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LANGSTON HUGHES' RACIAL PERSPECTIVE
ON THE SOVIET UNION
PRESENTED IN *I WONDER AS I WANDER*

INTRODUCTION

In June 1932, upon invitation by representatives of the Soviet film industry to participate in the production of a Moscow movie on the plight of black people in America, Langston Hughes, together with twenty-one other black Americans, left his racially segregated homeland for the reportedly racially progressive USSR. Hughes' own experience of racial discrimination and his knowledge of the etiology and the nature of racialism that attributed inferiority to blackness and superiority to whiteness from slavery on predisposed him to perceive Soviet reality through a U.S. racial prism. Indeed, while in the USSR, Hughes compared the Soviet national memory of Tsarist tyranny to racial segregation in America, and the post-revolutionary Soviet political system to continued racial segregation in his own country, working and living conditions of the USSR poor to those of disenfranchised black Americans, and even the physiognomy of peoples across the Republic to that of his own.

In discussing Hughes' Soviet experience, questions regarding the efficacy of racial consciousness arise. On the one hand, racial consciousness seems to be a specific quality resulting from individual experience that enriches perception and becomes an observational reference point. On the other hand, according to Zora Neale Hurston, "Race Consciousness' is a plea to Negroes to bear their color in mind

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at all times. It was just a phrase to me when I was a child. I knew it was supposed to mean something deep. By the time I got grown I saw that it was only an imposing line of syllables, for no Negro in America is apt to forget his race.”¹ Hurston even went so far as to contend, “Race consciousness [...] is a deadly explosive on the tongues of men.”² Therefore, the aim of this article is to ferret out the effect Hughes’ racial consciousness had on his perception and negotiation of the Soviet nation as well as the Soviet cultural and geo-political context ten years after the Bolshevik revolution.

LANGSTON HUGHES' AMBIGUOUS APPROACH TO SOVIET INTEREST IN BLACK AMERICA

The very fact that the theme of the Moscow movie focused on African-American experience rendered the trip racially marked from inception. Most probably, Hughes also agreed to engage in the project because it provided an opportunity to see firsthand the life situation of people of color in the Soviet Union, “the land where race prejudice was reported taboo.”³ After all, “[o]fficially, there was no racism in the multiethnic U.S.S.R., racial bigotry being antithetical to Marxist values. The Soviet Constitution [...] targeted racial and ethnic discrimination for special approbation and criminal prosecution.”⁴ Compellingly, at the outset, Hughes does not straightforwardly present his own interests, but describes other assorted participants, who were mostly

a band of eager, adventurous young students, teachers, writers and would-be actors [...] willing to do that, looking forward to the fun and wonder of a foreign land as much as to film-making. There were a few among them who said they wanted to get away from American race prejudice forever, being filled up with Jim Crow. These hoped to remain abroad. But most of the twenty-two simply thought they had found an exciting way to spend the summer (p. 70).

¹ Z. Hurston, *My People! My People!*, in A. Dundes (ed.), *Mother Wit from Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson and London 1973, p. 25.

² H. Gates, Jr., “Editor’s Introduction: Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” *Critical Inquiry* 1985, 1(12), pp. 1–20.

³ L. Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey*, Hill and Wang, New York 1993, p. 73.

⁴ M. Matusevich, “Black in the U.S.S.R.,” *Transition* 2008, 100, p. 56.

Racially conscious Hughes seems disappointed with both the Soviets and most of the black Americans for their lack of professionalism and naiveté. He cannot fathom why the Soviet authorities invited a group of twenty-two African-Americans, only two of whom were theater professionals, to produce a movie of such import. He implies a certain inauthenticity and negligence, because the skin color of the invited pseudo-actors seemed to be the only issue that mattered, not to mention the fact that beforehand the content of the project had not been fully introduced or thoroughly discussed with the black American cast.

Hughes' racial consciousness compounds his disappointment after he has an opportunity to scrutinize the movie scenario that he finds "unable to salvage."⁵ Being a racially committed Harlem Renaissance black poet who opts for representational art, Hughes considers the scenario "the absurd script [...] complete fantasy [...] the kind of fantasy that any European merely reading cursorily about the race problem in America, but knowing nothing of it at firsthand, might easily conjure up" (p. 77). He assesses the scenario as such after coming across unrealistic images, for instance, of a white master and his black maid dancing together publically, and of wealthy black American capitalists in 1930s Birmingham, Alabama. Hughes' expectations and the Soviets' objectives turned out to be too divergent to reconcile. While he hoped to contribute to the production of a movie that would reliably portray the plight of black Americans under Jim Crow, the Soviets highlighted the American labor movement. Langston admits that at that time he did not know anything about the ideas, strategies, and conventions of labor unions, but he had in-depth knowledge of American race relations. He knew of the racism that permeated labor unions, a phenomenon a scholar Elizabeth Ammons underscores:

Exacerbating black anger, labor unions excluded them but opened their ranks to most immigrants. Consequently black laborers were brought in to break strikes, which they usually willingly did. They had no allegiance to the unions, which had closed them out, and they needed work. The result, however, was that the racism of union members, many of them immigrants or the children of the immigrants, only increased, and the impact on race relations was deep.⁶

⁵ L. Rodgers, "Dorothy West's the Living is Easy and the Ideal of Southern Folk Community," *African American Review* 1992, 1(26), p. 163.

