Translating Whose Vision? Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and the Soviet Experiment

Joy Gleason Carew
University of Louisville, USA

Abstract: From the earliest days of the new "Soviet" Russia, battle lines were drawn not only across political lines, but also across racial ones. In early discussions of how best to shape this new political, economic, and social experiment, Lenin and white American fellow traveler, Reed, passed notes to each other laying out the seeds of what was to become the "Negro question." Initially directed at the United States and its large population of American Blacks, Blacks from other industrialized countries were also invited to the USSR. Three people would have a dramatic impact upon these cross-racial developments: McKay, Hughes, and Robeson. They would help mold the Russian people's view of the plight of Blacks and build internal solidarity, and help mold the impression of Blacks the world over about the Soviet Experiment and the Russian people. From McKay's 1922 visit, through Hughes' 1932 sojourn, and Robeson's last visits in the late 1950s, the Soviets and these Black luminaries actively linked the liberation desires of oppressed Blacks with the political objectives of the Soviets. Translating these visions across language and culture presented complications, but did not deter these collaborative efforts.

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1. Forays into Language, Race and Culture

From the earliest days of the new "Soviet" Russia, battle lines were drawn not only across political lines, but also across racial ones. In early discussions, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and white American fellow traveler, John Reed, passed notes to each other discussing the best way to bring the struggles of American Negroes into the Communist International (Comintern) deliberations. Initially, Lenin thought Reed could do this, but Reed understood that the full impact would not be as strong if the attendees heard this from a white man, rather than Black one. Seeking a Black spokesman, he selected the poet Claude McKay whom he had known back in New York. McKay's poetry had frequently appeared in Max Eastman's progressive journal, the *Liberator*. And McKay's (2013) "If we must die," for one, written in response to the 1919 race riots, called for a new, combative black man, "If we must die /Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot /While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs . . . /Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave /And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow! . . . /Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack /Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back."

McKay's presence at the Fourth International Comintern in 1922, along with that of Otto Huiswood, planted the seeds of what was to become the Comintern's "Negro Question," although

the full fruition of the Negro Question activity would not come until 1928 when the largest number of Blacks was elected to serve on important Comintern and Soviet committees and agencies (Carew, 2009, pp. 42-43).

This Soviet outreach was initially directed at Blacks in the United States; however, Blacks from other industrialized countries, such as South Africa, were also invited to the USSR. In many cases, they were studying or working in an industrialized country, such as the US or England. Early visitors and political trainees included Albert Nzula of South Africa and Kweku Bankole from Ghana. Bankole had been studying in Pittsburgh when he was recruited by the Young Communist League (Blakely, 1986, pp. 90-91). The Soviets considered US Blacks to be more representative of the proletarian forces they were trying to recruit. And they thought that cadres of these advanced Blacks would then help lead Black workers in other parts of the world.

But, three people in particular would have a dramatic impact upon opinion-making around these cross-racial developments: Claude McKay, and later Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson. Not only would they help mold the Russian people's view of the plight of Blacks and build internal solidarity, but also, they would be instrumental in shaping the impression of the Soviet Experiment for Blacks the world over. From McKay's 1922 visit, through Hughes' 1932 sojourn, and Robeson's last visits in the late 1950s, both the Soviets and these Black luminaries took active roles in linking the liberation desires of oppressed Blacks to the political objectives of the Soviets. Translating these visions across language and culture presented complications, but did not deter these collaborative efforts. The Russia that has entered the 21st century, with the repeated images of xenophobia and intolerance directed towards peoples of color in her midst, is a far cry from that envisioned some eighty years ago (Ozdal, 2013).

2. Cross-Racial Politics

When McKay (1999) gave his speech before the 1922 Comintern in Moscow, he spoke in English. The majority of the attendees were Russian speakers, but this was an international gathering and there were a number of representatives from Communist parties of other countries who would have understood English. English, like French, was a major *lingua franca*. Certainly, they all could see him — this Black man standing with prominent Communist leaders — and that impression would have been very powerful. Pictures have the capacity to be very persuasive communicative tools. This image of a Black man standing next to or among significant white figures in the Soviet Union would be purposefully repeated for the duration of McKay's stay and afterwards. The Soviets also quickly published a Russian version of McKay's Comintern speech in *Pravda*. And four months later, the *International Press Correspondent* published McKay's English version, which was distributed around the world (Baldwin, 2002, p. 37).

When Langston Hughes visited in 1932, he was part of the eagerly-anticipated "Black and White" film project. He and his fellow members of the film group looked forward to making a film that would represent racism in its ugly detail, but also demonstrate the true dignity of Black people. All were treated extremely well with luxurious accommodations, meals, and tickets to the ballet and opera. But, they were frustrated by the requirements of the film's director and an untenable script. Because of these intractable differences, along with political

machinations behind the scene, the project fell through. However, Hughes, for one, was not ready to leave. He wanted to experience more of this nonracial society and in particular, to see the Soviet Experiment's effect on the ordinary Russian and provincial peoples. Having secured permission to stay for a full year, Hughes wrote pieces for US outlets and publications in the USSR. He was writing in English, but was pleased to see his work being translated not only into Russian, but also into minority languages, such as Uzbek (Hughes, 1986, p. 144).

