paid return to the US via one of the major European capitals (London, Berlin, Paris) or residence in the USSR.[105] The offer did not calm anyone. The group began to fracture. A range of interpretations were laid onto the events, and for a time, subgroups emerged and dissipated fluidly as meetings took up full days and nights. Thompson

[101] See Gilmore, pp. 150-4 and Lee, pp. 146-7.
[102] Papers regarding the controversy over cancelling of 'Black and White', LMP 26:29; Rampersad I, p. 248.
[103] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 80.
[104] Rampersad I, pp. 248-9.
[105] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 95.

emerged as the principal defender of the USSR and was nicknamed 'Madame Moscow'; around her cohered the clique-turned-cadre of Crawford, Miller, and Hughes, as well as the Party member McKenzie (who nevertheless carried on a personal feud with Thompson dating from their time as co-organisers in the New York Friends of the Soviet Union group).[106] This group were nicknamed the 'L-Raisers' after the alliterative forenames of Thompson, Miller, and Hughes.[107] Opposed to this core of Soviet sympathisers was a triad of anti-Soviet critics including the journalists Ted Poston and Henry Lee Moon and the ex-Party member Thurston Lewis. They were nicknamed by Crawford the 'Black White Guards'.[108]

In this conflict, the 'L-Raisers' – that is, the emergent cadre of socialists – were not misty-eyed about Soviet motivations for the cancellation but were making difficult political calculations about the narrative they wanted a hostile international press to report to a public with few alternative sources of information about the USSR. Regardless of their discontents with Soviet society and with their treatment by Meschrabpom, they felt a responsibility to sustain diplomatic efforts between European socialism and the Black world. Their public effusiveness about the USSR was, in part, a dissembling performance judged to be necessary because of their confrontation with a fiercely anti-Communist media.

While the group nicknames were invented amidst the fallout from the cancellation of 'Black and White', this only exposed and exaggerated existing fault lines in the expedition. Thompson had been unimpressed with the behaviour of Poston and Lewis since their arrival, considering them 'thoroughly irresponsible'. She claimed that they had behaved shamefully in their treatment of Russian women, confirming the worst prejudices of white Americans, and had even 'cussed' at a representative of the Red International of Labor Unions (or Profintern) and their female translator.

[106] Miller to Juanita Lewis, 6 August 1932, H-LHP 4; Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 24 August 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 81; Rampersad I, p. 248.
[107] Faith Berry, *Before and Beyond Harlem: Langston Hughes, A Biography* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1992), p. 157.
[108] Matt Crawford to Nebby Crawford, 21 September 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 93.

When Moon arrived in Odessa accusing Meschrabpom of selling out to win American recognition of the Soviet government, he aligned with the established 'troublemakers' Poston and Lewis. Thompson, Crawford, Hughes, and Miller 'had to fight desperately hard to keep the rest of the group from falling into the trap laid by these three'. The split between 'right' and 'left' in the group was complicated by personal rivalries.[109] Thompson speculated that Moon's behaviour reflected a resentment that 'some of us, Lang and I especially, have rather cliqued with Loren and Matt and left him out.' She further insisted that Katherine Jenkins, having previously sided with the Communists, was being swayed by her fiancé George Sample into opposition. The arguments conducted over the days in Odessa and after the group's return to Moscow also saw slanders levelled at the loyalist cadre. By 23 August, the minority group centred around Poston, Moon, and Lewis were claiming that Hughes's actions were a result of self-interest as he sought to gain celebrity in Russia having been crowded out of the American scene. They further alleged that Thompson and Miller were seeking to enhance their revolutionary standing with the Soviets and, knowing little of Crawford, that 'he was only following his friends.'[110]

Thompson, Hughes, Miller, and Crawford largely prevailed against these accusations and were privately very critical of the Soviets. When the group returned to Moscow, they 'drew up a list of inefficiencies' in Meschrabpom's handling of the situation but maintained their belief that the company were honest in saying the film was merely being postponed. They complained that the company had mishandled much of the trip, from their failure to have visas ready in Berlin to their inability to produce an agreeable scenario with appropriate materials on hand for production.[111] Having heard about American diplomatic threats some weeks before, the group had even raised concerns with Meschrabpom previously about a political cancellation and had been reassured that it would not be abandoned on such grounds.[112] Finally, the group insisted that 'this postponement

[109] Miller to Juanita Lewis, 6 August 1932, H-LHP 4.
[110] Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 24 August 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, pp. 81-5.
[111] Papers regarding the controversy over cancelling of 'Black and White', LMP 26:29.
[112] Roman, p. 143.

would be used by the bourgeois press and all counter revolutionary organizations to poison the minds of Negroes against the Soviet Union and the revolutionary movement.' The criticisms were scarcely restrained or naïve, even if they ultimately remained largely private. However, when Miller presented this case to Meschrabpom in a meeting, Ted Poston then presented a minority position, accusing Meschrabpom of 'betraying the Negro workers of America.' Later, the case was taken to the Comintern, which Thompson was acutely aware of being 'the highest governing body of the revolutionary movement in the world.' Miller and Hughes presented the same case and were again followed by a report from the minority which they considered foolish and shameful. The minority group even went so far as to send a letter of complaint to Stalin.[113]

The two positions were finally stated in full in two separate press releases. The statement of the minority, signed only in the names of Poston, Lewis, Moon, and the Jamaican Laurence Alberga, clothed their outrage in a thin veneer of ultra-revolutionary language. It suggests there was some truth to Thompson's contemptuous dismissals of their 'limited political understanding', their 'colossal ignorance of […] the basic principles of revolutionary theory.'[114] The statement insisted that the film had been cancelled (itself denied by Meschrabpom and the majority at this stage) for 'political reasons'. Borrowing a few phrases from the Communist lexicon, perhaps remembered by Lewis from his spell of revolutionary activism, the group claimed that Meschrabpom's actions represented a compromise with 'American Capitalism and World Imperialism' and a sacrifice of 'permanent revolution'; that they constituted a deviation toward 'Right Opportunism'; and that the cancellation was an act of political expediency that revealed the Communist movement to be little different from 'the Christian Church, the Socialist Party, and countless other social fascist organizations.' The borrowing of phrases from different and opposed tendencies in global Communism – notably the Trotskyist 'permanent revolution' and Third Period Stalinist designation 'social fascist' – indicates a

[113] Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 24 August 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, pp. 81-3; Roman, p. 143.
[114] Thompson to Lula Mae Brown, 24 August 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, pp. 81, 83.

superficial awareness of Communist theory and a gestural commitment to 'the Revolution.'[115] The statement appears to have been designed to fuel the reports of the hostile international press about the desperate, beleaguered status of the filmmaking expedition and the sensational significance of the postponement.

The statement of the majority, signed by all the remaining cast members minus Leonard Hill, Katherine Jenkins and George Sample, was more measured in its tone and serious in its revolutionary sympathies, though it was forgiving in its attitude to the debacle. The statement focused on countering the false press reports about their experience of the USSR. In it, Thompson and co. buttressed Meschrabpom's claim that the film was only postponed because of 'scenario and technical difficulties', they emphasised that 'everything is being done for our welfare and accommodation', and they repudiated the minority claim of political motivations. The statement ended by asserting that the Soviet Union was a nation where socialism was being constructed and 'exploitation and oppression of racial minorities have been eliminated.'[116] Taken together with the private documents of individuals such as Miller, it indicates that there was a political savvy at work in their public declarations. There appears to have been a calculation that more priority ought to be given to defending the international reputation of the USSR than openly shaming Meschrabpom for their incompetence and suspected political cowardice.[117] To be open about his feelings around the film's cancellation, Miller wrote, would be 'un-social'.[118]

The reality amply justified the private qualifications the group members gave to their endorsement of the official position. While Meschrabpom wrangling was ongoing over the script, and the USSR was concerned to ensure US recognition (which came late in 1933), the most immediate reason for the cancellation was the rumoured threat that had been issued by American Colonel Hugh Cooper on hearing news of a Black American group visit. Cooper was a hydraulic engineer and

[115] Statement of the minority, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, pp. 88-9.
[116] Statement of the majority, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, pp. 89-90.
[117] See Roman, p. 143.
[118] Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 17 October 1932, H-LHP 3.

powerbroker between American business, the US Congress, and Soviet officials, and he blackmailed the Soviets into cancelling the film by proclaiming that he would halt work on the Dniesprostroi Dam if it went ahead. The Dniesprostroi Dam was a colossal undertaking, rivalling the ongoing American project known as the Boulder Dam (now Hoover Dam). Having almost completed the Dnieprostroi, the Soviet government were not willing to suffer a delay in its construction, and so 'Black and White' was quickly cancelled. They reported it as a postponement, but this was a dishonest presentation and they eventually admitted that the project would not be made.[119]

Premised on only a partial truth though it was, the majority statement reflected an experience that each of its primary authors – Thompson, Hughes, Miller, and perhaps Crawford – was deeply moved by. Through the ordeal of the film's cancellation, and the relentless press misrepresentation of their trip, each of these individuals evolved a deep commitment to the politics of revolutionary socialism. In several cases, these politics were tested and broken over a period of years, but their careers in the radical left were impactful over a long term. What's more, while they involved defence of the USSR, these defences were the result of political calculation at least as much as ignorance of real conditions in the country. Before moving this story beyond European Russia, it is worthwhile considering how life in Moscow and other sites of Soviet modernism was viewed by this West Coast network, and how the Pacific West manifested itself in the Soviet archive of Black America.

'Stranded without hope'

The Soviet narratives of Hughes, Miller, Thompson, and Crawford were marked by a constant process of managing their expectations, which were shaped by anti- and pro-Communist propaganda as well as testimonies of other guests, and by measuring and comparing the achievements of the capitalist and Communist worlds. Their evolving confrontation with Soviet alterity was at the same time a reflection on American life. In turn, American life was pictured through metonymic locations in

[119] Editorial note, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 90; Berry, pp. 168-70; Roman, p. 137.

the American West: regionality was written as nationality in their repudiations of American capitalism. By de-familiarising American mores, socialist possibilities became more tangible and the writing of their Soviet sojourn in correspondence, articles, and memoirs incorporated these new political horizons into a Black internationalist episteme. Readings of these narratives ought, however, to be conditioned by an awareness that even as Black visitors attested to the great possibilities of a planned economy, famines raged across Ukraine and, only a few years later, the Great Terror would steal away millions more lives, including those of many stalwart Communists.

In the previous chapter, I explained how the West Coast was routinely celebrated by invested agents such as travel companies and realtors as a place of freedom and prosperity, usually leaving migrants bitterly disappointed. Inversely, the Soviet Union was widely rumoured in the US to suffer profound scarcity and repression but, for the most part, when the 'L-Raisers' reported on life in the USSR they insisted on the falsity and bad-faith nature of these claims. On most counts, they found the Soviet Union surpassed their expectations, which had been lowered by the stories of white visitors and American propagandists. Several aspects of these divergent estimations of the USSR and the US West are illustrated by the impressions left by trips to two monuments of socialist and capitalist modernities: the unfinished hydroelectric station at Boulder Dam outside Las Vegas, Nevada, seen by Miller and Hughes before they left for the Soviet Union, and Dnieprostroi Dam in Soviet Ukraine, which Miller, Crawford, and others visited in the period following the film's cancellation.

In April 1932, during Hughes's stay with Miller in Los Angeles as part of his national speaking tour, he accompanied Miller and a white colleague, Norman McLeod, on an investigative expedition to Las Vegas to observe the working conditions and employment practices at the Boulder Dam site.[120] As a reporter for the *California Eagle*, Miller worked to expose discriminatory practices in the economy and society. He reflected on life in Las Vegas and work at the Boulder Dam site in one of his 'On Second Thought' opinion columns. The column framed the visit with reference to the false image presented

[120] Miller to Hughes and Thompson, undated [c. April 1932], LHP 113:2142.

by real-estate agencies and travel companies about cities in the West, using Los Angeles as an example of a 'highly advertised' city which frequently disappointed visitors on arrival. Having steeled himself for disappointment in Las Vegas, he reported being even further disenchanted by the reality of Black life there. He reported finding 'unfortunate men and women […] lured' by promises of employment only to fail at finding 'decent employment' and be left 'stranded without hope of getting away and with little hope that their condition will improve.' The Black population in Las Vegas was forming an impoverished underclass in the absence of adequate welfare provision, forced into 'liquor traffic and prostitution' to survive. Miller identified the most immediate cause of their abjection as the Jim Crow policy operative at Boulder Dam. Miller's extant Communist Party affiliation became evident, however, as he sought to avoid 'chauvinist' or 'nationalist' conclusions from his racial critique, emphasising the presence also of ranks of white unemployed and the low wages of the white workers. Finally, he asserted that Boulder Dam 'present[ed] a picture of America in miniature', characterised by the mutual abjection and hatred of white and Black workers amidst conditions of generalised exploitation and immiseration. The column ended with a protest against a nation that can erect 'a giant dam, a magnificent technical achievement' and generate the enrichment of a few out of the 'blood and misery of the workers'.[121] Proceeding from a commentary on the modern urban frontier in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, Miller's exposé at Boulder Dam became a repudiation of the mythology of American capitalism as a whole.

Arriving at the Dnieprostroi Dam in October of the same year, Miller was prepared to witness 'the difference between Socialism and capitalism as illustrated in two great electric power projects.' The very fact of his presence there – the final stop on a six-thousand mile journey around Central Asia and the Caucasus – turned upside down American claims about Soviet conditions.[122] Having reported from Las Vegas about African Americans lured West by false promises only to be left 'stranded without hope' in desperate conditions, his Soviet mobility and accompanying commentary offered a counter-

[121] Loren Miller, 'On Second Thought', *California Eagle*, 6 May 1932, p. 8.
[122] Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 17 October 1932, H-LHP 3.

narrative that inverted press claims that he was himself a naïve adventurer being held in conditions of captivity by the Communists.

As Las Vegas and Los Angeles epitomised American fakery, so Dnieprostroy appeared to expose the lie of Soviet unfreedom and backwardness. Writing to Hughes after the visit, Miller indicated that the Dam's construction represented a feat of human ingenuity and effort 'worthy of a great movie', confirming its favourable comparison with the project already nicknamed 'Hoover Dam'. Dnieprostroy overcame Miller's 'blasé' attitude to 'technical triumphs', as he insisted that 'nobody can fail to be taken aback at this project.'[123] A similarly dramatic impact was made on Matt Crawford, who gushed to his wife that the Dam was 'a spectacle I shall never forget' and 'the height of accomplishment of the Soviet Union'; a perfect, modern-technological counterpart to the more incipient 'socialism' witnessed in the Central Asian Republics. 'The future is here', proclaimed Miller.[124]

The respective promises and pitfalls of US capitalism and of Soviet Communism were mediated in similar ways by comparisons between the Meschrabpom film company and the Hollywood studio system. Hughes was especially invested in this genre of anti-capitalist critique, reflecting on the USSR from the position of a Black writer. His time in the Soviet Union was one of the most lucrative in his long career as a professional writer, and this was an important part of its charm for him. Determined to live exclusively from his writing, Hughes was barred from many of the most profitable parts of the American culture industry – most notably Hollywood – by prejudice. In the Soviet Union, however, his contract was upheld and payment for his work was generous. Each member of the cast lived happily on 400 roubles per month, augmented in Hughes's case by substantial payments for his poems and other writings.[125] 'I had never had enough money for such fine living in America', he remembered with a hint of bitterness.[126]

[123] Miller to Hughes, October 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 99.
[124] Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 17 October 1932, H-LHP 3.
[125] Rampersad I, p. 245.
[126] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 93.

The generous and good-faith nature of the 'Black and White' employment arrangements were a matter of fascination and charm for Hughes. The group embarked on the trip without having seen or signed a contract, and on arrival Hughes found that his contract – which enlisted him, uniquely, as a writer as well as a performer – was held up. When it arrived, it was written in Russian and he refused to sign until it had been translated. The Meschrabpom officials were offended, but Hughes persisted: he was aware of Hollywood's exploitative practices and the ruthlessness of the film industry. In Hughes's memoir, he reported that the Meschrabpom official exclaimed in response to the Hollywood comparison, 'don't mention Hollywood in the same breath with the film industry of the Workers' Socialist Soviet Republics. That citadel of capitalist escapism – Hollywood!' Hughes's insistence was nevertheless rewarded with an English translation of the contract, which he discovered was 'about a hundred times a week as much as I had ever made anywhere else.'[127]

Hughes's 1956 telling of this incident was informed by the years of bitter exclusion he had suffered in the decades between visiting the USSR and writing the memoir. On the numerous occasions that he attempted to access the substantial pay checks amply available in Hollywood to his less accomplished white peers he was disappointed. Indeed, the tale as woven in *I Wonder as I Wander* had a didactic quality, with Hughes seeking to instruct fellow writers about the hard business sense that he had learned was necessary to make a living from writing. Underlying this didactic exercise was a positive judgement of the Soviet motion picture industry; a judgement which very much survived Hughes's drift away from Communist circles. Small wonder he was impressed. During his year in the Soviet Union, in terms of purchasing power, Hughes was a certified member of the monied elite, and the status helped him to recover the confidence and comfort lost when he split from the anti-radical patron Charlotte Osgood Mason.

Hughes's hopefulness was little shaken by the cancellation of the film project, which he explained sympathetically in essays from the time. In part, his lack of criticism should be understood

[127] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 75.

through his awareness of the harsh and racist environment of America's own film industry. Countering the narrative of the hostile pro-capitalist press, aided by the dissenting minority of the group, Hughes insisted on the superiority of Meschrabpom over the Hollywood companies. A vast difference existed, he said, between being a hopeful artist who leaves Hollywood cursing the production company and being a Black aspirant leaving Moscow dejected. He explained, 'many disappointed would-be screen stars depart from Hollywood hungry. Our Negro artists left Moscow well-fed, well paid, and well entertained'. With a shrug of the shoulders he declared the cinema 'a complicated art' and expressed gladness that the poem was his primary medium.[128] He continued to hope that, by some means, Hollywood's hostility to a film project 'dramatizing race relations sympathetically' would be overcome.[129] In a piece for *The Crisis*, Thompson made a similar comparison, pointing out that Hollywood was equally prone to postponements and cancellations.[130] For the sojourners, their experience of the Soviet film industry only underlined the superior conditions for (racialised) intellectual labour in the Russian workers' state over those in the Jim Crow, open-shop world metonymically named Hollywood.

Indeed, the picture that emerges of the USSR in this archive of correspondence, journalism, and memoir is not only one of a land of equal opportunity, but of popular liberty too. Jarringly, Stalin's USSR became a site for reflections on the limitations, curtailment, and even existential threats to American democracy in the early Depression years. Once again, a catalyst for these reflections was precisely the impetus to construct the USSR as a desirable and viable alternative to US capitalism. Eager to repudiate reports of terror and violence, the Black visitors made special note of the behaviour of state officials. In these notes on Soviet liberty, California emerges once again as a negative comparative.

[128] Hughes, 'Moscow and Me', in *Collected Works*, ed by De Santis, p. 59.
[129] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 98.
[130] Louise Thompson, 'The Soviet Film', *The Crisis*, February 1933, p. 37.

Before departing for the Soviet Union, Miller had organised with the LA JRC to stage Hughes's *Scottsboro, Limited* play, only to have the notorious metropolitan Red Squad halt the production.[131] A trained lawyer and member of the ILD, when he arrived in the USSR he paid close attention to the behaviour of the gendarmes and made sympathetic comments on the Soviet justice system. His observations were shaped not only by those recent experiences in California with the US police and by the desire to challenge the Soviet reputation for tyranny, but by his reading of Marxist theories of the state. Aside from frustration with Soviet censors for dealing so heavy-handedly with a volume of Hughes's poems, Miller and the rest of the 'Black and White' radicals harboured few doubts about Soviet freedoms. Miller emphasised the status of the Soviet gendarmes as workers in uniforms, claiming they 'are what police ought to be: helpers of the general public.' He told of having witnessed an attempted arrest in which citizen bystanders engaged in a heated debate over the issue and agreed that the accused ought to be let free, which they were.[132] Miller was similarly unperturbed by the blasé attitude on display in the Soviet court he visited in Moscow. He noted the presence of factory workers acting as jurors, and the prominence of two women – one in the role of juror, another acting as prosecutor. As the assembled legal professionals smoked, producing an atmosphere of 'informality', the case was discussed with little attention to 'technicalities'. The whole blasé process was understood by Miller to be evidence of a democratisation rather than a tyranny.[133] The emergent picture was of an apparatus with the characteristics of a 'semi-state' in the language of Marxist theory: that is, a benevolent and radically popular-democratic force for the preservation of workers' power.[134]

From inside this apparent proletarian state, Miller reflected on the state of civil liberty in California in uncompromising terms. Implicated in the Comintern's Third Periodist thesis which identified nascent fascism even in liberal and social-democratic political formations, Miller considered

[131] Miller to Hughes and Thompson, undated [April 1932], LHP 113:2142.
[132] Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 17 July 1932, H-LHP 3.
[133] Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 16 September 1932, H-LHP 3.
[134] See V.I. Lenin, *The Essential Works of Lenin: "What is to be Done? and Other Writings*, ed. by Henry Christman, (New York: Dover, 1987) p. 282.

that there were only two possible futures for his home city of Los Angeles. 'Either', he wrote, 'it can be an armed Fascist camp or the minimum guarantees of free speech and free assemblage can be extended.' In the hyperactivity of the city's Red Squad, headed by the notorious William F. Hynes, Miller saw a nascent fascist threat and the inevitability of a massacre. Only through the building of a broad opposition to police violence could this threat be offset. In this conception, the task was one of working-class unity in smashing 'through all legal and semi-legal entanglements and impose its own will.' Sensitive to the urgency of this struggle, Miller sought to transcend his position as an intellectual, a group characterised by 'hesitancy' and which the proletariat had no use for insofar as they were 'not active in bringing [proletarian dictatorship] about'. In Miller's commentary, not only was the repressive behaviour of the LA police a matter of crucial importance – indeed, a question of existential seriousness if the fascist characterisation is taken seriously – but their defeat was contingent on the establishment of a class dictatorship which would mirror the practices Miller was observing in the Soviet Union. [135] For Miller, far from the Soviet Union displaying disturbing signs of tyranny, it represented a model to aspire toward in the necessary struggle against authoritarian, anti-labour forces in Los Angeles.

Miller was not alone in presenting a Californian framing to the Soviet trip. In writing his memoir, Hughes engaged the same geographical dynamic to present more circumscribed criticisms of American capitalism. Closing his narrative of the national speaking tour he had undertaken in the US before departing for the USSR, Hughes invited a comparison between his Californian stay and his Soviet experience, describing the move as a transition 'from the best of American capitalism' in Noël Sullivan's San Francisco mansion 'to the show place of Soviet communism – from Russian Hill to Russia itself.'[136] This comparison was suggested by Hughes to make a political critique grounded in his more liberal perspective of the mid-1950s, but it should not be understood as being constructed merely in retrospect as a literary device; in a 1932 telegram, sent on arrival in New York to catch the *Europa*,

[135] Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 17 July 1932, H-LHP 3.
[136] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 67.

Hughes told Sullivan that he would be sailing to the USSR 'with my last pleasant and unhurried memory of America your house'.[137]

Taking up Hughes's routing of his narrative of Soviet alterity ('quite another world') by way of the West Coast, the tropes of Californian plenty and Soviet scarcity are foregrounded.[138] Hughes loaded his description of the Hyde Street home at which Sullivan received him with sumptuous, luxuriant detail. The beautiful, dramatic view of the San Francisco Bay; the blooming profusion of flowers on its walls and balconies; the warm, welcoming embrace of the Black staff; the rejuvenating feel of soft bedsheets brushed by a gentle coastal breeze; the easy availability of fresh juice, hot coffee, a car, and a secretarial service: all are dwelled upon by Hughes to evoke a sense of California as a place of retreat and regeneration.[139] But they also teased a version of American reality generally denied him by his race. This description of Californian comfort is an all-too-brief glimpse of 'the best of American capitalism.'

The comparison with the USSR, from where reports were circulating about endemic food shortages, was made more sharply in Hughes's memoir through a conversation with Lincoln Steffens, the muckraking journalist and a friend of Sullivan. Steffens advised Hughes to moderate his expectations of Soviet achievement, insisting that its potential was far greater than its reality, and that it would be appalling to 'an American like [himself,] accustomed to at least having in sight – if not possession – all the heart desires'. 'Take soap and toilet paper', Steffens instructed Hughes. Hughes's rendering of this conversation, rounding off a long account of his tribulations in travelling Jim Crow America, can only be read as heavily ironic, designed to draw attention to the experiential chasm between the white Steffens and the Black Hughes.[140]

[137] Hughes to Noël Sullivan, 14 June 1932, NSP 40:1.
[138] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 67.
[139] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 64.
[140] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 65.

Hughes's autobiographical chapter closes with a final anecdote about American travel which underlines his exclusion from the full bounty of his American birthright. On the final leg of his tour before departing for the Soviet Union, Hughes drove up the West Coast to Portland and Seattle. In one Oregon town Hughes sought accommodation for the night. At one hotel after another he was refused lodging. Finally, the local police escorted him to a 'dingy hotel on the outskirts – a kind of rooms-by-the-hour assignation house where men take pick-ups or bar girls.'[141] The bathetic effect of the move from Sullivan's mansion to this Oregon hotel – from American bounty to Jim Crow misery – encapsulates much about Hughes's critique of American capitalism, albeit from the political perspective that prevailed in his 1950s writings. It also complicates his representation of the Coast as not an impure, incomplete retreat from Jim Crow and poverty.

Of course, in condemning the exploitative and exclusionary system underpinning American democracy, Miller, Hughes, and other of the 'L-Raisers' recapitulated Stalinist deceptions about the reality of life in the European parts of the USSR under the rule of an ossified bureaucracy and at a time of massive famine. Yet their glowing reports from the USSR indicate more than mere credulity: the harsh private criticisms made about Meschrabpom suggest a savviness on the part of Miller, Hughes, Thompson, and Crawford that ought not to be understated. Instead, their construction of the Soviet Union as a model of an egalitarian alt-modernity should be understood as responding to a definite political need to effect a more seamless and expansive union between African America and a powerful interracial, international working-class movement.

Returns

By the end of 1932, most of the 'Black and White' group had returned to that embattled capitalist democracy. The 'Black White Guards' left soon after they had disgraced themselves in the eyes of the Soviet government, while twelve visitors accepted the offer of a tour of Soviet Central

[141] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 66.

Asia.[142] On completion of that visit, Thompson departed for America to see her dying mother. Miller and Crawford left soon after. Having briefly shared a 'swell' apartment in Moscow with Alan McKenzie, they were both eager to see their partners after many months away: Miller was preparing for his marriage to Juanita Ellsworth, scheduled for February 1932, and also had plans for a novel.[143] He stopped long enough in Berlin to interview George Padmore, the West Indian Communist then editing *The Negro Worker*, and to see Paris.[144] Hughes, having parted ways with the rest of the 'Black and White' group to stay a while longer in Central Asia, returned to Moscow in late January 1933.[145] He found only a small number of the original twenty-two still around: Dorothy West had remained (working as a writer at Meschrabpom, but perhaps also eager to see Langston again), as had Mildred Jones (working at the *Moscow News*), Homer Smith (who had gained a lucrative job in the postal service), Lloyd Patterson (working as a decorator for Meschrabpom), and the actor Wayland Rudd (who was performing at the Meyerhold Theatre).[146] After several more months in Moscow – 'a hard place to leave' – Hughes embarked on a trek back to the comfort provided by Sullivan's patronage, with which he hoped to spend some months focused solely on creative work.[147] Thus, he bookended his exploration of Soviet alterity with two separate periods of rejuvenation in California.

All of the pro-Communist 'L-Raisers' took the inspirational experience of Soviet travel back with them to America, and in the cases of Miller, Hughes, and Crawford, this proletarian internationalism was re-translated into the West Coast interracialism that characterised activist groups like the LA JRC. They also used the spotlight lent to them by the debacle to continue their defence of the Soviet Union, particularly in the eyes of Black America. Confronted with fantastic stories

[142] Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 17 October 1932, H-LHP 3.
[143] Miller to Hughes, October 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 100; Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 17 October 1932, H-LHP 3; Hassan, p. 101.
[144] Hassan, p. 99; see also Miller to Juanita Ellsworth, 5 September 1932, H-LHP 3.
[145] Rampersad I, p. 263.
[146] See Hughes, 'Moscow and Me', in *Collected Works*, ed by De Santis, p. 60; Rampersad I, p. 265; Gilmore, p. 147; Mukherji, '"Like Another Planet to the Darker Americans"', in *Africa in Europe*, ed. by Rosenhaft and Aitken.
[147] Hughes to Noël Sullivan, 31 January 1933, NSP 40:1.

of Soviet incompetence and betrayal provided by the 'Black White Guards', Thompson and Miller worked especially hard to create a different narrative.

Thompson explained that 'two different kinds of publicity' were offered to the press, one from Miller and herself 'giving the true state of affairs' and another from Moon and Poston 'trying their best to make it appear that they and all the black people in the world have been betrayed.' As early as August 1932, Miller had written for the San Francisco *Spokesman* praising the USSR's liberation of national minorities, arguing that it showed the way not only 'in the abolition of unemployment and raising the status of the worker' but also in 'its solution of the race problem' – a phenomenon of special importance 'to Negroes.'[148] On his return to America in late 1932, he used the press attention to argue for a Black internationalist perspective, as discussed in Chapter 5.[149]

Thompson took their case to the leading journal of Black America, the *Crisis*. Writing in the February 1933 issue, she responded to an article which had stated that the *Crisis* editors had not seen 'any satisfactory explanation' for the film's cancellation. She continued to insist that the film was only postponed, that the postponement was simply a result of the script issues, and she pointed out that Meschrabpom was not an arm of the Soviet government but an organ of the Workers' International Relief. She concluded her essay with an attack on the four men who had signed the minority statement, considering it 'ironical and unfortunate that four Negroes, who, for the first time in their lives enjoyed complete equality in Soviet Russia, should walk into the trap of becoming the weapon against the Soviet Union of those capitalist forces that oppress them in America.'[150] Even 'Black and White' cast members outside of the pro-Soviet cadre wrote positively of their experiences. Privately, Laurence Alberga (a signee of the minority statement) conceded that they had received princely treatment in the land of the Communists, while Homer Smith authored a column for the *Pittsburgh*

[148] Loren Miller, 'Russia Solves Its Race Problem After Centuries of Bloody Failures by Czars', *Spokesman*, 6 August 1932, LMP 14:2.
[149] 'Another of 22 Actors Returns', *Atlanta Daily World*, 6 December 1932, clipping in LMP 14:1.
[150] Thompson, 'The Soviet Film', *Crisis*, pp. 37, 46.

Courier from his new home in Moscow, describing the USSR as, paradoxically, a very Christian country.[151]

After the initial wave of controversy died down, Black radicals directed their gazes more intently on the politics of Hollywood. Miller took on a role as a leading Black critic of the movie industry. Adopting the moniker Camera Eye, he wrote a semi-regular column for the *Liberator* through 1933 and 1934, commenting on developments in American cinema. These columns condemned the industry's racism and sought to draw connections between the exclusion and stereotypes of Black people prevalent in Hollywood and its capitalist basis. 'The artistic liberation of the Negro people', Miller insisted, 'awaits our economic and political liberation.'[152] He lambasted the sensationally racist pseudo-ethnographic movie *Ingagi* (1930), which purported to depict (by means of blackface) women in the Belgian Congo worshipping and becoming sex slaves to a gorilla, and he connected this 'fakery' with the more domestic forms of minstrelsy.[153] Miller also criticised leading Black celebrities, such as Roland Hayes, whom he urged to 'renew his touch with the realities out of which his art was born' by establishing 'direct contact with the Negro workers and peasants by singing their own songs to them and getting their reaction.'[154] Miller's columns extended Communist proletarianism to Tinseltown.

In this chapter, therefore, Hollywood has been rendered visible and significant in the development of 1930s Black radicalism. The archives of Miller, Hughes, Thompson, and Crawford reveal a story of Black radical engagement with the USSR which was conditioned by the failures in American promise of plenty, opportunity, and liberty, which the sojourners associated especially with Hollywood and with California. Invited to Moscow, mobilised via New Negro networks, and celebrated by the Communists on arrival, Black radicals minimised their criticisms of the USSR publicly to emphasise to Black audiences that socialism represented a viable alternative for African Americans. By understanding these pro-Communist 'L-Raisers' as a New Negro network fostered in the USSR but

[151] Roman, pp. 145, 148.
[152] 'Screenings', *Harlem Liberator*, 3 February 1934, p. 6.
[153] 'Screenings', *Harlem Liberator*, 20 January 1934, p. 6.
[154] 'Screenings', *Harlem Liberator*, 30 December 1933, p. 6.

with important roots in Oakland and Los Angeles, this chapter highlights a metabolic process by which social networks were transformed into comradely alliances with long-term consequences for Black radicalism. Hughes, Thompson, Miller, and Crawford each became important figures in local, national, and international movements. In their writings, Hughes, Thompson, and Miller in particular helped to discursively produce a Black internationalist episteme that figured the Soviet Union, with its paired commitments to revolutionary vanguardism and experimental avant-gardism, as a motherland for anti-racists and radical intellectuals. In Moscow but (literally and figuratively) by way of Hollywood, they took up the torch of an alternative modernism. With Black journeys beyond European Russia, to the south and east, the relationship between Blackness and modernity was considered in more ambiguous and sometimes problematic ways.

Chapter 3

'Dark Frontiers of Progress': Modernity, Black Subjectivities, and Global Radicalism

The closure of possibility for Black participation in the cinematic avant-garde in European Russia was at the same time an opening for different opportunities in the eastern expanses of Eurasia. Having found favourable comparisons between Soviet and American models of modernity, African American travellers were challenged by travel in non-Western contexts to consider the meanings of modernity in starkly different cultural settings. If many African American radicals came to be torchbearers for Soviet modernisation during their visits to European Russia, they also were in danger of implicating themselves in a complex set of cultural politics, combining colonial practices with anti-racist socialist transformation. Travel in non-Western (especially Asian) societies threw American civilisational discourses into relief even as they also challenged African Americans to reconfigure their ideological lense. Such global travel produced a more worldly cultural politics, combining modernist avant-gardism with folkish conservatism. It enabled African American sojourners to reimagine and reconfigure their identities along numerous lines, and to forge political and personal bonds across massive territories.

This chapter will detail the stitching of an Afro-Asian hybridity in the travel writings of Langston Hughes and Juanita Harrison. Harrison was a contemporary of Hughes, whose travels in Asia occurred some years before him (c. 1928-9) and whose record of travel, spanning much of the world and lasting from 1927 to 1935, appeared in published form in 1936. Bill Mullen has theorised Afro-Asian hybridity in terms of Afro-Orientialism, but for the most part he has discussed this in relation to China and Japan.[1] Here, the same framework for understanding Black engagements with non-Western subjects will tend to focus on Black-Muslim encounters. Dwelling on the contradictions in Afro-

[1] Bill Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

Orientalism as an anti-racist and anti-colonial formation, the chapter parses the modernist sympathies of Black American travellers and the liberatory possibilities they imagined in locations such as the Central Asian steppe and the cities of British India.

African American globality was shaped by an allegiance to Western visions of modernity and civilisation even as Hughes and Harrison each independently reformulated their identities in response to encounters with veiling practices, Asian folk cultures, and experiences of personal intimacy across cultural divides. The chapter spans a vast geographical area, from Turkey to India via Palestine and Uzbekistan. It deals only with the representations of Hughes and Harrison; there is no intention here to make claims about the historical processes in these regions or the experiences of their inhabitants. Instead, the chapter considers how the travel undertaken by Hughes and Harrison beyond and away from Atlantic networks brought them into contact zones where they might foster new solidarities. The personal intimacies they fostered were both in tandem and tension with the liberation struggles to which they were committed. Amplifying the voices of African American travellers with anti-racist convictions, the chapter will bear witness to the persistence of American and colonial tones even in their articulation of a worldly outlook.

In the development of an Afro-Asian alliance during the interwar years, the main American protagonist of many accounts is WEB Du Bois.[2] Certainly, Du Bois was among the first African Americans to sustain an interest in developments in Asia over many decades, and he travelled along similar routes to Hughes and Harrison in the 1930s: through the USSR, China, and Japan. Aspects of Du Bois's intellectual contribution will be mobilised here but the chapter is intended as a corrective to a literature that has too often viewed Afro-Asian hybridity during these years through the prism of

[2] Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism*; see also Reginald Kearney, *African American Views of the Japanese: Solidarity or Sedition?* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998); Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Vijay Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). For important discussions of Afro-Asian hybridity with a focus across other periods, see Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015) and Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen eds, *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

one intellectual, and even through a single work: Du Bois's 1928 novel *Dark Princess*. It instead proposes to construct a dialogue between Langston Hughes, who has been understood as an acolyte for 'an Afro-*planetary* vision', and Juanita Harrison, a proletarian Black globetrotter with little historical notoriety.[3] Their voices will be heard at times harmonizing, at others discordant, but together they articulated a discourse of globality and nationality which complicated racial, national, gendered, and class identifications. The non-Western territories traversed through the course of the chapter will be described as offering experiences of cultural syncretism, frontier-like, in which the African American encounter with different peoples of colour helped to reconstitute their subjectivity in multiple directions.

Juanita Harrison

To achieve this reformulation of Afro-Asian hybridity in terms of transcontinental frontiers, a new player will need to be introduced. Juanita Harrison enters the historical record from the furthest wings of the global stage; the fluorescence of her character shines brightly for its short duration at centre stage, and soon returns behind a curtain of obscurity. The ephemerality of her appearance is made only more confounding by the dissembling guise she appears to wear while addressing her audience. Her role is nevertheless pivotal. Harrison enables us to rehearse again the complex racial geography connecting US South to arterial West, to Eurasia and Africa; she also forces us to reconsider the masculinist terms of Afro-Orientalism, its ideological contours, and the class-inflected register of its performance.

Harrison had a talent for misleading people, including those who claimed to know her best. Her friend and employer claimed that Harrison was thirty-six in 1927; in fact, Harrison had been born to Jones Harrison and Rosa Cutler in Columbus, Mississippi in 1887, making her forty years of age in

[3] Moore, p. 50.

1927.[4] While certainly an African American in her heritage and experience, Harrison's skin tone was unusually light and her features racially ambiguous enough that she could confound racial categorisation. She exploited this to the maximum during her years of global travel.

Harrison's childhood was spent initially in conditions of poverty: she finished her schooling at 10 and began domestic work in 'an overburdened household'. Stimulated by the pictures in the magazines of her employers to think of a wider world that might be available to her, Harrison left Mississippi and spent her youth in an itinerant style, moving between Alabama, Michigan, Illinois, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, and Florida, as well as spending some time in Cuba and Canada.[5] After adding Kansas and Indiana to the list, she finally moved to California despite taking a financial hit when a bank in Denver collapsed, and she spent much of the 1920s in Los Angeles. While there, she took employment at the house of George and Myra Dickinson, a very wealthy couple with whom she developed a close relationship that would enable Harrison to realize her ultimate dream of a round-the-world trip. George Dickinson, whose fortune was derived (like many Californians) from real estate, invested Harrison's meagre savings in mortgages. The investment gave her a two-hundred-dollar annual security which, though small, was enough to allow her to undertake her ambitious trip, taking work as she needed to on the way.[6]

Heading first to Europe, Harrison shipped out from Hoboken, New Jersey, on 25 June 1927 aboard the *SS Serra Ventana*, and disembarked in Plymouth, England.[7] In the following years, she moved through Europe to West Asia, North Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia. For reasons that are unclear but likely related to the deteriorating economic situation in the US property markets from which she derived her security, Harrison was forced into taking a long hiatus beginning

[4] Mildred Morris, 'Preface', in Juanita Harrison, *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World*, (New York: Macmillan, 1937) ix-xii (p. ix); Cathryn Halverson, *Playing House in the American West: Western Women's Life Narratives, 1839-1987* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013), p. 159.
[5] Halverson, *Playing House*, p. 232 n. 1; Morris, 'Preface', in Harrison, *MGWBW*, p. ix.
[6] Morris, 'Preface', in Harrison, *MGWBW*, p. x.
[7] Juanita Harrison, *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), pp. 1, 3

in September 1930 during which time she lived and worked in France.[8] Harrison restarted her journey in May 1934, this time taking a route north through Europe to Soviet Russia, and then east to Japan and China before boarding the *SS Lincoln* to Hawai'i.[9]

Throughout her travels, Harrison wrote frequent and ungrammatical letters to her friend and former employer Mildred Morris and to another friend, Alice Foster in Pasadena, California.[10] Morris, who had connections in publishing, arranged for Harrison's epistolary output to be published, first in the *Atlantic* monthly in October and November 1935 and then as a book by Macmillan in May 1936.[11] Harrison was initially reluctant to have it published under her own name, emphasizing that her travel was not done 'for the public, it was for my own pleasure and I do not care wheather the public know who I am.'[12] Convinced to publish under her own name, Harrison's book was greeted with enthusiasm by a wide audience, rapidly exhausting library stocks and print runs.[13]

Titled *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* after a poem by the Victorian English writer WB Rands, the book is a rare and valuable insight into Black travel during the interwar years. Its deployment as a historical source nevertheless ought to be presaged with a consideration of its conditions of production, and its ideological framing. The precise interpersonal dynamics at work in its narrative are not clear, and the addressees of Harrison's dispatches are for the most part unnamed. So, while she may be read as having written frankly for her closest friends (particularly in corresponding with Alice Foster), the possibility persists that her writing was moulded by other considerations, such as Morris's power as a former employer and a white woman. Furthermore, Harrison's apparent passivity in the process of compilation and editing raises questions about absences in the text. For instance, according

[8] Cathryn Halverson, *Becoming Californian through Travel, Writing, Friendship, and Patronage*, video recording, Canal-U, https://www.canal-u.tv/video/universite_toulouse_ii_le_mirail/becoming_californian_through_travel_and_writing_friendship_and_patronage_cathryn_halverson.25829 [accessed 22/8/2018].
[9] Harrison, p. 265
[10] Miriam Matthews, 'Latest Book Reviews', clipping, AMP 1:2; Morris, 'Preface', in Harrison, *MGWBW*, p. xi.
[11] Halverson, *Playing House*, p. 158.
[12] Miriam Matthews, 'Latest Book Reviews', clipping, AMP 1:2. All quotes from Harrison are verbatim.
[13] Miriam Matthews to Alice Foster, 6 October 1936, AMP 1:2.

to Cathryn Halverson, whose scholarship has begun the work of demystifying Harrison's biography and explicating the meanings of her writing, the extended hiatus in France was not due to 'the unsettled condition in China', as Morris claimed. Instead, Harrison was forced to abandon her plans in 1930 because of financial pressures resulting from the economic collapse in America.[14] Halverson suggests that the decision to obscure this fact may have been an attempt to save face for the white Californian benefactors, whom Harrison represented as an all-powerful 'Picture of Hope sitting up in the world in Their true hearted kindness'.[15] Clearly, numerous actors were involved in shaping Harrison's travel narrative, and in reading her text it is necessary to be attentive to these multiple concerns.