⁶ E. Ammons, "Black Anxiety about Immigration and Jessie Fauset's 'The Sleeper Wakes,'" *African American Review* 2008, 3/4 (42), p. 465.

Hughes aspired to produce a movie based on actuality and not on socialist utopian notion of racial integration within American labor unions. Therefore, he agreed to proceed with the project on condition that the scenario was rewritten, which, unfortunately, never materialized.

Langston Hughes' ambiguous approach, or uncertainty, relative to the nature of Soviet interest in the plight of African-Americans is revealed in the manner in which he also juxtaposes the apparent courtesy of the Soviets towards black American visitors with Soviet selective and censored presentations of the culture and socio-political conditions of blacks in the U.S. Interestingly, "[o]rdinary citizens seemed to feel that they were all official hosts of Moscow" (p. 74). Hughes is unsure how to account for their courtesy. He surmises that governmental policy seeks to project the USSR as a country of civility or presents it as emanating from pure racial curiosity: "What few Negroes there were in Moscow, of course, were conspicuous wherever they went, attracting friendly curiosity if very dark, and sometimes startling a peasant fresh from the country who had never seen a black face before" (p. 86). Notwithstanding, the courtesy expressed by white Soviets was certainly appealing and surprising to a black man who had never experienced graciousness from white people while "queuing up for newspapers, for cigarettes, or soft drinks" (p. 74) in his own country. In Moscow, he could hear some Russians say "*Negrochanski tovarish* — Negro comrade — take my seat!" or "Let the Negro comrade go forward" (p. 74). In Odessa, as well, where the black cast were accommodated while waiting for the scenario reportedly reedited, Hughes viewed the "de lux Soviet resort" (p. 93) with awe, as such service and lavishness would have been beyond a black man's horizons in America.

Nevertheless, impressive as Soviet hospitality was towards black Americans, Hughes discerns a propagandistic motive. As mentioned previously, he noted that the exhibited gentility might come from attempts to project Soviet citizens' civility, as "[a]ny form of rudeness or misbehavior might be characterized as not being 'sovietski,' in other words, not worthy of a Soviet citizen" (p. 74). Sometimes, it appears to be an expression of solidarity. He recalls,

Of all the big cities in the world where I've been, the Muscovites seemed to me to be the politest of peoples to strangers. But perhaps that was because we were Negroes and, at that time, with the Scottsboro Case on world-wide trial

in the papers everywhere, and especially in Russia, folks went out of their way there to show us courtesy (p. 74).

Nevertheless, Hughes occasionally comments on Soviet hospitality as if it were a politically conditioned and internalized categorical imperative. He experiences inconsistencies struggling with Soviet red tape, when his visitor privilege of “*Negrochanski tovarish* — Negro comrade” (p. 74) went unacknowledged. He writes,

I struggled with Intourist, the agency through which foreigners bought tickets in Moscow. The courtesies of Muscovites to me as an American visitor, and especially as a Negro, I shall never forget. But those who composed the staff of Intourist were far from courteous. The bureaucratic males and females behind the counter there — whom I hope have all since been purged — were as rude and inefficient as any clerks I have ever encountered — ruder, in fact, since they knew that no foreigner could travel anywhere in the Soviet Union, or leave Moscow, except by and through their dispensation (p. 216).

Hughes returns at various points to the propagandistic nature of Soviet engagement in promotion of black American culture. In general, Hughes is impressed with Soviet interest in black American culture and race issues in the USA. Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson, and Roland Hayes had performed in the country as honored guests. “Pushkin, a descendant of ‘the Negro of Peter the Great’, [was] adored in Russia and his mulatto heritage was constantly played up in the press when [Hughes] was there” (p. 87). Historically, “[o]f the literature and art created by Afro- Americans, little was known in prerevolutionary Russia. Only in Soviet times were they read and seen not just by specialists but by the general public.”⁷

Hughes was eager to assist in the production of the Moscow movie project and recognized the “good intentions” of the scenarists, no matter how far-fetched from reality, and was perplexed upon the project’s discontinuance. He surmises that a major factor was scenario disagreement. Interestingly, he does not reveal his own response to the disappointing news, choosing to report on the emotional outbursts and conspiracy theories of the cast:

[...] hell broke loose. Hysterics took place. Some of the girls really wanted desperately to be movie actresses. Others in the group claimed the whole Negro race had been betrayed by Stalin. Some said the insidious hand of American race

⁷ B. Gilenson, “Afro-American Literature in the Soviet Union,” *Negro American Literature Forum* 1975, 1 (9), p. 25.

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prejudice had a part in it all — that Jim Crow's dark shadow had fallen on Moscow, and that Wall Street and the Kremlin now conspired together never to let the world see in films what it was like to be a downtrodden Negro in America (p. 95).

Subsequently, their Soviet hosts became less hospitable. Upon returning from Odessa to Moscow, black cast members were not as esteemed as before and were placed in a hotel that was “[d]istinctly third rate, [with] no dining room, and no private baths” (p. 96) well below their former accommodation at the luxurious Grand Hotel.