When Robeson sang in the Soviet Union, many of his songs were American Negro spirituals. As he commented in a New York *Times* interview just before he left for his 1931 European tour, "I prefer a program entirely made up of spirituals, because I know that therein lies our sound and enduring contribution" (Robeson, 1978, p. 81). Subsequently, after a number of trips to the USSR, he said in a 1937 broadcast in Moscow, "When I sing the 'Spirituals' and work songs of the Negro people to Soviet audiences, I feel that a tremendous bond of sympathy and mutual understanding unites us. The Russian folksongs and those of the Soviet National Republics, which were former Czarist colonies, bear a close relationship to the folksongs of the Negro people" (Robeson, 1978, p. 115). Sensitive to other people's cultures, he made it a point to learn some of their songs and sing them in their native languages, Russian included. One of his and his audience's favorites was "How Broad is my Motherland" ("Shiroka Strana Maya Rodina"), but he also delighted his audiences with traditional folksongs, such as "Dark Eyes" ("Ochi Chorniye"). Robeson would be sure to say a few words in Russian during his many performances and speeches, which thrilled his audiences as well (OscarLevant1, 2013). But, for longer comments, he spoke or wrote in English, leaving it to his interpreters to convey his messages in Russian.

Both, the Soviets and their Black visitors, brought to the table certain assumptions and political objectives. The Blacks welcomed the messages of solidarity with their struggles and appreciated the warm welcome and the experience of the Soviets' demonstrations of a nonracial society. And many wanted to replicate the developments elsewhere. The Soviets looked forward to having these prominent Black visitors in their midst to demonstrate cross-racial relationships for both internal and external audiences. This support network was key to help develop the Soviet Union following the Russian Revolution, and to shield her from unfriendly societies; and otherwise, after World War II, to help foster ties with peoples whose natural and human resources would be key to Soviet interests abroad.

However, as many an interpreter of languages knows, translating from one language to another is more than a simple exchange of words. The complexities of communication and nuance can befuddle the best of translators. And, when those doing the translating have their own political agenda, meanings can be bent and shaped to meet those other objectives.

3. McKay's "Magical Pilgrimage"

At the 1920 Comintern meetings in Moscow, those gathered were not only at great pains to build a revolution in Russia, but also to support and encourage solidarity movements elsewhere. And certain populations were singled out by Lenin (2013) for particular attention. His "Draft Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions," prepared for discussion at this meeting, noted that the "similarity of the economic position of the Negroes with that of the former serfs in the

agrarian centers of Russia is remarkable" and called for the Comintern to "render direct aid to the revolutionary movements among the dependent and underprivileged nations (for example Ireland and the American Negroes, etc.) [parentheses his] and in the colonies."

Lenin charged American journalist Reed to speak to the plight of the American Negroes at this meeting. But, Reed knew that a Black spokesperson would be more compelling. Thus, he extended an invitation to McKay to come to the next Comintern in 1921. McKay was flattered, but also a little intimidated by the responsibilities of being the spokesperson for the Black plight at such a gathering. So, he delayed the trip a year, and instead went to London to work with the Socialist leader Sylvia Pankhurst and her publication the *Workers' Dreadnought* (Cooper, 1996, p. 107). Feeling more self-assured, McKay (1970) made what he termed his "magical pilgrimage" in 1922 (p. 151) and stayed six months.

In his 1937 memoir, *A Long Way From Home*, McKay (1970) denied that special arrangements were made for his journey, and to some degree, this was true. While he needed an invitation, the fact was that he delayed the journey a year and, by 1922, Reed had passed away. Now, he needed to raise his own funds to get there, and find an ally who would help him get the formal credentials for his stay. McKay ended up signing on as a stoker on a freighter from New York to Liverpool, England, then took a ferry to the mainland of Europe, and another boat from Germany to the Soviet Union. Once he was in the USSR, he was fortunate that the Japanese Comintern delegate Sen Katayama, who frequented the same progressive circles as Reed, vouched for him (pp. 64-65).

McKay (1970) saw himself as part of a wave of people drawn towards the Soviet Experiment: "All I had was the dominant urge to go, and that discovered the way. Millions of ordinary human beings and thousands of writers were stirred by the Russian thunder rolling around the world" (p. 153). But, it is through McKay's eyes that this new "Soviet" Russia came into view for Blacks in the US. His article appeared in two parts (December 1923 and January 1924) in the *Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), edited by W.E.B. Du Bois. Leading off with, "The label of propaganda will be affixed to what I say here. I shall not mind; propaganda has now come into its respectable rights," McKay (1999) wrote, "there was nothing unpleasant about being swept into the surge of revolutionary Russia . . . No one but a soulless body can live there without being stirred . . . Russia is prepared and waiting to receive couriers and heralds of good will and interracial understanding from the Negro race" (pp. 276, 280, 286).