The text is also ideologically implicated in inconsistent and multivalent ways. A testament to unsentimental worldliness, Morris's preface for *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* introduces Harrison as an all-American adventurer (albeit a 'colored' one) and samples Harrison's own voice in doing so. Describing the childhood poverty of her subject, Morris quotes Harrison as dreaming of 'templed cities in foreign lands' and determining that 'around me no one has the life I want, not even the rich ladies I work for. I have to cut my life out for myself and it won't be like anyone else.'[16] It is a character portrait that matches the Turnerian frontiersman who helped to generate an American identity defined by strength, energy, and individualism.[17] Harrison, whose base in the West facilitated her 'fluid notions of home', 'reinvented herself through mobility in a decidedly "western" fashion'.[18] Harrison was limned by Morris as a 'colored' manifestation of American national destiny – an intrepid explorer of unknown and untamed wilds for whom restless migration was its own form of self-making.

[14] Harrison, p. 265; Halverson, *Becoming Californian*, video recording, Canal-U, https://www.canal-u.tv/video/universite_toulouse_ii_le_mirail/becoming_californian_through_travel_and_writing_friendship_and_patronage_cathryn_halverson.25829 [accessed 22/8/2018]
[15] Morris, 'Preface', in Harrison, *MGWBW*, p. x.
[16] Morris, 'Preface', in Harrison, *MGWBW*, p. ix.
[17] Matthew Rebhorn, *Pioneer Performances: Staging the Frontier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 2.
[18] Halverson, *Playing House*, p. 159; Cathryn Halverson, *Maverick Autobiographies: Women Writers and the American West, 1900-1936* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 129.

This representation of Harrison as the arch-individualist American requires careful demystification, revealing the objective conditions which enabled Harrison to live the life she did while respecting her very real achievements. Perhaps primary among those objective conditions – each, of course, to some degree determined by Harrison's own decisions – were her access to property during the California boom (negatively confirmed by her vulnerability to the vagaries of American markets); her own racially ambiguous appearance, which proved to be useful in her negotiations of alien cultural worlds; and the absence of family commitments. However powerful Harrison's will to freedom, the exercise of it was frequently circumscribed in ways that she was reluctant to frankly communicate. Indeed, it is frequently in the curtailments of her freedom, and in the resultant cultural negotiations that she engaged, that the text derives much of its interest.

Tropes of the Asian Frontier: Veiling

In the previous chapter, African American sojourners to the USSR were considered in their relation to divergent models of modernity. Outside of the metropolises of European Russia, however, the convergence of modernist and colonialist paradigms became clearer and produced more difficult ideological negotiations.[19] Across much of the non-Western world, the interwar period saw the consolidation of nationalist and transnational movements that contested the meaning of modernity while seeking to revolutionise the international order. The challenges to Western colonial hegemony were various and were themselves tangled together in struggle and collaboration. Communism was the primary challenge emerging from the European centre, but in Asia the promise of socialism also engaged with movements for anti-colonial nationalism, secularising reform, pan-Islamism, and pan-Asianism.[20]

[19] Epp Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 8.
[20] Çemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

In Muslim regions, women's bodies and sartorial practices became a primary terrain in battles over the civilisational status of non-Western societies. Unveiling campaigns were often integral to movements of secularising nationalism and socialist revolutionism.[21] In Soviet Central Asia, the central component of Soviet modernisation efforts was the *hujum*, a campaign to achieve an equality among the sexes which focused especially on veiling and segregation practices in the region.[22] The government of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in the new Republic of Turkey similarly sought to differentiate his regime from the Ottoman caliphate by encouraging women to wear Western clothing and adopt the habits of European women.[23] The emergent anti-colonial nationalist movement in Egypt, meanwhile, had as one of its primary leaders Huda Sha'arawi, founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union, associate of Ataturk, and advocate of unveiling.[24] These were interconnected processes derived from 'common experience of colonial domination by Europeans, and the networks of intellectual exchange between Muslims'.[25] In these connected social worlds, the meaning of the veil was also contested. For many Muslims, particularly those outside of intellectual elites, unveiling campaigns were redolent of colonial coercion. Veiling could therefore also act as a symbol of resistance to the dominance of Western frames of modernity, and signalled affiliation with anti-colonialism of a different sort.[26] In Egypt, for instance, it might have indicated an affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, which took an increasingly strident anti-colonial position in the 1930s and 1940s.[27] The resistance to unveiling campaigns was therefore itself politically complex.

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[21] See Stephanie Cronin, *Anti-Veiling Campaigns in the Muslim World: Gender, Modernism and the Politics of Dress* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).
[22] Martin; Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Will Myer, *Islam and Colonialism: Western perspectives on Soviet Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
[23] Alev Çinar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
[24] Sania Sharawwi Lanfrachi, *Casting off the Veil: The Life of Huda Shaarawi, Egypt's First Feminist* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Homa Hoodfar, 'The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women', in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. by Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 248-279 (p. 258).
[25] Kamp, p. 8.
[26] On the revolutionary possibilities of the veil, see the essay 'Algeria Unveiled' in Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).
[27] Leila Ahmed, *The Unfinished Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

Hughes and Harrison each confronted veiling and segregation practices in a series of different contexts. Hughes's travel encompassed much of the USSR's Central Asian nations, while Harrison ranged across West Asian locations (Turkey, Syria, Palestine), to colonised African territories (Egypt, French Somaliland), to British India. As they did so, they typically viewed struggles over the veil through the lens of Western modernity, as a Manichaean battle between oppressive backwardness and the liberated modern. Within these formulations, their respective commitments to kinds of feminist politics usually failed to differentiate them from dominant colonial narratives. Yet veiling practices also enabled Hughes and Harrison to envision different identities and model Black freedom in novel ways. While they often seemed to have adopted Western civilisational discourses uncritically, the practice of their travel helped to reroute their visions of liberation.

For Hughes, his arrival in Central Asia came as a compensation for the collapse of the 'Black and White' film project. Asked by the theatrical trade unions where in the USSR they would most like to tour, twelve of the 'Black and White' group – including Hughes, Miller, and Crawford – declared they were interested in 'those regions where the majority of the colored citizens lived'. The Central Asian provinces were something of a borderland, a 'forbidden territory' where tourists were not allowed to go, and 'a land still in flux, where Soviet patterns were as yet not too firmly fixed'.[28] The Central Asian republics had only been constituted by the revolutionary government through the 1920s and were still in the throes of a troubled social transformation. Nevertheless, in September and October 1932, the group were permitted access, travelling from Moscow to Tashkent in the north of Uzbekistan, and then further south to Samarkand and Bokhara. The visitors, wearied by the relentless schedule and rough conditions, did not continue with the planned itinerary to Ashkabad, but Hughes was determined to make the best of the trip. He remained in Central Asia, visiting Ashkabad, Merv, and the village of Permetyab in Turkmenistan before returning for another stay in Moscow.

[28] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 102.

Both Hughes in Central Asia and Harrison in her more expansive travel in the Muslim world articulated ideas about the relationship between Blackness and modernity which were directly responsive to veiling and segregation practices. The comparison between Muslim and American veils necessarily recalls Du Bois's seminal 1903 treatise, *Souls of Black Folk*.[29] In this text, Du Bois imagined American racial capitalism as itself a veiled society of a special sort. He advanced a theory of racial phenomenology founded on a notion of 'double consciousness', which regarded the Black subject in America as marked by a dual affiliation: to their race, with its cultural heritage in Africa and its members dispersed in a global diaspora, and to the American nation, which was founded and built on their subjugation – indeed, their abjection. Du Bois deployed the veil as a metaphor for this feeling, and named as one of its effects a condition of 'second-sight', which he defined as a 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'.[30] For Du Bois, the struggle against racism was imagined in terms of drawing back that racial veil to allow access to a world of universal human fraternity. It was a perspective grounded in a protest culture which focused on the assertion of Black manhood in terms of parity with the 'enlightened' modern European. In this articulation, therefore, veiling was a metaphor for exclusion from modernity and unveiling signalled a moment of entry into a romantic, universalist Enlightenment.

Hughes's writing on the Muslim veil was as shaped by the spectre of American racial segregation as it was by more typical Western concerns in such travel narratives. He represented Muslim veiling practices as vestiges of a dying social order, a fragment of a world shattered by the revolutionary process which he identified with racial liberation. The unveiling of Central Asian women and their entrance into public life was therefore a single moment in a wider process of racial emancipation – understood to mean the abolition of segregation, equitable access to educational and professional opportunities, and improvement in material well-being. But, as Kate Baldwin has explained, coded into his discussions on the Central Asian veil – and more especially on the culture of

[29] WEB Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
[30] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, p. 8.

boy dancers in the region – was an interest in more sexually and racially ambiguous ways of being, identifications with the feminine in defiance of a masculinist gaze.[31]

Harrison's book is dissident from both Du Bois's bourgeois-egalitarian modern and Hughes's perspective of a revolutionary modernity. In her writing she was not concerned with detailing a phenomenology of race or discovering a template for Black liberation but with reporting her adventures to friends. In doing so, she nevertheless described her confrontations with a series of alien social worlds, each with their own normative codes around class and status, race and gender. For the jaunty and fashion-conscious Harrison, the veil emerged as a different but similarly pivotal metaphor for her chameleonic social identity. She repeatedly adopted new forms of self-presentation, notably through dress but also via speech acts, which allowed her to access new social worlds. Veiling became a site of complex cultural negotiation and a challenge to the inherited social values of Western tradition. Even as Harrison viewed the veil with a colonial gaze, at a practical level it had a quite different value. Veiling offered Harrison an open field for entry into otherwise closed spaces, and a means to cross precisely the 'barriers of class or race' that so marked American social life.[32]

What therefore appears in outline are two distinct models of Black liberation emerging from a process of cross-cultural contact and accommodation and which invite a dialogue with one another. In Hughes's case, engagement with the veil was hitched to a political commitment to socialist revolution as an authentic mode of Black liberation and was accompanied by a current of non-normative desire that sometimes ran counter to the prevailing Soviet model of modernism. Harrison, meanwhile, modelled an individualistic Black femininity that – perhaps paradoxically – treated Blackness and Americanness as costumes: modes of identification to be worn and shed depending on context and need. Her more pragmatic approach to identity and travel, though, did not wholly exclude moments of solidarity that can be understood as idiosyncratic forms of internationalist practice.

[31] Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line*.
[32] Morris, 'Preface', in Harrison, *MGWBW*, p. xi.

Despite their divergence in many important respects (not least being that they never met or corresponded) Harrison and Hughes spoke to one another as Black travellers whose near-contemporary loops around the world involved renegotiations of identities through regimes of 'veiling' and segregation.[33]

Harrison's confrontations with veiling were often girded by a sense of gendered solidarity. The gendered ordering of veiled societies generated opportunities for bonding with local women. When she first visited the East African city of Djibouti, for instance, Harrison wandered into 'the Coolies quarters' where she was met by 'women and Girls' who danced for her. After saluting them 'in the Proper way' and noting that she was wearing 'a black Vail head dress', Harrison reported that the women befriended her.[34] Even as she adapted to non-Western cultural norms of this sort, though, Harrison's feminism was continually informed by a Western gaze that tended to reproduce unilinear and Eurocentric notions of progress. Near the Ganges River in India, Harrison witnessed a Hindu funeral pyre with 'a male and female corps wrapped in bright red'. As she reflected on her measured response to the sight she declared, 'I am quite a Hindu now.' This thought was quickly cut across by sympathy for 'the millions of wives that have been burned alive in the same spot only a few years back.'[35] Harrison's pride in her ability to assimilate into an alien culture was superseded by a continued affiliation with colonial perceptions of South Asian societies, which fixated on the practice of *sati* (widow burning) to justify the European presence.[36]

Though only a passing moment that Harrison dismissed light-heartedly, the anecdote was indicative of the entwined feminine sympathies and colonial mythologies that shaped her experience and assessment of the societies she entered. If Harrison's sympathetic approach to Muslim women

[33] As Carole Boyce Davies has noted, 'one can be veiled and yet mobile. Besides, the veil in historical context has multiple significations of self-presentation and self-effacement which allow motion between identities to take place.' Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.
[34] Harrison, pp. 160-1.
[35] Harrison, p. 137.
[36] C.A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 121.

indicated that she might be a practitioner of a Black feminist cosmopolitanism long before such an identifier was available, then this moment is suggestive of how bound together Harrison's feminism was with a colonial gaze. Recent scholarship on American imperial formations helps to buttress this sense that Americans were as implicated in such ideologies as were Europeans.[37]

Harrison's responses to seemingly mundane interactions routinely illustrated her complex ideological affiliations. In Constantinople in 1928 she commented in her distinctive style, 'you can see many women yet that ware the vaile I do not like to see them I feel like I are smouthering It must have been very sad Here 20 years ago.' Seemingly aware of social changes underway in the country, Harrison aligned herself with the forces of secularising reform, and went on to depict Turkish women as ghostly figures.[38] Condescending and colonial tones came through, too, in other aspects of her sensuous experience. She shared a train, for instance, with women whom she described as wearing bad-smelling ('rancy') black veils covering most of their faces and carrying 'their Thousan Children'.[39] The entirety of Harrison's 'human sensorium' was engaged when she encountered new cultural orders, and many of these sensuous responses were recorded in ways that accommodated imperial understandings of non-Western societies.[40]

Harrison was also prone to lament that 'the veil hides a beauty', indulging much the same 'romantic exoticism' which anti-colonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon attributed to colonising European men.[41] In Palestine, she helped two Syrian women who boarded a train without their children. After being caught up in the emotion of the event – 'the mother cried and went on it made me cry' – Harrison found solace in having seen the women's 'pretty but pale faces'.[42] In these encounters, which were among Harrison's earliest experiences of veiling, she found satisfaction in

[37] Andrew J. Rotter, *Empire of the Senses: Bodily Encounters in Imperial India and the Philippines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
[38] Harrison, p. 60.
[39] Harrison, p. 59.
[40] Rotter, p. 1.
[41] Fanon, p. 43.
[42] Harrison, p. 68.

transgressive moments of unveiling even as she exercised care for her women acquaintances. How her Asian acquaintances viewed her is difficult to sense, though her carefree and unveiled presentation seemingly made an impression: Harrison reported that Syrian women were 'puzzled that I didnt cover my face and went out in the streets alone.'[43]

Harrison appears to have undergone a process of cultural accommodation after these initial encounters, as she engaged with the veil in more inventive and positive ways. Increasingly, Harrison's travel writing recorded her use of the veil as a source of opportunity for adventure. She adopted the costume to access new experiences as a cultural insider. In Egypt, she described 'making myself so native like with my vail' to enjoy the local feasts. Harrison boasted of being able to attend 'a native wedding feast nearly every week'.[44] Similarly in India, she derived enjoyment from the potential the veil offered for misleading people about her identity: 'in my red shawl and black vail on my head no one would think I had seen Broadway.'[45] In this comment, Harrison's validation of her Americanness also disclosed the performance involved in her veiling – and, perhaps, in her self-writing. Obscuring the markers of her difference – her Americanness and Blackness – the veil eliminated Harrison's outsider status and presented an opportunity to imagine and perform a different version of selfhood. It offered a liberating kind of self-erasure. As such, it was a powerful tool for accessing new experiences and a relief from the straitjacket of a fixed ethnic identity. Within the veil and after the performance, however, Harrison preserved a private knowledge of who she was and where she came from. In these moments, veiling confounded any reading of her social identity but did not unfix her from a sense of self.

Harrison's deployment of the veil, though starkly distinct in tone and purpose, invites comparison with Du Bois insofar as veiling in both cases constituted a way of being that relied on a subjective split: the subject perceived the world from one position while also seeking to understand

[43] Harrison, p. 66.
[44] Harrison, p. 81.
[45] Harrison, p. 112.

and manipulate their appearance to racial Others. In Du Bois's writing, this epistemic split emerged from the condition of Blackness in America, requiring a constant accommodation to white expectation. As Harrison travelled and adopted Muslim dress, she similarly sought to sustain her sense of self while adapting her public self to suit social expectations. The operation of coercive power in Harrison's adoption of the veil was also occasionally visible. During her lengthy stay in colonial Egypt, Harrison wrote about exploring the streets of Port Said's 'Native' quarter. She related being forced to return home to replace the hat she was wearing with a veil because she felt 'out of place'.[46] Given her willingness elsewhere to cheerily upset social norms, there was a sense in this passage that a feeling of threat was being left unspoken. Compliance to veiling practices therefore had numerous sources.

As her familiarity deepened with non-Western cultural norms, Harrison positioned herself more ambiguously regarding normative European judgements of colonised people. She overcame an initial distaste for veiling and engaged with it as a way of fostering cross-cultural bonds of sorority and to access the interior of new cultural spaces. Though she clearly cleaved toward visions of order and progress that mapped onto colonial feminism, her narrative did not represent a simple teleology ending with an assertion of the superiority of Western capitalist social relations. The openness of her narrative regarding cultural difference emerged from her serious and sustained interaction with cultural Others, which ultimately resisted conservative disgust and uncritical immersion in favour of an engaged ambiguity.

A different sort of ambiguity emerged in Hughes's writing on the veil. For Hughes, as for the wider Communist movement, veiling was at the centre of an archaic and oppressive social world, bound up with royal despotism, masculine tyranny, and crucially, spatial segregation.[47] Insofar as the feminine subject remained veiled, she was 'smothered', unfree and un-Soviet; her unveiling was at the same time her release from the harem and the ultimate sign that the segregated social order was

[46] Harrison, p. 94.
[47] The role of Orientalism in the early USSR is discussed in Michael Kemper, 'Red Orientalism: Mikhail Pavolvich and Marxist Oriental Studies in Early Soviet Russia', *Die Welt des Islams*, 50:3/4 (2010), 435-476.

being broken down by incipient socialism.[48] In Samarkand, for instance, he noted how the 'liberation of Uzbek women from the harem and the veil' went hand-in-hand with supplying them 'with the means of economic independence.'[49] Hughes was mostly hostile to veiling, opposing it in terms familiar to colonialists and communists alike. As Kate Baldwin has explained, however, Hughes's dominant theme of Soviet progress and the unveiling of Asian women existed in tension with a sublimated set of non-normative desires. Through the cross-dressing boy dancers of Uzbekistan and the liminally gendered women dancers who replaced them as celebrated public performers during the revolutionary period, Hughes projected an equivocal sense of his own position in relation to heterosexual desire.[50]

If veiling is understood not only as a sartorial and religious custom but as signifying a set of segregated socio-spatial arrangements, it can be mapped through the American spaces which framed Hughes's understanding of it. The American region which was symbolically dominant in his discussion of veiling was the Jim Crow South – the region in which Black oppression was manifest in segregation and lynch law. Hughes figured the fight against veiling in the Soviet South as equivalent to – and a model for – the fight against the segregationist vestiges of America's peculiar institution. In doing so, he implicitly suggested that Islam and Communism were uniquely incompatible, in a manner typical of American writers in Soviet Asia.[51]

Yet he also argued for the special significance of Communism for racially oppressed peoples across the world. Hughes reported that, previous to 'the Soviet revolution', a form of racial segregation had been practiced against 'Asiatics' on such public conveniences as streetcars.[52] He then discussed the issue of Soviet repression against former tsarist officials, landowners, and other anti-Communist elements, establishing an explicit parallel between Soviet Asia and the US South. Hughes

[48] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 184.
[49] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 184.
[50] Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Lines*, pp. 86-125.
[51] Will Myer, *Islam and Colonialism: Western Perspectives on Soviet Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
[52] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 147. I have found no evidence in the historical scholarship on Central Asia that segregation practices of a kind with those targeting Blacks in the US existed in the Russian Empire.

expressed his sorrow for 'these irreconcilables', whom he compared to 'the gentler aristocrats of the South', disgruntled that they had been dispossessed of their human property. But this sympathy had its limits, as now the 'overlords' – Emirs, Khans, and tsarists – 'have fled' and it 'is the turn of those who in former days had to beg of the Cossacks, "Please, master! No more lashes, please! White master, no more! Please!"'[53]

By filling the mouths of Uzbek peasants with exclamations of a kind with those of enslaved Black people in America, he rendered the Bolshevik revolution as a model for Black rebellion and socialism as a viable route for Black liberation – all this, even after he had testified to the HUAC that radical politics were behind him. In a section of the memoir titled 'Light for Asia', he elaborated at greater length on the Soviet-US equivalence, detailing changing customs on public transit and returning to the topic of Soviet retribution against 'those who had not wished to see the Jim Crow signs go down.'[54] This apologia for Soviet state violence failed to account for the full scale of the terror and the complexity of Soviet nationalities policies, but the extremity of its distortions scarcely diminished the power of its commentary which was a polemical one directed at the US. For Hughes, life outside the segregating and immobilising veils of material underdevelopment and racial oppression was equivalent to Du Bois's vision in *Souls*. Both writers imagined unveiling as an escape from an inhuman shroud, though Hughes's focus on a more complete social levelling diverged from Du Bois's liberal projection of life beyond the veil as characterized by a recognition of Black manhood.

There was also a less recognised secondary level to Hughes's American mapping of Soviet Asia. At this level, the metaphorically 'veiled' (that is, segregated, deprived, and Othered) lands were understood as a borderland region ideologically coterminous with the US West and calling to mind the pioneer myth and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. In his writings on the Asian/American frontier, Hughes moved beyond a discussion of the domestic practice of American racism to the connection

[53] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 147.
[54] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 173.

between racial politics, modernity, and civilisation. In a section of Hughes's memoir titled 'Koestler Washes His Hands', he differentiated his perspective as an advocate for socialist modernity from that of a white Jewish companion while retaining the framing of Central Asia as un-modern. Having left his film-making companions with the intention of continuing with the tour of Central Asia, Hughes spent time in Ashkabad where he met a new companion. Arthur Koestler was a Hungarian journalist and, at the time, a supporter of Communism. In later years, he made his name as a renowned anti-Communist, most famously penning the novel *Darkness at Noon*. Together they explored Ashkabad and then went to Merv in Turkmenistan. Hughes's account of this part of the trip was animated by the contrast between himself and Koestler. The difference was primarily found in Koestler's reluctance to adapt his personal and hygiene habits to the local customs and his preference for a steady work routine over Hughes's more anarchic pattern. Koestler also had a temperament more given to a frank presentation of his sadness than the dissembling, private, and emotionally closed Hughes.

Hughes narrated a trip that the pair took to a place called Permetyab, a collective farm for ethnic Balochs who had fled oppression in Afghanistan and India to live in sanctuary under the rule of the Soviets. Hughes and Koestler's journey was treacherous, with a rumour of a mortal threat from the Baloch, described as some of 'the wildest tribes in the Afghan mountains'.[55] The region was barren and sandy, populated by nomadic 'Arab-looking' people living in yurts, 'dirty children and half-veiled harem women, who would run and hide' as they passed.[56] On arrival in the small village, they found a young Russian nurse who was heading the clinic there. She informed the visitors – to Hughes's dismay and Koestler's horror – that the people with whom they were sharing space, food, drink, and smoke were afflicted in their overwhelming majority by syphilis, and sustained such practices as biting off the umbilical cords of newborn babies.

[55] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 127.
[56] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 127-8.

Hughes's response to the young woman's presence indicated a self-conscious and semi-ironic affiliation with a modernity founded on racialized colonial logics: he looked with 'wonder and admiration' at this 'young white missionary' who was braving the 'dark frontiers of progress', even describing her as a 'Soviet pioneer'.[57] Similarly, when he later encountered a group of African Americans at a collective farm in Uzbekistan, Hughes noted that the conditions were 'more primitive than most of them had known at home' and his own trip there had been 'physically worse than any Jim Crow train trip I ever made in the United States.'[58] The reoccurring equivalence with Jim Crow here formed part of Hughes's argument that the material deprivation he experienced in the USSR was made up for by a moral or psychological 'wage' (to borrow another Du Boisian term) derived from the absence of racism. At the same time, his representation of a valourised white 'pioneer' suggested a further inversion of American racial politics, with the Soviet pioneer heralding a more sincerely noble civilizing mission, quite distinct from the genocidal Euro-American one. The very reliance on such a racialised, colonial imaginary nevertheless strikes a peculiar tone in Hughes's otherwise glowing account of Soviet modernization at the 'dark frontiers of progress'.[59]

Further layers of complexity were apparent in the narrative when Hughes elaborated on the contrast between Koestler and himself, with Hughes articulating a slightly different understanding of progress from the standpoint of a Black American man. 'To Koestler', he explained, 'Turkmenistan was simply a *primitive* land moving into twentieth-century civilization. To me it was a *colored* land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites.'[60] Koestler's vision as rendered by Hughes was one of Turkmen backwardness being corrected by Soviet intervention; the scheme was a temporal one which saw in Asiatic conditions a lag or slowness in their internal development which could only be corrected by an external compulsion. Contrastingly, for Hughes progress was imagined spatially, in terms evocative of the veil and the harem – and therefore, too, in terms of Jim Crow segregation. Hughes saw the

[57] Hughes, *IWAIW*, pp. 128, 130.
[58] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 177.
[59] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 130.
[60] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 116.

Turkmen as having been excluded from the civilizational domain which was racialized already as white, and defined progress as a moment in which those whose exclusion had rendered them '*colored*' were permitted to enter the domain of civilization. In place of a naturalised lag, Hughes suggested that the entry of the Turkmen into modern civilization had been denied – and that this denial was both deliberate and constitutive of a racial logic. Hughes struggled to articulate to Koestler the significance of viewing 'Soviet Asia with *Negro* eyes.'[61] It seemed that, for Hughes, to 'think Black' about questions of selfhood, modernity, and socialist revolution was to think spatially – to think in terms of the segregationist logics he problematically identified as common to Muslim and Jim Crow codes.

Folk modernism

It should not be regarded as incidental that Hughes's most effective thesis statement on modernity and civilization emerged from a discussion of the rudiments of Uzbek cinema. Before making his claim about understanding Soviet Asia 'with *Negro* eyes', he described the confrontation going on at the time between 'nomad tribes of the desert' and the Soviet film industry. The entry of these non-state peoples into literate civilization was occurring via classes for screen acting, on the operation of camera equipment, and on how to develop film. For Hughes, the sight of white people teaching a 'colored people […] about the making of films from the ground up' was remarkable and contrasted sharply with the situation in America. Coming from a country where Black citizens were banned from operating projectors by white supremacist unions and where Hollywood was an 'impregnable' fortress of white supremacy, the difference could scarcely have been starker.[62] The beginnings of Uzbek cinema culture appeared to demonstrate that the forces of technological modernism and white supremacy could in fact be decoupled, and the key to this decoupling was socialism. The promise of an ethnic modernism was a theme of Hughes's writings on Soviet Central

[61] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 116.
[62] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 116.

Asia and would prove to be formative in the creative works he produced during the period of his explicit Communist commitment.

In an essay published in October 1934 in a journal titled *Asia*, Hughes told excitedly of the ways that Uzbek folk culture was being transformed by contact with the modern world and the modern world was in turn being impressed by Uzbek culture.[63] He reported that performances with indigenous instruments including flutes and *barabans* were now being brought into 'the modern theaters', and that their 'music has been woven […] into the patterns of new plays that picture the struggles and triumphs of socialism in a world of ancient ways.' Though Hughes lamented the loss of the traditional marionette theatre and the rope-walking entertainers called *dorvos*, he found much to praise in the revolutionary performance culture. Through the revolution, the blockages to a modern theatre in Central Asia – tsarist censorship, conservative mullahs, male-only performances – were swept aside, against violent opposition. In their place rose many dramas of social significance – including one, *The Spoilers of Cotton*, which Hughes noted took as its topic the role of cotton production in the subjugation and subsequent liberation of Asian workers – as well as some scripts concerned with more ancient folk tales. Hughes also noted the entry of world culture into previously isolated Asian provinces through translations and stagings of European classics. The other side of this exchange was the impression being made by Asiatic companies which toured their performances in European Russia: Muscovites, he said, had been rhapsodic about Mongolian players acting a play titled *Dark Power*, which set a revolutionary theme to 'native music in the formal Chinese tradition, except that women took the feminine roles in the cast, not men'.[64]

'Since the Revolution', Hughes reiterated, 'there has been a great renaissance of folk art […] Now the theater, the radio and the motion picture are utilizing the best of folk expression, and all the

[63] Langston Hughes, 'The Soviet Theater in Central Asia, *Asia*, October 1934, pp. 590-93.
[64] Hughes, 'Soviet Theater', *Asia*, October 1934, p. 593.

leading folk musicians make records for the phonograph.'[65] He considered that the richness of Soviet culture was to be found not only in the 'Russian playhouses of Moscow' but the city's Jewish, Ukrainian, and 'Gypsy' theatres as well as those of the Georgians at Tiflis, the Turkomens at Baku, and the Uzbeks at Tashkent and Samarkand. Hughes left little room for doubt that he considered the USSR to hold substantial lessons for a US culture industry which had only unevenly begun to realise the value of using modern techniques to capture, amplify, and transform the folk cultures with which America was so rich.

Hughes was not only convinced of the formal qualities to be found in ethnic or folk modernism, nor was his support for it a merely sentimental celebration of diverse stories and voices; he considered folk modernism to be a peculiarly rich form for the circulation of impactful political messaging. In an essay for *Theatre Arts Monthly*, he wrote admiringly of the famed dancer Tamara Khanum, who had been among the first Uzbek women to shed the veil and trade the harem for the stage. Hughes reported admiringly that Khanum's performances were said to provoke women spectators to 'throw their veils forever into the fire', regarding her as exemplary of 'art that is also a social force, that changes life, that makes it better.' In the struggle, too, 'against provincialism and racial intolerance', he concluded that Soviet 'theaters and motion pictures' were effective weapons.[66] In this respect, his celebration of a film titled *My Motherland* can help to draw this part of our discussion to a close.

After his return to Moscow from Central Asia, Hughes wrote for the Soviet press, began to compose the fictional pieces that would become his short story collection *The Ways of White Folks*, indulged in romantic affairs, and struggled with the Soviet bureaucracy to secure permission to leave the country for China and Japan. During this time, he was embedded in Soviet cultural circles, and

[65] Hughes, 'Soviet Theater', *Asia*, October 1934, p. 593. Hughes might accurately be considered a participant and chronicler of what Michael Denning has called a world musical revolution in the early twentieth century. See Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution*, (London: Verso, 2015).
[66] Langston Hughes, 'Tamara Khanum: Soviet Asia's Greatest Dancer', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, p. 835, LHP 430:9619.

among the films that he saw was one directed by Iosif Kheifits and Aleksandr Zarkhi called *My Motherland*. The film was set in the Eastern borderlands between Siberian Russia and Japanese-occupied Manchuria. Made for the fifteenth anniversary of the Red Army and dedicated to the memory of Komsomol members 'fallen while guarding the frontiers of the socialist homeland', its story centred on a young Chinese man named Van Bosyak (Van the Tramp), who was recruited into the Manchurian army. This army initiated an invasion of Soviet territory which was resisted by a band of Red Army men. As the struggle in the borderland unfolded, Van developed an admiration for the Soviet Union and became antagonistic toward the army command. He was ultimately left in China by the Red Army, but his encounter with them made a revolutionary of him and spread the spirit of socialism to the Chinese frontier.

The moment Hughes was most touched by in the film, and which he connected with Soviet ethnic modernism, was an early scene in which a Red Army soldier made a proclamation about the extermination of 'that Chinese slant-eyed breed' who just killed one of his comrades. The racist interjection came after the other soldiers in the barracks were struggling to learn the phrase 'Red Army a friend of the poor' in Chinese. The young soldier was reprimanded by his officer, whose subordinate, Kupaev, showed him the body of the slain man: he shared the features of the enemy. 'It's not a matter of eyes, brother', said Kupaev.[67] In his telling, Hughes rendered the message slightly bolder: 'Our comrade's eyes are slant eyes, too'.[68] Through masculine, martial brotherhood and enlightened socialist leadership, the film modelled an end to racism which Hughes understood was made possible by the entry of Asian peoples into the modern culture industry.

The film returns us to the theme of Hughes's identification with non-normative subjects in the borderlands of Soviet life. The character of Van Bosyak was a wild, young outsider whose character was tempered by contact with the Red Army, and the film showed his anarchic energy being

[67] *My Motherland*, dir. by Iosif Kheifits and Aleksandr Zarkhi (1933) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hzwp38BtujM> [accessed 17-6-2019].
[68] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 174.

transformed into a productive revolutionary hopefulness. The Red Army, meanwhile, appeared to epitomise virtuous, collectivist masculinity, but its members were also revealed to be emotionally and ideologically vulnerable. The film represented war not only as a route to heroism through revolutionary sacrifice but as an inhuman theatre of cruelty. Hughes was attracted by its achievement of a propagandistic intent that retained the humane touch of non-propaganda art, and by its presentation of cultural outsiders being brought into the sphere of Western civilization through liberatory struggles.

It also illustrates the ways that these non-normative proclivities on Hughes's part were prone to conflict with the mainstream of official Communism in the 1930s. *My Motherland* was banned – despite rapturous critical acclaim – after a speech made by Stalin to the plenum of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission.[69] The film's incommensurability with Stalinism stemmed from its undermining of the preferred image of Soviet martial masculinity and its heroizing of an orphan boy at a time when such children were being persecuted by his regime.[70] Intentionally or otherwise, Hughes wrote over this history when he noted that the film was not screened abroad due to the 'complex international situation'.[71] With the full story of *My Motherland* restored, however, it becomes clear that where the current of Hughes's desire tended away from heteronormativity, masculinity, and civilized domesticity, his thought was routed away from Stalinism.

Tropes of the Asian Frontier: Trains

Encounters between technological modernity and folk cultures found another venue in the train, a mode of transport which both Hughes and Harrison spent a good deal of time using in their travels and which they each describe in some detail. Trains, like veils, provided a trope that charted

[69] Ekaterina Khokhlova, 'Forbidden Films of the 1930s', in Richard Taylor and Derek Spring (eds), *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, (London: Routledge, 1993) 90-96 (p. 94).
[70] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 151.
[71] 'The Soviet Theatre in Central Asia' draft, p. 7, LHP 306:5010.

ideological routes connecting Black travel in Asia to American geographies, imagined and real. Harrison and Hughes's narratives of train travel opened new ways of imagining the train as an engine of colonial modernity and (paradoxically) a space of freedom. Trains connected otherwise remote parts of the world, both linking and segregating peoples racialised as non-white, providing a space for cross-cultural encounter, friendship, as well as tension.

In imperial histories as well as in domestic American settings, train travel has been associated with the relentless forward movement of history, the ruthless disciplining and displacement of supposedly savage peoples and landscapes, the exploitation of migrant labour, and the enforcement of a racial ordering which instilled servility among those coded as non-white. In the making of the American nation, the train was the literal vehicle for westward expansion and for the integration of much of the North American landmass into a single political entity. As a symbol of this work, it was also associated with white European dominance over indigenous populations. The train encapsulated a fantasy of racial superiority that was predicated on the apparent technical expertise of European colonizers. A complicating factor in the story has been the role played by migrant labour in laying the tracks, the labour force being composed in large part of Asian and European workers who were excluded from whiteness.[72]

In the history of African America, the train took on a different meaning again. When enslaved people had sought to escape from servitude their most effective route had been through the complex series of networks known as the Underground Railroad. Though trains played little part in this movement, they became synonymous with the path to freedom and some abolitionists wished for a substantial extension of the actual rail network in the South as a means of aiding their mission.[73] After

[72] See Karuka; Ritika Prasad, *Tracks of Change: Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ryan Dearinger, *The Filth of Progress: Immigrants, Americans, and the Building of Canals and Railroads in the West* (Oakland: University of California, 2016); *Railroad: Trains and Train People in American Culture*, ed. by James Alan McPherson and Miller Williams (New York: Random House, 1976); and H. Roger Grant, *Railroads and the American People* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

[73] See Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of America's Fugitive Slaves* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2015) p. 17.

the defeat of Reconstruction, the train became connotative of a freedom dream betrayed as one of the principal arenas in which Jim Crow segregation was played out and contested.[74] A further twist to the saga of Black train travel came with the rise of the Pullman train company, which in the early- and mid-twentieth century hired great numbers of Black men as porters. These men laboured in uniforms that became a symbol of Black respectability and social esteem, while they and their families lived on wages which were regarded in African American communities as bounteous. Nevertheless, they continued to suffer indignities and discrimination from their employer and its customers. The Pullman porters therefore became beneficiaries of a new mobile and masculine freedom for African Americans even as they continued to suffer racist indignity in their labour. This peculiar social positioning helped make them central to the culture of Black protest – and, in Du Bois's *Dark Princess*, of Black internationalism. [75]

These were the meanings and histories of the railway that Hughes and Harrison brought to Asia. In their extensive global journeys, however, they experienced quite different modes of train travel which gave shape to their evolving sense of political solidarity. In these new cultural contexts, regimes of racial ordering operated differently, or scarcely at all, while class, caste, and gender dynamics played out forcefully. In turn, these differentials could be visibly racialized. In Hughes's account of train travel through Soviet Asia, the train emerged as a space of freedom where the physical intimacy of the over-crowded, integrated cabin gave opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, new familiarities and friendships. In Harrison's account the train emerged as perhaps the most important theatre for the renegotiation of identity, the construction of cross-cultural bonds of sorority, and as a testing ground for her cultural allegiances. For both, it presented special and unique kinds of cosmopolitan possibility.

[74] See Blair L.M. Kelley, ed, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of* Plessy v. Ferguson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
[75] See Gilroy, p. 133 and Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

The train's special status in this respect is not surprising. It is, after all, a location in which local hierarchies are often made manifest materially through particular organisations of space: women-only cabins, first, second, and third-class cabins, and the weaving of these divisions into colonial and caste relations all reveal stark truths about the society that the railway binds together. The rail space is also characterised by exposure to the cultural mores of a given country or region, providing an introduction for the foreigner that can be intimate and is often sustained through long periods of time. It can present a challenge to cultural toleration as well as an opening for a cosmopolitan education.[76] Finally, the train is a unique – often the most important – vantage point from which people come to know (or feel that they know) a landscape; it is tied to an affectual and ideological sense of human mastery over nature, and is therefore often bound to colonial ways of being, knowing, and feeling. 'In America's historical imagination', for example, the construction of a transcontinental railroad represented a unique 'triumph against nature' and the victory of manhood 'over wilderness, distance, and time'.[77]

The salience of the train as a space of encounter for Harrison has already been implied above, with reference to her negotiation of veiling. In the wider context of Harrison's narrative, the train was established as a recurrent trope and an arena in which many of her most interesting reflections on travel and identity were developed. The taxonomical effect of colonial rail travel gave Harrison choices about where she imagined herself fitting in and where her cultural affiliations lay. At the same time, the rail space gave her opportunities to foster communal bonds, however fleeting they usually proved.