Violent dissensions split our group asunder. Tempers flared. Some contended that all of us were merely being used as pawns in a game of international politics. Because Washington's recognition of Russia was rumored in the offing, not only our film, some said, but the cause of Negro rights was being sacrificed to curry American favor. Two members of our group claimed that Colonel Raymond Robbins had urged them weeks ago, over drinks in the Metropal Bar, to withdraw from the cast of a motion picture which, in the colonel's opinion, would be a black mark against the United States. Colonel Robbins was said to have been sent to Russia as a negotiator concerning future diplomatic relations between the two countries (p. 96).

Various scholars cite similar reasons for the movie project's cancellation. For instance, David Chioni Moore writes that apart from the scenario that Hughes found improbable, the “second cause was apparently the Soviet Union's hopes that the United States would finally, after some fifteen years of Soviet rule, extend diplomatic recognition to the USSR—and thus the Russians were wary of any films that might offend American officials.”⁸ Matusевич, along the same line, contends,

The antiracist and anticolonial rhetoric emanating from the Soviet Union proceeded unabated, but the deeds occasionally failed to match the words. So the Soviets reportedly shelved the Black and White film project in anticipation of the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States.⁹

Similarly, Kate Baldwin maintains,

By denoting the United States' vulnerability on the racial front, the Soviets played on U.S. paranoia and attempts to repair the injustices of race relations. Before World War II, it was via the issue of race that Soviet Russia garnered so many

⁸ D. Moore, “Colored Dispatches from the Uzbek Border: Langston Hughes' Relevance, 1933–2002,” *Callaloo* 2002, 4 (25), pp. 1114–1135.

⁹ M. Matusевич, *Black in the U.S.S.R....*, p. 64.

international brownie points, and after the war, when Russia became the prominent threat to American global imperialism, race became a strategic pawn.¹⁰

It is actually difficult to ascertain whether Hughes himself felt as if he had been a racially duped “pawn” of Soviet-American political machinations. The fact that he does not disclose his own thoughts about the issue probably owes to an assumption of probability without sufficient conspiratorial evidence. He merely euphemistically states, “I took the position that it was regrettable no film was to be produced, but since the script had been so mistakenly conceived, it seemed to me wise to make none” (p. 98).

Soviet misrepresentation of the spirituals is another example of propagandistic utilization of black American culture. The spirituals, one of the most essential black American cultural expressions, were devoid of references to God, which led to farcical performances.

At that time in Moscow, although some churches were open and one occasionally saw a cassocked priest on the street, there was an official anti-religious campaign under way. The radio belonged to the Soviet state, so religious songs were taboo on the air. An exception was made, however, of the spirituals — as examples of great Negro folk art — with the provision that when these songs were sung, the words God, Lord, Christ, or Jesus were not to be used. (p. 81)

Thus, Sylvia, a woman who “became an American folk-song star on the Moscow radio” (p. 81), sang spirituals, replacing the word ‘God’ with ‘dog,’ jesting that ‘dog’ is actually ‘God’ spelled backwards. Also black American artists were presumed to project a positive image of the Soviet Union. Otherwise, they were unacknowledged as was the Jamaican poet Claude McKay, who “had turned anti-Soviet and had gone to live in France, so his name was hardly mentioned when [Hughes] was in Russia and his books were no longer on sale” (p. 87),

On the whole, although black American artists and their art were given considerable recognition in the Soviet Union while unclaimed in 1930s mainstream American society, they could not be fully authentic. Nevertheless, racially conscious Langston Hughes does not perceive racism in the USSR as a major obstacle. Actually, because of the country’s commitment to Marxism, class-consciousness overrode race. The failure of the movie project, the misrepresentation of the spirituals, and the acknowledgement of certain black writ-

¹⁰ K. Baldwin, “Black like Who? Cross-Testing the ‘Real’ Lines of John Howard Griffin’s ‘Black like Me,’” *Cultural Critique* (1998), 40, pp. 103–143.

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ers like Claude McKay took place not due to racism, but rather due to their incongruence with the socialist society that the Soviet authorities wanted to project. Moreover, Hughes' silence on racism may also indicate that he did not experience significant racism during his sojourn in USSR.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON RACE ADOPTED BY BLACK AMERICANS WHILE IN THE SOVIET UNION

As indicated earlier, black Americans who came to the Soviet Union from their own strictly racially divided country were more likely than not to observe and respond to Soviet society through a racial prism. Their racial consciousness and sense of racial identity fused into specific attitudes and patterns of behavior.

First of all, as some of the members of the Moscow movie group manifested, a number of black Americans traveled to the Soviet Union to liberate themselves from American racial oppression and start a new life in a land that was said to be free of racial prejudice. After arrival, however, even though convinced of Soviet non-racialism, they remained sensitive to race. The privileged visitor status bolstered the black Americans' racial pride, and they sought to comport themselves with dignity, not always successfully, as Hughes candidly relates,

Conscious of being wholeheartedly admired, we solemnly decided at one of our first group meetings in the Grand Hotel shortly after our arrival that we must all do our best to "uphold the honor of our race" while in Russia, and behave ourselves at all times in public. We did pretty well, I think; but occasionally somebody kicked over a bucket, to the embarrassment of most of the others. Then the leader would call a group meeting, speeches would be made, and the culprit chided for "disgracing the race" — usually by being a little too drunk at the Metropol bar. But occasionally something of more serious nature happened (p. 88).