McKay was born in Jamaica, but had been living in the US for ten years when Reed contacted him. Thus, he had the dual perspective of the challenges of colonialism in his home country and of US racism. Like many ambitious West Indians, he had moved to the US in search of better opportunities, but also, America was the crucible in which his left-wing politics would be formed. Wrote McKay, "I had heard of prejudice in America but never dreamed of it being so intensely bitter; for at home there is also prejudice of the English sort, subtle and dignified, rooted in class distinction–color and race being hardly taken into account" (Cooper, 1996, p. 65).

McKay's address to the Comintern was quickly translated into Russian and published in *Pravda*, the Party newspaper. The English version of his speech was also published, but this did not appear until four months later. The *Pravda* version, however, showed some interesting

changes and adjustments. Kate Baldwin (2002), noted shifts in emphasis, as well as omissions: "Occlusions and omissions created building blocks of exchange between McKay and his guests, and may help explain the attitude of the Soviets towards black Americans as well as McKay's attempts during his Russian journey to educate the Soviets about U.S. racism." In reducing McKay's lengthy speech into a smaller, more compact article for the newspaper, the Soviets made judgments about what and what not to include. McKay's nuanced analysis of racism in the US, as well as comments on his concerns of racism within the US Communist party, was not convenient to promote the 'approved narrative.' From the perspective of McKay's hosts, the true "promised land" for Blacks could only be found through Communism and especially the Soviet variety (pp. 38, 39). Other concerns were of little relevance.

But, McKay (1999) may not have noticed the differences between his speech and the *Pravda* version because he could not read Russian, and he was clearly delighting in the exhilaration following his address. "I was welcomed . . . as a symbol, as a member of the great American Negro group" (p. 281). The occasion, itself, was immortalized with a picture of McKay standing next to the podium in the Throne Room of the Kremlin (Baldwin, 2002, p. 39). The Soviets also arranged for McKay (1970) to speak and especially, to be photographed in a wide range of other venues, "the photograph of my black face was everywhere among the most highest of Soviet rulers, in the principal streets, adorning the walls of the city . . . I was photographed with the popular leaders of international Communism . . . ; with officers of the Soviet fleet, the army and the air forces, with the Red Cadets and the rank and file" (p. 170-171). McKay's dark skin was perfect for the many photo-ops exhibited to show the nonracial society being constructed under the Soviet Experiment.

There was another Black man in Moscow at the time — the Dutch Guianese-American Otto Huiswood. But, he was light-skinned and photos with him would not be so visibly dramatic (Baldwin, 2002, p. 50). Instead, Huiswood was kept busy behind the scenes and did not appear in the main propaganda pictures. Also, Huiswood was the more reserved of the two and preferred to stay out of the limelight. Recognizing the difference between propaganda and true commitment, he told McKay, "Say, fellow, you're alright for propaganda. It's a pity you'll never make a disciplined party member." Both were given honorary memberships in the Moscow Soviet (City Council) (Turner, 2005, pp. 107, 109), but it was Huiswood who would return several times over the next decade, and play an important role in formulating the Soviets' Negro Question policies (Carew, 2009, p. 25).

Besides the many public appearances, McKay was encouraged to write not only poetry, but also stories and essays that would describe the Black experience (Baldwin, 2002, p. 29). "The Moscow press printed long articles about the Negroes in America, a poet was inspired to rhyme about the Africans looking to Socialist Russia and soon I was in demand everywhere . . . at the lectures of poets, journalists, the meetings of soldiers and factory workers" (McKay, 1999, p. 281). At one point, however, he did admit to some ambivalence about his role in the Soviet Union. When he went to get his first royalty check at the newspaper office, he encountered another writer, "the Count," who remarked on the size of his check, "if they paid me one-tenth of what they pay you I would be rich." McKay (1970) responded, "I thought you got as much as I got." The Count commented, "No…I couldn't for you are a guest writer, a big writer — bolshoi, bolshoi, bolshoi." McKay wrote that while he was flattered to be so recognized, he was

also frustrated, "Why should I be 'big' translated into Russian? It was because I was a special guest of the Soviets, and a good subject for propaganda effect. . . . I felt that if I were to be bolshoi as a literary artist in a foreign language, I should first make a signal achievement in my native . . . tongue" (pp.185-186).

McKay (1970) had various interpreters who traveled with him and helped him understand what the people were saying, as well as conveyed his messages in Russian. One of his favorite interpreters was Venko, "Venko was an interpreter with the O. G. P. U. [Secret Police]. He was not connected with intelligence work. . . . If you have something to say, [the Russians] will listen for long hours upon hours, as patient as sheep, even if you are speaking in a strange language. And afterwards, they will ruminate on it with satisfaction with more long hours of interpreting" (pp. 191-192).

However, he also realized that some interpreters might be taking some license in how they chose to convey his points. Attending a large meeting of the Young Communists with another interpreter McKay (1970) wrote, "The interpreter, a comrade commander in the navy, asked me if he should translate me literally, and I said 'Word for word.' And when I finished there was no applause." The group was eager to hear about the impending American revolution, but McKay was equivocating, listing exceptions and conditions, and generally not offering an encouraging description of the revolutionary action in the US. As he put it, he was not willing to paint a rosy picture, "I was always asked to speak, and so I prepared a few phrases ...I had listened to the American delegates deliberately telling lies about conditions in America, and was disgusted . . . " But, the Young Communist group President responded to McKay's comments, "Comrade . . . you are a defeatist. The American revolution cannot be so far away. But, if that is your opinion, we command you at once to do your part and help make revolution" (p. 176).