Harrison spent much of 1929 in South Asia, arriving first at Sri Lanka from East Africa aboard the *SS Orana*. After traveling around Sri Lanka, she made her way northward to the subcontinent. On her arrival at Madras train station, Harrison – wearing 'a red shawl', walking on 'bare feet', and 'looking

[76] 'On the one hand, the everyday routines of railway travel engendered a series of shared experiences among colonial India's vast body of passengers. On the other hand, train compartments and carriages, waiting and retiring rooms at stations, refreshment rooms, and dining cars were everyday spaces in which strangers found themselves in unprecedented situations of proximity. The ensuing conversations about distinction, difference, and distance – invoking (and combining) arguments of class, rank, race, or gender – resulted in negotiations that ranged from public protestations to litigious conflict.' (Prasad, p. 59).
[77] Dearinger, p. 2.

[…] about as low caste as a European can look' – went to the waiting room for second-class travelers. An Indian woman entered the room and, perceiving the bedraggled Harrison as 'low cast', insisted that she leave. Harrison used this incident to reflect on caste and colonialism in India, and what position she sought to occupy within this social order:

> high class Indian women ride in the 3rd they dont want to mix with the Europeans or with classes – then they say to a low cast on a bench you get down there and lay down – when I didnt get down she sat and looked at me with a puzzled face. I dont mind being a high cast but I want to be a low cast too.[78]

Harrison channelled the experience into a statement on her resistance to every social straitjacket, whether as a consequence of oppression or as a defence of privilege; it was a posture that was inherently anarchic if not necessarily political. It is nevertheless impossible to avoid reading such a description of spatialized oppression through Harrison's childhood experiences as a Black Mississippian under Jim Crow, and through the contemporary situation of her American readership. The passage does not fit an established ideological mould, but its cross-cultural resonance and Harrison's defiant individuality when faced with an oppressive social hierarchy give it a power and significance beyond mere incidental anecdote.

Even as she insisted on her right to access travel at every social level, Harrison's propensity for adventuring and her cosmopolitan approach often led her to prefer travel with the poor and with people disadvantaged by caste and race hierarchies. *En route* to Constantinople from Sofia, Harrison wrote that 'the First and second Class are the same the World over but it is the 3rd class that are so interesting', and again in East Asia she preferred to travel with poor Asians rather than elite Europeans. 'I want some interest', she explained, identifying cultural 'interest' with colonized subjects rather than their 'cultivated' imperial masters.[79] Her identification with members of the racialized lower classes could also be informed by her gendered sense of belonging. On a train to Bombay, Harrison was

[78] Harrison, p. 110.
[79] Harrison, pp. 58, 294.

interpellated – presumably due to some combination of her language, dress, and ethnic difference – as a 'European' by the conductor, who insisted that she ought to 'ride in one of the compartments of only 3 or 4 people'. She argued against him, insisting that she 'like[d] the women even the lowest cast are jolly and broad minded'. [80] Resistant to being treated as a European despite the privileges and comforts it could confer, Harrison preferred to navigate social spaces unrestrained by established expectations and the sanctions of authorities. She found the joy of travel and the essence of adventure in ephemeral connections with common people. Even on her way to Sri Lanka aboard the *Orana*, she regretted not spurning the comfort of that boat for a 'third class' train ride 'through the Sudan and Abysscina half starved thirsty and dusty' – 'then', at least, she 'would have had something to remember.'[81]

The memory of train rides through Soviet Asia appears to have been equally strong for Hughes. In part, the persistence of these memories is attributable to the danger and discomfort of his journeys; certainly, Hughes used the drama of navigating Soviet Asia's primitive rail system to punctuate his memoir with lively anecdotes of perilous adventure. There were nevertheless also social and cultural dimensions to his experiences of Asian railways that present analytical possibilities. Through much of his writing on the Soviet Union, Hughes argued that the material scarcities and various frustrations of Soviet life were compensated for by the moral superiority of the Soviet system over its capitalist rivals which were founded on the indignities of racism and exploitation. The theme was repeated when Hughes remarked that the discomfort and slowness of the Moscow-Tashkent line did not make it more 'unpleasant' than journeys on Jim Crow coaches in America. Whereas Jim Crow trains involved a miserable segregation, the Tashkent line gave him ample opportunity for conversation and bonding across cultural borders. He recalled holding conversations with Russians about the Five-Year Plans and ballet, and he educated them about the consequences of the Great Depression. Three days into the long trip, 'friendships had become more intimate across political and

[80] Harrison, p. 111.
[81] Harrison, pp. 97-8.

national lines' as passengers drew out their mandolins, balalaikas, guitars and accordions and began to sing and dance. For his part, Hughes presented Louis Armstrong and Ethel Waters records on the victrola for the satisfaction of his new friends.[82]

Festive encounters of a kind with that on the Moscow-Tashkent line were common, according to Hughes. His later trip from Bokhara to Tashkent developed similarly: the train delayed, he built a companionship with an Uzbek student at the station, whom he noted was dressed 'in half-European, half-native clothing'. The pair used an improvised, gestural language to bridge the cultural chasm between them. Once on the train, Hughes shared a jolly lunch with the Uzbek youth and a Red Army man, and was soon again surrounded by song and clapping.[83] Later again, taking the Trans-Siberian railway to Vladivostok, he met actors of a Mongolian troupe who shared tea with him even as they failed to bridge the language barrier.[84] In Hughes's stories, the train became a space of happy cross-cultural encounter, a vehicle which was rendered a contact zone of its own by its transporting function. It was also a space that was gendered: the bonds Hughes built by riding the Asian rails were uniformly masculine. Yet they spoke back to the American context in obvious and striking ways.

Drafting his memoir, Hughes seems to have had difficulty choosing the correct moments to draw American equivalences and to construct difference between the US and USSR. In the published version of his ride to Vladivostok, he dwelled on the peculiar human and natural cultures of Siberia – notably the ubiquity of camels – and indulged in an anecdote about meeting a European professor of Oriental languages. But in a discarded draft of this section, he sought to present a subtle case for Soviet-American friendship, reviving the role he had taken on in the 1930s as an agent of Soviet cultural diplomacy. Initially comparing 'spring in the verdant wilderness of Siberia' to the 'American Northwest' with its 'fir trees and rushing rivers and […] mountains footed by […] green fields', Hughes drew a picture of Soviet-American linkages. He observed that Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* had been

[82] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 103.
[83] Hughes, *IWAIW*, pp. 140-142.
[84] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 233.

regarded as 'dangerously democratic' by the tsarist regime and that *Pioneers, O Pioneers* had been distributed in thousands of copies by the Soviets in 1917. He went on to list the American authors heralded in the USSR, including Jack London, Mark Twain and contemporary writers such as John Dos Passos and Theodore Dreiser. Finally, he recalled giving his own novel *Not Without Laughter* to a Red Army man with whom he shared a compartment and to whom he made comparisons between the Siberian steppe and the Kansan prairie.[85] In its drafted form, the passage retained stylistic problems, but its excision from the manuscript should be read through the pressure Hughes felt for many years to succumb to the Cold War anti-Red hostility which insisted on the essential foreignness of the Soviet system.

The train became emblematic of what Hughes celebrated as most distinctive in Soviet modernism: the entry of folk cultures into the general tides of world history. Halfway through the Kazakh Desert, the train from Moscow to Tashkent stopped for a celebration of 'Russia's most famous living writer', Maxim Gorky. Hughes, who strove throughout his life for the affection of the humblest and most obscure of his own people, was moved by the ceremony, at which he spoke. There, 'nomad Kazakhs, the men in great coats of skins, the women in white headdresses, mingled with the passengers.' Punctuating the extraordinary global connectivity made possible by the railway, on his arrival in Uzbekistan a dishevelled Hughes was welcomed by 'crowds of yellow-brown Uzbeks in brightly flowered robes' gathered at their village stations and, in a surreal final twist, by 'a young Negro resplendent in a stiff white shirt and black tuxedo.'[86] Hughes's account of rail travel in Soviet Asia not only limned the train as a space of freedom, but the railway as a technology which might herald an age of unparalleled cultural syncretism, the iron tracks weaving a web that connected and elevated the globe's diverse vernaculars.

[85] 'Ten Days to Vladivostok', pp. 497-8, LHP 306:5013.
[86] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 104.

This dialectic of folk modernism subtly informed Hughes's writing even about the Central Asian landscape. Riding the Moscow-Tashkent line in a carnivalesque atmosphere ('singing, joke telling, dancing and tea drinking'), Hughes 'emerged from the desert one afternoon to speed through a fertile oasis of water and greenery' with 'cotton growing' and 'trees in fruit'.[87] He rendered the Central Asian environment, like the folk cultures of its inhabitants, as pristine, even as he came to 'know' the country via disruptive engines of technological modernity. The tension between the conservatism of Hughes's sentimental connection to the folk and his politico-cultural radical progressivism was both constituted by and constitutive of his cross-cultural engagements.

Consummating the Afro-Asian Alliance

If Asia was a frontier in which Black travellers constructed new political subjectivities, cultural syncretism was the infrastructural foundation for the new internationalism. But the most potent symbol of this Afro-Asian hybridity was found not in cultural exchange but in sexual intimacy and, most of all, in the imagining of a hybrid family devoted to radical social transformation. As Blacks and Asians made themselves into 'cocreators of a world in the making', the most effective symbol of that creative cooperation was sexual union and parenthood.[88] Through such familial bonds – the consummation of a political alliance founded on the ideal common ground of shared interests and genuine affection – the unity of a revolutionary shadow empire could be assured. In his paradigmatic 1928 novel *Dark Princess*, Du Bois projected the Afro-Asian alliance through such a hybrid family, but for a time in 1933 and 1934, it seemed that the famously unattached Hughes might have been entertaining the possibility of realizing such a union.

In Du Bois's fantastical romance of anti-colonial internationalism, an African American medical student named Matthew encountered an Indian princess and Bolshevik named Kautilya. Having

[87] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 104.
[88] Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 1.

already imposed exile on himself in protest against American racism, Kautilya's acquaintance turned Matthew to revolutionary activism. Through a series of twists, including a meeting of radicals representing all the world's peoples of colour and a botched plot to attack a train packed with Klansmen, Matthew and Kautilya were finally married in the novel's closing scene. At the wedding, Kautilya presented Matthew with a new-born baby, and their mixed child was heralded as the 'Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Races.'[89] Du Bois's novel fictionalized and romanticized real developments toward an anti-colonial international which were often organized through the global Communist movement and shaped by its Marxist-Leninist precepts.

Kate Baldwin has argued, via Arnold Rampersad, that the sublimation of Hughes's radicalism under the scrutiny of McCarthyism can be understood in tandem with the atrophying of his sexual life in response to related imperatives toward social conformity.[90] The line of connection leads on to questions about the moments of romantic engagement that punctuated his life as a 1930s radical, but that never attained the same level of personal commitment and public profile as his politics. Probably the most interesting and instructive romantic connection of Hughes's life was his relatively brief and somewhat curious affair in Moscow with the Chinese dancer Si-Lan Chen, known to him as Sylvia. Chen was a member of a highly distinguished family of Caribbean Chinese radicals and anti-colonial fighters. The daughter of Eugene Chen, who was a close colleague of the Chinese nationalist revolutionary leader Sun Yat-Sen, she had been born in Trinidad, and had lived in London, China, and Moscow – the latter move being made necessary in 1927 by the rising power of Chiang Kai-Shek.[91]

Chen was therefore already an embodiment of both transnationality and anti-colonial nationalism. She brought her cosmopolitan cultural grounding and radical political convictions to her dance practice, which 'drew on cultural traditions from Turkestan, Uzbekistan, and the South Pacific',

[89] WEB Du Bois, *Dark Princess: A Romance* (Milwood: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1974).
[90] Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line*, p. 87.
[91] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 256.

engaging 'classic forms' to present modern themes.[92] Like Hughes, her art sought to attune folk cultures to contemporary social and political crises, and her creative development was influenced not only by her relationship with Hughes but by her dialogues with Paul Robeson and Sergei Eisenstein.[93] It was in Moscow, and after Hughes's return from Central Asia, that the pair became entangled.

Hughes met Chen through her brother Jack. As they came to know one another, she developed an admiration for him as an artist and as a man. In his early 30s, Hughes was at the height of his confidence: handsome and jolly.[94] Hughes saw Chen as 'beautiful', 'delicate' and 'flowerlike', and spent a great deal of time during the winter of 1933 in her room at the Metropole.[95] His romantic engagements were always somewhat half-hearted and inept, however. When she left for a tour and Hughes continued his round-the-world trip, their relationship broke off and Hughes carried on a dalliance with a Russian woman before leaving for the East. Even in the intimacy of the relationship with Chen, Hughes was a difficult man to get to know, and she became frustrated with his evasiveness and the seeming insincerity of his affections.[96] The memory of their relationship continued to move Hughes, though, and when he returned to California he renewed their correspondence. Despite the fitfulness of his participation in the exchange, which carried on through 1934, he was serious enough about the courtship to consult with a lawyer friend about the possibility of Chen's immigration and their marriage. By turns cagey and passionately proprietorial, Hughes excused his behaviour by insisting that if Chen migrated to the US, or indeed if he encountered her elsewhere, he 'would take you and keep you forever'.[97] She was not to be 'taken', though – at least, not by Hughes. Hurt by him, shortly after their relationship ended Chen married the film-maker Jay Leyda.[98]

[92] Elizabeth E. Sine, 'The Radical Vision of Si-Lan Chen: The Politics of Dance in an Age of Global Crisis', *Small Axe*, 20:2 (July 2016), 28-43 (pp. 27-8).
[93] Sine, 'Radical Vision', p. 36.
[94] Rampersad I, p. 264.
[95] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 256.
[96] Rampersad I, p. 271.
[97] Quoted in Rampersad I, p. 287.
[98] Rampersad I, p. 288.

Politics framed the relationship between Hughes and Chen, and it intruded into their dialogue in intriguing ways. Both were artists committed to anti-imperialist politics, and were interested in working with the Communist call for proletarian art. Their shared politics, and their mutual concern for creating art that was effective in making social change, strengthened their bond. These shared passions played out, in a flirtatious fashion, in their correspondence. Chen, having been invited to perform a dance themed on 'Japanese fascism', joked to Hughes about the convenience of being 'able to change one's nationality so easily', listing her possible guises as 'Chinese, Japanese, West Indian, negro' and teasing that Hughes liked her 'best as the latter'. The comment led her to recall an 'intimate occasion' where Hughes had laughed at her for 'talking politics'.[99] Hughes, in turn, responded to a broody comment from Chen about her desire to have a brown baby by asking 'what nationality' their child would be. It would not matter, he jibed, 'so [long as] he or she is anti-Fascist!'[100] To this, Chen responded coolly: 'What do you mean 'ours'?'[101]

Hughes and Chen's wistful fantasies of interracial and transnational union never evolved toward serious planning. The exchanges were nevertheless the nearest Hughes ever came to making a long-term commitment to a woman. The rhyming between Hughes and Chen's romantic epistles and Du Bois's imagined consummation of an Afro-Asian revolutionary alliance in *Dark Princess* highlights how near such a union came to realization. It also raises questions about the depth to which Afro-Asian co-operation in a shared anti-imperial and anti-capitalist struggle penetrated the minds of Black radicals during the 1930s, and the strength of such commitments. Finally, it gives a twist to the queer story of Hughes's flirtation with Asian dance cultures: in Uzbekistan they signalled new configurations of gender and sexuality, while in his relationship with Chen he was drawn toward (and ultimately repelled from) a vision of heteronormative domesticity.

[99] Si-Lan Chen to Hughes, 29 August 1934, H-LHP 1.
[100] Quoted in Rampersad I, p. 287.
[101] Quoted in Berry, p. 185.

Conclusion

Whatever the depth or permanence of the alliances made during their travels, Black travellers outside the Western world were able to envision different modes of life, structures of identity, and systems of social relations. Experiencing worlds where modernity was under construction and was being hotly contested, and where they were compelled to adapt to wide cultural difference, they reflected critically if not always antagonistically about Western civilization, capitalism, and revolution.

Veiling acted as a powerful metaphor and a set of customs by which Langston Hughes and Juanita Harrison came to understand and represent the relationship between race, modernity, and gender. For Hughes, the veiling of Muslim women in Central Asia was equivalent to the oppressive racial veil drawn over Black people in America, and the desegregation of Muslim societies undertaken by the Communist government was equivalent to the reconstruction of American society in the aftermath of abolition. At the same time, Hughes imagined these Central Asian societies not as congenitally primitive but as being artificially excluded from modernity by Western capitalist powers. Soviet modernisation was therefore itself a kind of liberatory desegregation: an anti-colonial unveiling of peoples who had been subject to racialised exclusion. Harrison, by contrast, negotiated the veil as a practical and lived reality, viewing the practice through the eyes of a Westerner but also learning to deploy it in ways that enhanced her connection to the societies she was living in. Veiling challenged Harrison to renegotiate her identity and revealed the ways that her Black feminism could both forge bonds with Muslim women and profoundly condescend to them.

The entanglement of problems of culture, race, and modernity were explored also through Hughes's envisioning of a folk modernism, and in his and Harrison's descriptions of train travel. Hughes's encounter with Central Asian societies helped to foster a belief in the compatibility of ethnic cultural tradition and modernism in art and technology. This sentiment also shaped his description of train journeys in Soviet Asia. For both Hughes and Harrison, trains – though often symbols of

unidirectional progress, colonial advancement, and Black journeys to freedom – became spaces of cross-cultural encounter and exchange. Hughes and Harrison sustained this process of cross-cultural encounter to East Asia. Beyond the central Asian steppe and the British Indian metropolis, they ventured toward the Pacific, which was increasingly crucial to the unravelling global confrontation between belligerent imperialisms. There, state power appeared less as a modernising and Westernising force than as a hostile and pervasive shadow. Their encounters with different kinds of state in Imperial Japan and American colonies provoked different kinds of political articulation, protest, and cultural engagement.

Chapter 4

Black Pacific Circuits: State Surveillance and Racial Violence in Imperial Japan, China, and Hawai'i

If in their journeys through West, Central, and South Asia, Hughes and Harrison were approving of state interventions into the social lives of Muslim subjects, which were framed as modernising, revolutionising, or even civilising, their travels in the Pacific Rim and Hawai'i produced a quite different type of encounter with state power. As Americans and as sympathetic visitors to the USSR, they drew suspicion from state surveillance agents affiliated with Imperial Japan and the US. Their travels involved the further development of Afro-Asian solidarities but also provoked conflicts with state powers and generated moments of anti-state and anti-racist protest. In turn, their confrontations with state power shaped their travel narratives in ways that tended to obscure radical transpacific networks. The American Pacific emerged as a space where Jim Crow racism grew with the US's expanding legal domain. Even so, as Hughes and Harrison each travelled around the northern Pacific, their own cultural rootedness in America was exposed by the emergence of blind spots on the US's imperialist role in the region. This chapter details a narrative of Black travel in the Pacific that figures the Pacific as a space of racialisation and radicalism, but also an arena in which African American citizenship tended to overcome the internationalist dimensions of their anti-racism.

Since the late nineteenth century, the Pacific had been one of the primary areas in which Americans had taken up the 'White Man's Burden'. The region held out to the American ruling class the promise of a new frontier in the achievement of their Manifest Destiny and a fresh repository for their libidinal fantasies of strategic dominance and profit extraction.[1] Immediately on the defeat of slavery, both Black and white Americans also began to imagine that a new beginning could be won for

[1] Immerwahr; Gerald Horne, *The White Pacific: U.S. Imperialism and Black Slavery in the South Seas after the Civil War* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), p. 5.

the freedmen by sending them as US colonists to the islands of the Pacific.[2] While these plans never bore fruit, US colonisation of the Philippines and a series of smaller territories (Samoa, Guam, Hawai'i) relied in part on the deployment of Black troops. The dependence of American imperial ambition on the deployment of Black soldiers against non-Europeans risked undesirable outcomes for the ruling elite. It might give Blacks a sense of entitlement to full American citizenship by making them participants in the nation's expansionary destiny, or it might provoke among African Americans a deepening sense of solidarity with the US's own colonised subjects beyond (and within) the American mainland.[3] After all, Black participation in America's imperial projects did not protect them from ongoing discrimination in the ranks of the army, and long after the victory of abolitionism on the US mainland, the Pacific remained a region of violent and racialized systems of forced labour.[4]

The Pacific has therefore signified a challenge to the politics of Black liberation, where African Americans could imagine themselves as American citizens, unfairly disadvantaged in a racist civilizing mission that they shared with fellow Americans, or as members of an international fraternity of the oppressed, hostile to the project of American empire. Typically, narratives of Blackness in the Pacific have been rendered in masculinist terms, dominated by stories of Black soldiers, public intellectuals, and even pugilists.[5] By foregrounding Juanita Harrison alongside Langston Hughes, however, both masculinist and heteronormative framings of Pacific surveillance, radicalism, imperialism, and racialisation can be challenged.

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[2] Guy Emerson Mount, *From Slavery to Empire* (forthcoming); Nitasha Tamar Sharma, 'Over Two Centuries: Black People in Nineteenth-century Hawai'i', *American Nineteenth Century History* 20:2 (2019), 115-140

[3] See Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); John Cullen Gruesser, *The Empire Abroad and the Empire at Home: African American Literature and the Era of Overseas Expansion* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2012); and Gretchen Murphy, *Shadowing the White Man's Burden: U.S. Imperialism and the Problem of the Color Line* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

[4] Horne, *The White Pacific*, p. 2.

[5] Etsuko Taketani has frankly proposed that narratives of the Black Pacific may not permit 'feminist geographies'. See Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*, p. 28. On the connection between race, empire, and masculinity, see Michele Mitchell, '"The Black Man's Burden": African Americans, Imperialism, and Notions of Racial Manhood 1890-1910', *International Review of Social History*, 44 (1999) 77-99. On transpacific pugilism, see Theresa Runstedtler, 'The New Negro's Brown Brother: Black American and Filipino Boxers and the "Rising Tide of Color"', in *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance beyond Harlem*, ed. By Davarian L. Baldwin and Minkah Makalani (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

The politics of race and empire

In the making of Afro-Asia, the Japanese Empire was an important and frequently confounding reference-point for anti-racist and anti-imperialist activists. As an imperial power outside whiteness and positioning itself as a champion of the darker races, Japan made a claim on the sympathies of Black America. Some African American commentators identified the rise of a 'coloured' world power in the Pacific with a general upturn in the struggle against white supremacy, and were encouraged in this direction by the influence of Pan-Asianism, which channelled anti-imperialist sentiment even when expressed by the Japanese nationalist Right. Others, however, saw the fight of the Chinese against Japanese imperialism as part of a nascent international anti-imperialist resistance.[6]

These complex dynamics, entwining racial and imperial politics, were at their height in the first decades of the twentieth century, as Japan established itself as the rising power in the region. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Japanese imperial project was increasingly dominated by a nationalist authoritarianism that drew obvious comparisons with European fascism.[7] The rise to dominance of Japan's radical Right made Black sympathy for the emergent empire even more troubling and controversial, especially as the Japanese Empire was attempting to face down anti-imperialist movements in China. Nationalists under Chiang Kai-Shek had been at war since 1927 with the Chinese Communist Party, which would come under Mao Zedong's leadership in 1935. The conflict undermined the political unity of China, which was already threatened by the power of regional military leaders.[8] For most Black radicals, Afro-Asian solidarity meant support for the struggles of the

[6] Kearney, pp. 72-86; Gallicchio.

[7] There is a rich literature on Japanese expansion in the interwar period, and a long history of contention over the usefulness of thinking about the Shōwa Restoration as Japanese fascism. For an overview of this literature, see Joseph P. Sottile, 'The Fascist Era: Imperial Japan and the Axis Alliance in Historical Perspective', in *Japan in the Fascist Era*, ed. by E. Bruce Reynolds (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). For a useful recent contribution to this literature, see Reto Hoffman, *The Fascist Effect: Japan and Italy, 1915-1952* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015). Other important contributions include Masao Murayama, *Thought and Behavior of Modern Japanese Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963) and William Miles Fletcher III, *Search for a New Order: Intellectuals and Fascism in Prewar Japan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

[8] Lloyd E. Eastman, et al, *The Nationalist Era in China, 1927-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

Chinese against Japan. Nevertheless, given the continued dominance of European and American powers in much of East Asia, including in China's port cities, imperial rivalries interacted in complex ways with racial politics.

The most notorious Black apologia for Japanese imperialism, shaped by the appeal of racial internationalism, came from Du Bois.[9] An eminently anti-racist intellectual and a critic of imperialism, Du Bois had begun writing about the Japanese Empire in 1905, responding positively to their military humiliation of Russia – and, as many saw it, the whole white world – in the Russo-Japanese War. In 1936, he visited East Asia for the first time, arriving in the Japanese client state of Manchukuo (China's Manchuria province) as an honoured guest. He produced journalistic narratives for the *Pittsburgh Courier* that reflected Japanese efforts to convince him – and by extension the wider African American community – of the virtues of their imperial project. He 'endorsed' the vision of 'a regionally integrated Asia' advertised to him by Japanese diplomat Yōsuke Matsuoka, identifying this militaristic pan-Asianism with a form of socialist internationalism.[10] Even after the Battle of Shanghai in 1937, which saw the Japanese deploy overwhelming technologized violence against the Chinese and which Du Bois followed from American soil, he continued to defend Japanese expansion in racial terms as a defence against European imperialism.[11]

Black engagement with the politics of the Pacific Rim has been described in terms of a 'transpacific antiracism' by Yuichiro Onishi, but this does not quite capture the conditions of empire,

[9] On Du Bois's response to inter-imperialist rivalry in East Asia, see Kearney; Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*; Gallicchio; Yuichiro Onishi, *Transpacific Antiracism: Afro-Asian Solidarity in 20th-Century Black America, Japan, and Okinawa* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); and Gerald Horne, *Facing the Rising Sun: African Americans, Japan, and the Rise of Afro-Asian Solidarity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

[10] Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*, p. 172. Matsuoka was himself a transnational subject of a different sort. Educated in California and Oregon, in the years before Du Bois's visit he had led the Japanese delegation's departure from the League of Nations and had interpreted fascism for a Japanese audience, fostering ambitions to become an emulator of Benito Mussolini. After World War II, he was tried for crimes against the peace. He died before the end of the trial. See David J. Lu, *Agony of Choice: Matsuoka Yōsuke and the Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1880-1946* (New York: Lexington Books, 2002).

[11] Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*, p. 170.

citizenship, and indigeneity (nor the endurance of problematic racialisations) which emerge from the stories of Hughes's and Harrison's travels around the Pacific. These journeys encompass not only China, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, but US possessions such as the Philippines and, most prominently, Hawai'i.[12] As such, I position this discussion in terms of a Black Pacific, understood as a set of transoceanic circuits in which African American subjects were agents of inter- and anti-imperialist politics. In doing so, I engage with an emergent scholarship which conjoins histories of Black anti-racism and anti-colonial movements in the Pacific.[13] African American sojourners in the Pacific were vulnerable to the impugning of state authorities and were confronted by stark questions about their ambiguous positioning in the US's imperial project. By treating the Pacific as a single space, spanning the territories of Japan and the US, the continuities between apparently very different regimes come into clearer focus, particularly as they impacted on 'colonial and racialized subjects.'[14]

Constructing a Black Pacific archive for this period presents challenges, both intellectual and practical. Du Bois's apologism for Japanese fascism aside, the respective Pacific journeys of Langston Hughes and Juanita Harrison present no less significant questions, albeit of different sorts. As somewhat less honoured or friendly guests of the regime, Hughes and Harrison had a more disrupted experience of the Japanese Empire, and even as they crossed the ocean toward America, they continued to face similar problems. Travelling the region, respectively, in the summer of 1933 and the autumn-winter of 1934-5, they arrived after visits of quite different durations and purposes to the USSR. Any evidence of friendliness with the Soviet state made travellers suspect in the eyes of imperial Japanese officials, and the route of their travels raised hackles. This suspicion was heightened by the

[12] See Onishi, *Transpacific Antiracism*.
[13] Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*; Robert Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Quito Swan, 'Giving Berth: Fiji, Black Women's Internationalism, and the Pacific Women's Conference of 1975', *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 4:1 (2018) 37-63; Keisha Blain, '"[F]or the Rights of Dark People in Every Part of the World": Pearl Sherrod, Black Internationalist Feminism, and Afro-Asian Politics during the 1930s', *Souls* 17:1-2 (2015) 90-112; Vince Schleitwiler, *Strange Fruit of the Black Pacific: Imperialism's Racial Justice and Its Fugitives* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).
[14] Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War Two*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) p. 8

Japanese-US rivalry: their status as second-class citizens in America did not diminish Japanese suspicion toward travellers using US passports.

Though they visited many of the same places under the same jurisdictions, Hughes and Harrison took somewhat different routes through the Pacific world. Both travelled Imperial Japan and its nearest neighbour, the Republic of China, but Harrison's journey included more of the Japanese Empire's colonial possessions: like Hughes, she spent time in Korea, but she also visited Taiwan and the puppet state of Manchukuo. Both noted the hostility of imperial officials and were ultimately made to feel unwelcome. Harrison had her luggage confiscated at Keelung in Taiwan, and Hughes was arrested in Tokyo and instructed to leave Japan. Harrison's journeying then took her to the American Philippines. Finally, both spent time in Hawai'i, America's original overseas colony and a liminal space, neither wholly foreign nor fully American, where state surveillance, imperialist rivalry, and cross-cultural encounter continued to shape their experiences.

Understanding Harrison's experience continues to require wrangling with her published travel narrative, *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World*. Hughes's narrative, meanwhile, must be drawn in large part from his 1956 memoir, *I Wonder as I Wander*. Uncovering the shadowed radicalism of Hughes's Black Pacific requires careful augmentation of the memoir with contemporary material (essays, correspondences, diaries). Hughes's narrative was produced between the teeth of two quite different anti-Communist states: 1930s Imperial Japan and 1950s American McCarthyism. Among the arguments of this chapter are that Hughes's different responses to these two persecutions – public outrage at the first, a subtle mixture of quiescence and subversiveness at the second – are to be understood not only in terms of his relation to the persecuting authority or his changing temperament but through the changed political situation at a macro level.

The core arguments made in the chapter are organised around two themes. In the first, the recovery of transpacific radicalism remains central. It seeks to embed Hughes and Harrison in traditions of Black protest and networks of transnational radicalism. In doing so, the shade Hughes

cast in his memoir over his political activities in the 1930s Pacific recedes, while Harrison emerges as a practitioner of Black feminism, transgressing borders and engaging in a dissembling protest. In the next section, the interconnected processes of racial violence and colonial dominance take precedence. Hughes and Harrison's assessments of Pacific empire and – just as importantly – their silences on the US's role, will be considered alongside their protests against racial violence and discrimination, revealing both the expansiveness and the contradictions of African American anti-racism and anti-colonialism.

Fascist blues

The Black Pacific narratives of Hughes and Harrison were shaped by antagonisms with the imperial states of Japan and the US, and in Hughes's case especially by embeddedness in transpacific, interracial networks of radicalism. The circulation of radical ideas, the building of revolutionary networks, and the movement of contraband objects were the primary features of Hughes's shadowed radicalism in the Black Pacific. The radical intonations in Harrison's *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* require more training of the ear but remain clearly identifiable. Harrison's encounter with the Japanese state was characterised, first, by her subversive and transgressive mobility, defying policing and manifesting the self-confident assertion of a universal space that was implied by the title of her book ('*my* great, wide, beautiful world'). Second, Harrison responded to Japanese authoritarianism with a defiant joy that substituted the humorous styling of the blueswoman for the confrontational rhetoric of the revolutionary. Her interpellation as a radical by Japanese state authorities should, I argue, be taken seriously, as it draws attention to her participation (with the protagonists of Chapter 2) in the construction of Soviet alterity and her charting of a Black feminist geography around the Pacific and, indeed, the world.

When Hughes left Russia from Vladivostok, he was in a buoyant mood of not only artistic but political confidence, each of which had been fostered by his prestigious status as a guest of the Soviet

government. However, he entered a very different political terrain which demanded a degree of caution that was less compatible with his spirit of self-assurance and revolutionary boldness. East Asia was host to the first stirrings of a new international conflict. The ruthlessly anti-Communist Japanese Empire ruled Korea, Taiwan, and Manchukuo while in China a fierce civil war was compounded in 1934 by a Soviet incursion into the northwestern state of Xinjiang. The salience of anti-Red concerns at this geo-historical conjuncture was confirmed in 1936 with the signing of an Anti-Comintern Pact between Japan and Hitler's Germany.[15] It was despite such forces that Hughes participated in radical artistic, intelligence, and activist circles while he travelled on the Asian side of the Pacific Rim.

From Vladivostok, Hughes stopped at various places in occupied Korea, before making his way to Tokyo via the port of Tsuruga and the city of Kyoto. In the Korean ports and at Tsuruga, Hughes was challenged by Japanese authorities. He complained that the Japanese military boarded his boat at its first stop to inspect the passengers' passports and reported that once ashore he was 'trailed' by an anonymous agent – such malign presences were, in fact, 'always there'. When he arrived in Japan, Hughes was met immediately by Japanese state officials who demanded to know his business in the country and his reasons for travelling in Soviet Russia. Japan was a nation hostile to foreigners and was ruled by people unashamed of their repressive activities, Hughes concluded: 'they make no secret that they are shadowing you, and that they are suspicious of everyone.'[16]

Hughes recorded this story of surveillance in a 1934 essay for the Leftist press, but his memoir told a somewhat different story. There, Hughes made a brief note of a 'very polite' police inquiry at Tsuruga but made the focus of his narrative a brief companionship with two white Australians, while making various anodyne comments on 'Oriental' culture.[17] As he rewrote the story of Pacific espionage to minimize his involvement with revolutionary politics, he also asserted his compliance with normative heterosexual lures. Hughes shared details of a night out in Kyoto with his male Australian

[15] David H. James, *The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire* (London: Routledge, 2010) p. 185.
[16] Langston Hughes, 'Swords Over Asia', *Fight*, June 1934.
[17] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 238.

friend and the ship's captain, which ended with the captain giving Hughes a prostitute as a gift.[18] The inclusion of this oddly salacious passage ought to be understood through the joint compulsion to perform political conservatism and heterosexual conformity that guided his palimpsestual memoir-writing during the middle years of the 1950s.

The political content of Hughes's consequential Tokyo stay proved much more difficult to write over. On arrival in the Japanese capital, his first port of call was the famous Tsukiji Theatre, a 'little' theatre and company which had brought modern and avant-garde techniques to Japan for the first time and which was known to harbour socialists.[19] Hughes protested (quite incredibly) in his memoir that he was ignorant about the 'political cloud' hanging over the Tsukiji, even as his 1933 notebook referred to it as a 'left-wing theatre'.[20] Indeed, he immediately undermined the claim in the memoir by referencing the role of a Moscow acquaintance called Seki Sano – who was a former director of the Tsukiji and a Communist activist – in making the company aware of his visit. More plausibly, Hughes suggested that the hotel clerk from whom he acquired directions to the theatre subsequently informed the police about his activity. Regardless, as Hughes watched a performance at the theatre, he noted disapprovingly that a state censor also observed, ensuring the actors stuck strictly to the approved script.[21] Hughes's visit to the Tsukiji Theatre illustrates several important aspects of his East Asian travel: his involvement in radical networks, the elision of this political dimension in his later recollection, and the pervasive presence of Japanese agents during his time there.

It was not only the Japanese authorities who were interested in Hughes's activities, however. As a bona-fide celebrity visitor in the country, Hughes was invited to speak at a dinner of the distinguished Pan-Pacific Club. At the event, he delivered an oration that appalled his American

[18] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 240.
[19] The theatre is described in Martin Banham, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 566.
[20] Pocket diary from China and Japan, p. 43, H-LHP 1.
[21] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 241.

acquaintances, but which also alerted both Japanese and American authorities to his unapologetic radicalism discussed in more detail below.[22] Through the optics of the FBI, Hughes's striving for a global anti-racist and anti-colonial front became a claim that 'there was a natural bond' between 'colored races' and a prediction of 'war in which all the colored races, black, yellow, and red, would join in the subjugation of the whites'.[23] This rendering stripped Hughes's comments of their nuance. The FBI reduced Hughes's racial politics to a question of natural affinity rather than political coalition and collapsed his revolutionism into mere bloodthirstiness.

The political ripples from this speech were not immediately apparent and Hughes sailed on to Shanghai the following day. China's largest city charmed Hughes even less than Tokyo had, even if it held some political and cultural interest to him: in one essay he begged 'will somebody tell me something good to write about Shanghai?'[24] A city at the centre of all the complex conflicts going on in East Asia at the time – between China and Japan, Nationalists and Communists, and with European and American domination in its International Settlement – Shanghai in Hughes's telling was under a cloud of gangster-run vice industries, racism, and colonialism. He nevertheless defied the advice of his Western friends to stay in the city's International Settlement, outside of which he would apparently be at the mercy of the hostile Chinese population. On visiting the Chinese areas, Hughes concluded that their resentment was toward 'white foreigners'. He even compared the Chinese quarter positively with the International Settlement: among the 'jolly' Chinese, unlike the racist Europeans and Americans, 'color was no barrier'.[25]

Hughes identified with the Chinese as a colonised and racialised people and rejected Western travel advice that regarded Chinese districts of Shanghai as off-limits, but his stay in Shanghai and his narrative of it were shaped by his status as an American. Part of global circuits of African American

[22] Hughes, *IWAIW*, pp. 242-3.
[23] Quoted in Rampersad I, p. 273.
[24] Hughes, 'From Moscow to Shanghai', *China Forum*, n.d., LHP 428:9529; see also Pocket diary from China and Japan, H-LHP 1.
[25] Hughes, *IWAIW*, pp. 250-51.

performance, Shanghai was especially noteworthy for its jazz scene. Jazz grew in Shanghai with the increased presence of Western businessmen, 'a function of capitalist, imperial projects' as well as an expressive culture of subalterns. Within this power matrix, highly sought-after African American performers occupied a contradictory position, 'exposed to both the pleasures and pains of imperialism.'[26] Hughes's encounter with Shanghai's jazz culture exampled this liminality. After taking in a show given by a pair of African American dancers known as the Mackey Twins, Hughes interviewed their manager, Irene West. The conversation exposed the routes that jazz took from the US South, to the American West, to the imperial Pacific. The Mackey twins (not in fact brothers) had run away from the South and 'hoboed their way to California'. There, they began working as dancers 'in the Central Avenue honky-tonks in Los Angeles.' Spotted as talents, they won a place in Louis Armstrong's band, and performed successfully at contests and clubs in Western cities including San Francisco and Reno. Irene West had heard of them while 'putting together a colored show to play Honolulu' and had continued to tour 'from Hawaii to the Orient'. In Shanghai, she complained, it was proving difficult to keep the young men away from 'the White Russian women and the Japanese girls'.[27] As Americans in the International Settlement, even despite their subjugation as racial subjects, the performers had ample access to lifestyles denied to the Chinese.

Even if Hughes did not note the contradiction in this circumstance, he sustained his radical and anti-imperialist convictions during his time in Shanghai. The city's location at the nexus of Chinese civil war politics, anti-Japanese resistance, and international intrigue fundamentally shaped Hughes's experience. Ruled as part of Chiang Kai-Shek's Republic of China but dominated in large part by European and American powers, Shanghai had been surrounded by Japanese armies only the year before.[28] At the same time, war with the Communists was ongoing. Though neglected in his memoir,

[26] Nan Estad, 'Smoking Hot: Cigarettes, Jazz, and the Production of Global Imaginaries in Interwar Shanghai', in *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*, ed. by Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016) 45-65 (pp. 46, 47).
[27] Hughes, *IWAIW*, pp. 252-253.
[28] See Philip S. Jowett, *The Bitter Peace: Conflict in China, 1928-37* (Gloucester: Amberley Publishing, 2017).

political activity in sympathy with the Communists seems to have been one of his primary occupations in the city. In the teeth of hostile political forces, however, Hughes misjudged his level of protection and further provoked Japanese surveillance agents.