After having experienced dehumanizing and belittling domestic oppression, the privilege status granted to them abroad required the adoption of genteel compartment.

Upon occasion, when some events did not live up to their expectations, the black Americans at times reacted incautiously. For instance, some of the movie cast members' accusations of racism went overboard when the group was informed of the movie project's cancellation. They asserted that "the whole Negro race had been be-

trayed by Stalin [and] the insidious hand of American race prejudice had a part in it all— that Jim Crow’s dark shadow had fallen on Moscow” (p. 70). Unlike Hughes, they did not consider that the Soviet socialist utopian scenario might be at fault but fantasized overly exaggerated racially determined conspiracy theories.

Another psychological complex that emerged from black American encounter with the racially ambiguous USSR is a sort of racial identity crisis that Langston Hughes refers to as the loss of “all personal consciousness of color” (p. 84), manifested by Emma, who arrived to Europe as a member of a theatrical troupe at the turn of the twentieth century. Hughes writes that a Grand Duke was so charmed by her that he invited her to live in his spacious and extravagant mansion up until the Revolution. The nature of their relationship is unclear. Upon the overthrow of Tsarist Russia, the mansion was divided into a dozen apartments, one of which was granted to Emma. When Hughes met her, she was known for captivating public orations denouncing American racial oppression. She would be by the Soviets introduced as their “own beloved Negro comrade [...] who before she came to the Soviet motherland, knew the stinging lash of race hatred in her native America” (p. 84). Interestingly, Hughes considered her approach to blackness contradictory. On the one hand, thanks to her delicious cooking, she induced black people to “feel at home” in Moscow. On the other hand, white Southerners pejoratively called her “the Mammy of Moscow,” while she served a menu of “corn bread and greens, spoon bread, also barbecued spareribs” (p. 86). Therefore, she seemed willing to play stereotypical role of the black female domestic. Even more perplexing for Hughes was Emma’s longing for America after she lost her Tsarist privileged social status. Nostalgically, she recalled, “I used to have me six servants and a boot boy. Now, best I can do is one old baba older’n me, part time” (p. 85). Challenging Soviet propaganda, she apprised Hughes about corruption, class stratification, and unreported or underreported USSR events. Hughes acknowledges,

Living in the Grand Hotel and eating well, or accepting Emma’s black-market hospitality, I never would have known there was hunger a few hundred miles south of Moscow. But Emma said, “Why down around Kharkov, people’s so hungry they are slicing hams off each other’s butts and eating them. That’s no lie! A Russian I know just come from there; he told me folks is turned into cannibals.” [...] She first told us about the many railroad wrecks that later that year were openly played up in the Soviet papers as an urgent problem to be remedied. Emma

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would say, "Man, last night there was a wreck right in the depot — one train going out, another coming in, both on the same track. These thick-headed comrades don't know how to run no trains. Bang! Fifty people smashed-up-kilt in the railroad yard. Ambulances been going by my door all night long." Not a word of these frequent catastrophes would appear as news in the Moscow papers (p. 85).

Emma's disappointment with her USSR status led her to fantasize that in America she would regain similar Tsarist privileges that she had become accustomed to. She was delighted to welcome white American Southerners to her Moscow apartment, acting, as Hughes puts it, "too much of a 'mammy'" (p. 86). Hughes explains her attitude in the following way, "she had not been home for so long herself that she had lost all personal consciousness of color. When some of the members of our movie group told her that, were she to return to the land of color lines, she would not like it, she did not believe us" (pp. 85–86).

HUGHES' RACIAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Langston Hughes sojourned to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s and observed two variant attitudes of the Soviet citizens. Most of them had hoped for the social and economic equality that socialism pledged, while others regarded the government's policy as corrupt and propagandistic. Regardless of perspective, social class was a primary focal point.

Hughes' acute racial sensitivity drew his attention to the race-related dimensions of the Russian Revolution. During his visit to Central Asia, he particularly noticed divisions arising from Tsarist Russia, and to a certain degree in the USSR, that were not only geopolitical but also racial. Hughes writes that in the 1930s he, along with other members of the Moscow movie cast, who decided to stay a little longer in the Soviet Union after the project's cancellation, wanted "to see [...] those regions where the majority of the colored citizens lived, namely Turkmenistan in Soviet Central Asia" (p. 102). Geopolitical divisions became even more compelling when the group was informed that

this part of the Soviet Union was forbidden territory to foreigners. Only a very few selected journalists, and no tourists, were permitted there. It was said to be a land still in flux, where Soviet patterns were as yet none too firmly fixed, therefore it was not open to general inspection (p. 102).