At the urging of the Soviets, McKay produced two collections while he was in Moscow: *Negroes in America,* a discussion of racism in the US, and *Trial By Lynching: Stories of Negro Life in America,* a collection of stories. *Negroes in America* was published in a Russian edition translated by Okhrimenko. Almost simultaneously, the Soviets published his short story collection, also translated by Okhrimenko. Though McKay did not discuss them in his memoirs, Baldwin (2002) contended that these were seminal works for the early development of Black-Soviet relations. *Negroes in America* presented "a crucial picture of the author's opinions about the specific racial injustices facing black Americans," and, "*Trial by Lynching* [offered] the Soviets one of the initial 'firsthand' accounts of race relations in the United States" (pp. 60, 59).

"Petrograd: May Day, 1923" was the last piece McKay wrote before leaving in 1923. He was scheduled to leave in the spring, and he had left Moscow for Petrograd. But, he had to wait an additional six weeks because the harbor was ice blocked. As a result, McKay (1970) was in Petrograd at the time of the National Day, "May Day." He was overwhelmed with the celebration and he commented, "Petrograd had pulled a poem out of me." In part, he wrote, " . . . The Nevsky glows ablaze with regal Red/ Symbolic with the triumph and the rule/ Of the new power now lifting high its head . . . " The poem was published in the Petrograd *Pravda* in Russian translation, and subsequently republished in other regional papers. McKay observed, "I was overwhelmed with praise. The praise from the Communists was expected . . . But I was most gratified by the praise of the Petrograd literati . . . The translator of Walt Whitman said that I had composed a classic" (pp. 224, 223).

Wayne Cooper (1996), McKay's biographer, noted that McKay recanted his support of the Soviet Experiment in the 1940s with his growing dismay over Stalinism (p. 352). But, the genie had been let out of the bottle by his earlier writing. The enthusiasm over his 1922 visit laid the groundwork for subsequent visitors and Soviet relations with other Blacks (Baldwin, 2002, p. 85). In the USSR, his presence, as well as that of Huiswood, inspired the training programs the Soviets offered Black activists. Within three years, the Soviets would be offering political training at the School for the Toilers of the East (KUTVA) in Moscow (McClellan, 1993, p. 376). In the 1930s, groups of Black technical and agricultural specialists would be invited to help build the Soviet infrastructure. Artists and others would also be welcomed to work on other kinds of collaborations. And, from the US, through the 1920s and 1930s, many other Blacks would make their own journeys, including, in the mid-1920s, Du Bois, who had published McKay's piece in the *Crisis*; and Hughes and Robeson in the early 1930s.

4. Hughes' "Ark"

Langston Hughes was recruited in 1932 by Soviet film company, Meschrabpomfilm (Meschrabpom), along with 21 others who were curious about the Soviet Experiment. Though a few were decidedly progressive, all were tired of the lack of opportunities in the US and adventurous enough to sign on with the project. Among the others, twenty were black and one was white. According to the promotional material distributed in the US, "Black and White" was an English-language film for international distribution. It was to be an exposé of the true character of US racism and, at the same time, would show the dignity of black people to counteract the humiliating stereotypes so prevalent in films of the time. It was unabashedly a propaganda film, but the project goals matched the frustrations felt by the group members.

Meschrabpom promised the group that they would be well looked after and paid handsomely for their work, but they also had to be willing first to pay their passage over (Hughes, 1986, p. 70). This was more significant than a simple job, as Hughes (1986) wrote in his memoir, *I Wonder as I Wander.* After the long journey across, they stayed overnight in Helsinki, Finland. Then, "the next day we took the train headed for . . . the land where race prejudice was reported taboo . . . At the border were young soldiers with a red star on their caps. Spread high in the air across the railroad tracks, there was a banner: WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE [capitals his]." And he witnessed this poignant scene: "When the train stopped beneath this banner for passports to be checked, a few of the young men and women left the train to touch their hands to Soviet soil, lift the new earth in their palms, and kiss it." Hughes does not mention whether he was one of those who kissed the soil, but the trip was no less significant to him: "This unexpected chance to work in films in Russia seemed to open a new door to me . . . I was invited . . . to do the English dialogue . . . on a four-month contract . . . Many young white writers whom I knew had well-paid Hollywood writing jobs, but . . . Hollywood was still a closed shop — with the Negroes closed out . . . I thought if I were ever to work in motion pictures or learn about them, it would have to be abroad" (pp. 73, 65). Faith Berry (1992), Hughes' biographer, noted that despite tight money, when he had received notice from Louise Thompson that the "Black and White" film project team was leaving New York soon, he had wired back, "Hold that boat 'cause it's an ark for me" (p. 152).