On arriving in Shanghai, he heeded the advice of his Moscow acquaintance Agnes Smedley to try and contact the Marxist editor of the *China Forum* newspaper, Harold Isaacs. Visiting the office of the paper, he found that 'political gangsters' had recently attacked it. In discussions with Isaacs at his apartment, Hughes learned more about the role being played by European officials in the atmosphere of anti-Communist terror, even turning blind eyes to attacks on American activists who were in turn 'severe critic[s] of the British and French in Shanghai'.[29] Isaacs also introduced Hughes to the widow of Sun Yat-Sen, with whom he spoke about the family of his former lover Si-Lan Chen.[30] Hughes's contact with these associates of Smedley (Isaacs, Madame Sun, Lu Hsin) fuelled suspicion among Japanese police that he was behaving as an international courier in 'an underground network of communists' which also included Seki Sano and Yoshi Hijikata, the two Japanese delegates to the conference of the International Revolutionary Theatre Workers that he had met in Russia. The Japanese press feared that these radicals had 'handed important reports and information' to Hughes, which he was tasked with delivering to his contacts in Shanghai and Tokyo.[31]

In many respects, the question of whether this fear intuited Hughes's participation in a real information network is secondary to the fact that his mere mobility generated such paranoia in the minds of state surveillance agents. While there is no evidence that Hughes acted as a courier for politically sensitive information, Hughes did manage to send some souvenirs of his Japan trip back to the US. In correspondences with staff at the New York Theatre Union from September 1934, correspondents thanked Hughes for 'the boxful of things from Tokyo', including a selection of posters, which were 'posted on the walls of the Theatre Union office' and were due to be exhibited in the lobby

[29] 'Shanghai Terror', p. 520, LHP 306:5013.
[30] 'Shanghai Terror', p. 520, LHP 306:5013; Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 256
[31] Alex Buchman to Hughes, 24 July 1933, LHP 36:630. See also Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*, pp. 125, 128.

during the winter.[32] These souvenirs – likely taken from Hughes's visit to the Tsukiji Theatre – were material symbols of radical transpacific connections.

One final member of Hughes's transpacific network made contact on his return to Tokyo. Alex Buchman was an aeronautical engineer and a Communist sympathizer who had, by some coincidence, attended the same school in Cleveland as Hughes. At dinner on his final night in Tokyo and under the watchful eye of the police, Hughes was introduced to Buchman, who had heard of Hughes's return to the Japanese capital in the press. The two conversed over dinner, though had little to say to one another, and corresponded briefly afterwards.[33] Buchman was deported from Japan soon after for having made such suspicious contacts, and when he arrived in Shanghai, he entered the same milieu that Hughes had left. He joined Harold Isaacs not only as a Communist but as a sympathizer of the Trotskyist Left Opposition which was then in combat with the dominant wing of the movement.[34] Though Hughes would, in 1938, sign a 'Statement by American Progressives' in defence of the Moscow Trials, the Pacific route of his radicalism – like the frontier politics of his Soviet travel – paints a picture of his radicalism as non-sectarian, and sheds light on grains of dissent in his revolutionary work.[35]

When the *Taiyo Maru* docked in Japan – first in Kobe and then in Yokohama – Hughes was singled out from among the passengers for police questioning, which focused on his association with Madame Sun.[36] Avoiding detention, he took advantage of the stop at Yokohama to return for several nights to Tokyo. There, his Japanese welcome was finally brought to a rude end. As he watched a film in the roof garden of the Imperial Hotel, he was called to the lobby where he was told there was a

[32] Margaret Larkin to Hughes, 11 September 1934, LHP 155:2868; Paul Peters to Hughes, 15 September 1934, LHP 128:2392.
[33] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 273; Alex Buchman to Hughes, 24 July 1933, LHP 36:630; Susan Weissman, 'Alexander Buchman's Revolutionary Life', *Solidarity*, May-June 2003, https://solidarity-us.org/atc/104/p618/ [accessed 12-6-2019].
[34] Rampersad I, p. 274; Weissman, 'Alexander Buchman's Revolutionary Life', *Solidarity*, May-June 2003; see also Gregor Benton, *Prophets Unarmed: Chinese Trotskyists in Revolution, War, Jail, and the Return from Limbo* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).
[35] 'The Moscow Trials: A Statement by American Progressives', *New Masses*, 3 May 1938, p. 19.
[36] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 260.

delegation of writers wishing to meet him.[37] Eager to see the end of the film, he sought to delay but ultimately abandoned it before it reached a denouement. In the lobby, he found a group which included a man he later identified mistakenly as 'Naoshi Takunaga, the famous author of *The Street Without Sun* that had been published in the United States.'[38] Hughes's clumsy reference was in fact to Naoshi Tokunaga, whose name he took from Agnes Smedley and whose 1929 novel had not in fact been translated into English. Nor was Tokunaga likely to have been the man used as a police decoy as he was not in prison.[39] Whatever his real identity, the decoy writer was accompanied by two policemen who proceeded to interrogate Hughes about his connections with American writers affiliated with the Left: Mike Gold, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser. After this interrogative conversation, the visitors left.

When Hughes woke the following morning, he found that an officer at the Tokyo Police Department insisted on meeting him. Brought to the station, he was questioned along lines similar to his previous encounters (addressing his travel to the USSR, his activities in Japan and Shanghai, and the suspicion that he had acted as a Red courier) but in a more sustained and aggressive manner. In his remembered representation of this questioning, Hughes responded to the racial defence of Japanese imperialism by insisting that 'for [Japan] or any other Asiatic country to make colonies of other people's lands in Asia […] would not be good'.[40] Finally, he was confronted with a dossier of intelligence about his activities and acquaintances, and was asked to account for them in full.[41] After seven hours of questioning, he was escorted back to his hotel where his luggage was thoroughly

[37] Hughes's memoir tells us that the film was *Mata Hari*, starring Greta Garbo and Ramon Navarro (the latter was an acquaintance of Hughes's in California). He uses the film's suspenseful spy narrative to colour his own espionage story. But Taketani's reading picks up on a slip of the pen which reveals the literary subterfuge in Hughes's remembrance: Hughes said that the spy in the film was played by Pola Negri, who in fact played a spy in *Hotel Imperial* (Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*, p. 132). A further twist is suggested in Alex Buchman's letter to Hughes dated 24 July 1933 where Buchman expresses his 'hope' that Hughes 'manage[d] to see part of "Fugitive" tonight'. How much of American film culture Hughes had the opportunity to imbibe in Tokyo, and which parts of it he saw and when, are questions which seem only to become more knotted!
[38] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 262.
[39] Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*, pp. 133-134.
[40] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 265.
[41] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 268.

searched and the names of Tsukiji Theatre members taken from a souvenir fan Hughes had been gifted on his visit there.[42] Having struggled to avoid incriminating himself and others, Hughes was instructed that he should 'leave as soon as possible' and that he would not be permitted to return to Japan.[43]

News of his detention had reached the press very quickly, and though he was forbidden from speaking to the Japanese he gave a lengthy statement to an American correspondent. He expressed disgust at his treatment by the police and was dismayed that 'Japan was headed down the same path as Hitler's Germany.'[44] It was during the evening following his release that Hughes met Alex Buchman. The next day he took the train to Yokohama in time to board the *Taiyo Maru* once more. His memoir, sensitive to the echoes of Japanese anti-Communism in the McCarthyite Red Scare, concluded the tale with an apparent clipping from the *Japan Times and Mail*, which suggested that the Japanese authorities 'were satisfied that the Negro was not a Communist'.[45]

If indeed the Japanese police had decided that Hughes was not a Communist, it was scarcely due to a sustained effort on his part to persuade anyone that he was innocent of this charge. The Langston Hughes of 1933 appeared unfazed by his confrontation with state-led anti-Communist intimidation. On his return to the United States, he sent a letter of protest to the US Department of State about his treatment at the hands of the Japanese, which skirted around the question of his intentions in visiting the USSR. He then engaged in a period of sustained radical activism which included lectures on the advantages of Soviet-style socialism and the continued production and public performance of pro-Communist poems (see Chapter 5).[46] The State Department, for their part, dismissed his protest, explaining that Hughes's rendezvous with members of the radical 'Writers' League and Dramatists' League' and the suggestion raised in these putative conferences that he participate in 'the holding of a meeting' led Japanese authorities to suspect that he was 'connected

[42] Hughes to US Department of State, 30 August 1933, LHP 157:2907.
[43] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 271.
[44] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 272.
[45] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 276.
[46] Hughes to US Department of State, 30 August 1933, LHP 157:2907.

with some organization advocating the overthrow of the "system of private property", membership of which, under Japanese law, is a criminal offense'. As such, they judged that the Japanese had acted in accordance with their own laws and there was no basis for lodging a complaint on the matter.[47] Stories continued to circulate in Japan after his expulsion implicating him in a variety of contradictory views: some newspapers carried a fake interview with him in which he was quoted as 'praising Japan's imperialism to the highest' while others insinuated that he had admitted to being a hostile 'agent'.[48]

Hughes's subjection to state surveillance did not end when he left the Japanese Empire. When he arrived at Honolulu, Hughes was greeted by a coterie of reporters, one of whom pointed out to him a more unwelcome presence on the pier. An FBI agent lingered nearby as Hughes recounted for the newsmen the story of his expulsion from Tokyo. At this time, Hughes learned of Alex Buchman's ejection from Japan.[49] The FBI agent appears not to have intruded on the rest of Hughes's stay, but he would have given the poet pause to reflect on how his political activities were being received by established powers in his home country and the convergences linking the two major powers of the Pacific Rim.

The presence of this agent also invites consideration of the ways that anti-Communism, far from being a factor in Hughes's life contained to the period of the HUAC hearing, was a consistent and continuous feature as early as 1933. Unlike in later decades, however, in the historical moment of Hughes's Pacific journey, the high stakes for socialist activists were moderated by a precarious balance of social forces globally and domestically. It was this balance of forces – with the Soviet Union a dynamic force, the capitalist world beset by crises, and fascism of different stripes a present threat to democrats, as well as a rising tide of class struggle inside the United States – which gave Hughes the confidence to step back onto American shores with his Communist commitment undimmed. The tensions and elisions in his later remembrance of this period must therefore be understood as

[47] US Department of State to Hughes, 25 September 1933, LHP 157:2907.
[48] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 278; Agnes Smedley to Hughes, 31 October 1933, H-LHP 1.
[49] Hughes, *IWAIW*, pp. 278-89.

products of the profound contrast between 1933 as a moment of brash radicalism – biographically and conjuncturally – and 1956 as a time of uneasy (indeed, fracturing) social stabilization in America and dearly sought quietude for Hughes in his Harlem apartment.

Hughes was not the only African American traveller who found themselves suspected of subversive activity by the Japanese police in the middle years of the 1930s. While Hughes treated Japanese hostility to Communism with open contempt and attempted to protest to the US state, Harrison's response to similar suspicions was different but not less politically legitimate, drawing from precisely the blues tradition of which Hughes was, at many other moments, himself also part. Equally, Harrison's defiant border-crossing manifested a Black feminist assertion of the right to navigate space freely, regardless of national (but also racial and gendered) attempts to police it. Though Harrison did not spend her time traveling East Asia building radical networks, her treatment as a radical for having travelled through the USSR helps to highlight her narrative's implication in the Black Communist project of representing the USSR as a model of an alternative, liberatory modernity. This in turn raises questions about the construction of Black radical traditions, and the possibility of understanding Harrison as an idiosyncratic member of such a tradition.

Like Hughes, Harrison came to the turbulent Asian Pacific region via the Soviet Union, which she had visited as a tourist with no apparent ideological commitment to socialism. Her correspondence from the USSR nevertheless struck many of the same laudatory notes as her predecessors in the 'Black and White' film expedition. She framed it as 'a world in its self' which served to falsify her 'thought [that] the world were small'. Its difference was manifest at the 'Great Yuths Day' preparations she witnessed in early September 1934.[50] She joined the 'young men and Girls' as they marched through the streets of Leningrad, and a few days later brought the experience to bear in an argument with an elderly man about generational attitudes in the USSR. Harrison insisted that because she had 'romped and skiped along the streets arm in arm with' Russia's youth, she had 'felt their

[50] Harrison, p. 277.

hearts' and knew that they were happy.[51] Similarly, in her visits to children's nurseries and a registry office she was informed about the state of women's rights and family life in Soviet Russia and was impressed by the apparent availability of divorce, the absence of stigma around children's legitimacy, and the ruthless enforcement of rules around fathers' child support.[52] Repeatedly, she questioned 'what other Country' could make equivalent claims to full employment and the absence of class privilege. She insisted that the USSR was the freest country in the world and that their gendarmes 'were as gentle as mothers with their babies.'[53]

Her impressions were certainly shaped by Stalinist propaganda: her visit, after all, occurred in the period between catastrophic famines and the Great Terror. The emphasis on the fitness and contentment of the youth, for instance, reflected the Stalinist concern that the first generation raised by the Soviet regime be imbued with the virtues necessary for carrying the project of socialist construction forward.[54] But Harrison's narrative also spoke to many of the same conditions which so impressed American visitors of various political stripes.[55] However politically naïve her comments appear to be, given what is now known and what was then evident to many of those most familiar with the reality of Soviet society, Harrison's response to the USSR positions her in the same discourse as the committed Black Communists who helped to construct the Soviet Union as a viable alternative social order.

If the intentionality of this contribution might be doubted today, there was little room for doubt in the conflict-ridden Asian Pacific, where the mere fact of her visit raised hackles. Harrison's route from Moscow to East Asia took her through the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo and occupied Korea. Over a period of months, she visited cities in Japan (including Kobe and Kyoto) and

[51] Harrison, pp. 277, 281.
[52] Harrison, p. 278.
[53] Harrison, p. 279.
[54] See Seth Bernstein, *Raised Under Stalin: Young Communists and the Defence of Stalinism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).
[55] See for example, David C. Engerman, 'Modernization from the Other Shore: American Observers and the Costs of Soviet Economic Development', *The American Historical Review* 105:2 (2000), 383-416.

China (including Nanking, Swatow, and Hong Kong). On first arriving in Japan, at the port of Shimonoseki, the authorities struggled to identify Harrison as 'the lone American' on the ship: 'they didnt know when they saw me.' After a brief questioning, in which she explained that she had left her baggage 'in Los Angeles 7 years ago and one suit case is one to many', Harrison ignored the request to remain at the port for questioning. 'I was gone', she wrote later.[56] Refusing to have her mobility arrested longer than she felt was necessary, Harrison laid claim to her right to travel regardless of the intrusions of state power.

In late 1935, arriving at the port of Keelung City in Japanese-occupied Taiwan, the same state power asserted itself more forcefully. Suspected of being a spy because of her travel in the USSR, Harrison was only permitted to enter Taiwan after having her suitcase confiscated.[57] Instead of expressing outrage or irritation with the Japanese state's hostility, however, Harrison claimed it as a victory. She described her 'relief and enjoyment' at being divested of her baggage, wishing that the authorities 'have as enjoyable time with it as I have had without it.' She celebrated the opportunity (or rather, the need) the confiscation gave her to buy new goods, including a visit 'to the dress making shop[,] which is open on the street' and where 'young Chinese men do the making'. Instead of engaging official channels in a written display of protest and outrage at the state's unfair injunction as had the *litterateur* Hughes, Harrison made a performance of her undimmed joy. Having bought her new clothing for a mere '75 American cents', she 'danced about holding the skirt' and thereby drew 'a crowd of about 200'.[58]

The unflappable ebullience of Harrison's character animates the whole of her published travelogue, but this is a particularly notable instance of her turning a misfortune and an injustice into an opportunity for adventure and self-reinvention. It is difficult to avoid a sense that she was adopting a dissembling facade in the passage, particularly given the compensatory excess of the street dancing

[56] Harrison, p. 285.
[57] Harrison, p. 305.
[58] Harrison, p. 305.

scene. Harrison's reaction to the intrusion of Japanese anti-Communism therefore manifested a somewhat different cultural politics to Hughes's in this moment. Hughes's protest might be understood through his affiliation with a global movement against fascism and for the emancipation of the proletariat which hinged often on the deployment of the pen, but Harrison's must be read through her rootedness in working-class African American traditions of joyful defiance, summarised in the lyric 'laughing to keep from crying'.[59] Instead of penning a petition to the American state, Harrison authored a self-portrait that demonstrated her resilience and undimmed joy – in Houston Baker's words, 'a resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity' – akin to the attitude animating the blues that likely provided the soundtrack to her peripatetic American youth.[60]

Together with her blues sensibility, Harrison's response to the confiscation ought also to be read in terms of what Simone Brown has called 'dark sousveillance', as a way of responding to and confronting the kinds of 'all-encompassing' surveillance that characterised the lives of enslaved Black people only one generation before Harrison's birth. Such modes of resistance deployed public acts of performance, such as dancing and fiddling, as tricks to facilitate escape. They rendered performance as 'freedom acts.'[61] Situating Harrison in such a resistance tradition helps to position her text as a document of internationalised Black women's resistance.

Regardless of their actual ideological convictions and party-political connections – or, indeed, in the absence of either – both Hughes and Harrison were interpellated by Japanese authorities as suspicious and disruptive presences in their territory. In both cases, too, the state's identification of them as radicals buttresses the argument for framing them historically as such. In Hughes's case, the extremity of the Japanese state's response to his presence invites investigation into his activism and demands a retrieval of the history that he obscured in his Cold War memoir. The significance of this

[59] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 298.
[60] Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) p. 13.
[61] Simone Brown, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015) p. 22.

moment in Harrison's diary is to remind us of the Soviet passages which preceded it, and to raise questions about where and how she was located in traditions of African American protest. Though Harrison cannot be settled comfortably into any political bounds, her Japanese experience indicates that she might be sighted as a transient presence in the expansive commons of 1930s radicalism. Indeed, it was by her very transience that Harrison became radical.

The role being played by racial identity in Harrison's and Hughes's encounters with the Japanese state is not clear in their accounts. Though Hughes certainly had some understanding that Imperial Japan possessed its own kind of racial ideology, he made no claim that their hostility to him was provoked or significantly shaped by his own racial identity.[62] In this respect, it is instructive to locate Hughes's and Harrison's experience not only in traditions of African American protest but in the context of transpacific radicalism and the history of anti-Communist suspicion.

Among the research notes Hughes compiled in preparing the manuscript for his memoir, the sole scholarly reference-point was an article on Soviet Central Asia written by the left-wing Soviet affairs analyst William Mandel in 1942 in the journal *Pacific Affairs*.[63] *Pacific Affairs* was published by the Institute of Pacific Relations, a principal body of the 'Pacific Community' agenda, fostered as part of American imperial strategizing in the first half of the century.[64] Between 1934 and 1941, the journal was edited by the American Owen Lattimore, himself a pioneering scholar on Asian frontiers, who was later accused of being 'the Soviet Union's principal American espionage agent'.[65] Under his editorship, the journal was host to numerous radical commentaries, for instance publishing in 1935 an essay by Harold Isaacs, whom Hughes met in Shanghai, which provided a Marxist analysis of the Chinese

[62] On Japanese racism, see John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993) pp. 203-205.
[63] Research note on 'Soviet Central Asia' article, LHP 304:4996.
[64] Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*, p. 9.
[65] Paul F. Hooper, ed, *Remembering the Institute of Pacific Relations: The Memoirs of William L. Holland* (Tokyo: Ryukei Shyosha, 1995), p. iii. See also Tomoko Akami, *Internationalizing the Pacific: The United States, Japan and the Institute of Pacific Relations in War and Peace, 1919-45* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 171, 219.

revolution of 1927, on which Isaacs later wrote a classic book.[66] Lattimore was replaced by William Holland, whose New Deal politics were scarcely less suspect than his predecessor when, some years later, the journal came under the scrutiny of McCarthyite anti-Communists.[67] Hughes's small research note testifies to the influence of the Pacific Community formation on knowledge production about Asia, and highlights his links with the wider milieu of transpacific radicalism, the fate of which was unhappily tied up with the liberal internationalism, out of which the Institute of Pacific Affairs had been generated.

Like Hughes himself, this community of transpacific radicals suffered when American liberalism turned violently sour toward Communists in the post-Second World War period. The Institute of Pacific Relations came under suspicion from McCarthy's HUAC and in 1955 it lost its tax-exempt status as an educational institution.[68] The following year, Hughes published his politically cautious memoir having been offered the book contract in a flurry of publicity which followed his own HUAC hearing.[69] Though Hughes and Harrison expressed protest in different forms, they were part of a constellation of cultural producers who conducted socialist analyses and practiced modes of resistance across the Pacific Ocean.

Race and colonialism in the Pacific

Any understanding of African American confrontations with Pacific state powers ought to be grounded in knowledge of the colonial character of these powers and must also be cognisant of the peculiar positionality of African American subjects in such imperial rivalries. The historical entanglement of Black Pacific narratives with imperialist ambitions was illustrated at the start of the

[66] Harold R. Isaacs, 'Perspectives of the Chinese Revolution: A Marxist View', *Pacific Affairs*, 8:3 (September 1935) pp. 269-283. See also Harold R. Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010).
[67] Akami, pp. 212-213.
[68] William L. Holland, *Remembering the Institute of Pacific Relations: The Memoirs of William L. Holland*, ed. by Paul F. Hooper (Tokyo: Ryukei Shyosha, 1995), p. 92.
[69] Arnold Rampersad II, p. 224.

chapter with a discussion of Du Bois's sympathetic engagement with Japanese fascism. This had as its mirror image the earlier experience of James Weldon Johnson, whose diplomatic work for the US in the Pacific region implicated him in treacherous intrigues – including an anti-democratic coup – designed to subordinate Nicaragua to American commercial interests, with long-term implications for the wider Pacific sphere.[70] Neither Hughes nor Harrison participated in such dramatic political and diplomatic intrigues, either in service or opposition to colonial powers. However, their narratives of Pacific journeys evidence the complex entanglement of race and empire in the region: the possibility of building anti-colonial alliances across the Pacific, the connection of such alliances with American (and Asian) racial politics, but also the difficulty of producing a consistently anti-colonial politics.[71]

Hughes used his most high-profile appearance in Japan to protest American racism and launch an attack on all empire building, intervening with these radical pronouncements in a venue built by American soft power. The Pan-Pacific Club was an initiative formed as part of the Pacific community-building project undertaken by America in the early decades of the century as plans to build a bioceanic imperial domain took flight. The most visible manifestations of this ambition were in the building of the Panama Canal, completed in 1914, and the establishment of an Institute of Pacific Relations in 1925.[72] The Pan-Pacific Club brought distinguished Americans and Japanese together with representatives from other Pacific peoples and colonial powers. Hughes was invited to speak there soon after his arrival in Japan.

In his speech, Hughes had to improvise his own diplomatic effort as he attempted to win Japanese sympathy for the predicament of Black Americans while maintaining a critical anti-colonial perspective on world affairs. This diplomatic effort all but disregarded the attitude of the white Americans present, whose participation helped to provoke Hughes's anger. On arrival at the event, he

[70] Taketani, *The Black Atlantic Narrative*, pp. 32-57.
[71] Of interest here is Paula Park's concept of transpacific intercoloniality. See Paula C. Park, 'Transpacific Intercoloniality: Rethinking the Globality of Philippine Literature in Spanish', *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 20:1-2 (2019), 83-97.
[72] Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*, pp. 8-9.

found that he was to be seated next to the white wife of an American consular official. She was from St. Louis, a city which Hughes remembered as being especially racist. Hughes found her address to the luncheon patronizing toward their Japanese hosts. She complimented their tea ceremony, he said, 'as if she were amazed that the Japanese possessed such graces'. Embarrassed by the 'provincialism' of his countrywoman's speech, Hughes addressed his speech as a direct response to her.[73]

Taking up the theme of tea to reference the Boston Tea Party, Hughes discussed the exclusion of Black people from the freedom achieved by such struggles.[74] He went on to explain the psychological importance of Japan for African Americans, as 'the only large group of dark people in the world who are free and independent', and complimented them on being able to enjoy 'ceremonial tea without the unwelcome intrusion of the imperial powers of the West.'[75] Finally, in a message that the Japanese press did not reprint, he told the distinguished audience that it would be 'wonderful [if] all the colonies and color lines in the world were wiped out'. The majority 'colored' attendees applauded generously for him, but the American woman scolded Hughes for speaking ill of his nation.[76] The speech demonstrated a remarkable boldness on Hughes's part in directly confronting the racial condescension of the white American speaker and appealing for an end to colonialism in a room full of luminaries of colonising nations. It articulated an unambiguous internationalism which proceeded from African American's subordinate status as mere semi-citizens of the imperial US. Only in his division of the world between the white West and the coloured rest did Hughes appear to pedal back from Communist radicalism, as class dynamics were elided.

Experience of the Japanese Empire informed Hughes of the intimate connection between imperialism and racism as systems of domination. In his memoir, Hughes took special note of the prejudicial way that Japanese newspapers reported crime committed by Korean people. The subordinate place of Koreans and the proliferation of anti-Korean prejudices informed his view that

[73] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 243.
[74] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 243.
[75] 'Pan-Pacific Club, Tokyo: Speech excerpt', 30 June 1933, LHP 479:11917.
[76] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 243.

racism was driven by a social imperative to hurt and humiliate 'a group not one's own' and that racial solidarity did not spring simply from the fact of a people being 'colored'. His own colour had earned him no superior treatment at the hands of the Japanese authorities – the authorities, he noted, of a 'colored country' – because, above all, 'Japan was a Fascist country.'[77] By contrast, in his writing on Soviet Russia, he considered exclusive racial identities and racialized power differentials to have been shaken to their foundations by the new social order, and a sense of comradeship catalyzed which was coloured only Red.[78] World travel dramatized for Hughes the reality of racism as a matter not of biology but of the politics of capitalism and the power dynamics of imperialism.

While racial dynamics in the Pacific were complicated on one hand by the emergence of an imperialist power figured as non-white in American imaginaries (and in some quarters of Japanese nationalist opinion), they were also shaped by the intertwined trajectories of Jim Crow racism and expansionary US imperialism, particularly in Hawai'i. Over centuries, African Americans had imagined Hawai'i as a sanctuary from enslavement and the systemic racial violence which characterised post-abolition America.[79] Yet the Hawai'i that Hughes and Harrison came to write about was 'a colony of the United States, presided over by a cohesive oligarchy of haole [non-native, white] capitalists', whose vast wealth was an extreme contrast with the 'low wages and poor working and living conditions' of the racially mixed workers.[80] Black American's ambiguous positioning in this racial formation emerged from their status as second-class citizens of a colonising nation. As US imperialism came to dominate the Hawaiian Islands, American anti-Blackness gained ground there, but this process was itself compounded – particularly with the expansion of US militarism – by Black affiliation

[77] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 277.
[78] Hughes, 'Moscow and Me', in *Collected Works*, ed. by De Santis, p. 60.
[79] Sharma, 'Over Two Centuries', p. 117. See also Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hawai'i is my Haven: Race and Indigeneity in the Black Pacific*, (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
[80] Moon-Kie Jung, *Reworking Race: The Making of Hawai'i's Interracial Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) p. 55.

with the colonial power.[81] Hawaiian anti-Blackness was therefore both a symptom of American colonisation and an expression of anti-colonial resentment.

None of this automatically precluded possible alliances of African Americans with local Hawaiians, however. In 1932 (before Hughes, Thompson, Miller, and co. departed for the USSR) a moment of sensational racial violence in Hawai'i alerted US activists to the significance of racial violence in the Pacific and, by implication, their common cause with the colonised subjects there. A Navy officer's wife, Thalia Massie, claimed to have been beaten and raped by a group of five men, including a dark-skinned Native Hawaiian prizefighter by the name of Joseph Kahahawai. As the case was brought to trial and problems were exposed in Massie's story, her mother, Grace Hubbard Fortescue, arranged for two of the defendants to be kidnapped and beaten. The first, a Japanese man named Horace Ida, survived, but Joseph Kahahawai's brutal interrogation ended with his fatal shooting. The subsequent trial saw racial tensions in the American colony reach breaking point, and white supremacist logics triumphed in the jury's verdict of manslaughter and in Territorial Governor Lawrence M. Judd's commuting the ten-year sentences to a single hour.[82] Emerging in the popular consciousness of Americans at the same time as the Scottsboro case gained notoriety and anti-racist activism began to take a Red hue, the Massie-Kahahawai trials became a subject of emotional and intellectual engagement from many African Americans. As Louise Thompson wrote Nebby Crawford, the controversy forced an acknowledgement of 'the spread of the old American custom': lynching.[83]

When Hughes first arrived in California (two years before his Pacific travels), the Massie-Kahahawai controversy then ongoing in Hawai'i would likely have been a hot topic of conversation with his host Loren Miller, who had written several times on the case in his opinion column for the *California Eagle*. Miller presented the lynching as the culmination of a tragic history of 'the white man's

[81] Sharma, 'Over Two Centuries', p. 131.
[82] See David E. Stannard, *Honor Killing: Race, Rape, and Clarence Darrow's Last Spectacular Case* (London: Penguin Books, 2005).
[83] Thompson to Nebby Crawford, 16 January 1931, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 35.

civilizing efforts' which had turned a 'rather pleasant, if heathenish' place into a haven for 'honor slayers'. Further, he argued that it proved 'that our BEST CITIZENS are fully as capable of lawless murder as anybody else.' Miller also understood the Massie-Kahahawai trials in the context of colonialism, linking them with the 'sad plight of the Virgin Islands', whose 'natives […] are poverty-stricken because they have been bled white of their wealth by the Danish and American exploiters', who then blamed their condition on 'their innate inability to learn the lessons of civilization!'[84] On other occasions, his comments on the trials sat beside equally acerbic comments on US imperial hypocrisy. He lambasted the US government for condemning the Japanese invasion of Manchuria even as they ordered Marines to kill Nicaraguan rebels they labelled 'bandits', for similarly cynical reasons. He joked darkly about the pride that swelled American hearts at the thought that they had brought to Hawai'i 'pianos, radios, Fords', an economic depression and lynching.[85] Finally, he used the trial to engage in a detailed polemic against the white paternalism that was used to justify such violent 'defences' of 'their women'.[86] Such was the tone in which America's 'civilising mission' in the Pacific was being discussed in Hughes's social circles during 1932.

By July 1934, when the *Taiyo Maru* docked in Honolulu, the tension around the Massie-Kahahawai trials had subsided. The episode itself had begun to pass into history, but it retained a live and emotive memory not only for most local Hawaiians but for many Americans including Hughes. An acquaintance of Hughes's in Shanghai, Teddy Weatherford, had instructed him to contact Hawai'i's leading African American, Nolle Smith, when he arrived. Smith was an outgoing Republican member of the Territorial Legislature and a businessman, and he responded happily to Hughes's phone call from the pier. Received by Smith and his family, Hughes was taken to all the major sights in Honolulu – the University, the 'disappointingly small' Waikiki Beach, the 'lovely' Moanalua Gardens – and finally to 'the courtroom where the notorious Massey [sic] trials had been held'. Hughes said that the case

[84] Loren Miller, 'On Second Thought', *California Eagle*, 8 April 1932, p. 8.
[85] Loren Miller, 'On Second Thought', *California Eagle*, 15 January 1932, p. 8.
[86] Loren Miller, 'On Second Thought', *California Eagle*, 29 January 1932, p. 8.

had 'left a scar on the city's soul', but he also insisted that 'many warm personal friendships [persisted] across the various race and color lines in Honolulu.'[87] His notebook from the time gave more sense of the feelings he encountered among his Hawaiian acquaintances, who reported bitterly to him the attitude of the local political establishment, headed by Territorial Governor Judd. As far as they were concerned, the whole case was 'dead & buried' and there ought to be no further investigation 'disinterring the bones'.[88]

Despite the shadow cast by the legalized lynching of Joseph Kahahawai, much of Hughes's notes on Hawai'i were shaped by the optimism of his distinguished African American hosts. As far as Hughes's companions were concerned, the territory was a US possession that had been acquired by 'voluntary annexation' and was already 'on [its] way to statehood'.[89] He made detailed notes on the achievements of the African American middle-class in the territory, attaining a detailed accounting of Nolle Smith's remarkable professional history, having first arrived as an engineer in 1916 and eventually coming to own his own business in hauling and construction.[90] Hughes also took interest in Black pharmacists, engineers, chemists, and an 'early Negro missionary' whose name he misremembered as Betsy Stocks.[91] Even the role of Hawai'i as an important base for expanding US military commitments in the Pacific made only a passing and non-judgemental appearance in Hughes's notes, where he recorded that a Black naval worker named Arthur Strivers was employed by the Navy: one of only 'about 10 men of our race' on the Navy's payroll. Strivers was apparently 'well liked' and

[87] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 279

[88] Pocket diary from China and Japan, pp. 32-3, H-LHP 1. I am inclined to speculate that the imagery of burial and disinterment in these quotes suggests that Hughes was noting comments made by Nolle Smith, whose business specialized in excavation work. The imagining of a Black-owned business being hired to assist in the investigation of a lynching would surely have been an appealing one for what it might reveal about the peculiar racial formation in the Territory of Hawai'i and the social contradictions within it.

[89] Pocket diary from China and Japan, p. 32, H-LHP 1.

[90] Nolle R. Smith to C.C. Barnett, April 12, 1933, LHP 512:12698.

[91] Pocket diary from China and Japan, pp. 34-7, H-LHP 1. See also Notes on Black persons living in Hawaii, LHP 512:12698. Betsy Stocks was in fact Betsey Stockton, a freedwoman who joined a missionary trip to Sandwich Islands. She is the subject of a forthcoming book by Gregory Nobles, *The Extraordinary Life of Betsey Stockton: A Freedom Journey from Princeton, Around the World, and Back* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). Thanks to Guy Emerson Mount for drawing my attention to this.

had encountered 'very little prejudice'.[92] Hughes was evidently curious about the possibility that Hawai'i was a place of relative African American freedom, despite the colonial domination and racial violence so recently demonstrated by the murder of Joseph Kahahawai.

The narrow focus of Hughes's notes on Hawai'i does not represent the whole extent of his engagement with colonialism in the American Pacific, however. The Kahahawai murder made a strong enough imprint on his memory that, when he came to compile his 1952 collection of short stories titled *Laughing to Keep from Crying*, the 1932 lynching framed a story, 'Powder-White Faces', written from the perspective of an 'Oriental' man from an unnamed Pacific island.[93] The story tells of a man, known as Charlie Lee, who departs from American shores for South Africa having murdered a white woman. Hughes effectively transplants the African American fugitive narrative exemplified by Richard Wright's *Native Son* (published a decade earlier, and provoking mixed feelings from Hughes at the time) to a new racial and colonial subject: a Black man from a 'little American possession in the Pacific' which maps precisely onto Hawai'i.[94] Hughes dwells on the specificities of Charlie's experiences – changing his name to sound less 'Oriental', running errands for white hostesses and American Marines, watching his sister bear four children by a married white man – but the structure of the story is familiar, the patterns of racialised oppression unchanged. A lifetime of humiliations give rise to a sense of unrationalised anger, channelled and formed through a strongly felt connection to normative masculinity. This ultimately explodes in an act of outrageous violence against a white woman, and the man is forced to flee. On recalling his terrible act, 'Charlie suddenly remembered three Americans who killed a brown man in Honolulu over a white woman.' Charlie's recollection of the Kahahawai lynching is not only a reflection on that episode's enduring significance for Black Pacific subjects; it is an invitation – 20 years after the fact – to consider Hughes himself as one such subject.

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[92] Pocket diary from China and Japan, p. 37, H-LHP 1.

[93] Laughing to Keep from Crying setting copy, LHP 314:5112; Langston Hughes, *Laughing to Keep from Crying* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1952). The story was reprinted in 1963's *Something in Common and Other Stories*, from which I have quoted.

[94] Langston Hughes, *Something in Common and Other Stories* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963) p. 148; on Hughes's attitude to *Native Son*, see Rampersad I, p. 383.

In his notes and writings on Hawai'i, Hughes manifested a certain tension in his own positionality as a Black radical committed to anti-racism and anti-imperialism, and an American citizen who thereby enjoyed certain privileges and who was concerned for his people's full enjoyment of American bounties. Hughes evidently identified with Kahahawai and other Hawaiian victims of racial oppression, but he was not always so attuned to the colonial nature of the American presence in the Pacific, nor fully conscious of the peculiar position of African Americans in this context.

These tensions were even more pronounced in Harrison's account. Harrison produced no reminiscence on the Massie-Kahahawai controversy. Indeed, her narrative does not pause to mention it, perhaps because she had not been living in the US since 1927. Harrison's travel writing does, however, provide another opportunity to consider the complex positionality of African Americans in the US's Pacific empire. Unlike Hughes, Harrison spent some time in the American Philippines after her journeys in Japan, Korea, China, and Taiwan. She had little to say of her month in Manila, but she praised the women 'for their modisty' and their friendliness ('the nicest you can find in any Part of the World'), noting in a neutral tone that 'their education are Foriegn with other nations governing.' Harrison concluded that she 'wouldnt care to live there' but did not offer reasons.[95]

Her reluctance to present critical commentary on America's Pacific empire continued when she arrived in Hawai'i, though her return to American jurisdiction did lead her to give voice to one of her only explicit commentaries on American racism. Disembarking two years later than Hughes and in need of work, the military presence in Hawai'i had a more direct effect on Harrison. She found a job as a domestic worker for the family of a Navy Lieutenant who had departed 'for 3 weeks of war'. She appeared content with the arrangement, as 'the Lady' of the house had guests only twice a month, and Harrison was not expected to cook for more than four visitors. 'She [the naval wife] said the important part is that I take care of Them so beautiful and the House.' With respect to the navy officer, Harrison explained that he would be in a submarine, under water for '6 days at a time', and 'the Entire

[95] Harrison, p. 308.

Fleet are on its way to the Hawaiian waters'. Ominously, she reported that war was expected 'some day not to[o] far off.'[96] Indeed, there had long been fears of a war with Japan in the Pacific, and Hawai'i's military significance in such a confrontation was heightened by a treaty preventing the US from constructing any new bases west of the Hawaiian Islands. From 1935, preparations for such a confrontation led to a significant increase in the Army garrison there, and on 3 May a massive war game exercise took place.[97] Harrison's comments on these matters indicate some of the problems of reading her travel narrative as being engaged in politically transformative work: on matters of this kind, Harrison's text does not move beyond an implied sense of dread.

Immediately preceding this passage of political disengagement, however, Harrison did evince a predilection for protest. Before finding work with the naval family, she searched at the local YWCA for jobs. The job hunt, she was keen to emphasise, was necessitated by the depletion of her savings after her East Asian voyage, her language reminding us of the place of forced labour in Black Pacific history and raising questions about dearly-held distinctions between free and forced labour. Arriving at the YWCA 'against my will', she was told by 'the Lady in charge of the Employment' that she ought to 'go back' (presumably to the mainland US) 'as the white People here want only Japanese help'. Harrison was incensed by the suggestion that she would be denied work because of her race, and reported that 'when I got through talking to her She thought very different'.[98] Harrison knew well her own worth, and objected that 'any nation' might try and 'keep me from getting a job' of the 'Kind and Place and price' that she desired.[99] She was soon placed with the American Lieutenant and his wife, at a house that was as 'if it had been made to order'. Only once she was settled in such a pleasant

[96] Harrison, p. 312.
[97] Stetson Conn and Byron Fairchild, *The Framework of Hemisphere Defense* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1989), p. 152; 'Starts for Hawaii in War Game Move', *New York Times*, 23 April 1935, p. 26.
[98] Harrison, p. 311.
[99] Harrison, pp. 311-12.

abode was Harrison reassured that she would not become nostalgic for 'the beautiful soroundings' she had left in France.[100]

Though Harrison's narrative failed to engage politically with the military presence in Hawai'i and what it signalled about world affairs, at the suggestion of racial discrimination she was very ready to protest. This story, like the more violent racism of the Massie-Kahahawai trials in Hughes's notes, gave a darker tone to an otherwise glowing account of Hawaiian race relations. Once she settled in, Harrison enjoyed the variety of cultural opportunities available, attending gatherings and events for Chinese, Japanese, Hawaiian, and Portuguese people. She came to believe that Hawai'i was 'the most wonderful part of the World' and was glad to conclude her travels in 'this lovely part of the World.'[101] Hawai'i, regardless of the actual prevalence of prejudice resulting from colonial domination, suited the cosmopolitan sensibility Harrison developed in her years of itineracy, and she remained there for some years.

Consistent to Hughes's and Harrison's accounts of Hawai'i is a sense that it was a society of contradiction and conflict. Each of them found that moments of American racism blighted their experiences of the country even if neither fully articulated the kind of blistering critique that was found in Loren Miller's commentary around the Massie-Kahahawai trials. Where Hughes found a unique level of opportunity for Black settlers, Harrison's account made clear that a fight still had to be had for working-class African Americans to make a living on the islands. Harrison was nevertheless comfortable enough in Honolulu to stay there until 1940, and to return for her final years: it was there that she died in October 1967 (five months after Hughes) at the age of seventy-nine.[102] Though Hughes never made the return trip, he left wearing the customary leis and hoped to see his distinguished acquaintances there again.[103]

[100] Harrison, p. 312.
[101] Harrison, p. 314.
[102] Cathryn Halverson, *Playing House*, p. 172.
[103] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 279.