Intrigued, Hughes managed to obtain a press permit to research the region and document his observations to be later published in America. He discovered that Tsarist Russia was considerably racially segregated. He relates,

Ten years before, a brown young Uzbek like Tajaiv would have had to ride in the back of the streetcars in Tashkent, for previous to the revolution in Asia there had been Jim Crow streetcars in Uzbekistan. The old partitions that once separated natives from Europeans, colored from white, were still there when I arrived — I saw them. But now anyone sat anywhere in the Tashkent trams (p. 172).

He was even more impressed upon learning that within a short period of only ten years, racial segregation was abolished:

In ten short years, Jim Crow was gone on trams, trains, or anywhere else in Central Asia. Russians and Uzbeks, Ukrainians and Tartars, Europeans and natives, white or colored, all went to the same schools, sat on the same benches, ate in the same co-operatives, worked in the same shops or factories, and fussed and fumed at the same problems. Gains and defeats were shared alike. In Tashkent, whenever I got on a street car and saw the old partitions, I could not help but remember Atlanta, Birmingham and Houston in my own country where, when I got on a tram or a bus or a train, I had to sit in the colored section. The natives of Tashkent, about my own shade of brown, once had to sit in a colored section, too. But not anymore (p. 172).

Hughes also found varied Soviet attitudes apropos post-revolutionary racial liberty. Some individuals reacted cautiously; others felt free to fully actualize themselves.

[...] there was freedom for a Turkoman now to sit in Ashkhabad's dusty park and not see the old signs for Europeans only that formerly kept him out. Even with eternal grime and continued famines, racial freedom was sweeter than the lack of it. To Grasdani, such freedom in Asia meant only tin cans in the toilets and dark guests in the best hotels. But to Nichan it was education and football and his brown statue over a new stadium (p. 211).

'Grasdani' in Russian vernacular means citizen, an appellation that Hughes applies to an elderly Russian woman, who was formerly upper-class before the revolution, then was deprived of her privileged status by the Soviets, and refused to be called 'tavarish,' comrade. To no avail did she attempt to persuade Hughes that living standards after the revolution had deteriorated. Hughes remembers, "I could not bring myself to believe, as Grasdani did, that life was not better for most people now than it had been in the days of the Volga

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boatmen, the Asiatic serfs and the Jim Crow signs” (p. 173). Nishanov (Yusef Nishanov), in turn, was more industrious. He was a young Uzbek youth, holding Physical Culture Director for the city of Tashkent, who modeled for a statue to be raised over a newly built stadium. Hughes also surmises that during Tsarist times, he and his German co-traveler, the journalist Arthur Koestler, might have been forced to stay at separate hotels in Turkestan and to ride in segregated train compartments.

Hughes regarded such rapid social transformation with amazement. Even when he found out that new system was brought about through liquidation and mass incarceration, he remained sanguine. Looking at the attributes of the Russian revolution through the prism of American racial oppression and inhumanity of slavery, Hughes juxtaposes the reportedly abominable Soviet deeds with the stance that the distinguished black American abolitionist and writer Frederick Douglass took towards purported violence of the abolitionist movement. Hughes pens,

As to the purge trials, the liquidations, the arrests and censorship, deplorable as these things were, I felt about them, in relation to their continual denunciation in the European and American press, much as Frederick Douglass felt before the Civil War when he read in the slaveholding papers that the abolitionists were anarchists, villains, devils and atheists. Douglass said he had the impression that ‘Abolition— whatever else it might be was not unfriendly to the slave’ (p. 212).

Even though Hughes sympathized with the good-natured and hospitable elderly disillusioned Russian woman, he prioritized racial freedom over social class privileges. Confronted with such complexity, he sought to be as objective as possible, reflecting, “After all, I suppose, how anything is seen depends on whose eyes look at it” (p. 212).

HUGHES' RACIAL PERSPECTIVE ON EVERYDAY LIFE AND HUMAN RELATIONS IN THE SOVIET UNION

In addition to the astute observations that Hughes made regarding race issue in the Soviet Union, the propagandistic and reductive employment of black American culture by Soviet authorities, and complex attitudes that some black Americans developed upon encountering a new reality distinct from their homeland, Hughes

writes quite elaborately about his personal feelings and thoughts regarding everyday experiences in the racially desegregated country.

He comfortably attended public events and utilized public facilities along with people of multifarious complexions. Nevertheless, he remained attentive to their racial and ethnic physiognomy. For instance, he recalls the “crowds of yellow-brown Uzbeks in brightly flowered robes, waving from village stations” (p. 104) he passed while traveling by train across the Soviet Asia. In Ashkhabad, he was in awe of the friendly gestures and tranquil tone exhibited by

a bright-eyed, grinning Oriental youth [...]. Caught half napping, before [Hughes] could rise from across the bed, he had reached out his hand. A stream of musical inflections filled [Hughes'] ears— but [Hughes] had not the least idea what he was saying. The language was one [he] had never heard. [Houghes] took for granted, however, that he had come to take me to dinner [...]. [His] Red Army friend came from the high Pamirs away up near the Sinkiang border, and spoke only his own strange language. He was a captain of the border guard, and looked like a Chinese Negro, very brown, but with Oriental eyes. He was my friend for weeks, in fact my boon buddy, yet I never knew a word he said. However, when the ear gives up and intuition takes over, some sort of understanding develops instinctively (pp. 110–111).