Hughes had a growing following in the US Black community and certain progressive presses. He was especially pleased to have the Black community's support when the Depression hit. At the urging of Dr. Mary Bethune, president of Bethune-Cookman College, the Black college and church circuits became his source of income (Hughes, 1986, p. 41). In fact, he was on the western leg of one of these circuits when he received the news from Thompson. At the same time, though, Hughes harbored the ambition of breaking into the larger US arts and intellectual market, and this Soviet film project would both give him experience and greater exposure.

The group discovered that the Black experience in the Soviet Union could not be more different. In an article for the Russian journal *International Literature*, Hughes wrote, "There are among the permanent foreign working residents in Moscow, perhaps two dozen Negroes . . . you cannot find them merely by seeking out their color. Like . . . the Uzbeks . . . the Negro workers are so well absorbed by Soviet life that most of them seldom remember they are Negroes in the oppressive sense that black people are always forced to be conscious of in America" (Berry, 1992, p. 182). They, too, were beneficiaries of new courtesies, noted Thompson: "The Russians would push us to the front of the queue line for a bus or ticket, or offer us seats in a crowded streetcar . . . For all of us who experienced discrimination based on color in our own land, it was strange to find our color a badge of honor, our key to the city" (Goldstein, 1999). This included full hotel accommodations, invitations to social events, and interviews (Hughes, 1986, p. 87). Additionally, they were paid 400 rubles a month and provided ration books for their other shopping (Berry, 1992, p. 159).

But, two months into the film project, they received notice that the project was canceled. The Meschrabpom officials were not happy with the script (Berry, 1992, pp. 159-160), nor with the Negro actors (Hughes, 1986, pp. 97-98). They knew that the director was not pleased with their performance and complaints that the scenario itself had serious flaws. The story began in Africa with people being captured in the slave trade (Baldwin, 2002, p. 99) and then, was situated in Birmingham, Alabama, a southern industrial center. The Negro workers were the protagonists, a central white character was a progressive labor organizer, and the villains were reactionary whites. But, the scenario was written by people who had no direct experience with the US South and despite a basic story line that was credible, many of the scenes, including the insertion of the Red Army, were unbelievable (Berry, 1992, p. 159).

But, in fact, there was another factor — one of political expediency. The American engineer, Col. Hugh Cooper, who was under contract to build a major dam in the Soviet Union, had threatened to quit when he learned of the film project (Berry, 1992, pp. 168-170). The Soviets were caught between economic needs and propaganda goals to embarrass the US, and the former won out. But Cooper was not their only worry in this geopolitical wrangling. There were other prominent American industrialists building pieces of the Soviet infrastructure in that same period. The USSR did not suffer from the Depression as it was not a member of the world banking network. So, while plants were being closed in the US, heads of companies, such as Ford and General Electric, were happily pursuing projects in the USSR (Smith, 1964, pp. 209-210). Homer Smith (1964), one of the Black expatriates, observed, "Diplomatic recognition by the United States would be the open sesame for obtaining large American credits. Great quantities of American machinery could be imported and American engineering and technical

personnel would come to build new factories to speed up Russia's industrialization. One would have been naive indeed to expect Stalin to risk his promising chances . . . for the short range propaganda success" (p. 29).

Still, the artistic differences had, indeed, threatened to ruin the project. The US group was at loggerheads over the director's stereotypical "template" for representing Blacks. The director's previous experience had been with Africans and he was certain of the type of images he wanted to convey the message of this propaganda film. But the group he thought he had hired, was dramatically different from the people who arrived. They had been attracted to the proposal of showing American Negroes in all their dignity and the director's stereotypical pre-judgments of how they should act were insulting. There was no question that they wanted to make the film, but not through these simplistic caricatures. This was a clash of color, caste and class. These were middle-class American Negroes; some were college graduates, others were urban professionals, and a few were actors and artists. Though some may have been born in the South, dignity for them was to demonstrate more Northern, urban characteristics.

Also, the director did not consider them dark enough. Similarly to the Soviet appropriation of images of Blacks by choosing McKay over Huiswood ten years before, to him, they did not look like the "authentic" Blacks needed to depict the poor Southern black workers. Commented Thomas, "we have had to argue at great lengths to tell them we are all Negroes." Observed Frank Montero, "in appearance, ours was a very mixed group . . . From Wayland Rudd, who was dark as Paul Robeson, to a person like myself, who could be regarded as Hispanic" (El-Hai, 2013). And the problematic scenario required that these actors sing and dance in the stereotypical fashion seen in films of the time. Noted Hughes (1986), "Europeans . . . seem to be victims of that old cliché that all Negroes just naturally sing . . . Being mostly Northerners, only a few of us had heard a spiritual outside of a concert hall " (p. 80).

Hughes (1986) was particularly perturbed because he had been hired to work on the script and was constantly at odds with the Meschrabpom officials and the director, "[My contract] was held up a week or so while it was being drawn in detail. When it was finally handed me in triplicate . . . it was entirely in Russian. [I told them] I will sign only a contract I can read, in English." The script, too, had to be translated. Then, as he began to read it, "At first, I was astonished at what I read. Then I laughed until I cried . . . The writer meant well, but knew so little about the subject." Hughes was being charitable. But, after repeated efforts at rewriting scenes, he was not sorry to have a break. Commenting on the impasse, he had told them, "All I can see to do for this film," I said, "is to start over and get a new one, based on reality, not imagination" (pp. 75, 76, 79).