A circuitous conclusion

In a short epilogue, Harrison (and her editors) served the reader a scene of her Honolulu settlement in the garden of 'a nice Japanese Family'.[104] There, she lived for a mere $2.50 per month in an orange tent with three windows, a vase of flowers, and 'a beautiful bright Chinese blanket' on the specially made wooden floor.[105] She also found 'a sweetheart' whom she delighted in confounding with her relentless movement from place to place.[106] The spaces Harrison occupies in these final pages of her book are, like the Black Pacific more generally, supremely liminal. Her eccentric mode of domesticity is deeply unstable, being constituted by the inherently temporary abode of a tent; the placement of this tent in the garden of another family; and the development of a seemingly very casual romantic relationship. At a wider level, Hawai'i as a place of settlement adds to the sense of liminality, being located physically in a very isolated part of the world; being, too, on the borders between America and Asia, between US domesticity and foreignness, and in 1936, on the tense border between war and peace. The closure of Harrison's travel narrative takes the form of an unstable stasis that cannot really be believed as an end.

Harrison (or her editor) suggests, with a surreptitious nod and an impish wink, some awareness of this. Describing her new life in the tent, Harrison informs us that it is her 'first and only Home' (a home which can be moved anywhere) and her name for it is 'Villa Petit Peep'. 'This True name' was derived from her practice, when receiving guests, of allowing them only to sit on a seat outside the tent 'and Peep in'.[107] This vision of Harrison's nomadic residence forms the brief closing paragraph of the book. It becomes the final, lasting image the reader is left with, and it positions us as the semi-familiar guests on the garden seat, peering curiously into her private quarters. Harrison's proclamation of Villa Petit Peep as a 'True name' suggests that her truth was revealed only through

[104] Harrison, p. 315.
[105] Harrison, p. 317.
[106] Harrison, p. 316.
[107] Harrison, p. 318.

partial insights and incomplete disclosures. This arrangement was pictured again in a photograph that accompanied a piece in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* on the visit paid to Harrison by the *Atlantic* editor Ellery Segwick in March 1936 (see Figure 5). The photograph shows Harrison, in colourfully printed

Figure 5 Ellery Sedgwick visiting Juanita Harrison at Villa Petit Peep, March 1936.

dress, standing over the dandily attired Sedgwick from the other side of a small gate, which Harrison has inscribed 'Villa Petit Peep'. Her distinguished visitor rests on the gate and shows her the content of an open book. 'Uninvited visitors', the accompanying article explains, 'are supposed only to peep inside, not to enter bodily.'[108]

The literary and photographic images invite a re-thinking of the seeming intimacy and frankness of Harrison's narrative, delimiting a new divide between Harrison and her audience. They

[108] William Norwood, 'Juanita, Unique Authoress, Meets "Unseen Sweetheart"', *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 25 March 1936, p. 6.

ask us to recall that she initially wanted to adopt a pen name when publication was proposed, and that she failed to respond to Miriam Matthews, a California librarian interested in discussing her book.[109] They remind us that Harrison entered the public eye only with reticence, and appeared to be conflicted about her moment in the spotlight. Returning to the general themes of the chapter, they recall for us the shadowed radicalism, the dissembling protest, and the lurking surveillance that characterised both Hughes's and Harrison's journeys in the imperial territories of Japan and the US. These images of Harrison are therefore totemic of the globe-spanning circuits of travel which helped generate Black internationalist practice during the 1930s, and the circuitous disclosures of truth that helped disguise its meanings in such fraught spaces as the Pacific.

[109] Miriam Matthews, 'Latest Book Reviews', clipping, AFP 1:2; Miriam Matthews to Alice Foster, 6 October 1936, AFP 1:2.

Chapter 5

‘Goodbye to Isolation’: Afro-cosmopolitan Marxists, migrant workers, and California class struggle

Globe-spanning circuits of transatlantic and transpacific radicalism overlapped, entered dialogue, and even merged in California. A key passage for migrant workers from the US, Mexico, and East Asia, Californian economy and politics were intimately bound up with intra- and trans- national migration. California therefore had a unique place in American political culture as it related to questions of race, nationality, and class-struggle radicalism. Focusing on state-, city- and county- wide political movements there, the focus of this thesis turns from the global locations in which Black internationalist politics were generated to the ‘domestic’ American locales where they were practiced.

The enlivening Communist movement in California during the early-mid 1930s played an important role in organizing migrant workers to defend their rights to live and work with dignity in America, articulating a politics of solidarity which bound multiracial organizing to an inclusive vision founded on proletarian internationalism. This chapter will discuss the participation of two Black intellectuals, Langston Hughes and Loren Miller in this movement of transpacific radicalism will be discussed. Their interventions during the period of the strike wave of 1933-4 will be a major concern, but this will be situated in a wider history of participation in and retreat from California’s Communist movement. As we will see, the changing ideological hue of anti-Communism through the 1930s was an important part of the story of Black engagement in California radicalism. The combined pressure of racist anti-Communism and Rooseveltian nationalism ensured that the proletarian internationalist basis for Black radicals’ solidarity practice in the transpacific borderlands was substituted by a civil

rights nationalism. It was nevertheless *through* class-struggle politics that such alliances were made, and the civil rights agenda was formed.[1]

To consider the responses of these Black intellectuals to California class struggle, the chapter borrows from Alan Wald an understanding that Black Marxist intellectuals increasingly articulated their identities 'within an internationalist framework' that linked 'their struggle for liberation to the liberation of all humankind.'[2] This Afro-cosmopolitan Marxism was a key feature of radical culture in the Depression years. It works to conceptualize the connection between local struggles and global solidarities, which were bound together not only by the internal logics of racial capitalism as explicated in Marxist literature, but by the overlapping diasporas, the entwined migratory circuits, of 1930s California. Afro-cosmopolitans' political identities were themselves shaped by the violent interventions of American state and non-state actors, concerned with crushing the radical political culture in California. As a political ethic responsive to the fact of diaspora 'as *the* central theme of American history', Afro-cosmopolitanism refuted conceptions of the American nation as a 'domestic' or isolated space, and it distended the Black Atlantic into a quite different 'outer-national' shape to include the Mexican borderlands and the Pacific Rim.[3]

The first part of the chapter will focus on Loren Miller, whose journalistic output in newspapers such as the *California Eagle* and *Negro Liberator* help to illuminate the ways that constructing multiracial coalitions was tied up with the articulation of Black nationalist and proletarian internationalist politics. In the second part, Hughes will return to centre-stage as a cultural practitioner of interracial solidarity through his authorship of a documentary play about the California agricultural strikes. Co-written with white radical Ella Winter and foregrounding white, Black, and Mexican

[1] Jacqueline Dowd Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past', *Journal of American History* 91:4 (2005) 1233-1263 and Robert R. Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
[2] Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time*, pp. xiv, 81.
[3] Robin D.G. Kelley, 'How the West Was One: The African Diaspora and the Re-Mapping of U.S. History', *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. by Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 123-147 (p. 123); Gilroy, p. 17.

characters, the play – considered both as a literary text and a historical document – displays Hughes's investment in a radical cosmopolitanism whose horizon far exceeded the North California valleys where it was set. By considering Hughes and Winter's 'Harvest' as an important contribution to a culture of Afro-cosmopolitan Marxism, the revolutionary politics and transnational dimensions of the interracial Left are foregrounded.[4] At the same time, some of the challenges to their representational practices – the writing of non-American vernaculars into their work and attempts to sketch characters from other racialised groups – reveal limits to this radical cosmopolitanism. The archive of journalism and drama that this chapter draws upon helps to consider how, having begun to break their national isolation by global travel, African American radicals sought to manifest this expansive sense of solidarity within America. Centring the human geography of California, as a route in transpacific circuits of labour and radicalism, the chapter troubles the distinction between transnational and interracial radicalism, proposing that in Depression California, to operate interracially was to begin thinking and acting transnationally.[5]

Hughes and Miller in the California Left

Before departing for the USSR, Miller and Hughes had been among the crop of intellectuals who were immersing themselves in the radical Left. The contours of the 1930s American Left were formed out of tectonic political shifts following the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution. Early-twentieth century formations, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Socialist Party, were convulsed by internal divisions, weakened by splits, and undermined by state repression. Eventually these struggles produced a somewhat unified Communist Party. But the economic boom and mild political reaction of the 1920s combined with factional divisions to limit the development of the Leninist party. Anti-capitalist messaging was given a major boost after 1929 and

[4] On interracial leftism as an American populism, see Erin Royston Battat, *Ain't Got No Home: America's Great Migrations and the Making of an Interracial Left* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).
[5] Nikhil Pal Singh reminds us that this understanding of racial integration as an internationalist project was an important aspect of Martin Luther King's radicalism. See Singh, p. 14.

the Communists sought to benefit from this opportunity. By 1933, the Left – with the Comintern-affiliated Communist Party most prominent – had begun to win successes from a surge in labour radicalism.[6]

Hughes and Miller returned from the USSR separately and by quite different routes. Whereas Hughes's return to America took him through the shadowed liminality of the Pacific, Loren Miller made the journey in late 1932 via Europe and for him, 'the return from the Soviet Union to the United States' had a starker dualistic quality, 'like taking a step from the daylight into the dark.' Having been convinced that the Soviet experiment was producing an orderly social progression, America appeared to Miller to be rife with 'chaos and confusion […] official panic […] drifting from bad to worse' with 'mounting unemployment and disorganized and insufficient relief efforts.' [7] The election of Franklin Roosevelt inspired neither Hughes nor Miller to imagine that an end to the misery was nearby: 'the greatest president since Herbert Hoover', Miller wrote acerbically of the incoming Democrat, while Hughes would voice Black disillusionment with the New Deal in his 'Ballad of Roosevelt'.[8] Instead, they looked for inspiration to the rising tide of working-class resistance. Between the immediate shock of economic collapse in 1929 and the emergence of a Left-liberal coalition around New Deal-type social democracy during the late 1930s, a moment of revolutionary possibility appeared to open which saw radicals like Miller and Hughes articulate a politics of interracial and transnational solidarity.

In California, the state where Hughes and Miller ultimately began and ended their Soviet sojourn, the new Left radicalism took numerous forms. On the political front, many non-Communist Leftists gravitated to Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California (EPIC) campaign, launched in 1934, which promised to counteract the impact of the Depression with aggressive state intervention and the introduction of a progressive income tax. Electoral politics was not at the centre of Hughes's or Miller's

[6] See Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991).
[7] Untitled manuscript, LMP 14:2.
[8] Loren Miller, 'On Second Thought', *California Eagle*, 5 May 1933, p. 10; Langston Hughes, 'Ballad of Roosevelt', *The New Republic*, 14 November 1933, p. 9.

attention, however, and EPIC proved short-lived when Sinclair's attempt to win the Democratic gubernatorial nomination failed. Instead Miller, Hughes, and their revolutionary comrades in the Communist Party were focused on strategic causes célébres. These included the campaigns for the freedom of prisoners such as the Scottsboro youths and the incarcerated union militant Tom Mooney.[9]

Communist-affiliated radicals also gravitated toward the dynamic new industrial militancy present especially in the agricultural sector during 1933 and on the docks in 1934. Immediately following Miller's return to the States, the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union (CAWIU) – organized and led principally by Communists – undertook an organizing drive in the Californian valleys.[10] Through the following year dramatic and militant strikes of cotton pickers and other low-paid agricultural workers hit numerous locales and captured the attention of the national movement. Shortly afterward, a new industrial conflict seemed to dramatize even more the revolutionary potentialities in bloom during the spring of 1934. A strike of longshoremen paralysed San Francisco and then spread to other urban centres along the West Coast. Soon, San Francisco was the site of pitched battles in the streets between police and strikers. As members of California's interracial radical networks, Hughes and Miller were in solidarity with these struggles. They engaged with such campaigning principally through two organisations: the John Reed Clubs (JRC), which served to organize artists and intellectuals, connecting them with the working-class movement; and the International Labor Defense (ILD), which was responsible for the legal defence campaigns around

[9] On the California Communist Party, see Robert W. Cherny, 'Prelude to the Popular Front: The Communist Party in California, 1931-35', *American Communist History*, 1:1 (2002), 5-42; Robert W. Cherny, 'The Communist Party in California, 1935-1940: From the Political Margins to the Mainstream and Back', *American Communist History*, 9:1 (2010), 3-33; Beth Slutsky, *Gendering Radicalism: Women and Communism in Twentieth-Century California* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); Karl Yoneda, *Ganbatte: Sixty Year Struggle of a Kibei Worker* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1983); Dorothy Ray Healey and Maurice Isserman, *California Red: A Life in the American Communist Party* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

[10] Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 142.

Scottsboro, Tom Mooney, and Angelo Herndon. Both were front organizations of the Communist Party, though the membership of Miller and Hughes in the Party itself is not certain.[11]

These years did not only witness a forward charge of labour radicalism, however. California was frequently at the forefront of anti-Red initiatives marked by reactionary vigilantism, with Imperial Valley nicknamed 'the cradle of vigilantism'.[12] With large populations of foreign migrants as well as increasing numbers of poor Black and white migrants from blighted areas of America, California was ripe with nativist, white supremacist, and class resentments. State and state-parallel organizations of reactionary terror harassed radicals regularly. These included special Red Squads in urban areas and more ad hoc and voluntary formations in rural zones, often organized as 'citizen's groups' who figured union activists and radical organisers as un-American outsiders unworthy (like Latin American and Asian migrants) of citizenship.[13] Central to the long, continuous history of anti-Communism, much of California's infrastructure of reactionary surveillance and violence was inherited from the First Red Scare of 1919-1920.[14] As Communist activist Dorothy Healey commented, in many respects 'the red scare had never ended in California – the authorities had simply run out of reds in the mid-1920s. With the start of the depression they got a fresh supply.'[15] *The Nation*, a leading magazine of New Deal progressivism, commented in 1934 on the violent political divides in the state: 'if ever a revolution was due, it was due in California. Nowhere else has the battle between labor and capital been so

[11] Rampersad I, p. 215. On one possible source for claims about Hughes's membership, see Langston Hughes, *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes*, ed. by Susan Duffy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), p. 53.
[12] MJ Heale, 'Citizens versus Outsiders: Anti-Communism at State and Local Levels, 1921-1946', in *Little Red Scares: Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921-1946*, ed. by Robert J Goldstein (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) 45-69 p. 54.
[13] Robert Justin Goldstein, 'Preface', in *Little Red Scares: Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921-1946*, ed. by Robert J Goldstein (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), xiii-xxiii (p. xvii).
[14] See Frank Donner, *Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) pp. 44-5; Heale, 'Citizens versus Outsiders', in *Little Red Scares*, ed by Goldstein, 45-69; Louis B. Perry and Richard S. Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963) pp. 269-71.
[15] Healey and Isserman, p. 40. The "little red scares" between and beyond the two major anti-Communist offensives (1919-20, 1946-54) are discussed in Robert J. Goldstein, ed, *Little Red Scares: Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921-1946* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

widespread and bitter, and the casualties so large'.[16] Black radicals were implicated in these struggles for political freedom, not least because the apparatus of political repression had a clearly racialized basis given the importance of migrant and non-white populations for California radicalism.[17] Importantly, too, given the status of Americanness in anti-Communist discourse, Black Californians were challenged to articulate their own position as outsiders within the American citizenry.

Against isolation: internationalism as interracialism

Understanding the particular shape of Afro-cosmopolitan Marxism in California at this time, we might begin by considering the communities constituted by Communist print culture between which Miller and Hughes were positioned: the organ of Black Atlantic radicalism, the *Negro Worker* (1931-7), and the primary Communist newspaper in the Western US, the *Western Worker* (1932-7). George Padmore's *Negro Worker* helped to constitute what Holger Weiss has called the 'radical cosmopolitan African Atlantic'.[18] Based in Germany, Padmore worked on the *Negro Worker* on behalf

[16] 'Upton Sinclair's Victory', *The Nation*, 12 September 1934, p. 285.

[17] See Edward J. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900-45* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 51. David Struthers tells us that among those imprisoned under the Criminal Syndicalism Act in the post-WWI years were the Mexican anarchists Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón, Tarknath Das of the South Asian revolutionary Ghadar Party, and Black IWW member Ben Fletcher. See David M. Struthers, *The World in a City: Multiethnic Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), p. 202.

The implication of Black radicals in these struggles over political repression was evidenced by an anecdote told by Miller to Hughes before they departed for the USSR. Miller had attempted, with his comrades in the LA JRC, to stage Hughes's agitprop piece for the Scottsboro campaign, *Scottsboro Limited*, as part of their commemorations of the Paris Commune. When Miller and other JRC members entered the venue for the play, however, they were joined by members of the city's infamous Red Squad – a special police department dedicated to curtailing socialist activism in Los Angeles. The gendarmes informed them that the play could not be performed. Miller tried to keep a low profile during the initial exchange but was confronted by an officer with whom he shared 'a number of uncomplimentary remarks'. After half an hour of various arguments between the revolutionaries and the police, Miller returned home, later joking about his 'disgust' that his imagining of the 'workers of the world demonstrating […] with demands that Loren Miller be released' had come to naught. Even the cultural activities of the LA JRC (including also a staging of Aristophanes' *Lysistra*) were dutifully subject to the highly restrictive political atmosphere created by California's Criminal Syndicalism Law and its wider anti-union and anti-radical infrastructure. (LM to LH and LT, April 1932, in *Letters from Langston*, ed by Crawford and Patterson, p. 52; 'International Events and the Western Worker', *Western Worker*, 1 February 1932, p. 5).

[18] Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 46. See also Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*.

of the International Trade Union Committee for Black Workers (ITUCBW), a Comintern body. The struggles of Black peoples in Africa, the Caribbean, the US, and Europe were the bread-and-butter of the paper, but alongside this reportage were articles on the Soviet Union and on wider international developments. In January 1933, for instance, the Chinese scholar Ji Chaoding penned an analysis of Japanese imperialism under the pseudonym R. Doonping. The article was titled 'Is Japan the Protector of the Coloured Races?'[19] The piece was republished seven months later in the CPUSA's *Harlem Liberator*. In it, 'Doonping' attacked Garveyism as a reformist current which spread misinformation about the Japanese, who he insisted could not be trusted as allies of Black anti-imperialism and anti-racism.[20] While the paper centred around transatlantic struggles against imperialism and racism, it connected these to a global class struggle and gave space to voices from across the colonized world. It helped to manifest a worldly Black Communist identity. Indeed, the work of the ITUCNW was modelled on and intended to complement the notably less successful work of the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, an initiative of migratory Japanese and Chinese radicals who struggled to build a readership for their journal, *Pan-Pacific Worker*.[21]

The cosmopolitan community to which the *Pan-Pacific Worker* was aimed was reached to some extent by the *Western Worker*. Founded as a regional journal of the CPUSA, the *Western Worker* had a remit covering the whole region west of the Rocky Mountains, but as California was the primary site of Communist activity in the West it loomed especially large in the journal's output. The *Western Worker* indulged local and regional interest among American radicals while insisting on a consistent politics of working-class internationalism.[22] In the long-running column, 'International Events and the Western Workers', the paper sought to educate its readership about events of global significance and

[19] R. Doonping, 'Is Japan the Protector of the Coloured Races?', *Negro Worker*, January 1933, pp. 14-18.
[20] R. Doonping, 'Japanese Imperialism – "Protector" of the Oppressed Darker Peoples', *Harlem Liberator*, p. 4.
[21] Ani Mukherji, 'The Anticolonial Imagination: The Exilic Productions of American Radicalism in Interwar Moscow' (Brown University, 2011), p. 110.
[22] More detailed mapping of Communist Party membership and activities can be found through the University of Washington's Mapping American Social Movements Project. See 'Communist Party Membership by Districts 1922-1950', in *Mapping American Social Movements Project*, < https://depts.washington.edu/moves/CP_map-members.shtml> [accessed 11/11/2019].

related them to the lives of working people in the American West. Some of the groups to which the column appeared to address itself were the Filipino, Japanese, and Chinese migrants resident in large numbers in California. On occasion, the paper connected the concerns of these migrant groups with those of African Americans, whose plight it also covered regularly in the form of reports on lynchings and discriminatory employment practices. In February 1932, for instance, the *Western Worker* compared a deal struck between California Representative Richard Welch (an advocate of Filipino expulsion) and two Filipino politicians with Marcus Garvey's notorious meeting with 'the worst enemy of the Negro people, the Ku Klux Klan'.[23] In the same column, the paper drew connections between the ongoing Massie trial in Hawai'i and the prevalent lynch law in the US South, concluding that both signaled attempts to terrorise oppressed people. 'We feel a deep indignation and disgust with rapists', the paper insisted, 'but the plutes who are living off the backs of the Filipino, Hawaiian, Negro or other peoples are the worst rapists there are'.[24]

The two newspapers represented the communities between which Loren Miller's internationalist activism and writing operated. On one hand, Miller was inspired by Communism as Padmore was propagandizing it in the cosmopolitan Black Atlantic, focused on the liberation of the African diaspora globally and linking that struggle with those of other subordinate classes and nations. On the other, he was operating on a day-to-day basis in a radical white-led movement in the American West, which propagated an equivalent policy but was negotiating a complex demographic picture that necessitated discussions of Black oppression in the American South, Filipino nationalist struggles, and Japanese expansionism. The internationalism evident in Miller's participation in the Soviet expedition

[23] 'International Events and the Western Worker', *Western Worker*, 1 February 1932, p. 5. The two Filipino politicians were Sergio Osmeña and Manuel Roxas. The deal involved the US granting greater autonomy to the Philippines in return for the repatriation of Filipinos resident in America. It occurred as part of the negotiations known as the OSROX Mission. The final result of the mission was the passage of the Hare-Hawes-Cutting Act, which committed the US to Philippine independence in return for continued US naval bases in the country as well as various tariffs and quotas on Philippine imports. The defeat of the bill in the Philippine Senate led to the passage instead of the Tydings-McDuffie Act in 1934. For a full account, see H.W. Brands, *Bound to Empire: The United States and the Philippines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), chapter 8.
[24] 'International Events and the Western Worker', *Western Worker*, 1 February 1932, p. 5.

should therefore be regarded as consistent with his established investment in radical cosmopolitan communities, though it also served to bolster those commitments.

One of the ways travel strengthened Miller's cosmopolitan commitment was in the proximity it brought him to the *Negro Worker*, which convinced him of the paper's significance. He encountered George Padmore when, en route between the USSR and the USA, Miller paid a brief visit to Berlin. The details of Miller and Padmore's meeting were left unrecorded, but Miller was evidently impressed by his comrade's work. When he arrived back in the US, Miller sought to connect the eye-opening experience of global travel with the urgent problems facing African Americans at home. He leaned on Padmore to do so. Miller implored African Americans to break from the 'provincial mindedness' and 'isolation' that were 'forced on' them by their oppression. Contrary to the impression that the situation of African Americans was unique in the world, Miller emphasized that 'our problems are definitely and intricately interwoven with the problems of the whole world.' In order to achieve freedom, African Americans 'must be alive to international currents' and extend their hands in alliances 'with other oppressed [peoples] against the common enemy'.[25] As a first step toward doing so, he suggested informing themselves of global affairs (most pressing, 'the war situation') by supporting the *Negro Worker*. In the *Negro Worker*, reported the *Atlanta Daily World*, African American audiences would discover that the cruelty of British colonialism in Africa exceeded even the suffering of Black people in the American South.[26] Miller and Padmore, as participants in the radical, cosmopolitan African Atlantic, understood this worldly outlook to be essential for a more effective liberation struggle that transcended national borders and combatted the disempowering sense that African Americans lacked allies because their oppression was exceptional.

The internationalism that Miller admired in Padmore's work was mirrored in Miller's own journalism. Miller's employment at US papers had continued during his stay in the Soviet Union, during

[25] 'Newspaperman Returning from Russian Tour Outlines Impressions', Associated Negro Press, clipping, LMP 14:1.
[26] 'Another of 22 Actors Returns', *Atlanta Daily World*, 6 December 1932, clipping, LMP 14:1

which time he acted as a correspondent of the Associated Negro Press, dispatched his 'On Second Thought' columns to the *California Eagle* (albeit more fitfully than usual), and published a piece in the San Francisco-based *Spokesman* newspaper.[27] This work advertised to African Americans the substantial progress made in the USSR to combat racial inequalities. Even before this, however, he had sought to connect international events to local and national concerns, participating especially enthusiastically in diatribes against middle-class Black leadership in America, whom he referred to as 'loaders'.[28]

Before leaving for the USSR, Miller had written several columns addressing issues such as the rise of Japanese imperialism and the Indian nationalist movement headed by Mohandas Gandhi. Writing for the *California Eagle*, Miller articulated these connections in terms which specifically addressed his African American audience and strove to make the connection between global events and local concerns clear to his readers. On the tensions in the Pacific, for instance, he observed that in the event of war, 'colored soldiers will be herded into the slaughter right along with everybody else and when it finally ends all of us will be wondering what we made the world safe for.'[29] Even as he opposed an American attack on Japan, however, he resisted Japanese overtures to African Americans. Just as 'Richard Doonping' had explained to *Negro Worker* readers that Japanese imperialism was not a friend to the dark-skinned peoples, so Miller took a consistent proletarian stance in his international coverage. He explained that Japanese 'agents are about among us whispering that Imperial Japan is the friend of the darker people, and seeking members in what they call "The Pacific Movement"', which he derided as 'tripe'. Instead of an imperialist 'Pacific Movement', Miller sought to elicit sympathy for the Chinese victims of Japan in Shanghai and with 'the Japanese workers and peasants [who] are living under conditions that are no whit better than those visited on Negro workingmen in

[27] 'Another of 22 Actors Returns', *Atlanta Daily World*, 6 December 1932, clipping, LMP 14:1; Loren Miller, 'Russia Today', *California Eagle*, 22 July 1932 and 29 July 1932, p. 8; Loren Miller, 'On Second Thought', *California Eagle*, 5 August 1932, 12 August 1932, 19 August 1932, 9 September 1932, 23 September 1932, 21 October 1932, and 7 November 1932, p. 8; Loren Miller, 'Russia Solves Its Race Problem After Centuries of Bloody Failures by Czars', *Spokesman*, 6 August 1932, p. 2.
[28] 'Another of 22 Actors Returns', *Atlanta Daily World*, 6 December 1932, clipping, LMP 14:1.
[29] Loren Miller, 'On Second Thought', *California Eagle*, 13 November 1931, p. 8.

Chicago and tenant croppers in Alabama.' He insisted that it was precisely by engaging in struggle at local or national levels that unity between 'the great mass of Japanese and Negroes' could be achieved: each organizing 'to kick out' their respective 'rich overlords', taking notes from one another 'on technique and strategy', and 'join[ing] with other workers of all colors who are no less exploited'.[30]

Miller similarly routed his international commentary back to domestic political tasks when addressing leaders of foreign anti-colonial struggles. Always irreverent, he dismissed the Mahatma as an 'under dressed Hindu' who represented only the rich Indians, but then compared Gandhi's leadership with that of African American race men. He identified Gandhi's 'queer delusion' in national independence with the 'colored captains' in America, who had much to say about equality of the races but neglected to discuss the 'double burden of color and class exploitation' amid 'the breakdown of the American economic system'.[31] Miller's perspective on global events was indivisible from his polemical interventions into the politics of Black America.

While, in his *California Eagle* columns, Miller spoke for the most part to a Black audience, at moments he extended his Communist analytic to other diasporas in California. Addressing the question of Filipino repatriation, which raised a controversy in 1933 as negotiations were underway for a new political settlement for the American colony, Miller ridiculed claims by Filipino leaders and American politicians that their people were content with the measure. 'After several hours scurrying up and down the Filipino section' of Los Angeles and having discussed with two Filipino experts, Miller reported that 'Filipinos are 99 per cent opposed to the measure'. Miller was concerned with the racist character of the deportation clauses. He insisted that the simple act of 'naming [Filipinos] as a race for deportation has its profound effect' given that similar measures would not be considered for European migrants – a fact he related to the economic dependency of the Pacific nation. Finally, he compared the affair with the situation of his own people and the recent experience of Mexican migrants. He

[30] Loren Miller, 'Thoughts on Liberation', *Negro Liberator*, 20 October 1934, p. 5.
[31] Loren Miller, 'On Second Thought', *California Eagle*, 25 December 1931, p. 8.

equated the proposed law to the equal accommodations bills in the US South, which inscribed equality between racial groups but in practice acted as 'subtle testimonies to the theory that the Negro is held to be an inferior'. Explaining minority Filipino support for the bill, he claimed that 'Uncle Tom is not hedged in by race'. Miller objected that the laws sought to do to Filipinos what had already been done to Mexicans 'with far less show of reason' given Mexico's independent status. In defence of America's racialised migrant populations, he insisted that 'California Negroes can no more solve their unemployment problem by sending Filipinos back home than could New Jersey (which tried it!) solve its problems by urging that Negroes be sent back to the south.'[32]

Elsewhere, Miller went further in elaborating a connection between his internationalist perspective and his belief in the power of interracial organizing. In a column in July 1931, he responded to news that demonstrators in France and other European countries, who opposed the execution of the Scottsboro boys, had thrown stones at American consulates. Miller considered that the protests signaled the possibilities for interracial organizing in America:

> Of course the people who stoned these consulates were white. They were not moved to protest because some of their own color were going to death: they were actually protesting across the color lines. Which brings me to the point that Negroes are far less moved by injustices inflicted on oppressed minorities than they have a right to be. When Sacco and Vanzetti were being railroaded to death a few years ago I was in close contact with a bunch of colored collegians and attempted to raise funds to be forwarded for their defense. Not only did I meet with no response, I was actually hooted down. "What of it," said one of my fellows, "if they do kill a few Italian anarchists?"

Miller sought to teach Black Californians a lesson in solidarity. He pointed to the contemporary political scene, highlighting the plight of the imprisoned Tom Mooney and his comrade Warren Billings, and protested that 'if there are more than a dozen Negroes who know or care about the circumstances of their conviction I have yet to hear of them.' Once again, a focus for his ire was the

[32] Loren Miller, 'On Second Thought', *California Eagle*, 16 June 1933, p. 12.

established Black leaders, particularly in the NAACP. Referencing 'anti-Filipino riots' in California as among the favourite 'state sports', he demanded to know why the NAACP were uninterested in defending this group of 'colored' people. 'These are the usual race riots that exercise us so when they happen to Negroes', Miller argued.[33] In the article, Miller attempted to inscribe an identity of interests shared between African Americans laboring at the nexus of dispossession and racial oppression, other poor and racially oppressed groups in California, and sympathetic whites organized in the radical Left.

The key word Miller used in constituting this new collectivity was 'minority', a term common to discussions of national and racial questions in the period and used, for instance, by Richard Wright in his 1937 manifesto for Black literature 'Blueprint for Negro Writing'.[34] In Miller's argument, African Americans, whom he described as 'the most oppressed minority in a great nation', had failed to evince sympathy for other minorities, either 'political or racial.' 'Minority' was doing a great deal of work in his formulation, capturing not only a demographic fact but a deeper collective experience of diaspora, particularly as it was felt by those excluded from whiteness. Even further to this, Miller's 'minority' conception also extended to Communists as a maligned ideological grouping. (The Communists might themselves be imagined as an ideological 'diaspora', cut off from the Soviet motherland, which they were trained to treat with patriotic dedication). By envisioning 'the minorities of the world' united in a 'common cause' to 'get their rights', however, Miller flipped the particularism and powerlessness of the minority into an expansive new collectivity. He encouraged African Americans to acknowledge and build a community of interests inclusive not only of other subject ethnic groups but also of white radicals victimized for their activism. He found potential for such a motley and disruptive community in the campaigns around the Scottsboro case organized by the Communist-aligned ILD.[35] Indeed, when Miller reported on a Scottsboro meeting in Los Angeles, he noted the representation of 'California's

[33] Loren Miller, 'On Second Thought', *California Eagle*, 3 July 1931, p. 8.
[34] Richard Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', *New Challenge* (Fall, 1937).
[35] Loren Miller, 'On Second Thought', *California Eagle*, 3 July 1931, p. 8.

polyglot population – white, Mexican, Negro, Chinese, Japanese' in the crowd, cheering and gasping at the speech of Janie Patterson, mother to one of the accused.[36]

In a piece written in the period after Miller's return from the USSR, he made a similar appeal for a multiethnic, anti-capitalist alliance proceeding from outside the nation-state. Here, however, he strove for a more historical and theorized perspective consonant with the Communist Party's Black Belt thesis. 'Goodbye to Isolation' assumed that the 'melting pot' mechanism for assimilation into the American body politic had failed when the nation was founded on the unfreedom of Black people. Additionally, it claimed that the capacity for assimilation by 'the capitalist state structure' was further limited 'in the latter stages of capitalist development'. Miller therefore suggested that the experience of African Americans was akin to those of other 'alien peoples' whose entry as free people into America forged them into 'compact blocs where merger with the dominant groups comes only at the top or the deepest bottom of the social scale.' (Through the rest of the essay, Miller used the word 'majority' interchangeably with 'dominant' and 'minority' in ways that assumed a group's subjugation.)

In his narrative, African Americans were an ethnic group exterior but integral to the American nation. From this position they developed a defensive racial consciousness which gave political leadership to Black purveyors of 'bourgeois nationalistic propaganda' that was hostile to class struggle and accommodating of racial segregation.[37] The Garveyite projection of a vision of Black statehood was, according to Miller, the logical extreme of this politics. With the coming of the Depression, however, 'class strife' increased and 'working class whites' began to make 'bids for the Negro's support'.[38] The distance between the Black freedom struggle and the fight of white wage-workers was being bridged, and through participation in that struggle African Americans could achieve the dream of statehood that had previously animated the Garvey movement.

[36] 'Unpublished Material', LMP 46:7.
[37] 'Goodbye to Isolation', p. 3, LMP 39:8.
[38] 'Goodbye to Isolation', p. 6, LMP 39:8.

Miller posed the question of interracial organizing in the terms of international relations, as if proposing foreign policy positions to an embryonic Black state. He identified an antagonism between 'a bound-together world' which was 'birthing internationalism' and a global process of accelerating national antagonisms as states 'sharpen national patriotisms to arm themselves for the conflict.'[39] Within this scheme, he saw African Americans reaching one hand out to Ethiopia in defence of collective racial interests and another joining with the struggling working-class in America across colour lines. He characterized appeals against interracial struggle as manifesting a politics of isolationism that 'puts the Negro on the side of the status quo'.[40] Miller rhetorically sought to bind race-first politics to the strategic calculations of white, bourgeois politicians, who advocated an isolationist policy for America.

The urge to ally with other racial subjects and discuss race in broad terms continued to animate Miller after the Communist Party dropped its Black Belt thesis. In August 1936, Miller agreed to sponsor and deliver a paper at a Western Writers Congress organized by the white Californian writer Carey McWilliams.[41] Miller agreed that his paper should address 'the Negro' as part of a discussion on 'Racial Groups and Western literature'.[42] At a meeting of the Southern California sponsors of the event, Miller insisted that 'particular emphasis should be given to Oriental races and the Mexican', indicating that possible speakers on the latter might include Robert Tasker (a left-wing Hollywood screenwriter) or Virginia Bartlett, and nominating the journalist Louise Leung to speak on the 'Oriental races'.[43] These suggestions bore no fruit, however, and by October Miller was listed as a speaker

[39] 'Goodbye to Isolation', p. 7, LMP 39:8.
[40] 'Goodbye to Isolation', p. 6, LMP 39:8.
[41] Carey McWilliams to Barbara Chevalier, 14 August 1936, Berkeley, Bancroft Library, Carey McWilliams papers (CMP), Material relating to the Western Writers Congress, 1936-7, folder 1.
[42] Carey McWilliams to Barbara Chevalier, 15 September 1936, CMP, Material relating to the Western Writers Congress, 1936-7, folder 1.
[43] Carey McWilliams to LM, 20 October 1936, CMP, Material relating to the Western Writers Congress, 1936-7, folder 1.

alongside neither Tasker, Bartlett, nor Leung on the topic of 'Literature and Racial Problems'.[44] His advocacy for a wider discussion was an example of the enduring cosmopolitan quality in his politics.

Miller's Afro-cosmopolitan Marxism challenged the distinction between national and racial isolationisms. He commented extensively on global developments, protesting imperialism and racism where they manifested, but he always drew these struggles into a relation with the domestic situation of African Americans and other minority groups. Addressing political strategy within America, he sought to foster an interracial community among all oppressed minorities. He imagined this interracialism as itself bound up with the diplomatic and strategic positioning of an incipient Black nation and with the necessarily cross-racial makeup of a global movement for liberation. As an advocate of the Black Belt thesis and for a multiracial movement for justice in America, and as an incendiary commentator on both domestic and global affairs, Miller limned a peculiar relation between African Americans, the South, his own cosmopolitan West Coast community, and the global proletariat. While the Soviet expedition was clearly a high-point in Miller's internationalist commitment, and served to harden his ideological convictions, his investment in an internationalist revolutionary politics predated the trip to the USSR. Miller's Afro-cosmopolitan Marxism emerged as much from the productive overlap between the radical Black Atlantic and the multiracial Communist movement in Los Angeles.

Langston Hughes and California radicalism

While Miller's radical Afro-cosmopolitanism is most evident in his journalistic work, equivalent creative and political practices can be identified in the archives of other intellectuals. Hughes, who had returned to California in the summer of 1933, found his creative practices transformed by his engagement with European and Asian modernisms, most clearly seen in his turn to the short story form. After reading DH Lawrence's *The Lovely Lady* (at the recommendation of Marie Seton, who he

[44] Program Outline [undated], CMP, Material relating to the Western Writers Congress, 1936-7, folder 12.

befriended in Moscow) Hughes was determined to do for 'folks in America' what Lawrence did for the English: compose 'psychologically powerful accounts […] that send shivers up and down my spine'.[45] But in Northern California where he settled in 1933, near the agricultural valleys where militant industrial action was being taken by the ethnically diverse proletariat, Hughes brought this revised cultural practice into conversation with experience in the resurgent US labour movement. During his time as a member of the mostly white intellectual community around Carmel-by-the-Sea, Hughes produced work which was at times intensely localized but which firmly resisted any sense of regionalist parochialism. Writing and protesting across colour and cultural lines, Hughes drew the ire of local racists and displayed a deep distrust of the American state. The antagonism between Black Marxists and the American state – an antagonism which was also tied up with California's peculiarly well-established anti-radical infrastructure – will be a theme of the final part of this chapter. For now, a more detailed account of the racial politics in California's radical movement will help to give flesh to the notion of Black radicals as Afro-cosmopolitan Marxists. Due to his more expansive archive and greater celebrity, it is possible to trace Hughes's movements through the cosmopolitan radical movement with more precision than Miller's. In offering such an account, expansive solidarities which crossed borders of racial and national identity are evident in American locales.

After Hughes's return to mainland America in early August 1933, he went for a brief stay at Noël Sullivan's luxurious home in San Francisco. Though his time in the city was mostly restful, political demands were made on him to begin sharing his experience of the USSR and East Asia. On 30 August he spoke at an event hosted by the *Western Worker*. There, he told of the 'conditions of the workers in Japan, Shanghai and what he saw in the Soviet Union'. Even as he sought to bring the lessons of his global travel back to the California labour movement, though, he had one eye on 'the strike news in California'.[46]

[45] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 213.
[46] 'International Events and Western Workers', *Western Worker*, 28 August 1933, p. 3.

Events were developing fast in the fields of northern California. Just that month, strikes had been organized in the lettuce and beet fields around Salinas, while in Fresno, Bakersfield and Sacramento grapes, peaches and pears were all left unpicked.[47] Workers, organised for the most part by Communist Party cadres, were making demands for better pay. On 21 August, the *Western Worker* excitedly declared that 6,500 workers had joined the industrial actions from San Diego in the south to Chico in the north. The ethnic diversity of the workers was a major source of both power and vulnerability throughout these struggles. Mexicans and Filipinos often comprised most of the strikers, while Japanese and Americans (white and Black) also joined. This cross-ethnic unity ensured maximum impact, but various factors impeded alliances. Class tensions in the migrant communities, for instance, came to the fore when 'Filipino misleaders' and the Mexican consul made appeals to ethnic nationalism to undermine Communist influence.[48] In Walnut Creek near Sacramento, Japanese farmers even joined with members of the American Legion and 'thugs' under the command of the local sheriff to break up a meeting of organizing workers. The anti-strike gang achieved their ends by threatening the Japanese owner of the lot where the meeting was being held.[49]

These were the complex racial dynamics at play around the movement that Hughes participated in during his California stay spanning 1933 and 1934. Even when Hughes's energies were focused on Black oppression in America, the crowds he spoke to and the platforms he shared manifested the overlap of numerous diaspora communities in American locales. On 29 January 1934, for instance, two thousand people gathered to hear the outcome of an anti-lynching meeting in St. James Park in San Jose. The meeting was chaired by Matt Crawford, Hughes's friend from the Soviet expedition and now a leading Communist activist. 126 delegates, representing thousands of members, were gathered from across the West: Washington, Oregon, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, and Nevada, as well as California. They passed motions demanding the repeal of California's anti-Red

[47] 'Filipino Workers Vote to Strike in Lettuce and Beets', *Western Worker*, 14 August 1933, p. 1; 'Strikes Sweep California Fields; 6,500 Already Out', *Western Worker*, 21 August 1933, p. 1.
[48] 'Strikes Sweep California Fields; 6,500 Already Out', *Western Worker*, 21 August 1933, p. 1.
[49] 'Fear Agricultural Union; Sheriff Breaks Up Meet', *Western Worker*, 14 August 1933, p. 3.