On another day, “an intense-looking young white man, in European clothing, with a sharp face and rather oily dark hair” (p. 113) knocked on Langston Hughes’ hotel room door upon hearing jazz tunes within. The man turned out to be Arthur Koestler, a later Berlin acclaimed journalist, who would accompany Hughes across Central Asia. Such encounters were experiences that he was unlikely to come across in America. In the USSR, he felt at ease eating, dancing, traveling, sharing hotel rooms, researching, and conversing with people of all races.

Even while performing prosaic everyday activities, he could not avoid comparing his Soviet experience with that of racially segregated America. Although many trains there were still wretched, Hughes “did not find the trip nearly so unpleasant as many [he] had made on Jim Crow trains at home, where [he] could not eat in the diner and was segregated in a single coach” (p. 103). When he observed a white man teaching a brown indigenous girl how to produce films, Hughes

could not help but think how impregnable Hollywood had been to Negroes, and how all over America the union of motion-picture operators did not permit

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Negroes to operate projection machines, not even in theaters in Negro neighborhoods. Negro-owned establishments had to employ white projectionists (p. 116).

Hughes also juxtaposes Soviet Central Asian cotton kolkhozes with American cotton fields in the segregated South. He unexpectedly found many black Americans employed on the kolkhozes as experts in cotton cultivation, knowledge of which they obtained in the American South and now would pass on to Soviet planters. Hughes was taken aback by his compatriots' working and living conditions that were even more primitive and miserable than in the South. The particularly harsh winter, lack of fireplaces, gas stoves, radio, and jukeboxes exacerbated their wretchedness. Even so, Hughes noted that "despite their problems they were not a gloomy group, and Christmas with them was a very jolly period for [him]" (p. 177). As Hughes indirectly conveys, the black workers experienced a level of individual freedom in the Soviet Union, as opposed to their homeland, that transcended their harsh environment. Their racial identity proved to be advantageous with the locals in that they "were so nearly the color of the Uzbeks themselves, nobody took [them] for strangers and urged [them] to the front lines" (p. 177). Although their dismal conditions sometimes led to despondency, they were financially well rewarded. The two factors rendered the Soviet collective more humane than that of the American exploitative sharecropping system. Hughes describes the racial bifurcation engendered by the system in the following way,

[...] the man who owned this big plantation lived in a great house with white pillars. His children went to private schools in the North, I was told, and his oldest girl traveled abroad. Black hands working in white cotton created the wealth that built his fine house and supported his children in their travels. [...] Economists call it the share-crop system. The plantation owner advances every month a little corn meal and salt meat, calico and candy from the commissary, gives seed and a cabin. These advances are charged to the black peasant's account. At the end of the year when the cotton is picked, the plantation owner takes the whole crop and often tells the worker his share is not large enough to cover the rent of the cabin, the cost of the seed, and the price of the corn meal and fat meat. "You owe me," says the planter. So the Negro is automatically in debt, and must work another year to pay the landlord (pp. 176-177).

From Hughes' perspective, American cotton plantations were considerably more advanced technologically, but the Soviet ones, just ten years after the Revolution, were more progressive racially and in terms of social equality, liberating factors for black Ameri-

cans who had suffered oppression in their own country seventy years after issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation that supposedly enfranchised enslaved black people. While in the USSR, the black American workers received just remuneration, in America southern sharecropping produced indebtedness. Racially, Hughes, as did many of his black compatriots, experienced diurnal freedom and respect during his Soviet sojourn, something that he missed in his own country.

HUGHES' RACE-LESS PERSPECTIVES ON THE SOVIET UNION

Even though race figured prominently in Langston Hughes' assessment of Soviet reality, he was also very observant and attentive to social circumstances beyond race, noticing certain inconsistencies regarding justice and egalitarian objectives of the revolution.

On the one hand, Hughes assessed a number of measures undertaken by the Soviet authorities as being genuinely progressive. In *I Wonder As I Wander*, he candidly lists the three achievements of the new government that he would hold most memorable: "Moscow dental customs, the unveiling of the harem women in Turkestan, and the disappearance of the color line throughout Soviet Asia," (p. 227) the latter elaborated on earlier. Speaking of dental care, as trivial as it might seem, Hughes had never received such sensitive medical care as he did in Moscow. He recalls a French dentist he visited in Africa who without anesthesia pulled his tooth with pliers. In Haiti, another tooth, filled without desensitizing the nerve, had to be extracted on the following day. In Moscow, medical treatment left him "amazed. It was the first time anywhere a dentist had not charged [him] a small fortune. So, in the Soviet Union, a writer, or any worker, could have his dental work done for nothing!" (p. 227).

The second achievement of the Soviet government that Hughes focused on is the means by which the unveiling of Muslim women was accomplished along with the transformation of gender roles. "Because of the great difficulties involved in the liberation of Uzbek women from the harem and the veil, [...] a special effort was being made to supply women with the means of economic independence. The silk industry was utilized for this purpose" (p. 184). Before, their husbands acquired the profits. After the revolution, the women themselves sold the cocoons directly to purchasers and were trained and employed in the new mills.