Still, Meschrabpom paid them in full for the four months of their contract. It also offered to arrange for them to stay on for a few more months and to tour other parts of the USSR; or to send them back to the US with stops in Paris, London, and Berlin. Half left immediately. Some spread malicious stories in the media about the Soviets' "race bias" and currying favor with American government and industrialists (Hughes, 1986, p. 96). Hughes and Thompson, who remained in the country, chose to stress the viability of the contracts, "The film 'Black and White,' postponed on account of scenario difficulties, will be made in the Spring . . . our contracts and salaries continue." They sent an article to the New York *Herald Tribune,* but only the *Daily Worker* picked it up (Berry, 1992, pp. 166-167). Though the story of the cancelation

spread in the US and elsewhere abroad, Hughes (1986) discovered while he was traveling in Soviet Central Asia a few weeks later, that there had been no coverage of the project or its demise in the Soviet press (p. 109).

Despite the acrimonious break up, Hughes was happy to explore regions where the Soviet Union's "people of color" lived. "The Russians and Ukrainians are white, but there are many colored peoples in the Soviet Union. The Yakuts in the North are colored, and the Uzbeks, the Turkomens, the Tajiks in the South are colored. By our American standards even the Tartars might be Jim Crowed south of Washington, D.C. . . . In Old Russia and its colonies, the Tzars treated these people badly, too" (De Santis, 1995, p. 171).

Ultimately, all but four left the country. A group stayed on a few more months to see what the Soviet Experiment might offer them (Berry 1992, p. 170). Hughes extended his stay to a full year, while Smith, Wayland Rudd and Lloyd Patterson settled down in the USSR (Carew, 2009, p. 132).

Interest in Hughes' writing was intense. "I made more from writing in Moscow in terms of buying power than I have earned anywhere" (Baldwin, 2002, p. 189). Earlier works of his were translated into Russian and other languages of the USSR. *The Weary Blues* was translated into Uzbek, and Hughes (1986) noted, "The State Publishers of Uzbekistan gave me a check for six thousand rubles as an advance on my book, enough money to buy thirty camels . . . so many rubles and a book of mine that would be read in Samarkand, Bokhara, Kokand and Fergana, after I had gone back to Harlem" (p. 144).

Like McKay, he recognized that he was speaking to audiences both in the USSR and abroad. Now, he was being published in these new international outlets, as well as sending items to the Black and progressive presses in the US (Baldwin, 2002, p. 116). Besides *International Literature*, which was published in Russian, English, French, and German, Berry (1992) noted that he also had pieces in the *Negro Worker*, the publication of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW) sponsored by the Comintern and based in Germany. This publication, issued in English and French, was targeted to working class readers (p. 189). Hughes' work appeared in domestic Russian outlets, such as his poem, "Ballad of the Landlord," which appeared in *Krasnaya Nov*, a Russian journal (Berry, 1992, p.182). And he secured a commission with the Russian newspaper, *Izvestia,* to write a series of pieces about the developments in Soviet Central Asia, many of which appeared in both Russian and English (Berry, 1992, pp. 172, 189). These essays were later collected into a 1934 book published in Moscow, *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia* (Rampersad, 2002a, p. 265).

That the Soviets were happy to have Hughes' observations of this provincial region should not be a surprise. This region had been neglected by the Tzarist regime and the Soviets had chosen it to be a 'model' society for the progress that the Soviet Experiment could bring to people. Pointing to these advancements as possibilities for American Blacks, Hughes (1986) wrote, " . . . illiterate actors from the nomad tribes of the desert were being taught to read and write at the same time as they were being taught to act . . . This interested me enormously because here were *colored* [emphasis his] people being taught by *white* [emphasis his] men about making of films from the ground up . . . I could not help but think how impregnable Hollywood had been to Negroes" (p. 116).

Hughes did attempt to learn both Uzbek and Russian (Baldwin, 2002, p. 4). However, he had

two persons who did much of the written translation into Russian: the poet Julian Anissimov, who translated several of Hughes' poems, and the literary critic and translator Lidya Filatova (Hughes, 1986, p. 197). A few months into Hughes' stay, Filatova observed, "Hughes is one of the most important poets in America, and so far is the only established Negro writer whose work tends to leave the beaten path of petty-bourgeois and bourgeois Negro literature" (Berry 1992, p. 162). But her political philosophy becomes even more evident in her critiques. Hughes' best work was that which was "impregnated with a spirit of proletarian internationalism" and she cautioned, "Hughes is first of all a poet of the Negro proletariat. His writing should help to solve the problems confronting the Negro toilers of the United States. The force of Hughe's [sic] will be stronger, the influence deeper, if he will draw closer to the Negro masses and talk their language" (Kernan, 2007, pp. 169-170). This is the same narrow vision that helped disrupt the film project. For, as Filatova appeared to stress, the Blacks' authenticity lay in certain stereotypical notions of language and cultural behaviors.