Criminal Syndicalism Law, the release of prisoners including the Scottsboro boys and Angelo Herndon, the release of Communists in Germany from Nazi prisons, and resolved to help build the League of Struggle for Negro Rights (of which Hughes was honorary president). The imperative of waging a wide and vigorous fight against lynching and other terroristic forms was embraced by the crowd, who were also eager to hear updates on a strike in the Imperial and San Joaquin valleys. The audience included 'a good representation of Filipino, Chinese and Japanese workers' and the speakers list included a persecuted activist from Yakima, a delegate from the National Miners Union, and Hughes himself, the 'noted poet of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights'.[50]

This meeting signals an important aspect of the radical movement of the period: the revival of urban street speaking traditions which had been so important in the early twentieth-century California radicalism of the IWW, which had been threatened by the rise of the radio in the 1920s and which had helped to build audiences for radical ideas across racial and ethnic divisions. The Communist revival in street speaking sought to foster cosmopolitan connections by inviting an ethnically mixed group of speakers and distributing handbills in many of the languages spoken by California's residents. But the cosmopolitanism of the California radical movement went somewhat deeper than these mixed gatherings.[51] For instance, Hughes's exploration of Japanese culture continued in California when he was invited to speak directly to a group of Japanese Communists organized around the journal *Rodo Shimbun*. The Japanese Communist newspaper sponsored a March 1934 'Japan Nite' where his keynote address on 'the Japanese and Darker Races' featured alongside juijitsu performances, theatre, dancing, and a chop suey dinner.[52]

Hughes's stay in California was not exclusively, or even primarily, among its working-class migrant population, however. Shortly after his holiday in Sullivan's San Francisco home, Hughes moved out of the city and took up residence at Sullivan's house (called Ennesfree) in the exclusive

[50] '2,000 Greet Anti-Lynch Conference', *Western Worker*, January 29, 1934, pp. 1, 5.
[51] Wild, p. 189.
[52] Kurashige, p. 80

seaside town of Carmel. There, Hughes hoped to take some time away from the relentless travel of the previous years in order to get some writing done. Carmel would provide retreat of a peculiar kind, granting Hughes a degree of comfort and isolation he had not found for several years, and ingratiating him in circles of privileged white radicals. At the same time, though, it brought him closer to the centre of the state's industrial struggles, providing opportunities for new and more extensive engagements with California's proletarian diasporas. Even before arriving, Hughes had already noted approvingly that some of its residents were participating in anti-capitalist activism.[53]

Carmel was renowned as a place of refuge for artists, poets, and writers. At the heart of this community was Ella Winter, who shared a house with her ex-husband Lincoln Steffens, a famed muckraking journalist enjoying his autumn years in California. Winter was the leading figure of the local JRC, and had herself lately published *Red Virtue*, a book about the USSR based on her recent travels there and which Hughes read while in town.[54] The Steffens household helped form a nucleus of radical feeling which ran counter to the prevailing political conservatism in the town.[55] Carmel's network of radical-minded intellectuals cohered into a small group of JRC members among whom, apart from Winter and Steffens, were the playwrights Orrick Johns and Martin Flavin, the photographer Edward Weston (who shot a portrait of Hughes in this time), and the sculptor Jo Davidson. Among Hughes's friends were also Clare Short, the poet Robinson Jeffers and his wife Una, and the espoused writers Sara Bard Field and Charles Erskine Scott Wood.

For Hughes, the appeal of Carmel also arose from the personal bonds he developed with its small Black population. Spending so much time among whites, he joked, he had begun washing his hair with Golden Glow, but he attempted to retain his connection with ordinary Black folk by fostering a wider social circle which encompassed Carmel's African American inhabitants, most importantly

[53] LH to Noël Sullivan, 31 January 1933, NSP 40.
[54] Ella Winter, *Red Virtue: Human Relationships in the New Russia*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1933); Journal, LHP 492:12440.
[55] See Rampersad, p. 278 for a description of Carmel's local history and politics.

Sullivan's housekeeper Eulah Pharr.[56] Pharr was not heavily involved with the political activism of the JRC, but she appears to have participated in aspects of the radical culture about which her friends were so passionate. Pharr reported in a letter to Hughes sent some time after he left the coast that she had seen and enjoyed the popular Leftist plays 'Waiting for Lefty' and 'Newsboy' with mutual friends and fellow radicals Matt and Nebby Crawford.[57] Parallel to Hughes's social involvement with African Americans in Carmel, he also sustained a political investment in the struggle for Black liberation. In February 1934, he hosted an auction at Women's City Club in San Francisco to raise funds for the Scottsboro defence, engaging distinguished intellectuals across the colour line to donate materials, time, and money to the effort. James Cagney acted as auctioneer, while donations came in from John Dos Passos, WC Handy, Ezra Pound, Bertrand Russell, and Claude McKay. In the end, he exceeded his target of $1000 by four hundred dollars.[58]

Much of Hughes's creative output produced in Carmel reflected his ongoing commitment to African American folk and focused on Black-white relations in America. The most substantial creative legacy from his stay in Northern California was in the corpus of short stories collected in *The Ways of White Folks*. He had begun to compose the stories in the USSR, but most of the work on the book occurred in Carmel. Politically, *The Ways of White Folks* has been regarded as a 'racial romance' which fit the 'proletarian renaissance' of 1934.[59] Though not explicitly agitational or communistic, the book bore marks of Hughes's radical commitment: he wove an IWW member into 'Cora Unashamed', some Communist sentiment into 'Poor Little Black Fellow', and a class-struggle imaginary into a story of Southern whiteness, titled 'Father and Son'.[60]

The book borrowed from Hughes's recent experiences travelling the world and living in California, but only in limited or submerged ways. 'Cora Unashamed' was set in a Kansas town and

[56] Quoted by Rampersad, p. 280.
[57] Eulah Pharr to Hughes, [undated, c. 1935], LHP 128:2404.
[58] Rampersad I, p. 283
[59] Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 218.
[60] For a reading of the text which centres the Soviet connection and radical politics in *The Ways of White Folks*, see Baldwin, 'The Russian Connection', *MFS*, 48:4 (Winter 2002), 795-824.

was based on real-life events told to Hughes by the Kansan Loren Miller.[61] Although mostly set in and about America, some of the stories also included tales about Black men who travelled in Europe. These included 'Home', about a violinist's return to his Midwestern hometown, and 'Poor Little Black Fellow', about a boy adopted by a liberal-minded white New England family. But the collection's content did not display the global range of Hughes's recent experiences, whether as a traveler in Asia or a close witness to the struggles of Mexican and Filipino workers in California.

Indeed, California only appeared in one story, 'Rejuvenation through Joy'. The story ridiculed the primitivist vogue of previous years and featured a white-passing African American cult leader, Eugene Lesche, as the main character.[62] The story is concerned with artifice and performance, both of which are essential to the development of Lesche's cult. These themes help move the story to Hollywood, where Lesche takes up acting roles that propel the cult forward. Identifying Hollywood as a place of artifice in a story of Black erasure, 'Rejuvenation through Joy' also ironically helped give Hughes one of his first tastes of Hollywood's treacherous lure when in 1935 Paramount studios briefly flirted with the idea of making a film adaptation.[63] Very far from the representation of California in 'Rejuvenation through Joy', however, is a sense of a culturally diverse and militantly restless working-class.

By digging into Hughes's activism in Carmel, we can access a different side of his creative work. Before he had even departed for the USSR, Hughes had made the acquaintance of the members of Carmel's JRC. In June 1932, he visited the town to deliver a lecture titled 'From Racial to Proletarian Poetry' – a topic which offers some guide to the tensions in Hughes's oeuvre during these years.[64] On

[61] R. Baxter Miller, 'A Brief Biography', in *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, ed by Steven C. Tracy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) p. 40.
[62] The similarities between the fictional Lesche and the former Harlem Renaissance doyen Jean Toomer have been noted by other scholars, though it is also worth considering Hughes's acquaintance with another guru of colour, Jiddu Krishnamurti, through his Carmel networks (David Chinitz, 'Rejuvenation through Joy: Langston Hughes, Primitivism, and Jazz', *American Literary History* 9:1 (Spring, 1997) 60-78; Hughes, IWAIW, p. 282). In September 1933, he saw Krishnamurti lecture at the Peter Pan Lodge, concluding that the mystic was 'amusing and abstract' (Journal, LHP 492:12440).
[63] Rampersad I, p. 308
[64] 'John Reed Club Holds Carmel Meet', *Western Worker*, 15 June 1932, p. 2.

his return more than a year later, he quickly established himself as a member of Carmel's JRC chapter. He spoke at a meeting on the topic of Soviet Asia on 22 October 1933, contrasting the conditions in the American South with those for the national minorities in the Central Asian Republics.[65] He also helped to arrange for Miller to journey north to speak to the group.[66]

But more than speaking engagements, his activist energies were focused – alongside the rest of his JRC comrades – on the ongoing strike wave. Two days after delivering his speech to the group, Hughes celebrated a victory of the cannery and fishermen workers by going on a night-time sardine run.[67] Meanwhile, in Tulare County, cotton pickers had declared a strike over the low wage rates they received for their piecework and in protest against their appalling living conditions. The strike was led by a young white Communist, Caroline Decker, who visited the Carmel JRC to speak about the strikers, their difficulties, and 'the significance of the strike to the revolutionary movement.' At the same meeting, the actor Helen Ware read a poem penned by Marie de L. Welch about a strike in San Jose, actor Frank Sheridan read an editorial from a newspaper threatening the Tulare cotton pickers with interment in a prison camp (a 'bullpen' in the vernacular of American labour), and Noël Sullivan reported on behalf of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners from a recent visit to the strike area.[68]

As already indicated, Hughes's time in Carmel involved a balancing of various commitments: he maintained some of his closest friendships with white people, but at the same time he deliberately sought the company of his own people. He also made a less intimate but more politically charged relationship with the multiracial proletarians engaged in struggles around the county's villages. On another level, the period witnessed a conflict between his desire for retreat and the immediate possibility – indeed, the pressing urgency – of political involvement amidst intense polarization. This last tension reached a climax not during the agricultural strikes but amidst an urban strike movement

[65] Bulletin Number 4, Carmel JRC, p. 1, LMP 48:1.
[66] Hughes to Noël Sullivan, [undated, c. 1933], NSP 40.
[67] Rampersad I, p. 280.
[68] Bulletin Number 4, Carmel JRC, p. 1, LMP 48:1; Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 54.

based on docks along the West Coast, and centred in San Francisco. The Carmel JRC mobilized once again to support a momentous working-class struggle, feeling that the machine guns being pointed by the National Guard at the strikers were also 'pointing at us' some 125 miles away. They held a series of meetings in the Greenroom of the Community Theatre, which witnessed increasingly fractious debates between supporters and opponents of the strike from various backgrounds: 'summer vacationists, clerks, old ladies, Negro maids and working men, little merchants, artists, and college graduates without jobs' were all in attendance. The local opponents of the strike (the majority) also began to organize themselves through the American Legion and taking a cue from the brutal state violence of the Bloody Thursday events in San Francisco, they considered militant action against local radicals. Local police and American Legion members disrupted one meeting called by the JRC, and subsequently used intimidation to prevent them from using the hall for public meetings again.[69]

As tensions escalated, the nine-year-old son of Ella Winter and Lincoln Steffens became a target for right-wing vitriol, and Hughes was 'singled out' for being the only Black JRC activist. Rumours circulated about sightings of him 'on the beach and in cars in company of white women'. Finally, a member of the town's vigilant committees instructed a local African American to inform Hughes that he was in physical danger and should leave the village, which he did for a month to live in San Francisco and work on the script for 'Harvest'.[70] Ella Winter was directly implicated in these rumours. In one memorable report she was said to have 'slept with twenty-nine Negroes', to which Lincoln Steffens responded drily, 'why not thirty?'[71] Such was the intensity of the threats to her and her family, Winter decided at the last minute to withdraw her name from the playscript she had co-authored with Hughes before it was even submitted to the Theatre Union.[72] The impact of the experience on the group of

[69] 'Vigilantes Knock At My Door', LHP 366:5902.
[70] 'Vigilantes Knock At My Door', LHP 366:5902; Rampersad, p. 293.
[71] Ella Winter, *And Not To Yield: An Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1963), p. 207.
[72] Hughes to Maxim Lieber, 8 August 1934, LHP 102:1925

Carmel radicals further provoked Noël Sullivan's decision to sell his Ennesfree cottage and purchase instead a more remote plot of land in the Carmel Valley called Hollow Hills Farm.[73]

The experience of the Carmel JRC in the summer of 1934 highlights the difficulty of genuine isolation from the class struggle, which Hughes apparently sought in his time in Carmel. It is also indicative of the special level of anti-radical violence perpetrated in California by the institutionalized forces of reaction in the state. This violence was mobilized in part against precisely the interracial nature of California's radical Left. Within these struggles between migrant workers and US state, and amid the threats of reactionary nationalists which apparently included some members of the local Black community ('Negro maids and working men'), Hughes sided unambiguously with the strikers and with Mexican and Filipino victims of anti-Communist racism.[74] How this connected to a politics of nation and internationalism is best understood through his creative practice.

'Harvest'

Emerging from Hughes's most engaged moments (the solidarity visits to the areas of most intense struggle and Caroline Decker's regular meetings with the Carmel radicals, particularly Winter) came a creative collaboration between Winter and Hughes. This was the first such collaboration Hughes attempted since the painful experience of writing 'Mule Bone' with Zora Neale Hurston. The play he and Winter proposed to write evolved through various name changes – from 'Blood on the Cotton' to 'Blood on the Field' to 'Harvest' – but its basic purpose was clear. They sought to capture the drama and – importantly – the key political lessons of the strikes in the San Joaquin Valley for agitational and propagandistic purposes. Despite extensive work on it over a period of many months by both Winter and Hughes, the play was never produced. It has since been neglected as a minor document in Hughes's corpus and in the history of American proletarian theatre.

[73] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 58.
[74] 'Vigilantes Knock At My Door', LHP 366:5902.

Regardless, 'Harvest' marks a moment of possibility – and contains a set of tensions – which ought to be registered. On one hand, 'Harvest' is a testament to the radical possibility of the class-against-class reality of American industrial relations in 1933-4: a creative, pro-Communist collaboration between a Black man and a white woman amidst the often charged sexual politics of Leftist interracialism during the 1930s; a representation of California's multiracial proletarian radicalism; and a product of artistic techniques borrowed in part from foreign sojourns. For all its multiracial and transnational possibility, though, 'Harvest' was still ideologically grounded in Americanism in its representation of Mexicans and its inclination toward melting-pot uniformity. For all the apparent ideological flatness of such agitprop, 'Harvest' helps to illustrates the complex terrains of nationalism, interracialism, and internationalism in the work of radical Afro-cosmopolitans at a high-point of class-struggle militancy. The interplay of these ideologies was shaped by the policing of Americanness in California as part of an effort to exclude non-white migrants, Black Americans, and radical whites.

By engaging in a collaborative creative project across colour and gender lines, Hughes and Winter were attempting something for which few (if, indeed, any) precedents existed in the history of American theatre.[75] While interracial theatre productions were not uncommon, and indeed they proliferated under the New Deal with its massive Federal Theatre Project, I have not found an example of co-authorship of a playscript between a Black man and a white woman before Hughes and Winter's work. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility that such an instance had occurred, but at the very least the obscurity of any such example proves the point: that to do so, and quite publicly, was a bold act indeed. As has already been alluded to and will be seen below, their boldness did not go unpunished. However, in the prevailing atmosphere of Carmel during the autumn of 1933, with its

[75] The racial politics of early twentieth century American theatre are discussed in Cherly Black and Jonathan Shandell, *Experiments in Democracy: Interracial and Cross-Cultural Exchange in American Theatre, 1912-1945* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016) and in Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

radical clique of intellectuals and the apparent lack of 'racial prejudice', the project appeared relatively unproblematic.[76]

Having been moved by the 'very thrilling struggle' of the motley agricultural workers, Hughes sought to make a positive contribution to the revolutionary movement and was inspired creatively by the growing canon of Communist agitprop.[77] As such, authoring a play for the workers' theatres was an obvious way to channel his solidarity into the literary work he was determined to complete during his stay. In working with Winter, who was the de facto political commissar of the local JRC, he indicated his willingness to channel his creative energy into revolutionary politics. The two shared a commitment to the Communist movement which had been strengthened by recent trips to the USSR, and while Hughes provided the project with rich literary experience and an expertise in the vernacular speech of ordinary Americans, Winter had closer connections to the action of the strike itself.[78] Together, they hoped that the source material would ensure 'a sound and provocative drama of the actual struggles of agricultural and migratory workers in California (and in a sense, all America) today.'[79]

The play was intended as a documentary record of the struggle in Tulare County as it had been witnessed by the Carmel JRC members and recorded in the local and Leftist press. It borrowed the techniques of modernist theatre witnessed by Hughes both in his domestic and international travel. The opening stage directions describe it as 'a mass play' with audience involvement and 'the old frame of the proscenium' broken. Furthermore, Winter and Hughes suggested deploying a '"newspaper" curtain', on which 'actual portions of the reporting of the strike' would be reproduced, and indicated that a screen might be used to flash up parts of 'the strikers' handbills' and the advertisements displayed by the ranchers and their vigilantes. The material for these displays would have been

[76] Rampersad I, p. 280.
[77] Quoted in Rampersad I, p. 281.
[78] Around this time, Hughes was reading Winter's book about the USSR, perhaps as an example for the material he was producing for a similar travelogue. See Journal, LHP 492:12440.
[79] Hughes to Michael Blankfort, 12 July 1934, LHP 155:2868.

provided by Winter, who accumulated 'a huge album of pictures, clippings, leaflets, handbills, etc., of the strike.'[80] This documentary aesthetic was inseparable from the 'didactic' intention of the play.[81] The action dramatized several key aspects of the Communist Party perspective, including the New Deal's role in protecting exploitative bosses against workers' struggles for justice and the ancillary, unreliable role of the middle class in revolutionary politics.

Susan Duffy has detailed the similarities between 'Harvest' and other American agitprop plays – such as *Strike!* and *Strike Song* – seen by Hughes on his travels across the country. Aside from broad similarities in 'theme, tone, and tenor', the plays share a focus on celebrating revolutionary unionism, feature women protagonists leading strikes, and use primary documents as sources for dialogue.[82] But the impact of Soviet and Japanese theatre on Hughes's playwriting should not be neglected. Hughes's reminiscences and his notes from journeys in the USSR and East Asia are preoccupied with theatre cultures. International travel clearly contributed to Hughes's increasing interest in the theatre, which was sustained during the subsequent years of his radical commitment. Hughes's interest in modernist developments in the theatre world was on display in Russia, for example, where he had been a guest at the Moscow Art Theatre and had taken in plays by experimental directors such as Meyerhold and Vakhtangov. Similarly, his interest in the radical Tsukiji Theatre in Japan reveals the entanglement in his life of socialist politics, internationalism, and theatrical experimentation.[83] As has already been detailed (in Chapter 4), this interest in modernist theatre also developed alongside a passion for the fusion of ethnic traditions with avant-gardism. As such, though 'Harvest' technically tacked more closely to the autochthonous culture of documentary theatre, any narrative of its genesis should

[80] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 68.
[81] Ella Winter to Hughes, 4 June 1935, LHP 173:3178. Among the most important theorists of the documentary theatre in the interwar period was Erwin Piscator, who elaborated on the educative possibility of documentary theatre in his 1929 book *The Political Theatre*. Though his work was not published in English until 1978, his ideas framed the movement outside the Germanosphere. See Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980) and Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999) p. 14.
[82] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 56.
[83] Hughes, *IWAIW*, p. 76.

account for the transnational life being lived by Hughes in this period, and the ways his global travel was shaping his creative output.

The transnationalism of Hughes's Depression-era life was mirrored in the migratory lives of the characters in 'Harvest', though the framing of these characters also revealed limits to the play's cosmopolitanism. In the playscript, Hughes and Winter instructed that 'if possible, one or two Filipinos' be cast among the striking workforce 'to add to the melting pot of races that is California's low-paid agricultural reserve.'[84] The note indicates an authorial awareness of the multiracialism of California's itinerant workforce and the significance of displaying such a group united in common struggle. Even so, the melting pot image is more fitting for a play of illiberal Americanism than of revolutionary cosmopolitanism.[85] It seems that the authors did not share a wholly consistent anti-nationalist attitude to the play as they continued to work on it. In 1935, Ella Winter went so far as to describe its 'thesis' of 'out of many, one' as a 'highly American' proposition.[86] Such comments suggest that 'Harvest' was not imagined straightforwardly as anti-nationalist. At the least, Winter sometimes anchored the play's transnational revolutionism in a 'highly American' desire for cultural melding.

The play opens with a scene of arrested migration, as a car carrying a Mexican family comes to a sputtering stop in the California night. Their Spanish-language curses mark their cultural difference, which becomes racialized when members of a passing group of white Southerners address them as 'greasers' and blame 'damned Mexicans' for the unavailability of work to the 'white man'.[87] Despite the interethnic tensions between the Mexican and American proletarian migrants, when a cop arrives and orders them to disperse, he makes no distinction between the Americans and Mexicans. 'This Valley's overrun with tramps now', he complains, and insinuates that, though the Arkansan family are not 'lousy foreigners', neither are they welcome on the West Coast. 'You', says

[84] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 68.
[85] On the multiracialism of California's agricultural workers, see Elizabeth Sine, 'Grassroots Multiracialism: Imperial Valley Farm Labor and the Making of Popular Front California From Below', *Pacific Historical Review* 85:2 (2016), 228-255.
[86] Ella Winter to Hughes, 4 June 1935, LHP 173:3178.
[87] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, pp. 71, 72.

the cop to the white migrant Luther, 'look to me like one of those goddam trouble-makers.' Luther deflects the charge to his companion Shorty, and the two scrap while the police accuse them of 'startin' a riot – afore you even get to the cotton fields!'[88] The moment, with its still-implied anti-Red prejudice, dramatizes the projected alliance of racial and political minorities called for by Miller above, through their common victimization by the American state.

This matrix of oppression is realized as a source of strength as the play develops. When agricultural workers are seen at work, they are neither as whitened nor as masculinized as in many more romantic representations of California agriculture workers. Instead, 'many men, women, and children, whites, Mexicans, and a few Negroes' compose the workforce.[89] Mack, a white American and the leading radical among the workforce, explains to his fellow white workers that the responsibility for the poor conditions the workers share is not 'the Mexicans or the Negroes' but 'the white folks out here, big ranchers' who had ensured that the federal government relaxed migration rules to 'get plenty Mexicans and Filipino boys to pick cotton and grapes and lettuce' on the pretense that they would receive a train fare, good wages, and education for their children.[90] Mack then invites the disgruntled workers to a union meeting, forging a comradeship with his co-worker Jose to ensure Mexican participation.

As the dispute escalates, it becomes clear that the racist epithets initially heard in the mouths of white migrant workers are in fact the language of the enemy ranchers. At a meeting of the bosses' association, an all-white and mostly male crowd throw racist insults around liberally. When addressed by the striking worker Mack, for instance, one local capitalist objects that the 'Red' has no business 'talking for Mexicans and niggers.'[91] A sharp contrast is established in the subsequent scene, which sets a meeting of the strike committee in a barn (as opposed to the ranchers' plush conference room), and sees men and women of different ethnic groups (white American, Mexican, Black American)

[88] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, pp. 75-6.
[89] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 77.
[90] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, pp. 80-81.
[91] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 93.

discuss strategy. Buster, the Black committee member, is criticized for using the anti-Mexican slur 'greasers', instructed by Mack to 'leave that word to the bosses'.[92] The anti-Black implications of anti-Mexican racism are later made clear when a deputy denounces Mexicans as 'black Indian-looking bastards.'[93] Hughes and Winter illustrate that in class struggle, racial prejudice and slurs are corrosives deployed on behalf of the rich against the exploited.

In so doing, they embrace the transnational dynamic of class struggle in the borderlands. Elizabeth Sine has explained that the workers in the valley carried with them traditions of the Mexican anarchists of the Partido Liberal Mexicano (known as the Magonistas after the brothers Enrico, Ricardo, and Jesús Flores Magón), as well as 'Wobbly-influenced anarchists and syndicalists, political dissidents of various stripes, or anti-colonial internationalists.'[94] These traditions are referenced more or less obliquely through 'Harvest', but the most significant indication that non-American revolutionary traditions are being transplanted into the Californian struggle comes at the end of Act 2. Jose describes his Mexican homeland to the American Shorty in terms which speak to continental and revolutionary, rather than nationalist, romanticism. Mexico, he says, is 'pretty, kind o' like California', with 'mountains and deserts, and [a] moon like this'. Not only the landscape, but the political struggle appears relevant:

> We make plenty revolution once. My papa fight with Zapata, try to get land and work. But the generals win – and they kill us. Always, they kill us poor peoples. […] Plenty poor people sleep on ground in Mexico, go hungry, starve. Like here. They fight. They always get beat down. […] But someday, maybe we no beat down. Someday, maybe we win.[95]

By depositing the romantic aspect of revolutionary politics in the leading Mexican character, while retaining white characters as the serious political leadership of the strike, Hughes and Winter

[92] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 97.
[93] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 110.
[94] Sine, 'Grassroots Multiracialism', p. 230.
[95] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, pp. 123-124.

recapitulated common conceptions of Mexico and its people as part of a hemispheric Orient.[96] Nevertheless, Hughes's and Winter's references in 'Harvest' to the relatively recent history of peasant revolutionism in Mexico indicate the authors' sensitivity to vernacular cultures of rebellion. Moreover, their attempt to render Mexican English-speaking in conversation with different American vernaculars (white Arkansan and African American) oralised the cosmopolitanism of California's radical working-class movement. Doing so helped to articulate the difference between the community of interest among oppressed minority populations in California, and the apparent community of interest represented by the American nation. Though this drama was occurring in a recognizably American locale and its representation of Mexicans failed to break American cultural molds, the play veered away from the ideological terrain of nationalism.

Hughes and Winter also evinced an awareness of the special vulnerabilities and concerns of the Mexican workers. Numerous references to the threat of repatriation are made in the play. For instance, when the desperate strikers are given the opportunity to receive New Deal relief, many Mexicans fear accepting the offer, as it would involve providing the state with their car registration details and, they fear, being put on a 'black-list' for deportation.[97] They also take a critical stance to the role of Mexican state officials, who are accused of participating in the ranchers' divide-and-rule strategy. Jennie, the white Communist and labour organizer modelled on Caroline Decker, scolds the Mexican Consul for urging 'the Mexicans to go back to work and break the strike', while Mack concludes that the 'consul's a class enemy.'[98] Not only American but Mexican nationalism are suspect in this drama.

As the strike continues to intensify, with the clearing of the workers' camp and continuing resolve from the strikers, the ranchers' opposition resolves into a fascistic sentiment. In a scene which

[96] See 'Gilbert G. Gonzalez, 'Mexican Labor Migration, 1876-1924', in *Beyond La Frontera: The History of Mexico-US Migration*, edited by Mark Overmeyer-Velázquez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 28-50 (pp. 35-36).
[97] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 117.
[98] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, pp. 120-121.

sees the Farmers' Protective Association convene, they surround themselves with the paraphernalia of American nationalism, including a stars-and-stripes flag and presidential portraits. The ranchers denounce the strikers as 'a dirty bunch of Mexicans' under the influence of 'alien agitators' and describe the new union as a grouping of 'greasers and niggers and shiftless bums', in a series of rhetorical moves typical of conservative American anti-Communism.[99] The strike is seen as 'foreign interference' to be resolved with the demand to 'deport the lot of 'em'.[100] Finally, the ranchers combine their identity as 'red-blooded American citizen[s]' with misogyny, proclaiming that the attractive young woman leading the strike, Jennie Martin (based on Caroline Decker), 'sweethearts' the workers.[101] The meeting resolves in the presence of the sheriff to 'take the law into our own hands and eliminate the agitators'.[102]

Once again, Hughes and Winter contrast the masculinist white nationalism of the bosses with the multiethnic working-class community they confront. As the workers prepare to face the vigilantes, the cosmopolitan character of their community is emphasized. Mexican music is showcased as the Mexican workers enter 'laughing and singing' with guitar in hand, and then shout slogans in Spanish: 'viva la Secretaria! Buenos Tardas, companero! Vivo la huelga!' Soon, a new group appears, of workers including the Black strike committee member Buster, shouting 'BLACK AND WHITE UNITE TO FIGHT'.[103] The moments in this final scene before the violent denouement celebrate the creation of a viable community of struggle across the racial and cultural lines drawn early on. When the strikebreaking vigilantes arrive, the group are dispersed and several lead characters (Jose, Buster) – are killed. The audience are nevertheless left with the image of a white worker holding a banner painted with the 'BLACK AND WHITE UNITE AND FIGHT' slogan as police descend on the scene.[104] Winter and Hughes

[99] Hughes, *Political Plays*, p. 124. On American anti-Communism, see Gerstle and Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism*, (New York: The Free Press, 1995).
[100] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 125.
[101] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 127.
[102] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 130.
[103] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 132.
[104] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 137.

therefore make interracialism and the persistent power of working-class unity the core theme of their playscript, and oppose the American state and American racial nationalism to these.

For all the work its authors invested in it (Hughes returned to it as late as 1936), 'Harvest' was never performed.[105] When Hughes submitted it to the Theatre Union in September 1934 the Union responded that despite 'the many fine characterizations in it and its real power', the play (still called 'Blood on the Fields' at this point) could not be produced in the form submitted due to 'its size' and other 'problems of writing and of production'.[106] 'It doesn't quite hold together', one Theatre Union official told Hughes, 'there is too much strike, that is, it isn't somehow concentrated into dramatic form.'[107] Subsequent edits – including the change of name to 'Harvest', which was borrowed from the title of the Marie Welch poem that had been read at a JRC meeting the previous year – were never seen by the Theatre Union.[108] They nevertheless appear to have been informed by concerns over the play's scale, as an ambitious closing scene depicting a mass funeral procession was dropped.[109] Nor have historians been interested in recovering 'Harvest', despite the extensive efforts at rehabilitating proletarian culture over recent decades. Anne Loftis, for instance, dismisses the play as 'a long, artificial propaganda vehicle'.[110]

Whatever complaints may have been made about it, 'Harvest' occupies a unique place in Hughes's playwrighting oeuvre, and Hughes's dedication to the project suggests his interest in it was neither superficial nor passing even if its timeliness lessened as the agricultural strikes receded in the popular consciousness. Channeling a moment of multiracial, class-struggle possibility in California, Hughes and Winter represented the working-class as a migrant and transnational force, and as one which – insofar as it was united across ethnic lines – stood opposed to the racist, anti-Red American

[105] Rampersad I, p. 327.
[106] Margaret Larkin to Hughes, 11 September 1934, LHP 155:2868.
[107] Paul Peters to Hughes, 15 September 1934, LHP 128:2392.
[108] Hughes, *Political Plays*, ed by Duffy, p. 60.
[109] Ella Winter to Hughes, 4 June 1935, LHP 173:3178.
[110] Anne Loftis, *Witnesses to the Struggle: Imaging the 1930s California Labor Movement* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998), p. 46.

state. What's more, they did so as political radicals and theatrical modernists who were themselves products, in part, of global travel. 'Harvest' is a uniquely internationalist intervention in Hughes's playwriting career: emerging from the fields of San Joaquin Valley via the rustic streets of Carmel-by-the-Sea, and framed by memories of European and Asian modernisms, it was nevertheless stoppered from any wider circulation.

In each of these respects, 'Harvest' might be contrasted with the more famous testimony about the California agricultural strikes, John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*. It was via Ella Winter and Lincoln Steffens that Steinbeck (who lived near Carmel, in Pacific Grove) became acquainted with the movement. Steinbeck soon began working on a documentary novel on the strike, substituting the strike leader Pat Chambers as the story's hero. When it was published in 1936, *In Dubious Battle* climbed bestseller lists and won critical acclaim; it has since been republished as a Penguin Modern Classic.[111] As a record of California class struggles, however, it marked a retreat from Hughes and Winter's project. Steinbeck whitened and masculinized the protagonists of the strike and stood at a skeptical distance from the radical politics that moved its organisers. Whatever the formal justifications, the burial of 'Harvest' and the canonization of *In Dubious Battle* has done an historical disservice to the dynamic multiracialism of California radicalism circa 1933.

Together, Miller's journalism and Hughes's California protest play stand as testaments to their common articulation of an Afro-cosmopolitan Marxism. This cosmopolitanism was not identical with the 'radical cosmopolitan African Atlantic' but instead emerged out of the convergence between Black diaspora consciousness and the diverse, Communist-organized but multivocal and vernacular radicalism in California. In California, they rearticulated the same worldly perspective as we have seen previously in their archives from Soviet Russia and Asia. But their Afro-cosmopolitan perspective was not simply a product of those global travels. It signaled the importance of understanding America as not merely a national or domestic space, but an already globalized one characterized by convergences

[111] Warren French, 'Introduction', in John Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* (New York: Penguin, 2001), pp. ix-xi.

between diaspora cultures, including on the terrain of militant class struggle. Miller and Hughes evidently intimated that this situation contained possibilities for their people as they sought to transcend a regime of racial apartheid. Practicing this kind of anti-capitalist politics in Depression California positioned Hughes and Miller, with racialised migrant workers, as antagonists of American nationalists and the American state.

Afro-cosmopolitanism sans Marxism

The subsequent careers of Miller and Hughes led each of them away from California. In Miller's case, he headed in 1935 to New York to work as an editor at the *New Masses*, though he only remained for six months, returning to Los Angeles to renew his commitment to a legal career. Hughes spent most of the 1930s living in and travelling between Mexico, the US, and Europe, returning to California for only brief visits until, late in 1940, he travelled from Los Angeles to Noël Sullivan's Hollow Hills Farm near Carmel, where he stayed for much of the following year.[112] For both Miller and Hughes, their returns to California coincided with ideological drifts away from Marxism. Miller departed from the Communist movement to focus on his legal career, which was enabling him to provide for a growing family: he became a father in 1937, and stopped all Leftist activity the following year.[113] Hughes's journey away from the Marxist Left was more tortured; equally prosaic concerns about finance compounded with ideological differences to divorce him from the Communist Party milieu.

Probably the key incident in changing Hughes's relationship with Communism occurred during his 1940 visit to Los Angeles, where a group of anti-Communists intervened decisively to rouse a popular controversy around him. The parallels and contrasts between this incident and Hughes's earlier confrontation with Californian anti-Communism, amid the 1934 longshoremen strike, are worth dwelling on. Booked to speak on 'Negro folk songs' at a 'Book and Author' luncheon at the Vista del Arroyo Hotel in Pasadena on 16 November, Hughes's appearance was prevented by the arrival of

[112] See Rampersad I, pp. 392-5, and Rampersad II, chapter 1.
[113] Hassan, pp. 123, 125.

a crowd headed by evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson.[114] Leaflets distributed by the protestors announced that Hughes was a member of the 'American section of Moscow's "International Union of Revolutionary Writers"' and printed as evidence a poem, 'Goodbye Christ', written at the height of his Communist commitment. McPherson's final message read: 'ATTEND THE LUNCHEON CHRISTIANS and hear GEORGE PALMER PUTNAM Introduce the author of the above "poem," MR. LANGSTON HUGHES Distinguished young Negro poet – and eat, *if you can*.'[115] Embarrassed, Hughes agreed with the hotel manager, luncheon officials, and the luncheon's host, George Palmer Putnam, that he would withdraw from the program. The racist implication of the picket was made explicit when, as Hughes shook hands with a white associate, 'a woman rushed up and yelled, "Down where I come from we don't shake hands with n-----s."' Hughes noted bemusedly that McPherson's band were at the same time playing 'God Bless America'.[116] The picket formed part of 'an autumn wave of red-baiting in Los Angeles'.[117]

The incident was covered by local press but would have passed over quickly had McPherson not sent her leaflet to the *Saturday Evening Post* for publication. Responding to the building public relations problem, Hughes issued a statement which distanced him more clearly than ever before from his previous Leftism. He couched his positive impression of Soviet Russia in a narrative about his experiences in the American South on his 1932 tour, insisted the narrator of the poem was not himself, and condescended to his past self and his comrades by deploying the cliché of 'radical at twenty' and 'conservative at forty' (eliding that he had in fact been a mature thirty-year-old when he departed for the USSR). He insisted that he had never joined the Communist Party, and that he was not a Marxist; the question of whether he was a Christian was answered more ambiguously.[118] The statement

[114] Langston Hughes, 'Concerning "Goodbye Christ"', in *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten*, ed by Emily Bernard (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), p. 179.
[115] 'Report, 3/13/41', FBI File on Langston Hughes, *F.B.Eyes Digital Archive: FBI Files on African American Authors and Literary Institutions Obtained through the US Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)*, <http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/fbeyes/hughes> [accessed 25/05/18].
[116] Hughes to Noël Sullivan, [undated, c. November 1940], NSP 40.
[117] Hughes to Malcolm Cowley, 2 January 1941, LHP 48:896.
[118] Hughes, 'On "Goodbye Christ"', in *Remember Me to Harlem*, ed by Emily Bernard, pp. 177-180.

quelled some concerns about Hughes's profane views and attracted support from many, but it provoked angry responses from the Left.[119]

Facing a very different array of political forces than he had in 1933-4, Hughes's response to this anti-Communist controversy departed sharply from his bold defiance against the Japanese state and the American Legion in 1933-4. By 1940, the forces of anti-Communism had rallied around and begun to be coordinated by the Dies Committee. This first incarnation of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was established in 1938 to investigate right-wing as well as Leftist subversion, but in fact it acted as a conservative counter-offensive against New Dealers and the Left.[120] The recovery of the Right's lost political ground, combined with the economic stabilization effected by the New Deal, the loss of Communist momentum after the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, and their Popular Front accommodation to New Deal liberalism, to bolster Roosevelt's cross-class coalition. When Hughes confronted a new wave of anti-Communist controversy in 1940, therefore, the revolutionary possibility of 1933-4 had been neutered and the proletarian internationalist imaginary that produced 'Harvest' seemed already dated. There was a new political space in which Black freedom could be fought for alongside other racial minorities in America, and it was toward this politics that both Hughes and Miller gravitated in the 1940s. If their Marxist commitment shriveled (albeit to different extents), however, Afro-cosmopolitanism as a political and ethical disposition remained.

As radical multiracialism and civic nationalism converged, multiracialism began to be imagined as an integral component of a new American identity. The leading journal of this emergent American cosmopolitanism was *Common Ground*, of which Hughes became an editor and to which he regularly published material (essays and poems) in the 1940s. *Common Ground* was founded in 1940 by the Common Council for American Unity, a product of the Californian intellectual networks of which

[119] Rampersad I, p. 395; Rampersad II, p. 8.
[120] Kenneth O'Reilly, 'The Dies Committee v. the New Deal: Real Americans and the Unending Search for Un-Americans', in *Little 'Red Scares': Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921-1946*, ed. by Robert Justin Goldstein (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 237-260.

Common Ground's leading figure, Louis Adamic, was a member. It was concerned with anti-fascism but also with forging an Americanism which enshrined cultural pluralism and racial equality at its centre.[121] It therefore became a venue which brought Hughes's protests for Black freedom – now rid of Communist proclivities – together with commentaries on immigrant and ethnic America. Having mostly sublimated the working-class revolutionism and anti-nationalism of 'Harvest', Hughes found a different way of integrating his celebration of Black vernacular culture with a multiracial quest for freedom.

In a very different field of activity, Miller embarked on a similar ideological trip. Having been a more consistent defender of the Party in earlier years – for instance, in his support for the Black Belt thesis – when Miller broke from the Left it was both more sudden and a sharper political turn than Hughes's. By 1944, Miller was running for Congressional office as a liberal Democrat.[122] When, in 1952, he came to buy the *California Eagle* from his former boss, Charlotta Bass, the political dynamic between the two had been reversed: Bass was regarded as a Communist sympathizer who had maintained a Leftist editorial line, while Miller was a Cold War liberal who pivoted the paper sharply rightward.[123]

During the same period of disenchantment with the Left, however, Miller worked relentlessly on civil rights cases, especially on behalf Japanese Americans. As a lawyer and columnist at the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, he galvanised Black opinion in defence of Nisei (children of first-generation Japanese immigrants). In 1940, this took the form of joining resistance to the registration, fingerprinting, and ultimately the internment of Japanese people.[124] Later, as Miller's attention turned to racially restrictive covenants in housing, he took up the case of 5 Japanese American brothers who were victimized by the Alien Land Law of 1913, which deprived immigrants of the right to transfer land

[121] Tania Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism in Twentieth-Century African American Writing* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 107; David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 97.
[122] Hassan, p. 147.
[123] Hassan, p. 184.
[124] Hassan, pp. 126-128.

ownership to their US-born children.[125] Miller's post-Communist activism sustained the expansive set of solidarities he began to articulate during the 1930s.