As well as foregoing accomplishments, “many things were happening in the Soviet Union that [he] had never seen happen elsewhere” (p. 227). He was astonished upon learning that the First Conference of Prostitutes-Become-Workers had been convened to establish measures by which the newly formed government could lessen the number of USSR prostitutes, whose numbers had already decreased in Moscow from approximately four thousand to four hundred. The question was how to provide the women with decent jobs, medical care, and social assistance. In Central Asia, in turn, Hughes was awed by the educational level much higher than that of America. He wrote, “Certainly children in Uzbekistan seemed to me to know more of world politics than American children. They would stand on strong little legs, independent and confident, and comment on subjects as big as war, colonies, lynchings and world revolution” (p. 170).

Even so, Hughes noted various shortcomings and failures. One of the most notable was class stratification, a phenomenon which theoretically should have been absent from the socialist country. Economic bifurcation was most visible between the Moscow and Central Asia regions. In the former, as mentioned above, Hughes and his compatriots lived luxuriously. In the latter, he observed and underwent food scarcity, miserable living conditions, lack of hygiene, substandard medical care, and infrastructural inadequacy. For instance, in describing the village of Permytyab, Hughes writes that it consisted

of more sheepskin yurts than houses. What houses there were had only one or two rooms, walled with sunbaked bricks of thistle and mud. The floors were dirt. Mangy dogs bounded forward with hyenalike snarls as our car drew up, then slunk away whining as if used to severe beatings if they lingered too near a human being. Dirty old sultans (or so I was inclined to imagine each elderly Oriental male), smoking water pipes, sat in some of the tent openings. The women, like dogs, immediately scurried out of sight, as if they too were used to being beaten. A few half-naked children peeked at us. Almost everybody was barefooted, their clothing ragged, their turbans filthy. These were the most depressed people I had yet seen in the Soviet Union (p. 129).

To some extent, the deplorable conditions in Soviet Central Asia were understandable, because the area was marginalized, neglected, and exploited during Tsarist times, and more time than ten years after the Revolution would be needed to improve the conditions in vast Central Asia. Nevertheless, across the USSR, the alternative system produced its own ruling elite vis-à-vis those less well off. In Tashkent,

Hughes came across the restaurant offering French and American melodies that only people with “pockets full of rubles” (p. 182) could afford. Hughes also encountered the so-called besprizorni, who

were wandering delinquents, a problem to the Soviet authorities and a source of amusement and irritation to ordinary citizens. These were the homeless children of the Revolution, children of passing armies, death, broken homes and maladjustment, who refused to stay in the schools assigned to them (p. 151).

Eventually, he came to the conclusion that in the USSR as well as in other lands he had visited, there was a tendency of the ruling class to dominate regardless of the national social or political system, and that the USSR should not be overly idealized.

[...] not only in the Soviet Union but around the world — even in places where there is almost nothing, the rich, the beautiful, the talented, or the very clever can always get something; in fact, the best of whatever there is. From Topeka to Tashkent, San Francisco to Samarkand, I had learned that some can always get cream while most drink milk, some have wine while others hardly have water. The system under which the successful live — left or right, capitalist or communist — did not seem to make much difference to that group of people, in every city around the globe, who managed by hook or crook to live well. Be it Asia, Europe, or America, these folks had theirs. Not always were they the rich folks, either—sometimes merely the beautiful, the talented, or the clever (p. 181–182).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the socialist ideologies that promised individual freedom, social justice, and equality propagated by the USSR were the paramount reasons for its attraction to black Americans in the 1930s, a period of horrendous oppression that motivated the racially conscious writer Langston Hughes to sojourn to the Soviet Union in hope of experiencing racial freedom. To a large extent, the country met his expectations, leaving him awed with the opportunities to freely engage in ordinary everyday social activities and societal offerings together with people of all races. He was filled with wonder upon discovering the advancement the socialist system had made in liquidating racial segregation in the USSR within a mere decade.

Hughes’ racial perspective augmented his perception of the USSR. The attitudes of average Soviet citizens towards race at that time are uncertain. Some of them took up particular patterns of behavior,

for instance, hospitality to foreign visitors, at governmental behest to project, as stated before, the USSR civility, while other citizens, like people in Central Asia, probably had never thought about race before Hughes' visit. The poet's psychological and social comfort among the dark-complexioned peoples there stemmed more from his racial frame of reference than theirs. Even in assessing segregation in Tsarist Russia, it is difficult to say to what degree race was the determining factor because in certain areas Europeans and natives were segregated primarily according to nationality not race. The fact that Hughes accentuates race seems to emanate from ingrained American racial perspectives.