Hughes' writing about developments among the Uzbeks, or the experiences of Blacks in Moscow, was invariably couched in terms of the experiences of Blacks in the US. Soviet Central Asia, however, provided the prism through which he and other Black observers could evaluate the changes under the Soviet Experiment. These were the USSR's peoples of color and they, too, had experienced segregation and second-class citizenship. At one point, when Hughes and the German-Jewish writer Arthur Koestler were traveling together in parts of this region, Hughes (1986) was perturbed that Koestler did not appreciate that which he saw: "I was trying to make him understand why I observed the changes in Soviet Asia with *Negro* [emphasis his] eyes. To Koestler, Turkmenistan was simply a *primitive* [emphasis his] land moving into twentieth-century civilization. To me it was a colored land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites" (p. 116). Ten years later, in the mid-1940s, in a series of articles on the Soviet Experiment for the Chicago *Defender* newspaper, Hughes continued to stress that the Soviets were able to accomplish social improvements that seemed insurmountable in the US: "I thought to myself how many white Americans say it will take hundreds of years, or two or three generations, to wipe out segregation in the South. But in Tashkent [Uzbekistan] it had only taken a few years — and a willingness on the part of the government to enforce decent racial laws" (De Santis, 1995, p. 171).

But, in the early 1950s, after decades of writing positively about the Soviet Experiment, Hughes back-pedaled under pressure from the US House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). He had seen Robeson and Du Bois lose their livelihoods, along with their passports, and he was desperate to save his career (Rampersad, 2002b, pp. 216-217). Yet, as was the case for McKay, this later change of heart came well after Hughes' earlier writing had excited others about the Soviet Experiment.

5. Robeson's Breath of Fresh Air

Robeson made his first visit to the USSR in December 1934, though he had been observing the Soviet Experiment from afar for quite some time. He saw the accounts of McKay, Du Bois and Hughes, and had heard from friends who were doing political studies or attended congresses there (Carew, 2009, pp. 141-143). When he moved to London in the early 1930s, he began

studying Russian in earnest and reading *Pravda* and *Izvestia* (Robeson, 1978, p. 94). And then, his two brothers in-law, John and Frank Goode, moved there, and John had written, "You will be coming to a country that is absolutely devoid of racial prejudice . . . In fact, they lean the other way and favor the races who have been oppressed . . . It is a country where there is no unemployment. And the lot of the Worker is getting better" (Boyle, 2001, p. 306).

The final reasons that impelled Robeson to make his own visit were the invitation from the famed filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (Robeson, 1978, p. 94), and the intriguing observations of some of his African friends. Recounting this, Robeson (1988) said, "[These were] people who had been classed as a 'backward race' by the Czars". He had been struck by the resemblance between the tribal life of the Yakuts and his own people of East Africa. "What would happen to a people like the Yakuts now that they had been freed from colonial oppression and were part of the construction of a socialist society. Well, I went to see for myself " (pp. 35, 36).

At a reception Eisenstein held in his honor on that first visit, Robeson (1978) remarked, "I was not prepared for the endless friendliness, which surrounded me from the moment I crossed the border" (p. 93). This statement was all the more meaningful because he had recently escaped an attack by German thugs at the Berlin train station. Robeson's wife, Eslanda, was very light-skinned and they had the Englishwoman, Marie Seton, as a traveling companion. The sight of this large black man with these two "white" women had enflamed these racist sentiments. Robeson commented that the reaction reminded him of a lynch mob and, "I could read the hatred in their eyes." He hurriedly escorted the women onto the train. And while they were now safe, Seton observed Robeson hunched over near the window, still ruminating on the near disaster for hours afterwards (Duberman, 1995, pp. 184, 185). Despite his prominence on stage and screen, he was still a Black man who could be humiliated and ambushed by racism.

A few weeks later, another reporter asked him, "Have you noticed a race question in the Soviet Union?" to which he replied, "Only that it seems to work to my advantage" (Robeson, 1978, p. 100). Robeson was discovering what Goode and the others had written about. He had been attracted to the Soviet Experiment and its nonracial policies in the abstract, but this paled by comparison to experiencing it. Returning in July 1935, he happily announced, "In Soviet Russia, I breathe freely for the first time in my life" (Robeson, 1978, p. 100). On another visit, he stressed that in the USSR, he felt like a full human being for the first time — pronouncements that the Soviet media would repeat frequently (Baldwin, 2002, p. 227).

Differently to McKay and Hughes, Robeson traveled in and out of the country over a long period of time. He returned numerous times through the later half of the 1930s, after World War II in 1949, and then several times from 1958 until he fell ill in the early 1960s. Robeson was frequently in the media and used his "bully pulpit" to send messages out to both immediate and larger audiences. He also chose his battles carefully. He became aware of the Stalinist pogroms against Jews (Baldwin, 2002, p. 316, note 125) — some of whom were his friends- but he resolutely kept his focus on Black liberation.

Robeson became quite proficient in basic conversational Russian and in delivering prepared comments before songs at concerts, but he had to rely on interpreters and reporters to convey most of his comments in Russian. Thus, the meanings that his English-language listeners might have gotten, could diverge from that which Russian audiences understood.