These elements of continuity were also evident in his 1940s writings. For instance, penning a lawyerly review, titled 'Strangers in the Land', of a 1946 book on race and immigration law, Miller grounded his legal activism in an analysis of American racism which substituted legal argumentation for the Marxian language of 'Goodbye to Isolation', and drew liberal conclusions that emphasized judicial reform over revolutionary overturn. In 'Goodbye to Isolation', Miller had considered that mechanisms of assimilation into American society were closed due to the structure of capitalist economy as it existed in the twentieth century. His later text retained 'unassimilability' as the primary frame through which American racism was viewed, but it rendered this as a problem of the legal system. An ill-defined justification for exclusion from citizenship, Miller wrote that 'unassimilability […] is understood by everybody […] as completely descriptive of a certain peculiar, and very objectionable, quality possessed by, and inherent in, persons of Asiatic or African nationality or ancestry.'[126] Miller went on to detail the conjoined trajectories of US immigration and naturalisation laws and Asian and Black demands for civil rights. Finally, he asserted that racial discrimination would only be reversed by 'group guarantees in the constitution' or by abandoning 'the doctrine that racial classifications are permissible for any purpose.'[127] As a major civil rights advocate in the 1940s, Miller retained the basic structure of solidarity and common struggle that characterized his earlier Communist discussion of 'minorities', but he hitched these to a national-democratic and reformist political vision rather than a proletarian internationalist and revolutionary one.

Trained as members of the Communist Left into an Afro-cosmopolitan perspective that linked US-based interracial protest with internationalist solidarity, both Hughes and Miller sustained this vision of broad political coalitions and interlinked struggles for justice when they departed from

[125] Hassan, pp. 150-151.
[126] 'Strangers in the Land', p. 2, LMP 46:7.
[127] 'Strangers in the Land, p. 8, LMP 46:7.

Communist Party circles in the 1940s. Such coalitions would remain important features of civil rights protest through the later decades of the twentieth century and would ultimately return – particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, with the advent of Third Worldism – to the field of revolutionary politics. This chapter has sought to identify the lineages of that period in the 1930s Old Left. There is still more to be said, however, about the shifting relationship between Black radicals and the US nation-state during the era of New Deal reform and Popular Frontist coalition-building. The entanglement of a world-facing Afro-cosmopolitanism with New Deal nationalism is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Folk Internationalist: William Attaway, the Popular Front, and Global America

As the 1930s ended, Popular Front Leftists participated with New Dealers in a rearticulation of American nationalism which proclaimed racial inclusivity as a core principle. With the expansion and radicalisation of the New Deal under pressure from militant labour protests, and with the Communist Party having pivoted from class-against-class ultra-Leftism to Popular Front class collaborationism, New Deal liberals and the Left stitched together a powerful alliance which sought to redefine Americanism. This ascendant social bloc was, at the same time, a government policy defending ruling-class interests against anti-capitalist radicals, and a social movement grounded in working-class communities and mediated by powerful union bureaucracies. Ideologically, it deployed civic nationalism to advance a social-democratic program. Against conservative narratives of nationhood which constructed Americanness in opposition to racial others (especially Black, Asian, and increasingly also Mexican people), the Popular Frontist bloc advanced a national identity based on democratic values and common endeavour. Within this populist cultural configuration, labouring people were valourised as the authentic makers of the nation and cultural producers working in various media sought to capture the faces and voices of these ordinary people.[1]

The fight against fascism gave shape not only to a new US political order but also to a transformed international system. At the global level, the Popular Front had as its corollary the anti-fascist alliance between the USSR and imperialist Western powers. The alliance was broken temporarily with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 but was reconstructed after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Out of those alliances, at the end of the Second World War, came the United Nations,

[1] Gerstle; Denning, *The Cultural Front*; Battat; Sonnet Retman, *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Brian Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012).

which as well as being a venue where Cold War tensions were played out became an important arena for worldwide movements against colonialism. Among the architects that helped make it a more receptive environment for anti-colonial and anti-racist activists were prominent African Americans associated with the Left such as Ralph Bunche and Eslanda Goode Robeson.[2] Despite the efforts of anti-colonial and anti-racist activists like Robeson and Bunche, however, the relationship between anti-colonial and anti-fascist formations was frequently tense and even conflictual. Many actors in the anti-fascist fight were wedded to, or passively accepting of, imperial projects, whereas anti-colonial activists approached the fight against fascism as irreducible from resistance to empire.[3]

This chapter takes as its starting point the contiguity between the American Popular Front and the transformation in international politics by anti-fascist and anti-colonial movements in the final years of the Depression. By attending to the work of the African American novelist William Attaway, it considers the entangled development of a revised, progressive American nationalism with the collapse of one international order and the emergence of another. The link between the national and the global is traced through Attaway's construction of folk cultures. Studies of Popular Front literature commonly figure the romanticisation of proletarian or preindustrial folk as part of a nationalist project to redefine Americanism and to present critiques of society in the US.[4] In this chapter, the nationalist strains in Attaway's Popular Front literature are read as tending also to articulate a commentary on global, civilisational problems and international relations. Through a parsing of Attaway's racial and national politics, the global scope of his political vision enters into focus.

Attaway was a lesser-known writer of the Popular Front and Chicago Renaissance, who has not commonly been associated with the emergence of new internationalisms – either liberal or anti-colonial –, but the contradictions and conflicts in Attaway's narratives of life in America demand that his pivots from national to international concerns be registered. Even as a writer whose chosen topics

[2] Plummer; Ransby; Getachew.
[3] Munro, p. 10.
[4] Christin Marie Taylor, *Labor Pains: New Deal Fictions of Race, Work, and Sex in the South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2019); Denning, *The Cultural Front*; Battat; Retman.

were more insular and localised than other subjects of this thesis and who exemplified some of the limitations in Popular Front culture's representational techniques, Attaway's work offers thoroughgoing civilisational critiques and displays some of the radical possibilities in American culture during the New Deal era. His grounded, folkish cultural politics represented a continuity of sorts with other modes of Black internationalism even as he participated in the reimagining of American national identity.

Attaway was not alone in straddling Popular Front Left-nationalism and anti-colonial internationalism. Langston Hughes, for instance, penned poems which appropriated American nationalism (most notably, the seminal 'Let America Be America Again' from 1935) as well as rallying calls against empire and fascism (such as 'Broadcast on Ethiopia' and 'Roar, China', written respectively in 1936 and 1937).[5] Hughes's oeuvre continued to articulate manifold solidarities into the late 1930s and beyond, and his work in these years – which saw him move between the US and Europe, famously authoring reports from the frontline of the Spanish Civil War – sustained many of the productive tensions of the earlier years. But attention to Attaway's rootedness in the American context during the Depression years presents a unique set of challenges to narratives of this period which prioritise the development of transatlantic solidarities by mobile subjects, of which Hughes was one.

Attaway's internationalism was primarily hemispheric and his fiction was acutely sensitive to American regionality; to read Attaway as an internationalist is therefore to read Mexicans as subjects in America's imperial formation, and remote American locales as possible sites of global solidarity. In these respects, though Attaway emerged as a writer from the metropolises that have anyway dominated historical narratives of Black internationalism (Chicago, New York), his work is valuable to a remapping of Black internationalism in its engagement with other American regions and its

[5] Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) pp. 189, 192, 198.

coarticulation of a Popular Front nationalism with internationalism.[6] His portrait of a Popular Frontism from below also contended, however, with a somewhat pessimistic perspective on American racial politics, as Attaway repeatedly emphasised the ever-present lure of divisive and violent racial nationalisms.

A figure of the Black cultural front, scholars have commonly framed Attaway as a product of Chicago cultural radicalism organised around the Federal Writers Project (FWP) and the Communist Party.[7] In penning his first novel, however, he also borrowed from his experience as an itinerant labourer in the same moment of multiracial radicalism in California as Hughes and Winter. Frequently considered a relatively minor figure in African American cultural history and in the tradition of American social realism, Attaway's creative interventions signalled the emergence of an increasingly inventive and individual voice. While his work clearly sought to confront the social and psychological consequences of the Great Migration and the economic depression, it also responded to the contemporary politics of migration, war, and industrialisation in ways that fundamentally problematised the claims of even the most progressive (civic, rather than racial, and universalist, rather than exclusionary) iterations of American nationalism.

By concluding this thesis with a consideration of Attaway's work, our discussion of Black solidarities is re-grounded in the everyday locations of African American life and in the negotiation of national identity amidst rapid national and global change. Attaway's work also continues to revise the geography of Black solidarities during the Depression, engaging as it does with the mythology of Westernness and the history of Mexican migration. The chapter will proceed initially from an assessment of the ideological nuances in Attaway's debut novel – a 'migrant narrative' which engages

[6] Cheryl Higashida has described the post-Second World War articulation of 'nationalist internationalism' in the Black Left, but the 'nationalism' with which she is primarily concerned is Black racial nationalism and not the US nationalism of the Popular Front. See Higashida, pp. 2-3.

[7] See discussions of Attaway in Robert Bone and Richard A. Courage, *The Muse in Bronzeville: African American Creative Expression in Chicago, 1932-1950* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2011); Richard Yarborough, 'William A. Attaway (November 19, 1911-June 17, 1986)', in *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed by Steven C. Tracy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012) 30-52; Mullen, *Popular Fronts*.

with the politics of race, class, and nation through a tale of proletarian life and migration set mainly in Washington State. It will then move to a consideration of Attaway's second novel, reading it as a story whose embeddedness in an industrialised American setting belies the expansiveness and global concerns of its social criticism. Setting the two novels beside one another, the chapter traces links between Attaway's critical multiracial nationalism and a more thoroughgoing assessment of industrial society and American hypocrisy in an international context. In the final part of the chapter the afterlife of Attaway's literature will be considered. The re-presentation of his work as pulp and its adaptation into an unmade film project during the 1950s will illustrate how Popular Front culture was re-integrated into American culture at large and its radical possibilities were muffled, if not altogether muted.

Introducing Attaway

A product of the social realist trend of the 1930s, Attaway constructed his fictions to mirror social life as directly as possible. In telling journalists about his own life, Attaway related tales which also served to indicate that his fictions were closely proximate to his personal reality. Not only a novelist of the Great Migration and of Depression-era hoboing, Attaway was a participant in both. He was also of a younger generation than Hughes, Harrison, and Miller, and was perhaps one of the first Black writers to take up the craft having been inspired by Hughes's poetry.[8]

Attaway was born to a middle-class family in Greenville, Mississippi in 1911, and described his move north to Chicago at the age of five as a 'second and real birth'.[9] Growing up in Chicago, he would have witnessed the racial violence of the Red Summer in 1919, even as his family also became

[8] Stacy I. Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Richard Yarborough, 'William A. Attaway', in *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. by Tracey, p. 31.
[9] Richard Yarborough, 'William A. Attaway', in *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. by Tracey, 30-52 (p. 30); Dan Burley, 'Let Me Breathe Thunder', *New York Amsterdam News*, August 12, 1939, p. 6

members of the city's Black elite.[10] Finding a passion for literature and performance at school in part through his sister Ruth (who later herself became an actress on the stage), Attaway sustained this interest when he enrolled at the University of Illinois in February 1932. Switching from medicine to law to make time for his late-night writing sessions, Attaway also took the opportunity to study Spanish – a skill which failed him when he tried to deploy it while traveling in Mexico.

At various points during the early 1930s Attaway abandoned study to travel the US, Mexico, and Canada. Variously reported as being a consequence of his father's death in 1929, a dispute with a university dean, and a mere whim, Attaway's 'urge to wander' brought him into direct contact with the American labour movement as a participant.[11] Working variously and itinerantly as a cabin boy on a boat to Canada, a stevedore in San Francisco, and an agricultural labourer, he was present on the industrial frontline during one of the most turbulent periods in the history of American labour. After returning to studies, he sustained his affiliation with the labour movement. He made a consequential acquaintance when he attended a meeting featuring a young Richard Wright speaking on trade unionism. Like Attaway, Wright was a Black Chicagoan who had moved from the South and become politically involved with the Left. The two also shared a common aspiration to write. Attaway invited his new friend back to campus to read his story 'Big Boy Leaves Home' for the university's literary society, who were shocked and scandalised by the violence of the piece.[12]

The encounter with Wright was fortunate in helping Attaway connect to Chicago's literary Left, but the obvious similarities between the two writers has helped to obscure the less celebrated Attaway under Wright's substantial shadow. As the dean of New Negro literary radicalism in the 1930s

[10] Attaway's father, a physician, signed a joint public statement with other Black businessmen condemning the violence of 1919. He was a prominent member of the Mississippi Club, an organisation to support Black migrants in Chicago, and joined the prestigious Chicago Business League (Richard Yarborough, 'William A. Attaway', in *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. by Tracey, 30-52 (p. 31).)

[11] Dan Burley, 'Let Me Breathe Thunder', *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 August 1939, p. 6. See also 'Books and Authors', *New York Times*, 25 June 1939, p. BR8; Milton Meltzer, 'William Attaway, Negro Novelist', *Daily Worker*, 26 June 1939, clipping, Attaway Fellowship Application, Nashville, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Rosenwald Fund (RF), box 390 folder 8.

[12] Milton Meltzer, 'William Attaway, Negro Novelist', *Daily Worker*, June 26, 1939, clipping in RF 390:8.

and 1940s, Wright established the paradigm within which the period's literary production has been read. In important respects, however, Attaway played truant from Wright's model.[13] Much of Attaway's early writing bore few obvious marks of his encounter with Wright. At university he worked in the mode of theatre, writing and performing in a one-act play titled *Carnival*, and soon after graduating he published a short story, 'Tale of the Blackamoor', in Dorothy West's *Challenge* – a journal of politically independent literary radicalism. Though concerned with racism, 'Tale of the Blackamoor' had a romantic and mythic quality alien to Wright. More markedly, Attaway's first novel, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, had whites as its protagonists. Attaway wrote *Let Me Breathe Thunder* during a stint living and working in New York as a union organizer and then traveling the country with a theatre company (alongside his sister). Released in the early summer of 1939 to coverage in the liberal, Black, and Leftist press, the book carried obvious influences from another renowned populariser of social realism: John Steinbeck.

Attaway was embedded in the culture of social realism beyond Richard Wright. As a member of the George Cleveland Hall branch of the Chicago Public Library and possibly also the South Side Writers Project, Attaway participated in a milieu populated by radical-minded, Communist sympathising, and FWP-employed artists who collectively incubated a documentarian aesthetic and a commitment to art as a vehicle of social protest. Richard Wright was the celebrity progeny of these circles, but they included many influential voices, such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Frank Marshall Davis, and Arna Bontemps. These multiple affiliations linked Attaway to the Popular Front movement. Chicago also fostered significant academic currents which fed directly into the creative practice of Popular Front artists. Sociologists based at the University of Illinois-Chicago, including Robert Park, Robert Redfield, Louis Wirth, and Horace Cayton, shaped the 'sociological imagination' of Attaway and his colleagues, helping to turn creative production toward sober social critiques centred on rough

[13] On the significance of racial realism in the construction of the African American tradition in literature, see Gene Andrew Jarrett, *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature*, (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2007).

outsiders and vagrants.[14] Attaway's work was a product of all these overlapping influences, not only embodying the principles of the Popular Front but the innovative theories of Chicago School sociologists.

While he has not regularly been considered as such, Attaway was also in some part a writer of the American West. Not only did his first novel clearly respond to the runaway success of Steinbeck's story of proletarian migrants in California, *Of Mice and Men* (published in 1937), he was a passionate admirer of Willa Cather, a seminal turn-of-the-century author of the West.[15] His engagements with the region were not purely literary, either. *Let Me Breathe Thunder* bore the marks of Attaway's own time as an itinerant worker in the West. Attaway's personal stories of train travel echoed some of the most dramatic moments in the book. He claimed, for instance, to have travelled from El Paso, Texas, to Mexico in a refrigerator car and nearly starved due to his limited ability to communicate words like 'sandwich' and 'meat' in Spanish. He also told a story of having travelled over mountains on his way back East during a freeze that rid his fingers of sensation for two years. Both of these incidents worked their way, in altered form, into his first novel.[16] At the same time, these stories worked as promotional exercises. Told to a Leftist journalist, they helped to shore up Attaway's claim to be an authentic and legitimate proletarian writer. Establishing himself as such demonstrated his loyalty to the intellectual project of the Popular Front and his financial interest in garnering a Leftist audience.

Having established himself as an author with *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, Attaway then won institutional support for a new, more ambitious project requiring research on the mill towns in Allegheny Valley, Pennsylvania. He accepted a scholarship from the Rosenwald Fund to support his research and write up the project, which he first conceived as a sociological study but ultimately

[14] Carla Cappetti, *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 1.
[15] Ashley Shrez Odom, 'An Email Interview with Noelle Attaway Kirton', Mississippi Writers and Musicians, 28 April, 2001, < https://www.mswritersandmusicians.com/mississippi-writers/william-alexander-attaway> [accessed 18/12/2017].
[16] Milton Meltzer, 'William Attaway, Negro Novelist', *Daily Worker*, 26 June 1939, clipping, RF 390:8.

turned into a proposal for a more creative endeavour. His proposal for what became *Blood on the Forge* described a 'factual novel', originally intended to cover the years from 1914-19 and describing the fate of African American migrants moving from a rural life in the South into modern industry. He considered the contribution of the novel to be threefold: educational (providing 'students with valuable source ideas that may be fully investigated by scholars'), historical ('a personal approach to the past'), and artistic ('this work will surpass my late book: "Let Me Breathe Thunder"').[17] Released in 1941 and hitched commercially onto the coattails of Wright's blockbuster *Native Son* from the previous year, *Blood on the Forge* did not make a significant splash on bestseller lists. It nevertheless indicated Attaway's maturation as an author and, read alongside his debut, reveals how Attaway's tales grew from stories of New Deal Americana to an expansive folk internationalism.

Let Me Breathe Thunder

In his first outing as a novelist, Attaway used stories of broken homes and unrealised domestic idylls to reflect on the wreckage of the American national myth. His setting of the novel in a landscape of the archetypally monumental and rugged American West, and his use of a direct and rough language, nevertheless integrated this biting social commentary into a narrative that one reviewer called 'a strong, arrogant American story'.[18] Composing this national story, Attaway articulated an expansive set of solidarities across racial borders even while maintaining a critical outlook on the possibility for transcending these divides. Reading *Let Me Breathe Thunder* as Attaway's reflection on a nation in crisis exposes its contradictions as a text committed to interracialism while remaining sceptical of the chances for a successful bridging of racial divides, and one which leans into nationalist tropes even as it reflects on the nation's fundamental failure to provide the kind of life promised by its distinctive mythology.[19] In Attaway's folk tale, American life is illuminated through the perspectives

[17] 'Plan of Work', p. 2, RF 390:8
[18] Barefield Gordon, 'Attaway Writes Stirring Novel of American Scene', clipping in RF 390:8.
[19] For a further detailed commentary on the novel's interracialism, see Battat.

of its victims. These are mobile, racially mixed, and frequently transnational, but they remain fixed in a social commentary that does not escape the bounds of the US. In many of these respects, Attaway's debut novel sustains the structure of cosmopolitan solidarity evident in Hughes's and Miller's earlier intellectual-activism, while retreating from Miller's Communist-Black Nationalist framework and Hughes's unabashed proletarian internationalism.

One of the book's most widely commented-upon aspects was Attaway's decision to write from the perspective of a white character, and to populate the book mainly with whites. Contemporary critics took various attitudes to Attaway's spurning of 'Black' subject matter. Attaway's fellow Black Chicagoan Barefield Gordon praised him for 'let[ting] race propaganda fall where it may'; the *New York Times* reviewer considered it proof that 'it is possible for a Negro to write about whites'; while Ralph Ellison regarded the choice of white protagonists as having diminished the importance of the work. Ellison encouraged Attaway to set himself 'the harder, truly creative task of gearing his prose to Negro theme and emotion.'[20] Even later scholars have been quick to dismiss *Let Me Breathe Thunder* as an early attempt to exploit the market for a 'raceless novel'.[21] Attaway did not discuss the decision to write a novel about whites, but by choosing to write from a white perspective he manifested the kind of interracial understanding whose lack he lamented in the wider nation.

The story fits the mould of a Depression-era 'migrant narrative', while emphasising the interracial communities made possible by experiences of migration.[22] Its narrator is a white American named Ed who travels with his friend Step and a Mexican child called Hi Boy. They get work on the farm of Sampson, in Yakima Valley, Washington. Sampson lives on his idyllic estate with his daughter Anna. Ed and Step take Anna to a party at the house of Step's Black friend, the former prostitute Mag, and her partner, Cooper. At Mag's house, Step rapes Anna, who subsequently becomes infatuated

[20] Barefield Gordon, 'Attaway Writes Stirring Novel of American Scene', clipping in RF 390:8; Stanley Young, 'Tough and Tender', *New York Times*, June 25, 1939, clipping in RF 390:8; Ralph Ellison, 'Recent Negro Fiction, *New Masses*, 5 August 1941, p. 24.
[21] Lawrence P. Jackson, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
[22] Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 229; Battat, p. 11.

with her brutaliser. Soon, though, the two men resolve to leave the farm and intend to let Hi Boy stay there to be cared for by Sampson and Anna. On trying to leave they discover that the town has turned on Cooper (who is accused of having raped Anna) and they hop onto a train with an injured Hi Boy. In the final journey over the mountains Hi Boy becomes increasingly ill until finally he dies. Ed and Step place his body on a train destined for Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The prominence of Mexican and Black characters provides Attaway with ample opportunities – despite his choice of a white American narrator – to display an expansive sense of solidarity across colour and national lines. His interest in the situation of Mexicans is demonstrated repeatedly. At one early point in the novel, the description of a migrant camp full of Mexican people helps to remind Attaway's readers of the conditions which proliferated during the darkest days of the economic breakdown. The characters encounter an elderly woman at the camp, who explains that all the men are working some miles away. She sells them supplies and asks about how Hi Boy came to be with them. The moment bears witness to two social breakages at the heart of the novel: impoverished migrants being forced away from their homeland to live and work in America and families torn apart by monumental social disasters.[23]

Only later in the story are the details of Hi Boy's orphanage revealed. The boy lost his family as they tried to steal to survive their travels in the borderlands. When they were kicked off a freight car, they took to stealing food from railcars. They were found out and arrested by an official while Hi Boy got away. In an empathetic moment, the narrator Ed expresses bewilderment at the racism suffered by the migrants, asking 'why those snakes out that way hate Mexes like that?'[24] Hi Boy's story adds the greater part of the novel's sentimental power, lending not only emotional weight to the action but greater potency to the social commentary. By centring a Mexican orphan's search for a new home in America, Attaway demonstrated a cosmopolitan political sensibility which offered a hard

[23] William Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1939), pp. 45-6
[24] Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, p. 169.

rebuke to exclusionary nationalism and sought to sympathetically represent an ethnic group commonly erased or marginalised in Depression narratives of working-class hardship.[25]

This sensitivity to the struggles of ethnic Mexicans in America was consistent with Attaway's wider commentary on racism, which embedded it in localised contexts and was cognisant of its multiple victims. His multiracial literature was also a literature of protest against 'multiracism', and his setting it in the West helped to establish the contrast with the Black-white binary of the South.[26] In one conversation, the elderly Cooper explains how racism is articulated differently across the nation: 'All along from Texas through New Mexico they hate Mexes worse'n a snake; down in lower California they get mad like dogs if you mentions Japs; I ain't never been far east, but they say out there everybody hates everybody else.'[27] Attaway understood racism as a mutable reality, one which impacted numerous social groups in America and left no part of the nation untouched. Pivoting the story toward a lynching in the final part of the novel, he nevertheless expressed this truth primarily as it related to African Americans.

As an author of transracial solidarity, Attaway permitted moments of hopeful fraternity among differently racialised characters, even while, as a sharp and somewhat pessimistic critic of American racial capitalism, he insisted on ultimately foregrounding the tragic persistence of racial violence.[28] One moment in the text especially encapsulates this balance of hopefulness and pessimism. When the three traveling companions (Ed, Step, and Hi Boy) manage to travel in the dining carriage of a train, Ed is struck by the whiteness of the carriage's interior and of the other passengers in it. The feeling recalls for him an experience in Detroit, where Ed had seen 'a very black boy' walk

[25] For instance, Steinbeck's novel of agricultural strikes, *In Dubious Battle*, engaged in a wholesale whitewashing of the struggles of mostly Mexican, Filipino, and other workers of colour.
[26] Singh, p. 20. See also Battat, pp. 33-4.
[27] Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, p. 115.
[28] Bruce Wierick, a tutor of Attaway's at university and a referee for his application to the Rosenwald Fund, described him as 'a kind of Negro Hamlet, shrouded in melancholy, and feeling more than I liked to see the oppression of color discrimination'. See Bruce Wierick, 'Confidential Report on Candidate for Fellowship', RF 390:8 and Shana Alexssandra Russell, 'Domestic Workers, Sex Workers, and the Movement: Reimagining Black Working-Class Resistance in the Work of William Attaway, Richard Wright, and Alice Childress, 1935-1960' (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2015), p. 56.

into a restaurant and the waiter refuse to serve him. Recalling the incident, Ed looks down to examine the colour of his hands, reassuring himself of his whiteness.[29] In this way, Attaway figures class snobbery as a modality of racial oppression.[30] In doing so, he clearly gestures toward a possible community of interest among white proletarians and Jim Crowed African Americans, even as he also recognises the power of white identity as a method for stratifying and dividing the working class.

A second incident highlights some of the gendered politics of Popular Front interracialism and the salience of the railcar as a space of cross-racial bonding in Attaway's writing. Taking place in a 'reefer' (refrigerator car) rather than a dining carriage, the scene sees Ed, Step and Hi Boy encounter another interracial group of travelling workers. An anonymous Black member of the other group identifies the appeal of the road – for him, the road out of the South – with an escape from entrenched racial attitudes and taboos. As evidence for the liberating potential of the road, the Black vagrant tells a story about having had sex with 'a yeller-haired girl' while riding the rails into Chicago. She had consented to sex for money with several of the travellers and did not discriminate when the Black man made the same demand. The man reflects approvingly, 'Black or white, it's all the same on the road.'[31]

Of course, the man's story exemplifies the significance of the South as a place of oppression and danger for African Americans, but it also genders the freedom achieved through escape, and masculinises the liberated space of the railroad. As much as a flight from the racial oppression of Jim Crow, what the man describes is an evasion of the burdens of domestic labour in favour of a masculine freedom which is cross-racial. It is also noteworthy that this transracial freedom is expressed not through political struggle but in a commodified sexual encounter of the kind which was so integral to the celebrated male experience of migration. In this railroad space, male power is intact but racial

[29] Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, p. 25.
[30] Stuart Hall, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 386.
[31] Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, p. 58.

inequality and the sexual taboos which help to enforce it are defied to the delight of the Black male migrant.

The sense of interracial possibility and Black male sexual freedom is, in the final portion of the novel, brutally dispelled with the emergence of white mob violence and the ruthless policing of Black sexuality. Cooper, the aged partner of Mag and primary victim of the racist violence, had earlier commented that in Yakima, Washington, 'they just as ready to run white out of town as well as black.'[32] The comment is given a darkly ironic inversion when, as Ed and Step prepare to leave town, Cooper is accused of having raped Anna, who is waiting at the house he shares with Mag to say goodbye to Step – the actual rapist. As a white mob gathers ready to lynch Cooper, Ed is momentarily tempted to join the murderous rabble: 'there was a glorious feeling of being strong as God Almighty in the very air… of having a thousand hands and feet.'[33] The lynching incident and Ed's passing inclination to participate in it appears to foreclose the previous hopefulness about Washington as a place isolated from the hateful racial politics of the rest of America and Ed as a white man relatively innocent of such violence.

The end-of-innocence theme of *Let Me Breathe Thunder* is disclosed in part through an ample use of Biblical imagery: Attaway's story is abundant with Edenic apples and Satanic snakes. Grounding a novel of social protest in Biblical allegory appears as a disconcertingly conservative aesthetic choice for a radical author such as Attaway, reflecting the ideological complexity of the cultural movement he emerged from. Alongside the levels of Biblical allegory, an Indigenous myth occupies a central place in the symbolic economy of the novel, even deriving the title of the book. Attending to this myth helps to reveal the contradictions of Attaway's racial politics. Turning, with many of his contemporaries, to white itinerants as the source of an authentic voice for a traumatised nation, Attaway revealed the truth of their tragedy through an indigenous folk culture.[34]

[32] Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, p. 114.
[33] Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, p. 212.
[34] See Retman, p. 12.

In a conversation between the farmer Sampson and the itinerant Ed, Sampson tells Ed a story explaining the origin of Mount Rainier. In Attaway's rendering of Native lore, the mountain was a god, who created the world and on completion found himself a destructive, wandering force outside of its pattern. He finally settled in place as a mountain and his groans of distress now appear as thunder. Sampson explains that Ed and Step are 'relatives of that poor god', members of a generation jerked outside of the social pattern by the Depression just as the generation before them experienced a formative trauma with the First World War. Having had their lives disrupted 'they can't hold down a steady job, they can't get back into the pattern.'[35]

The story of the Indigenous god foregrounds a premodern folk culture as social criticism and legitimates its power as an illuminating myth. The critique which the mythos shrouds is nevertheless founded on typically modern ways of knowing. Attaway's story is more suggestive of engagement with the work of Chicago sociologist Robert Park than it is of a political advocacy for Indigenous peoples. In his 1928 essay 'Human Migration and the Marginal Man', Park proposed the existence of a social-psychological human type, the 'marginal man', who is 'a lone and alienated […] individual who actively and consciously chooses homelessness, exile, and society over intimacy, harmony, and community.'[36] This combination of the folk culture of the colonised with the commentary of modern social science is reflected in Attaway's decision to ventriloquise the Native American tale through the conscientious white farmer, whose amateur anthropology is depicted without commentary or reflection on the forced removal of Indigenous people from the Washington valley where his idyllic farm flourishes.

There are equivalent tensions in Attaway's writing of folk authenticity as it relates to Hi Boy, who figures as a symbol of prelapsarian innocence, of musicality and idealism. An infantile presence not only because of his youth but because of his very limited English vocabulary and the Othering effect of his Spanish utterances, Hi Boy's tense relation with the masculine Step also serves to feminise

[35] Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, p. 158.
[36] Robert E. Park, 'Human Migration and the Marginal Man', *American Journal of Sociology*, 33:6 (1928), 881-893; Cappetti, p. 61.

him. When sharing a railcar with other travellers, a comment that Hi Boy 'looks sort of like a girl' provokes Step's anger.[37] In a later scene, Step refuses to allow Hi Boy to handle a gun because he might 'start bawling' and Hi Boy defends his hurt pride by stabbing his own hand with a fork. It is this wound which eventually becomes infected and leads to Hi Boy's death.[38] The feminisation of Mexico and Mexicans was typical of American representations, serving to render the southern neighbour a nation 'easily dominated by the artistic or economic forces of the North'.[39] Further to this, Attaway attributes qualities of musicality and idealism to Hi Boy which reinforce the positioning of Mexicans as folkish primitives. The tragic gap between Hi Boy and his white American companions is highlighted when the sight of beautiful mountains induces Hi Boy to give a 'soft and mystical' look, as if 'far away at some place that must have been so simple and beautiful that only a child's mind could go there'.[40] The two men are hurt by their inability to access this mystical and naïve world. While protesting the American failure to give a home and a life to Hi Boy, Attaway himself continued to labour in a representational mode which fixed Mexican characters inside a structure of racialised clichés.

The tangled relationship between Attaway and Americanness in *Let Me Breathe Thunder* was therefore itself bound up with a complex politics around race and modernity. Attaway validated folk cultures as ways of understanding the modern world even as he, in turn, constructed folk culture in line with modernist and Western modes, relying on Chicago School sociology, leaning into nationalist clichés, and generously employing Biblical imagery. *Let Me Breathe Thunder* expressed elements of continuity with what in the previous chapter was described as an Afro-cosmopolitan Marxism, articulating an expansive sense of solidarity with racialised subjects and presenting fundamental critiques of the class and racial – though, in its unapologetic masculinism, not the gendered – structures of US capitalism. Centring white male proletarians as its protagonists, the novel gestured

[37] Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, p. 60.
[38] Note the Christian significance of the fork as a symbol of evil. Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, p. 70.
[39] James Oles, 'South of the Border: American Artists in Mexico, 1914-1947', in *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914-1947*, ed. by James Oles (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), p. 49.
[40] Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, pp. 27-8.

toward the possibilities for interracial solidarity that appeared to be opening up at the moment of its publication, with the rise of industrial unionism. Ultimately, however, Attaway withdrew from any such optimistic reading of American race relations. Doing so, he ostensibly asserted, even if critically, the power and agency of his white, male, and American characters over their feminised and non-American victims.

In this regard, however, the ending of the novel opens an alternative possible reading. After Hi Boy's death, Step and Ed put his body on a train bound for Albuquerque, New Mexico. 'He's going back almost to where he came from', Ed remarks, having recalled earlier in the story that they had first met him in Las Cruces.[41] Hi Boy, the innocent whose death resulted from a wound from a satanic fork, is thereby symbolically bound to 'the crosses', a connection emphasised by Attaway: 'with thoughts of the kid would come the name of the town, Las Cruces'.[42] Attaway's Biblical imagery suggests the possibility of a revitalisation and redemption, for Hi Boy as symbol of human innocence and of romantic primitivism; for Ed and Step as men who were physically and psychologically unmoored by the Depression; and for America as a nation which has failed to deliver its on foundational commitments. The source of this future redemption is not in America's heartland, however, nor in a change of mind from its core citizenry – it is instead generated from the Mexican borderland. Ambivalence is the tone in which Attaway ultimately addresses the connection between the American future and the folk cultures at its edge. As a transnational folk figure, Hi Boy is both condemned in American society and the source of its future regeneration.

These themes continued to play out in Attaway's second novel but in a way that pivoted more clearly toward international concerns. Numerous elements of *Let Me Breathe Thunder* – both fundamental and superficial – were sustained or developed in *Blood on the Forge*. The interest in music and musicality as features of the folk, the breakup of established domestic ties, and the

[41] Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, p. 265.
[42] Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, pp. 169, 172.

sociology of migration are among the themes uniting the two projects, but even in naming the primary woman character Anna, Attaway invited intertextual reading. Pairing his two novels enables us to map the continuities between his commentary on the broken American nation and his broader, international and civilisational, critiques.

Blood on the Forge

With *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, Attaway entered Popular Front culture with a 'migrant narrative' of a kind with those of Steinbeck and Woody Guthrie, but with *Blood on the Forge* he composed a 'proletarian social novel': that is, a work of realism which focuses on numerous protagonists whose interconnectedness is emphasised, and which centres around a key moment of class-struggle confrontation.[43] Despite their formal variations, *Blood on the Forge* has most often been compared with Wright's *Native Son*. Attaway had the mixed fortune of releasing his more mature second work in the aftermath of Wright's sensational success, inviting obvious but not especially flattering comparisons with Wright's novel of fugitivity. My reading instead prioritises the biographical and world-historical context of *Blood on the Forge*, its development from *Let Me Breathe Thunder* and its responsiveness to the onset of global war. The transition from *Let Me Breathe Thunder* to *Blood on the Forge* signalled a shift in Attaway's treatment of his key concerns – the relation between class and race, the status and significance of America, the impact of migration on domestic relations and masculinities – a process which at the same time involved a turn toward global and civilisational questions.

A novel of the Great Migration and set in 1919, the story of *Blood on the Forge* primarily focuses on intra-national but, to a lesser degree, also intra- and inter-continental travel. Its central characters are three brothers – Big Mat, Melody, and Chinatown – who are compelled by Mat's brutal retaliation against an abusive white boss to escape their lives as Kentucky sharecroppers. They arrive

[43] Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 362.

in a mill town in Allegheny Valley, Pennsylvania, and take up jobs at the steel works. As industrial tension builds in the town, the brothers adjust to life there: Mat abandons his religion and his marriage to live with a Mexican girl named Anna, Melody's guitar music changes, and all three indulge in vices associated with urban life. A series of cataclysms mark a decisive break from their rural past: Chinatown loses his sight in a massive mill explosion, Melody's blues music withers in the heat and the pace of industrial life, and Mat dies after inflicting terrible violence on Anna and his striking white colleagues.[44]

Understanding the novel's responsiveness to international developments, however, is best achieved when reading backwards from its ominous, 'unmistakeably elegiac' conclusion.[45] In the final scene, Melody and the blinded Chinatown ride a train out of the mill town. They are joined by a blind soldier returning from the First World War, who strikes up a conversation and explains that he was a steel man before he went to war. The man asks Chinatown to listen for a sound 'like a big drum somewhere in the valley'. A manifestation of the trauma of industrial warfare, it 'was real to the soldier' but its only actual presence is in 'the rumble of the train'. For the soldier and, soon enough, Chinatown, it nevertheless appears as more meaningful and pervasive than this repetitious drone. The sound is of 'cannon guns, bigger 'n a smokestack'. Melody looks on at the pair 'listening for sounds that didn't exist' and recognises in this mirrored image the death of his own sibling relationship: 'they were twins.'[46]

The moment is effective as both a summation of the novel's established concerns and as a dramatic *volta* which reframes the preceding action. It achieves these effects in three ways. First, it makes visible (and audible) the massive social trauma of the World War previously hidden in the narrative. It invites consideration of the way that the events described in the novel should be understood as part of wider, international social transformations. Second, it helps to elevate the

[44] William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge* (New York: New York Review Books, 2005).
[45] Bone and Courage, p. 200.
[46] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, pp. 236-7.

criticism of industrialism and the destruction of folk culture to a profounder civilisational level. Insofar as a new social bond is made from this painful process, it appears merely as pathetic and tragicomic. Finally, it eerily recalls the return to global, industrial conflict ongoing during the period of the book's authorship and publication; a conflict which served to further highlight the international dimensions of Black oppression.[47] Instead of foregrounding the heroic and masculinizing aspects of war, Attaway emphasises its impact in terms of physical disablement and psychological regression. Altogether, the close of the novel appears to falsify any reductive reading of *Blood on the Forge* which prioritises its commentary on American race/class relations over Attaway's other concerns.

Despite the brutal racial violence of Kentucky, Attaway ensures the contrast with the North is not a favourable one. Kentucky appears not only as the land of Jim Crow and the poverty of sharecropping but as a place of homely comforts and familial intimacy. The trio encounter the North, meanwhile, as 'an ugly, smoking hell', 'full of hatreds they did not understand'.[48] Among their first human acquaintances is 'a fat-cheeked black girl' whose heavy perfume fails to cover the stink of a rot in her breast.[49] Her appearance signals the town as a place of un-Christian iniquity and physical decrepitude. The transition from rural South to industrial North is also rendered lyrically by Attaway, who interposes passages of vernacular commentary (temporarily adopting a first-person plural voice) into the narrative. This collective Black voice is given individual expression by several key characters, in a way that carries forward Attaway's concern for the survival of folk culture in industrial society.

Among the key voices in Attaway's folk chorus is Melody, whose name signals the aspect of folk culture with which the character is most concerned. A musician who played blues guitar idly but ably in the South, the move North rapidly affects his ability to make the music of his home. Initially he simply feels compelled to make music of a different tempo, 'a strange kind of playing for him, but it was right for that new place.'[50] Later, however, he appears to intentionally smash his hand in despair,

[47] Singh, p. 103.
[48] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, pp. 45, 49.
[49] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 49.
[50] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 62.