Also thought provoking in Hughes' travelogue is the ambiguous stance he assumes towards USSR's ostensibly racially-conscious politics and concern with the black American experience and culture. Hughes perceived some USSR governmental measures as inauthentic and questionable, for example, the movie project failed because of the disjuncture between Hughes and its producers over the scenario that presented fanciful images of American race relations, and the spirituals, the sacred genre, were bereft of references to God, thus deprived of their most essential element. When the black cast did not fulfill the expectations of the Soviet authorities, they began to feel unwelcomed and that their host had sought to use them as "pawns in a game of international politics" (p. 96). Be that as it may, nevertheless, the overall image of the USSR that Hughes presents, at least in racial terms, is far more positive than that of America, when one considers comparisons between racial relations in the USSR and the USA. Despite its negatives, the Soviet Union remained in Hughes' eyes "a country he continued to love even after he appeared to repudiate the political system under which it operate[d]." ¹¹

Indubitable, "Alongside a rich cultural heritage, the Soviet Union's bold political moves brought resources, openness and inclusiveness in the newfound rhetoric of its race-less, class-less social experiment."¹² Nonetheless, other factors outweighed the USSR's racial progressivism in Hughes' decision to return to racially segregated America. Free and welcomed as he felt, he did not consider

¹¹R. Arnold, "Future Scholarly Projects on Langston Hughes," *Black American Literature Forum* 1987, 3(21), p. 313

¹²K. M. Ahern, "Drafting a Revolutionary Pushkin: Cyril Briggs and the Creation of a Black International Proletariat," *South Atlantic Review* (2008), 2(73), p. 117.

the Soviet Union his home. To some extent, the misery in Central Asia weighed upon him although most circumstances were not as oppressive as those that black people in America had to endure. He also felt uncomfortable with certain contemptuous Soviet ideas about black Americans and their culture, for instance, the aspersion that “jazz [was] decadent bourgeois music,” a notion that “the Soviet press had hammered into Russian heads” (p. 122). All in all, Hughes often took an ambiguous stance towards USSR policies.

Agnieszka Łobodziec

SPOJRZENIE LANGSTONA HUGHESA NA ZWIĄZEK RADZIECKI
PRZEZ PRYZMAT RASY UKAZANE W AUTOBIOGRAFII
I WONDER AS I WANDER

Streszczenie

W artykule porównano dwa odrębne konteksty geopolityczne, tzn. posegregowanych rasowo Stanów Zjednoczonych i rzekomo postępowego pod względem polityki rasowej Związku Radzieckiego, opisywanej przez Langstona Hughesa w autobiografii *I Wonder as I Wander*. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono sposobowi, w jaki Hughes ze swoją świadomością rasową odnosi się i interpretuje swoje doświadczenie w Związku Radzieckim, system polityczny tego kraju, usługi, tradycje i grupy etniczne, szczególnie w odniesieniu do doświadczenia i kultury ludowej Afro-Amerykanów. Podkreślono analogie, jakie Hughes zaobserwował między czarnymi Amerykanami a radziecką klasą robotniczą, szczególną bliskość, jaką czuł z mieszkańcami Turkmenistanu oraz jego spostrzeżenia dotyczące poczucia wyższości, jaką moskiewska elita okazywała zepchniętym na margines mieszkańcom biedniejszych regionów. Mimo że Langston Hughes był traktowany w Moskwie jako gość honorowy, wołał jednak kontynuować swój pobyt w Związku Radzieckim na terenach Środkowej Azji, gdzie, jak stwierdził, „żyła większość kolorowych obywateli”. W artykule omówiono też stopień, w jakim pobyt Hughesa w Związku Radzieckim wzmocnił zarówno jego perspektywę uniwersalną, jak i świadomość rasową, z założeniem, że świadomość rasowa wzbogaciła, zindywidualizowała oraz pogłębiła jego rozumienie obcego kraju tak odmiennego od jego własnego.

LANGSTON HUGHES' RACIAL PERSPECTIVE...

Агнешка Лободзец

ВЗГЛЯД ЛЭНГСТОНА ХЬЮЗА НА РАСОВЫЙ ВОПРОС В СОВЕТСКОМ СОЮЗЕ В АВТБИОГРАФИИ *БРОЖУ ПО СВЕТУ И УДИВЛЯЮСЬ (I WONDER AS I WONDER)*

Резюме

В статье анализу подвергается сопоставление двух разных геополитических систем, т.е. расово сегрегированных Соединенных Штатов Америки и якобы прогрессивного с точки зрения расовой политики Советского Союза, отраженное Хьюзом в автобиографии *Брожу по свету и удивляюсь (I Wonder as I Wander)*. Особое внимание уделяется тому, как Хьюз интерпретирует свой опыт, накопленный в Советском Союзе, и оценивает политическое устройство этого государства, проявления культуры, услуги, традиции и этнические группы — в особенности в сопоставлении их с опытом и народной культурой афроамериканцев. Подчеркиваются выведенные Хьюзом аналогии между черными американцами и советским рабочим классом, а также его наблюдения, касающиеся чувства превосходства, проявляемого московской элитой по отношению к жителям более бедных регионов страны. Что интересно, несмотря на тот факт, что Лэнгстон Хьюз был почетным гостем в Москве, он, все-таки, предпочитал во время пребывания в Советском Союзе проводить время на территории Средней Азии, где, как полагал, «жило большинство цветных граждан». В статье затрагивается тоже вопрос, в какой степени пребывание Хьюза в Советском Союзе способствовало укреплению его универсального мировоззрения и расового самосознания.