But, Robeson's greatest effect at knitting Black and Soviet interests together came during

the late 1950s and early 1960s. His central commitment had always been the quest for self-determination and the right to choose one's friends and allies. His fight to have his passport returned was part of this. Forced into internal exile along with W.E.B. Du Bois, it took seven years of legal wrangling before they won their case with the 5-4 Supreme Court ruling in the Rockwell Kent and Walter Briehl cases. The court ruled that, "the Secretary of State had no right to deny a passport to any citizen because of his political beliefs . . . " (Duberman, 1995, p. 465).

When he and his wife reappeared in the USSR, it was almost a decade since his last visit. And, by this time, Robeson had shifted from "visitor" to "icon." Though the physical Robeson had not been able to come over this period, a 'virtual' Robeson had been maintained in the hearts and minds of the Russian people by the Soviet media. He appeared in special stories, replays of previous concerts, and programs in which he would participate through radio hook-up from the US (Baldwin, 2002, p. 309, note 79). As much as the US government wanted to contain him, his international presence grew even larger. Therefore, in 1958, as Martin Duberman (1995), Robeson's biographer, noted, people were thrilled to have him back in their midst, to see him speaking at special venues, to hear his interviews on the radio, to learn more about his struggles in special documentaries, and see and hear him at concerts in large stadiums (p. 468).

Robeson and the Soviets now sought to bridge the Soviet Experiment with African nations seeking their independence (Baldwin, 2002, p. 243). He signaled this in his January 1960 announcement, "Come and see this exciting Socialist land . . . You will see something extraordinary. You will see a new kind of human being – one shaped in conditions where deep concern for others is basic . . . We know that the power and influence of the Soviet Union and the Socialist world will support the struggles of people everywhere . . . " (Robeson, 1978, p. 464). And, then, in 1961, in one of \his last public appearances in Moscow, he appeared at the re-naming ceremony of the People's Friendship University for the recently slain African leader, Patrice Lumumba (Carew, 2009, p. 152). This university would provide advanced educational and professional training to thousands of Africans and other peoples of color over the next thirty years.

Robeson's treatise, *Here I Stand*, published in 1958 while he was still fighting the US government, was translated into Russian, *Na tom ya stoiu*. Baldwin (2002) noted certain discrepancies here, too: "Portions of the text are excised, sometimes with ellipsis indicating the cut, but more often without any editorial clue." The work shifts from Robeson's discussion of multiple actors to a focus solely on Robeson and continuation of the 'cult of personality.' And Baldwin (2002) noted that there were additions which stressed the centrality of the Soviets in liberation struggles. But also, she granted, "slippages were used by both the Soviet press and Robeson as welcome footholds from which to maneuver: for the Soviets, the staging of Robeson as Soviet hero; and for Robeson, the staging of his internationalist mission" (pp. 228-230).

6. The Challenges of Bridging Aspirations

McKay, Hughes, and Robeson, might have had their words 'shaped' by their interpreters and translators on occasion and in some places more than others. Certainly, the Soviets considered them intermediaries to other Black peoples and a means by which they could demonstrate the superiority of the Soviet Experiment. But also, these Black visitors purposefully selected that

which they would highlight in their comments and writing. Crossing cultural and linguistic boundaries, they understood that they had different audiences. There was the primary audience of other Blacks in the US, who like themselves, was looking for greater dignity and opportunity. There were the Soviets whom they saw as allies in putting pressure on the US to enforce civil rights laws. And, coming out of World War II, there was the renewed anti-colonial movement and the need to link the Soviets to the liberation goals of African and other peoples of color.

Both, these Black visitors and the Soviets, also understood the special importance of the physical journey to the USSR and having people elsewhere see images of them there, not to speak of their personal goals to experience the Soviet Experiment's nonracial society. Representing this to others, they were keen to put the best light on the Soviet Experiment's successes, even to the extent of avoiding discussions of actions or behaviors that might compromise this image. And, they directly or indirectly implied that with the Soviets' help, or by following the Soviets' efforts at modernization, other struggling peoples could achieve these things, too. The Black visitors recognized and accepted that they were playing key roles in representing Black America, and, by extension, other Blacks globally, to the Soviet authorities and the Russian people. And they hoped that this would encourage the Soviets to reach out to other Blacks, as well as encourage Black people in the US and elsewhere to be interested. These early models of cross-racial solidarity inspired the Soviets to offer the scholarship programs from the late 1950s onwards to legions of African and other Third World students, and also inspired these students' acceptance of these multi-year awards (Carew, 2009, pp. 206, 208). That these international students, as well as the former Soviet Union's people of color, like the Uzbeks, should now find themselves the subjects of the very intolerance that they were trying to escape, would be of great disappointment to the early shapers of Black-Soviet relations.

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Author Note

Joy Gleason Carew (Ph.D) is a Linguist and Associate Professor of Pan-African Studies at the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky USA. She is the former Associate Director of the University of Louisville International Center, and former Director of the Center for the Study of Critical Languages at Lincoln University in Lincoln University, Pennsylvania.

She is the author of *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (Rutgers, 2009).

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