'knowing that [the guitar] could never plunk away the craving that was in him.'[51] Finally, in leaving the mill town he abandons his guitar.[52]

The slow destruction of Melody's blues music expresses a change in his mode of life and in his affective world. Attaway was interested in these processes not only as they affected African American life in the Great Migration era, but as constitutive experiences of industrial modernity. His multi-sided perspective on the process of migration and acculturation is made clear in his characterisation of the Mexican girl Anna. She is introduced to the reader as an adolescent prostitute residing with her exploitative aunt in 'Mextown'. Her first encounter with the Moss brothers is with Melody, who does not have sex with the girl but does fall in love with her. Later, in another intimate moment with the brother of her lover, Anna describes her life in some detail. Before moving to the US, where she had first settled in Vaughan, New Mexico, Anna had lived in rural Mexico in peonage akin to that of American sharecroppers. She had refused to marry a poor man 'who has no house and watches the neighbor's goats', desiring instead to marry for wealth.[53]

Anna's story is one of primitive innocence corrupted by modern consumerist lures and migrant dreams of America betrayed by its inequitable reality. It emerges from the special context of American cultural proximity to Mexico, and the economic-political significance of its northern neighbour, which was especially pronounced during the years of Porfirio Díaz's clientelist dictatorship, ending with the revolutionary outbreak of 1911. Anna had grown up shoeless (presumably in the later years of Díaz's rule) but had noted with jealousy how American women who passed by in cars and took photographs of the farm wore high-heeled shoes. Her encounters with these privileged tourists shaped her aspiration to become 'like the *Americanos*', epitomised for her by possession of 'high-heel shoes with bright stones in the heels'. Invited north by her aunt who promised that she would earn enough to be 'the finest woman in Mexico City', the reality Anna entered in the US was one where she

[51] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 127.
[52] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 234.
[53] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 73.

continued to 'look like the peon, only there are no goats'. When she partnered with Big Mat, she expected that she would have a house, high heels, and would 'learn to speak good'.[54] The reality, of course, was quite different. The climax of the narrative sees Anna provoke Mat into a vicious violent outburst by ridiculing him as a 'black peon' and contrasting his living conditions with the luxury of a real '*Americano*'.[55] In Mat's mind, peon translated from the Mexican to American context as 'like "nigger"', and this sense of emasculating, un-American class/race subordination drives him to the tragic, sanguinary strike-busting rampage that ends in his death.

With the remixed Anna character, the end-of-innocence theme of *Let Me Breathe Thunder* is rid of its Biblical allusion and instead is more solidly grounded in the sociological imagination. In Attaway's debut, innocence is personified in the virginal Anna and the mystical Hi Boy. In *Blood on the Forge*, these two stories are wound together and revised to make a more coherent social commentary. The purity of the white virgin is lost but her vulnerability to the violence of rough, masculine migrants is sustained, and this is combined with Anna's own tragic story of migration into America. Anna's innocence is therefore already largely lost at the start of *Blood on the Forge*, her acquisitive personality having been formed under the influence of American culture even in rural Mexico, and her virginal purity having been stolen by her exploitative aunt. This version of a spiritual descent figures the social transformations attendant on urban, industrial capitalism – transformations founded on migration – as moves from a preindustrial innocence to an industrialised iniquity.

Another voice of the folk, a disabled Black mill worker named Smothers, delivers a prophesy of reckoning for modern industrialism. Dismissed as 'off his nut' by colleagues, the first appearance of Smothers' own voice occurs in the dark of the workers' lodgings, telling his companions that 'the ground got feelin'' and the steel being torn out of it 'want to git you'.[56] He insists that the economy of the mill town is founded on transgression: 'it's a sin to melt up the ground'.[57] Constantly dismissed

[54] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, pp. 114-115.
[55] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 223.
[56] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 53.
[57] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, pp. 122, 150.

and demeaned by his colleagues, Smothers warns that they ought to 'listen when I say what's in me to say'.[58] His prophecy finally comes true with the industrial accident that rids Chinatown of his sight. Smothers had compared the mill stacks to 'big guns', ready to 'do a fella in' as revenge for the ravaged earth, and when a massive explosion kills Smothers and thirteen other men it appears that revenge has been had. Like the tale of the unhappy god in *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, here the mystical perspective of the folk is used to illuminate the tragic drama of the novel, legitimating alternative ways of knowing the world even if the apparent agency of the earth remains basically unbelievable.[59]

Though these folk traditions are not necessarily respected by many of the workers, Attaway represents the town as the scene of numerous, overlapping diaspora groups, each with similar vestiges from their pre-industrial heritage. For Melody, music becomes a way to relate to other ethnic groups. When he first met Anna, she asked him to play Mexican tunes on his guitar and, fresh from the South, he struggled to do so.[60] Later, he recognises commonality between his own blues songs and the folk music of the ethnic Ukrainians in the town: transcending language differences, the melodic 'wailing' of the Ukrainians was 'the same tongue' as that of 'the sloping red-hill country in Kentucky'.[61] The Ukrainians appear to have immigrated from conditions similar to those of the Black migrants at the heart of the narrative and the Mexicans who occupy an off-centre position. In the scene of Mat's attack on a group of striking workers, which ends with his death, Attaway mounts his most direct authorial intervention to derive a political lesson from the story. In doing so, he explains that a Slavic striker attacked by Mat 'had never been in the South. He was from across the Sea. His village was in the Ukraine, nestling the Carpathian mountains.' Attaway considers the man innocent of American racism and his murder by Mat appears as a pathetic, misdirected revenge for Mat's experience of Jim

[58] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 102.
[59] The ecological ethic in *Blood on the Forge* is the topic of a piece by John Claborn, who understands the 'action' of the earth in terms of 'affect', as posited by Brian Massumi. See John Claborn, 'From Black Marxism to Industrial Ecosystem: Racial and Ecological Crisis in William Attaway's Blood on the Forge', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 55:3 (2009), 566-595.
[60] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 72.
[61] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 98.

Crow.[62] The moment is even more tragic given the progress Big Mat previously made in building a cross-ethnic identification; he had been fondly nicknamed Black Irish by his Irish colleagues due to his ox-like strength. 'Lots of black fellas have got Irish guts', one of them remarked.[63] The Pennsylvania town is therefore not only used to explore interracial dynamics but to reflect on the global dimensions – spanning Mexico, Kentucky, and Ukraine – of the migratory pattern (from rural peonage to urban wage-work) accessed through the Moss brothers.

What might be called a global vision of folk cultures can be glimpsed in *Blood on the Forge*. Characterised by slow-paced rurality, intimate familial bonds, a common musical sense, and a sincere connection to the land, the folk appears both as a source of cultural authenticity and as a common ground on which various ethnic and racial groups might meet. Attaway's vision shares much with Paul Robeson's later articulation of 'the common people' as the force determining the character of a nation, but also the source of international fraternity: 'the common people of all nations are truly brothers in a great family of mankind'. Like Attaway, Robeson's understanding of a folk internationalism was especially grounded in a knowledge of musical cultures.[64] While Attaway's folk stories evidently participated in the envisioning of a multiracial America, they also overgrew national borders through the recognition of global class, cultural, and civilisational dynamics which impeded cross-racial harmony.

Having sketched an outline of this global folk, the final image of the novel – of a disabled Chinatown mirroring a similarly disabled soldier returned from the First World War – returns us to Attaway's civilisational critique. The two men literally embody the toll taken by the processes of urbanisation, industrialisation, and violent social-political conflict. Having grounded his vision of

[62] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 231.
[63] Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, p. 92.
[64] Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958) p. 48. Robeson has elsewhere been described as an advocate of a 'folk internationalism' that transcended 'the inherited fixity between folk culture and a single, irreducibly conceived national-ethnic identity'. See Bill Schwarz, 'Black Metropolis, White England', in *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, ed. by Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 185.

interracialism in shared folk cultures, Attaway claims that entry into modern industrial capitalism severs the connection between a people and its past, even as migrants such as Big Mat struggle to move on psychologically and politically from their formative environment. What, if any, new possibilities emerge in industrial society from this wreckage is not apparent.[65] In place of the authentic fraternity witnessed while the Moss brothers lived on the Kentucky farm, we are presented with a grotesque substitute – a fraternal bond woven from shared physical and mental traumas.

'Cry Violence'

Blood on the Forge struggled to make a commercial impact and, just four months after its publication, the nation was launched into a new war by Japanese attacks on American territory. Despite the ominous and critical perspective on industrial warfare presented in the novel, Attaway signed up to serve in the summer of 1942. When he returned from the conflict, Attaway abandoned his career as a creatively independent author, publishing a single short story in 1947 which was a swan song to this kind of writing.[66] 'Death of a Rag Doll' was a meditation on art and family, focusing on a troubled period in the relationship between an outcast, maligned boy and his soon-to-be-wed older sister. Attaway's own relationship with his actress sister Ruth appears to be a key context for the story, which drew on his personal experience as a rebellious schoolboy who came to be guided by his older sibling.[67] The story aligned with a transformed cultural scene in postwar America. Published in the first issue of *The Tiger's Eye*, this 'little magazine' edited by Ruth and John Stephan embodied the new spirit of American art in the postwar era as effectively as 'little magazines' such as *Challenge* had in the 1930s. The Stepan spouses established *The Tiger's Eye* as a journal for the artistic avant-garde, bringing to it an attitude that prioritised the creation of art over the articulation of criticism: 'art can

[65] It is perhaps worth noting, though, that Attaway considered writing a sequel to the book detailing 'the wreckage of a people drifting into Pittsburgh, settling the "bottoms" of that town. Also, the social problem they present at present'. Any more detailed plan for this work has been lost. 'Plan of Work', p. 2, RF 390:8.
[66] William Attaway, 'Death of a Rag Doll', *The Tiger's Eye*, New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Tiger's Eye Records, Manuscripts, Box 30, Issue 1.
[67] Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time*, p. 283.

speak for itself better than anyone can speak for it'. *The Tiger's Eye* gained a reputation for pioneering abstract expressionism, a genre which was tied to a nationalist and anti-Communist cultural politics.[68]

Attaway's positioning in the changing political landscape of the 1940s was not so straightforward as 'Death of a Rag Doll' might indicate, however. As the Communist Party lost the favour it had enjoyed among the professional classes and became vulnerable to attacks from the conservative Right – beginning especially as early as 1939, when it compromised its anti-fascist positioning by defending the USSR and its peace treaty with Hitler's Germany – the energies of its Popular Front politics were sustained in more mainstream institutions of American life.[69] The anti-Communist backlash had initially been organised at the federal level around an early incarnation of HUAC, established in 1938 under the chairmanship of Texas Democrat Martin Dies. With Dies at its head the committee sought to delegitimise the New Deal by associating it with an 'un-American' radicalism.[70] This domestic anti-Communism subsided with the wartime alliance against fascism, though the ideological overlap with racial nationalism was evident when the Committee helped fuel the racist claims which justified Japanese American internment in a so-called 'Yellow Report'.[71] Postwar, as US-Soviet relations frosted over, a new impetus was given to racialised anti-Communism. In defiance of these shifting moods, Attaway continued to support Communists by transporting Party members forced into the underground during the Second Red Scare and participating in CP-led cultural meetings.[72] Attaway's postwar life demonstrated his political and professional adaptability, but unlike

[68] Muriel Schienman, *A Guide to Art at the University of Illinois: Urbana-Champaign, Robert Allerton Park, and Chicago* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), p. 164; Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2011), p. 304. For more on *The Tiger's Eye*, see Pamela Franks, *The Tiger's Eye: The Art of a Magazine* (New Haven and London: Yale University Art Gallery, 2002).
[69] See Mullen, *Popular Fronts*.
[70] Albert Alexander, 'The President and the Investigator: Roosevelt and Dies', *The Antioch Review*, 15:1 (Spring, 1955), 106-117; Gerstle, p. 159.
[71] Dillon S. Myer, *Uprooted Americans: The Japanese Americans and the War Relocation Authority during World War II* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1971) p. 18.
[72] Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time*, p. 283; Alan Wald, *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) p. 65.

many 1930s Leftists (including, most famously, his old friend Richard Wright), he did not undergo a chameleonic transformation.

Attaway's peculiar process of adaptation to the new cultural context was part of a broader process by which Popular Front culture entered the American mainstream. This effected what Michael Denning has called a labouring of American culture, describing the ways that stories of, by, and about working people became central to national life. The culture of the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organisations), in Denning's telling, expressed a new structure of feeling and gave rise to new aesthetic forms. Just as the 'post-war settlement marked the failure […] of a laborist social democracy', however, so the progressive cultural output of the Popular Front was redressed in the clothing of a more conservative nationalism in the postwar years. The afterlives of Attaway's projects help to illuminate the ways that his visions of racial diversity, critiquing American society while reaching toward a radical, global perspective, were ideologically tamed.

The first revival of Attaway's fiction came in 1952, with the decision of Lion Books to republish *Let Me Breathe Thunder* as a cheap paperback under the telling new name *Tough Kid*. A year later, *Blood on the Forge* was given the same treatment by the Popular Library. According to Paula Rabinowitz, it was by 'pulping' that 'Americans became modern'. Rabinowitz sees in this mid-twentieth-century process 'a democratizing literacy' which allowed for the sharing of 'new visions of the American landscape and its inhabitants.' The example of Attaway nevertheless compels readers of mid-century pulp to locate this 'democratizing literacy' in the context of the narrowing political freedom of the McCarthyite Red Scare. This reveals not only a democratic redistribution of Black protest novels but a commodifying and ideologically loaded 'remediation' of Attaway's messages.[73] The effect was not only to widen Attaway's audience, therefore, but to obscure his radical politics.

[73] Paula Rabinowitz, *American Pulp: How Paperbacks Brought Modernism to Main Street* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 27, 23.

A closer look at the *Tough Kid* release helps to illustrate this point. The name change indicates already a turn away from Attaway's artistic ambition and the lyric strain in his work, but it was in the cover illustrations that the marketing imperative most clearly trumped the ethos of the text. On its

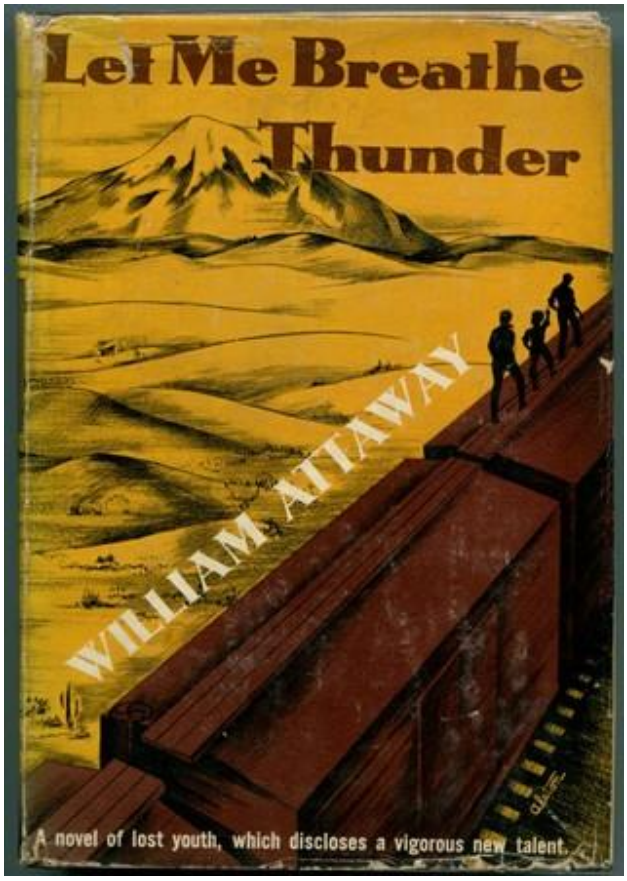

Figure 6 The first edition of Attaway's *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, published by Doubleday and Doran in 1939.

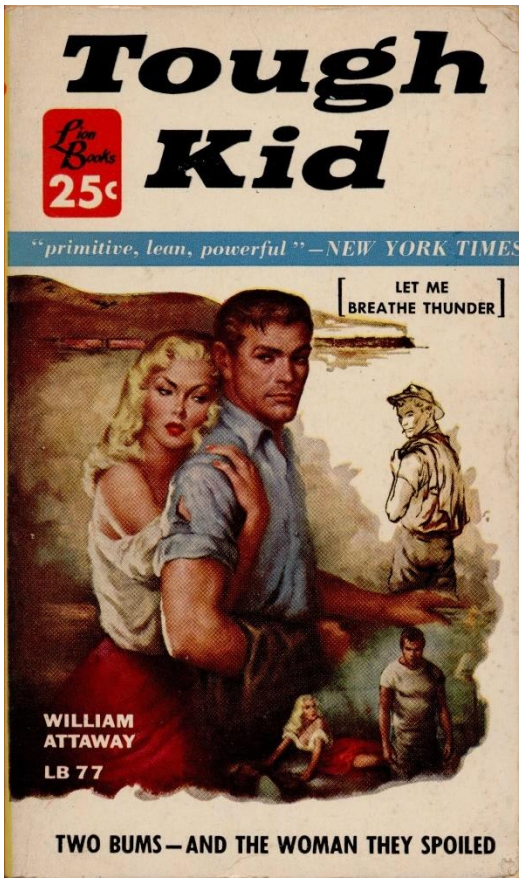

Figure 7 The cover for the 1952 Lion Books edition of *Tough Kid*.

1939 Doubleday release (see Figure 6), *Let Me Breathe Thunder* had been presented with a cover that foregrounded the Western landscape and the railway, and advertised Attaway as 'a vigorous new talent'. Lion Books's *Tough Kid* release (see Figure 7) instead dwelled on the sexual relationship between Anna and Step. Both characters were drawn as gendered and racialised archetypes (the seductive blonde, the rugged and handsome white farmworker) rather than as individual personalities. This marketing strategy affected the scale and direction of the book's distribution, bringing Attaway's voice 'into white (and black) bedrooms', but it also shifted the way that the story was read.[74]

[74] Rabinowitz, *American Pulp*, p. 37.

The same process was undertaken with *Blood on the Forge*. The novel had originally been released as part of Doubleday Doran's 'important fiction' and was covered with a drawing of Big Mat alongside other workers set against an industrial backdrop (see Figure 8). When it was pulped, the cover instead made Anna the most prominent character, depicting her as racially ambiguous and more adult than Attaway indicated in the text (see Figure 9). Behind her lurked a lustful, guitar-plucking Melody. The back cover (see Figure 10) similarly emphasised the novel's sexual content, with another portrait of Anna paired this time with Big Mat. Psychologically complex Black male protagonists were demoted to competitors for the attention of a highly sexualised woman, and no sense was given that the plot centred as much around an industrial struggle as romantic entanglements. In these cases, to pulp a work of literary fiction was to whiten the cast of characters, sexualise the women (or, indeed, adolescent girls), and attempt to mute the politicised commentary.[75]

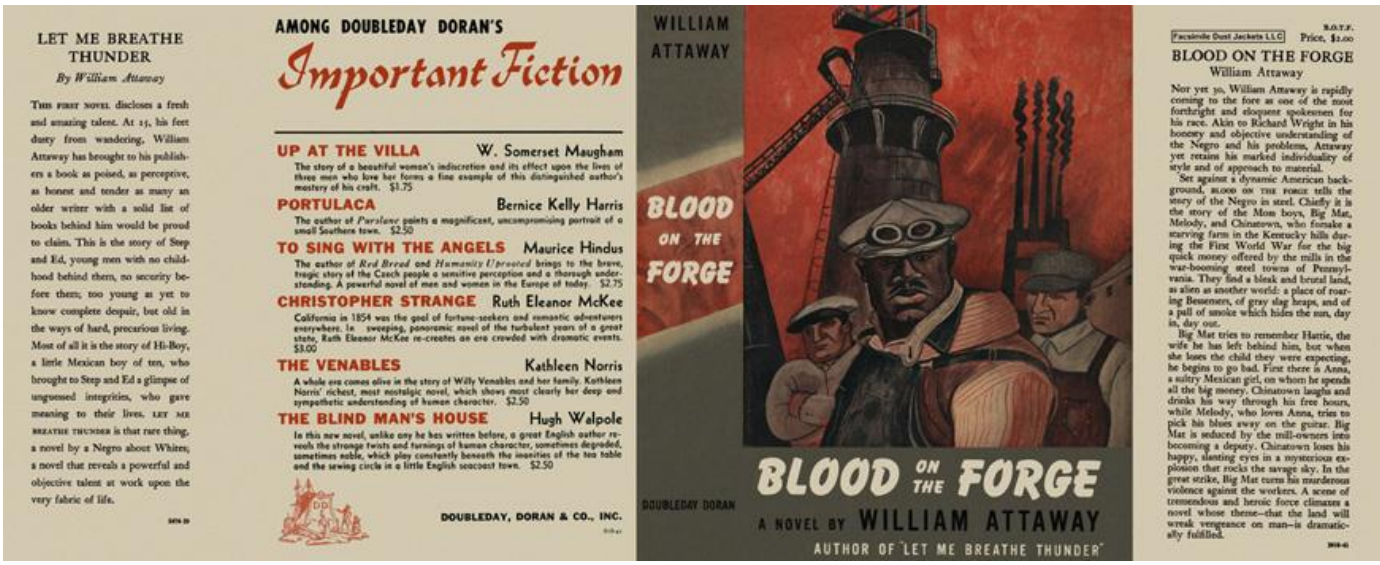

Figure 8 The jacket for the first edition of Blood on the Forge, published in 1941 by Doubleday and Doran.

The rebranding of *Let Me Breathe Thunder* as *Tough Kid* was also achieved by simple editorial invention. The book's frontmatter included an 'extract' describing Step's relationship with Anna as one in which a young woman falls in love with a restless and dangerous man, who appeared to lash out against her obsessive adoration by shooting her in the head. The headline of the page read 'it was

[75] William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, (New York: Popular Library, 1953); William Attaway, *Tough Kid*, (New York: Lion Books, 1952).

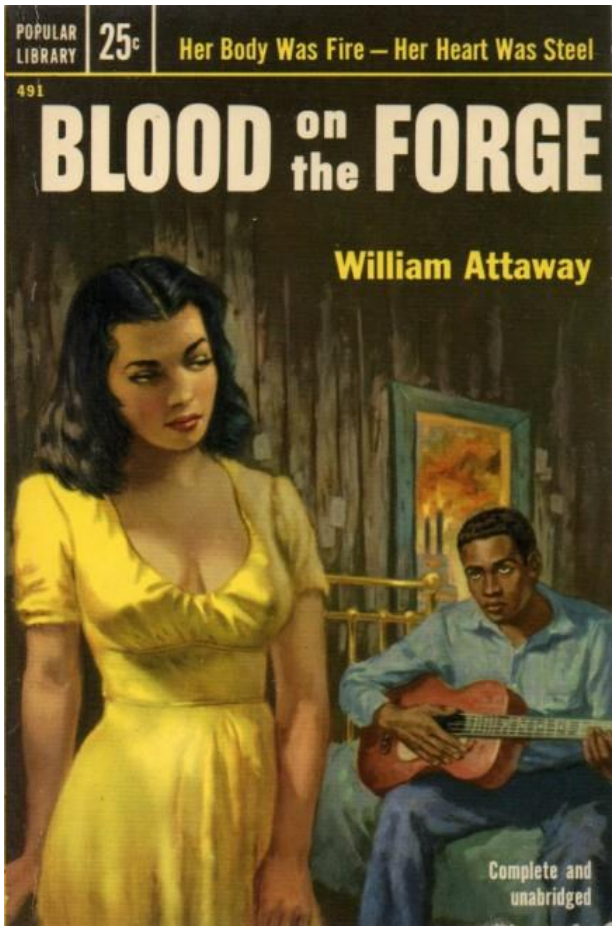

Figure 9 The cover art for the 1953 Popular Library edition of *Blood on the Forge*.

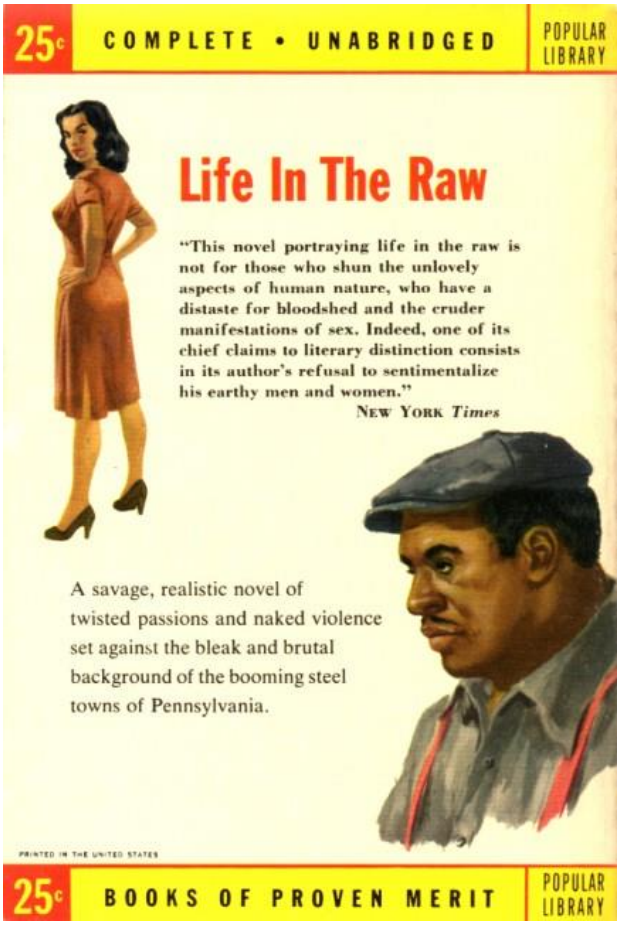

Figure 10 The back cover of the 1953 Popular Library edition of *Blood on the Forge*.

assault, maybe murder – and Anna had it coming…' In place of Attaway's examination of white masculinity in a context of economic desperation and migration, the publishers presented the story as one of sensational sex and violence, and fabricated an important plot point.[76] This manoeuvre hitched Attaway's work to a reactionary gender politics and a conservative view of American nationhood. Yet these distortions also based themselves on the real limitations of Attaway's artistic practice, which – as discussed above – combined gestures toward radical protest and internationalist perspectives with an uncritical reproduction of tropes of American life, particularly in his representation of women and Mexicans. The pulp revision of Attaway's work responds in part, then, to the ideological tensions of the texts themselves and the cultural movement that helped give shape to them. In this respect, it is instructive that the actual text of the novel was reproduced faithfully.

[76] Attaway, *Tough Kid*, frontmatter.

Pulping involved an exaggeration of the most problematic aspects of Attaway's work and an attempt to disguise his radical politics, but it did not demand a violation of the integrity of his story. The status of the book – as a commodity being re-circulated in a context of circumscribed political freedom – demanded that its ideological content be manipulated, but its primary use-value continued to reside in the undisturbed story as Attaway told it.

This integral core was sacrificed, however, when it came to adapting the book for another medium. In November 1954, Hollywood writer Lewis Clay developed a treatment for a movie version of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, which was renamed now to 'Cry Violence'. This treatment went beyond Lion Books's superficial repackaging of Attaway's story, thoroughly revising it in numerous key respects. In the process, the novel's protest elements were expunged, the cast of characters was radically whitened, and what psychological complexity Attaway managed in his debut was replaced with simplified archetypes. Step and Ed, respectively, became 'The Wanderer' and 'The Friend', Anna (renamed Ann) became 'The Girl', Mag was 'The Blowzy Blonde', and Cooper (renamed Dapper Dan) rendered 'The Boy Friend'. Meanwhile Hi Boy, still 'a ten-year-old Mexican waif', was made to 'hero worship' Step. Removed from its Washington setting, it became 'a story of Arizona'.[77] Finally, perhaps the most significant alteration was made to the conclusion, which saw Ed lose his life for his friend, Step almost killed by Sampson, and Step and Hi Boy ultimately settle down with Anna and Sampson on their farm.[78]

In a conversation between Attaway and the screenwriters Alfred Hayes and Herb Kune, it was also agreed to update the story to address the situation after the Second World War. 'America today is filled with stories of war heroes who have difficulty adjusting to civilian life', remarked a note-maker at the meeting, and Step was to be rendered as one of these types. In summarising, the story was described as one of 'youth, maladjusted, in flight, finding a haven, and the basic, best concepts of

[77] Cry Violence Treatment Synopsis, Los Angeles, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA, Albert Zugsmith Papers (AZP), box 2 folder 8.
[78] A Note on "Breath of Violence", AZP 2:8.

American life in the healthy and true environment of the ranch'.[79] From a tale about how domesticity had become unimaginable to a generation of displaced men, and one which strove to represent a multiracial America riven with injustice and violence, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* became a story which appeared to affirm the inevitability of normative domesticity. In so doing, the 'Cry Violence' outline asserted the primacy of (white) national belonging in a colonised (not merely national) territory. Violence in this telling was an unfortunate psychological hangover from the war which was resolved by 'the love of Anna and the heroworship and hunger for companionship and sympathy of Hi-Boy.'[80] The proposed 'Cry Violence' adaptation of *Let Me Breathe Thunder* testifies both to the incorporation of Popular Front literature into American national culture, and the way that this process occurred alongside an atrophying of the radical impetus behind it. More particularly, the reworkings sought to integrate narratives of national failure and transnational possibility into nationalist prerogatives.

The ideological compromises made in the 'Cry Violence' project nevertheless belie real aspects of continuity in the way Attaway's professional life was shaped by his political commitments – saliently, his continued devotion to liberation through the celebration of Black diasporic culture. When, in the 1950s, he moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career as a songster and scriptwriter, he carried his political sensibilities with him. His most notable credit in the postwar decades was as a writer for 'Day-O (Banana Boat Song)', which became a major hit for his close friend Harry Belafonte in 1956 and was used as the foundation for the beat to Lil Wayne's 2011 single '6 Foot 7 Foot'. 'Day-O' was adapted from a traditional calypso song, and the year after its release Attaway published a *Calypso Song Book*, demonstrating his continued commitment to Black folk cultures. In 1966, Attaway made a notable contribution as a scriptwriter for a TV special on Black humour and moved with his family to Barbados. The move was motivated in part, according to Alan Wald, by 'a desire to reside in a country with a Black government, Black police, and a Black professional class.' After living there for ten years Attaway

[79] A Note on "Breath of Violence", AZP 2:8.
[80] A Note on "Breath of Violence", AZP 2:8.

returned again to Los Angeles, where he died in 1986.[81] His career after abandoning novel-writing was therefore notable on several levels: simply as an African American creative making a living in Hollywood he was a rare exception, but as someone who was able to use this position to make Black contributions to global culture visible, he embodied one of the enduring legacies of the Popular Front movement.[82]

Attaway's own contributions to that proletarian culture stand as texts which exemplified the possibilities pursuant in it, but were also marked by its contradictions: raising demands for racial inclusivity but remaining invested in Americanism, engaging with the domestic sphere but falling short of feminist critique. Intensely localised in their themes, and indulgent of some nationalist tropes, Attaway's novels nevertheless sought to reformulate national identity with a multiracial cast of characters and a frank presentation of social violence. At the same time, they pivoted toward the global sphere, considering America's place in the world, and even articulating a folk internationalism. This folk internationalism was grounded in a sense of shared musical expression and imagined an anti-modern counterculture that was common to African American, Ukrainian, and Mexican migrants. Attaway's advocacy of a multiracial Americanism (what Erin Royston Battat has described as an anti-racist populism) was therefore contiguous with his internationalist belief in the fraternity of mankind's common people.[83] Rendering the folk as the medium by which we might imagine interracial and internationalist possibilities, Attaway also engaged in thoroughgoing critiques of industrialised production and industrial warfare. By seeking to construct an authentic American folk that made space for racialised subjects, Attaway drew together shared threads of global culture, rejecting false differences, respecting real ones, and drawing lessons about both from the lives of labouring people.

[81] Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time*, p. 283.
[82] Attaway's success in this field can and should also be viewed in relation to the continued frustration of Hughes's ambitions and those of many other aspirant Black writers. See Chapter 1.
[83] Battat, p. 2.

Conclusion

The core contention of this dissertation has been that African Americans' articulations of internationalist politics in the Depression years were both expansively global and deeply implicated in Americanness, frequently at the same time. Proceeding from the westernmost periphery of an Atlantic frame, where Black politics was articulated in terms of nationalism, multiracialism, and transnationalism, the thesis has charted Black travel in global locales from Moscow to Tokyo. It has demonstrated the modernist sensibilities of Black travellers, who nevertheless encountered Soviet society and non-Western cultures as cosmopolitans interested in fostering solidarities across national and racial borders. In constructing Soviet socialism as a viable framework for Black liberation, renegotiating their identities in conversation with Muslim societies and Asian borderland cultures, and sojourning through the North Pacific under the surveillance of the Japanese and US imperial states, African American internationalist practitioners made a global politics that exceeded Black Atlantic framings. In different ways and at various moments, however, their elaboration of a global politics of solidarity was shaped by their status as Americans. Returning to mainland America, the thesis has identified the continued entanglement of nationalisms and internationalisms in the journalistic and creative practices of Langston Hughes, Loren Miller, and William Attaway. Black involvement in the early-1930s Communist movement in California fostered an Afro-cosmopolitan perspective that situated Black oppression locally and globally in a context of state repression against racial and political minorities, generating radical critiques of the American state and society. Later in the 1930s, the changed political landscape produced a convergence between multiracialism and US nationalism which, in Attaway's novels, demonstrated a continuing orientation toward internationalism as a project grounded in folk cultures and the lives of the common people.

The significance and meaning of the Left and of radicalism have emerged as important themes in this study. Organisationally and ideologically, the Communist movement provided an indispensable infrastructure for Black internationalists in the 1930s. The Communists and the wider Left invited

African Americans to imagine themselves as members of an international proletariat and the Soviet Union as a motherland. Black sojourners in the USSR participated as canny political operators in the discursive construction of themselves and the Soviet Union in these terms. At the same time, Communist-led organisations at local levels helped to build movements that encouraged Black intellectuals to think through an anti-nationalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-fascist lens. With the subsequent development of Popular Frontism as a policy and a movement, African Americans reimagined their place in America and the world in ways that bore the marks of a Left-liberal coalition which translated revolutionary-proletarian internationalism into a language of populist reformism. In this way, the thesis contributes to histories of a long civil rights movement, connecting Communist organising with patriotic protest while frankly presenting the very significant ruptures and discontinuities that reshaped the Black freedom struggle in the mid-twentieth century.[84]

Growing scholarly interest in Black radical traditions has produced contestation about its meanings; its key moments and proponents.[85] The construction of histories of Black radicalism around the archives of male intellectuals and of Communist Party affiliates during the 1930s has obscured its operation in other periods, its emergence through different organisational apparatuses, and its feminist articulations. In concert with scholars who have made space for women's interventions into Black radical politics, I have made a case for reading Juanita Harrison as a participant in the project of Soviet cultural diplomacy and have registered her interpellation as a subversive by the Japanese state. This study also testifies to the importance of such women as Louise Thompson, Susie Revels Cayton, and Charlotta Bass in the negotiation of race, nation, and internationalism from radical standpoints. The centrality of Black women radicals has formed part of an argument that Black radical politics was an ideologically diffuse, impure, and complex set of political conceptions and activist practices. There

[84] See also Bernstein; Gilmore; Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement'; Dayo F. Gore, '"The Danger of Being an Active anti-Communist": Expansive Black Left Politics and the Long Civil Rights Movement', *American Communist History* 11:1 (2012), 45-48.

[85] Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*; Nneka D. Dennie, *(Re)defining Radicalism: The Rise of Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability in the Nineteenth Century*, forthcoming from University of Pennsylvania Press.

was no linear logic connecting thoroughgoing anti-racist critiques with a rejection of US nationalism or an emphasis on internationalist perspectives. Instead, radicals mixed their banners with liberals, and intellectuals at times expressed their expansive anti-racist solidarities through a universalist civic nationalism.

By focusing on figures rooted in the US West Coast, many of whom have been marginal in the historical record, the thesis presents a challenge to narratives of internationalist Black politics that rest on a narrow selection of prominent, educated individuals based in New York, the Caribbean, or a European metropolis. Interested not only in making a more expansive archive of Black internationalism, this study has read engagements with global themes in a variety of texts, ranging from published novels, memoirs, and journalism, to private correspondences and material objects exhibited in galleries and elsewhere. The kinds of internationalist politics one finds depends on the places one looks, and here the focus on a different set of archives has produced some sense of the diversity of Black engagements with ideas about nation and globe. In Juanita Harrison's account of global travel, we find a cosmopolitan feminism; in William Attaway's novels, folk internationalism; in Loren Miller's journalism and activism, a world-facing and multiracial Black Marxism. Accompanying and enriching these archives, Langston Hughes has emerged as a figure capable of articulating internationalism in several of these modes as he evolved politically and artistically.

The structure and arguments of the dissertation have contributed to a skewing of the scales of local and global politics. Remapping Black internationalism has required a negotiation of the slippages between Black internationalist visions, universalist modes of US nationalism, and local efforts at multiracial protest. It was through both global travel and local political engagements that African Americans came to break the isolation of Jim Crow. They did so as part of numerous imagined political communities (the global Communist movement, multiracial US nationalism, cosmopolitan/colonial feminism) and migratory circuits (transpacific, transatlantic, intra-national) that tested the primacy of a diasporic frame.

In addressing Black travel around the world and multiracial activism in transpacific contact zones, this study has also foregrounded questions of citizenship, empire, and modernity in the archive of Black globality. Conceiving of the US as a fundamentally colonial and imperial state formation, the ambiguities and ambivalences in African American engagements with nationalism and internationalism have been foregrounded. As rightful but excluded makers of America's national-imperial community, African Americans fostered an identification with colonised and oppressed peoples globally as well as with transnational migrants in the US. The fact of citizenship shaped African Americans' experiences of travel and helped to generate some more conservative forms of civil rights nationalism. Black travellers in Asian borderlands and colonial metropolises were frequently critical of colonial powers, but they also championed Western modernity and retained blindspots, especially on how imperial power operated in these contexts. Throughout this period, the question of citizenship was weaved together with the shape and position of US radicalism. Right-wing attempts to figure radicals as un-American persisted through the interwar years, reaching a new pitch and scale mid-century. As such, African American radicals were forced to make their case for citizenship as both Black people and political radicals, a position that was frequently difficult to maintain and helped to make a wedge between Communist and civil rights agendas. Even as radicals, however, Black activists were commonly partisans of technological modernity, artistic avant-gardism, and civilisational narratives, which tangled in complex ways with the politics of imperialism.

The routes and themes outlined in this thesis have a contemporary resonance that can be illustrated in the life of the most powerful Black politician of the current century. When Barack Obama became the first Black president in 2008, he achieved his victory by articulating a vision of America as a multiracial democracy that borrowed, paradoxically, from his own biography as a Hawaiian who had spent part of his youth in Indonesia.[86] The racist backlash against Obama fixated on his apparent socialist convictions, and one Hawaiian relationship became particularly evocative: his mentorship by

[86] Nico Slate, 'Race as Freedom: How Cedric Dover and Barack Obama Became Black', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37:2 (2014) 222-240 (p. 224).

a man named only Frank in Obama's memoir, but soon revealed as Frank Marshall Davis, a poet and journalist who came to prominence through the 1930s Left.[87]

Davis was a Communist who had moved from Chicago to Hawai'i in 1948 at the suggestion of his friend and comrade Paul Robeson. Mentored by this Black radical, Obama became a champion of American multiracialism but also of liberal internationalism in a framework of US imperial dominance. As president, he acted as a cautious, protective ward over this imperial structure.[88] The paths walked by Davis and Obama illustrate many of the complexities explored in this thesis. Davis arrived in the Territory of Hawai'i fully aware that 'Paradise had serious problems', in solidarity with the Japanese there who had suffered 'appalling treatment' during the War, and engaged with the vibrant labour movement.[89] Out of Hawai'i (which became a state in 1959), Obama emerged – first to Los Angeles, later in New York and, most famously, in Chicago – as an acolyte of American racial justice, loyal to its imperial infrastructure, but still subject to racialised Red-baiting that sought to exclude him from the national community.

Connected and in contradiction, the pairing of Davis and Obama signals not only an intersection of opposite life paths or of ideological lineages in Black America, but more fundamental ambiguities in their roles as agents in world history. Rightful members in the most powerful national-imperial community on the planet, African Americans are also subjects whose experience of oppression and whose deep connection to transnational communities have commonly rendered them inimical to empire and to exclusionary nationalisms. By routing the history of their internationalist imaginaries through the West Coast and the non-Western world, this thesis illustrates the difficult and

[87] Barack Obama, *Dreams from my Father* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 76; James Zeigler, *Red Scare Racism and Cold War Black Radicalism* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), p. 146.
[88] Adam Quinn, 'The Art of Declining Politely: Obama's Prudent Presidency and the Waning of American Power', *International Affairs*, 87:4 (2011), 803-824; Cornel West, 'Pity the sad legacy of Barack Obama', *The Guardian*, 9 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/09/barack-obama-legacy-presidency> [accessed 13/6/2020]; Paul Street, *Empire's New Clothes: Barack Obama in the Real World of Power* (London: Routledge, 2010).
[89] Frank Marshall Davis, *Livin' the Blues: Memoirs of a Black Journalist and Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 311-12.

consequential choices that have confronted African Americans negotiating the politics of nation, empire, and globe in the past.

These negotiations are, however, still ongoing. This dissertation has been completed in 2020. The Obama presidency seems to occupy an increasingly distant historical past, obscured by four years that have been thick with historic transformations. I write amidst an international rebellion sparked by the murder of George Floyd and inflamed by Obama's delinquent, belligerent successor. The exceptionally inept response to the COVID pandemic from Western governments, meanwhile, has compounded the sense that the boomerang of history is spinning toward China and the Pacific. At this moment, it is as clear as ever that the choices African Americans make about their place in local and international communities, in structures of global governance and international resistance, have the potential to remake the world.

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